

# Seconds-in-Command as Logical Heir Apparents

**Does your board look for leadership in all the wrong places? Here's the right place to look — and why.**



By Joseph C. Santora

**H**ermann Goring (Hitler) was one, so was Clyde Tolson (J. Edgar Hoover), and so is Ayman Al-Zawahiri (bin Laden). Such individuals rarely share the limelight of their bosses, and the public quickly forgets them; yet, they play a vital role in furthering their organizations' purposes by complementing their bosses' work. They have a reputation for being fiercely loyal, brutally honest, and completely trustworthy. In business enterprises they're commonly called Chief Operating Officers (COOs), and in the nonprofit sector they're called deputy directors or administrators.

Given their extensive organizational knowledge, the question arises: Why are seconds-in-command so often ignored as potential successors to chief executive officers (CEOs) and executive directors (EDs) in the nonprofit sector? The main reason is that boards tend to seek high-profile individuals not currently working with the organization. Seconds-in-command must often contend with outsiders who have established national reputations, who are politically well-connected to funding sources, or who excel at fundraising.

Too often, boards believe that appointing an outsider gives the

organization a certain aura and that outsiders bring something magical with them. However, board appointments of outsiders often signal a departure from current operating strategy and call for dramatic organizational change. Boards would be wise to look closer to home. Here are some reasons why seconds-in-command often make the best successors to the top leadership position:

- **Executive directors rely on seconds-in-command** to provide administrative oversight and leadership. While the executive director attends to external matters

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# Here are three second-in-command scenarios\* in nonprofit community-based organizations:

## Scenario 1

The founder of this nonprofit organization had been leading the enterprise for 20 years when he learned that he needed corrective heart surgery. Only then did he inform the board of his choice of a successor. He recommended that his second-in-command be appointed to succeed him should he become incapacitated or die as a result of surgery.

He survived the heart surgery, and the issue of succession was never again mentioned in his presence. The second-in-command assumed that he was still the “heir apparent” and would lead the organization when the founder retired. Then, at a staff meeting, the founder remarked in passing that he had no intention of ever retiring from his position. He would “die in the saddle.”

A few years later, the second-in-command received a job offer from another organization. Believing he had little chance of becoming CEO at his current organization, he left after 15 years of service. His resignation created a serious organizational brain drain and placed the organization in jeopardy. In the six months since his departure, the organization has yet to fill the huge void created by his departure.

## Scenario 2

This organization’s founder led the nonprofit for 20 years, building it from a storefront to a large, thriving enterprise. During the initial years, she mentored several younger employees but refused to discuss the issue of succession. She reported directly to the board of directors. Her autocratic leadership style prevented her from appointing a second-in-command. When she died in office without the benefit of a successor in place, the board was forced to scurry around to seek a new CEO.

After several months of searching, the board appointed an outsider as CEO. It took a few months for the board to realize that the new CEO didn’t fit the organization’s needs. Over the next five years, the board hired and fired five outside interim and permanent CEOs, and the organization teetered on the brink of disaster. Fortunately, the organization was able to recover by appointing a board member—an insider with intimate knowledge of the organization — as the CEO. It was he, as a turnaround specialist, who returned fiscal stability to this organization.

## Scenario 3

The founder of this nonprofit led the organization for more than 35 years before he voluntarily retired (a very rare occurrence) at age 72. For the 20 years

before his retirement, he invested time mentoring his deputy director. He promised her that she would be his replacement when he retired. He helped prepare her for the position by having her attend board meetings, prepare board reports, and make presentations to the board.

True to his word, upon retirement, he recommended her as his replacement. Board members unanimously endorsed his recommendation, since they knew her, trusted her abilities, and felt comfortable that she could continue the founder’s work. The founder had truly mentored and empowered his second-in-command. He retired knowing that the organization was in good hands and that his legacy would continue. Organizational stress was non-existent, and service delivery continued uninterrupted. Stakeholders viewed the transition from second-in-command to executive director as seamless. Today the organization continues to attract funders and serves a broader constituent base.

*Each scenario contains an important message to nonprofit leaders. Scenario 1 shows what happens when a founding CEO creates an impenetrable glass ceiling for the second-in-command. When an opportunity presents itself, the second-in-command will leave and place the organization in jeopardy.*

*In Scenario 2, we see the outcome of an autocratic leader who refuses to choose a successor. This stance puts the organization in a precarious position, because the executive pipeline is empty. Board decisions to hire an outsider can be costly and time-consuming, especially if the selection process is unsuccessful.*

*In Scenario 3, the organization’s leader displayed forward thinking by mentoring his second-in-command. Having a succession plan in place ensured organizational continuity.*

*These descriptions show what happens to organizations when their leaders overlook second-in-command as replacements. The profiles also demonstrate how organizations can succeed when they create a smooth transition by mentoring a second-in-command to replace a departing CEO. This analysis suggests that nonprofit organizations are doing themselves a major disservice by not appointing a second-in-command to the top leadership position when the CEO leaves.*

\*The three scenarios are based on consultancies. Some facts have been slightly altered to preserve the organizations’ anonymity.

## Seconds-in-command have the awesome responsibility of controlling internal operations.

such as fundraising and politics, seconds-in-command have the awesome responsibility of controlling internal operations. Their many roles include, but aren't limited to, the following: They manage and evaluate staff, implement and monitor programmatic activities, work with consultants, and support the organization's infrastructure. Their work roles follow the 80/20 rule: They spend 80% of their time addressing internal affairs and 20% dealing with external affairs. (Conversely, executive directors devote 20% of their time to internal affairs and 80% to external affairs.) Without seconds-in-command, organizational leadership and performance would be less effective.

- If they've done their jobs, seconds-in-command have become an integral and almost indispensable part of the organization. They know the major organizational players, the system and its operation, and organizational nuances.

- The decisions and recommendations of seconds-in-command have major organizational implications. They constantly handle sticky situations. They've had their mettle tested.

- Seconds-in-command have passed an endurance test. Their work performance has been appraised, and their dedication to the organization is unquestionable. Appointing seconds-in-command as executive directors sends a crucial signal throughout the organization — that hard work and

## Having a succession plan in place ensures organizational continuity.

dedication, coupled with other important leadership traits, leads to promotion within the organization and maintains organizational continuity. Equally important, appointing seconds-in-command prevents them from seeking positions elsewhere, leaving the organization weak and vulnerable.

Seconds-in-command who assume the top leadership position may not always be dynamic, nor a "replacement" for a charismatic leader or founder; however, they can create a thriving environment for their organizations through their commitment. They should be given the right of first refusal. ■

### Resources

\*Jenson, Donna, "In Search of the Balanced Leader," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 6.

\*Peck, David, "Choosing a CEO: The Board's Six Biggest Mistakes," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 2.

Santora, Joseph C. and James C. Sarros, "CEO Succession in

Nonprofit Community-based Organizations: Is There Room at the Top?", *Career Development International*, 6(2).

\*Santora, Joseph C., "Planning for Leadership Succession: Are You Ready?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

*\*These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center. The articles from Volumes 14-23 are available free on-line at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members), and articles prior to Volume 14 are available on CD-ROM at [www.snpo.org/publications/articles.php](http://www.snpo.org/publications/articles.php).*

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