

DARING TO LEAD

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

Though this research was mostly about *listening* to executive directors, the findings do suggest as well some calls to action for those who “dare to lead.”

RECOGNIZE YOUR MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND LEADERSHIP AS IMPORTANT ASSETS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION: ASSETS THAT MUST BE STRENGTHENED AND SUSTAINED.

Management writer Peter Drucker has commented that nonprofit executives must answer to many more constituencies than their counterparts in business. Executive directors are called upon to be strong managers, strategic thinkers, reflective philosophers, successful fundraisers and public speakers, and inspirational leaders.

INSIST ON BUILDING THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE THAT WILL SUPPORT YOU, AND THAT WILL SUPPORT THE ORGANIZATION AFTER YOU HAVE DEPARTED.

Nonprofits have a tendency to do a dollar-and-a-half more services for every new dollar raised. Fear of “overhead costs” encourages executives to underestimate the need for high-level administrative and development staff, while others ineffectively delegate to the staff they have. In turn, an infrastructure that is not in line with the scale of an organization contributes to stress at every level, undermining an organization and its staff.

DEVELOP YOUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

The survey data indicate that the more satisfied and successful executive directors have boards who emotionally support them and help them out in critical management functions. But boards usually need coaching on how to best team up with their executives. Long-tenured executives in a recent focus group stated that a key factor to their success was their constant attention to board development. In order to rely on their boards for support, early in their current jobs the veteran executives had recruited the right talent for their boards and then worked with them to develop a healthy board/executive relationship. Maintenance of that mutually supportive culture required constant attention. It’s a two-way street: boards and their executives both carry responsibility to support and develop each other.

SEEK OUT OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET AND LEARN FROM OTHER EXECUTIVES.

Given the relative inexperience as nonprofit executives among the population, pursuing opportunities for both formal and informal networking and knowledge sharing is essential. Isolation prevents first-time executives from normalizing their experiences and challenges. Indeed a secondary impact of associations, conferences, focus groups and the like is to be able to place oneself on a normal curve among peers. Also, the line between professional and personal nurturing can be blurry when a job is all consuming, so attention to physical and spiritual health, as well as upkeep of non-work hobbies and relationships, is widely agreed to be essential to long-term sustainability.

BUILD FUTURE LEADERS.

The baby boomers who now comprise the largest segment of executive directors entered the workforce at a time when the nonprofit sector was expanding rapidly while simultaneously re-inventing itself. Since baby boomers didn't follow established career paths themselves, they are uncertain how to create them within their own organizations, and reluctant to encourage younger staff to seek advancement elsewhere. And with a large majority of executive directors being white, they may be on unfamiliar ground when encouraging and nurturing future leaders of color. Today's program managers, caseworkers, administrative assistants, activists and accountants will be tomorrow's executive directors.

In addition to developing future leaders for the sector, executive directors should pay special attention to their own successors. Whether the next leader comes from inside or outside the organization, communicate with the board about succession planning is an important responsibility. This can be especially difficult for founders or other long-time leaders, who can find it difficult to imagine separating from their organizations, and whose boards may shy away from raising the topic for fear of appearing un-supportive.

INSIST UPON EQUITABLE PAY.

Women executives would be wise to take notice of their pay relative to male peers. Now that executive compensation data is readily available via the IRS Form 990s online at Guidestar.org, women can pursue pay equity with comparable information in hand. Individual women executives may need to strengthen their negotiation skills, or get help from a sympathetic board member. Beyond personal compensation, organizations need to value positions appropriately for the qualities of leadership the organization demands. When executives purposefully suppress their wages, they make a demeaning statement about their own talents and their organizations, and set up their boards up for a rude awakening when they leave. In other words, if it would take twice her current salary to replace an executive, she should be making a lot more now.