

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY

Successful Successions

By Ted Ford Webb

Succession from one generation of leadership to the next is a period of opportunity, and risk. Common sense, an inclusive listening tour, frank dialogue that invites all views within the board, and from other key players, and a robust analysis of what the organization needs going forward are the essential ingredients for this process.

But also be aware that many challenging and critical needs can be in plain sight, and still go unaddressed. Why? Because boards and their executive leadership, over time, can settle on an equilibrium — accepting or implicitly agreeing to work around fundamental tensions and difficulties, like the frog in a slowly heating pan of water.

These are mostly happy stories. In each case our client was prepared for an unvarnished look at the circumstances that would likely shape the next chief executive's tenure. Before hiring the new CEO, they were able to establish a common understanding of the challenges they would face together. Those foundations paid dividends in the performance of the organization and the chief executive.

Leveraging a Unified Board and a Favorable Funding Environment

Eight years ago we were engaged to recruit the President of a nationally renowned public/private partnership, known for innovation, solid research and an effective, community based service delivery model. The founding President was retiring. She had built a solid foundation, and felt it was time for fresh energy and growth.

We recruited a strong and vocal advocate. She was highly skilled at promoting the agenda of the organization, in public testimony, in the media and with funders and community leaders. The organization prospered and grew during most of her eight-year term.

More recently the party in power, and the ideology and public policy that shaped this organization's funding, changed. What had been a monolithic board was suddenly no longer so, and the political activism of the President was suddenly a liability. The President retired, and we were engaged to find her successor. We look back on this placement as a success. The person we recruited was well matched to the needs of the organization, until she wasn't.

Adapting to Partisan Conflict and an Unfavorable Funding Environment

When we were invited back eight years later we found a very different set of circumstances. There was growing tension between newly appointed and long-term board members. The new board leaders wanted to be fully involved in setting the board agenda, and no longer just accept the agenda proposed by the President.

Our judgment was that the board needed to contend with the issue of board governance as a precursor to and within the chief executive search. We encouraged open give and take between board members on both sides of the issue with our top candidates.

The successful candidate had previously worked effectively with engaged, policy-making boards. She favored a richer and deeper dialogue with the board, but she was also very clear about boundaries. The organization adopted a new strategy for advocacy, fund raising and government relations. This is proving to be a powerful force for growth.

Educating Poor Board Leadership and Adapting to Changes in Funding

We were first engaged to recruit the chief executive of a large, historically influential and well-endowed urban child and family service organization over eight years ago. We discovered that the agency had run through a series of three-year term executive directors. Board members regularly introduced confusing and contradictory expectations. Some board chairs considered themselves CEOs and gave direct orders to staff.

The successful candidate made the case for investing in a clear management structure and team, for providing the board with complete and timely information, being fully accountable and also insisting on well defined boundaries. Under his watch, the organization grew from a \$25 million enterprise to an \$80 million enterprise.

Building on a Strong Foundation

When the chief executive we recruited retired, eight years later, we stepped back into an organization that had been transformed. The CEO had built a strong management team. Decision-making was based on a thorough review of the data and a robust debate. They trusted one another, they encouraged creativity, they learned from their mistakes.

The person we recruited fit just right. She was a great face for the organization: articulate, a strong communicator and a passionate advocate. The match was based on an honest negotiation about the board's desire for continuity. And by the way, this happened eight years ago — she has prospered, as has the agency.

Change Is Hard

About five years ago we were engaged to recruit the executive director of a prominent anti-slavery organization. The founders were in various stages of departing. There was a controversial split over two

competing agendas within the organization — building programs to demonstrate a viable alternative to culturally embedded slavery practices, or promoting awareness, education and policy reforms in first world countries.

The person we recruited lasted about 18 months. Under her watch, the organization made the difficult choice to do away with the media program. But she was badly beaten up in the process.

We Stand on the Shoulders of Those Who Came Before Us

We were engaged again by this anti-slavery organization. The board was united. The staff was united. Having made the objective case for this new focus, and with an organization in alignment to move in this direction, we were presented with a marvelous slate of candidates. The person we chose has been just tremendous. Board, staff and executive director are united in purpose.

The universal truth that runs through these and all leadership transitions is the tremendous value of honesty. No candidate, no board, no organization is without challenges and limitations. Honestly sorting out, together, how we will overcome these barriers are both the means and the ends to success.

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