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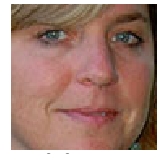
Nonprofits Can Make Succession Planning Part of Everyday Work

By Liz O'Connor


Liz O'Connor

Daily demands on nonprofit leaders means succession planning often seems like one more great idea they don’t have time for, but there's much they can do to identify the next generation of leaders without adding to their workload.

According to a 2014 study published by TSNE MissionWorks, more than two-thirds of all Massachusetts nonprofit leaders planned to leave their jobs by 2020, but only one-quarter had a plan in place for that transition. In addition, more than 60% of nonprofits had no plans to address unanticipated departures. This will cause problems given the oncoming “silver tsunami," a wave of retirements at the executive level happening as the baby boomers leave the workforce.

While an executive search certainly is, and in most cases absolutely should be, part of nonprofit succession plans when a leader decides to move on, there are many things organizations can do to help identify and nurture internal staff as potential leaders. Consider the following:

1) Celebrate the urgency of succession planning. The opportunity to cultivate new leaders is precisely what organizations need. The “silver tsunami” is a golden opportunity to invest in the next generation of leaders. It's also a great opportunity to diversify leadership in the nonprofit sector.

2) Talk about it. A lot. Everyone knows that eventually there will be new leadership. There’s no reason to avoid the topic, and plenty of reasons to talk about it; primarily the need to prepare for it. The team will appreciate knowing that it is on the organizational radar as it has profound effects on all.

3) “Unpack” the top jobs. Make lists of the essential skills, experience, competencies, and special considerations for each of the jobs. Be minimalist. Your goal is to have a minimum set of conditions that a replacement must meet, not a portrait of the perfect fit. Overcommitting to the inessential could constrain your ability to see a good next-generation leader. Be mindful of the role implicit bias can play in your description of what leaders need to be and bring. Be sure to read **"7 Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process"**.

4) Start asking your team members about their goals within the organization. Share the “unpacked” job description. Let people start getting themselves ready by focusing on what matters most.

5) Integrate mentoring and coaching into your daily work with next-level staff. Here are a few examples of how you might do this:

- *Build and maintain external relationships:* Most EDs spend a lot of time meeting with donors, potential board members, policy makers, and peer organizations. Bringing mid-level staff along to meetings, conferences and other events can enable the staff to build their own relationships.

- *Fundraising:* When considering a new grant application, ask staff who don’t currently work on grants to develop a memo highlighting the organization's strengths and weaknesses with respect to the opportunity, and then meet to discuss their opinions. Together, determine whether or not to apply, clearly explaining your decision. If you decide to apply, ask different staff to take on roles developing logic models, budgets, or narrative explanations for the work ahead.

- *Team leadership:* Consider rotating the design, facilitation, and management roles in staff meetings. Engage managers in leading the team (including you) through repeated tasks (budget reviews, etc.) Give coaching/advice before and after (but not during) the meeting, and talk with them about what the experience teaches them about their own interest in leading a team.

6) Catalog what you learn. Consider creating a table like this, and updating it when you’ve successfully helped individual team members develop new competencies:

	Has Now	**Is Developing**	**Has Potential + Interest**
Executive Director			
Skill 1: Fundraising	Chris	Kelly	Robin
Skill 2: Strategic Thinking	Chris, Kelly		Chris
Skill 3: Team management		Robin	Robin, Kelly

7) Think about every hire as a potential successor to the top jobs. When hiring entry or mid-level staff, you’re bringing potential leaders into the organization. Be clear about essential skills and let new hires know you want them to focus on developing skills needed at the leadership level well before the top jobs open. People appreciate the opportunity to learn on the job, and the skills you’ll help them build will be helpful regardless of where they go for their next position.

8) Learn from the next generation. Remain open to new approaches to managing the work of the organization, which means cultivating your ability to see leadership that looks different from what you know today. Pay attention to the successes of different styles and approaches in the work outlined above, and revisit your “essential skills” to be sure you're not inadvertently confusing the way you do it with the impact you want to achieve.

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