

Executive Succession

Interim director a 'smart' choice for nonprofits in transition

Leadership transition can be difficult for nonprofit organizations, particularly if the departing professional is a much-admired founder or when the parting of company is not congenial. Boards sometimes live in denial that their beloved administrators are leaving for greener pastures, and severe financial and management demands leave some board-executive relationships shattered beyond repair.

Laura Otten, director of The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University's School of Business, said in circumstances such as these, it may serve an organization well to use an interim director: "It's a helpful alternative to grabbing the wrong person before you let go of another, or when you need to fill an already-empty position, and it's a practice that the corporate sector has used for a long time. Nonprofits are just beginning to see the interim director as a useful tool that says, 'we're an organization that is thinking very, very smart.'"

Today nonprofits are using interim directors for a variety of reasons—not just turnarounds—although the majority of what the Center has seen since it began its Interim Executive Director Program in 2006 has been about cleaning house.

"Sometimes the board knew this going into the program, and sometimes it was when the interim began peeling back the onion, so to speak, and found out just how much [the board] wasn't aware of and how much cleaning needed to be done," Otten said.

"This is a chance for the interim to go in and say, 'this is working, this is working and this isn't working,'" she said, "and help an organization get into a healthy position before it hires a permanent executive director. It also saves the new hire from spending his first year righting the ship, and that's huge."

Other benefits of an interim include the ability to:

- **Make tough decisions.** An interim director isn't hired to go gently and build long-term relationships, so he can use his objectivity to identify problem areas and make difficult decisions about underperforming programs, departments, employees, vendors, etc.

- **Assess what the board wants going forward in its new director.** Otten said that sometimes boards don't think about where they'd like to see their organizations in the future, so they wind up hiring the same sort of director they had. "This is no disrespect to the person leaving," she said, "but interims give boards opportunities to identify skills and talents needed in the next permanent executive director."

- **Allow time for reflection.** An interim director allows the organization time to catch its breath. Depending on how well the relationship ended with the last executive director, a board may appreciate the time to regroup. Or a board may not have heeded the warnings of its executive who told it he was retiring, and an interim allows the board time to hire the best replacement, instead of scrambling to fill the position.

- **Provide a fresh, objective look at the agency.** If an agency is losing its founder, there's an entrenched culture, Otten said, and staff, constituents and the board may need time to learn how to deal with issues differently. An interim provides the opportunity to see "what it feels like" under new leadership and can even challenge the board to reexamine its roles and responsibilities.

Nonprofit Center aids organizations in executive searches

La Salle University's Nonprofit Center assists not only nonprofit organizations seeking interim directors through its Interim Executive Director Program, but also those agencies beginning an executive search.

The separate program works with the board to:

- craft a job description;
- identify the most appropriate advertising vehicles;
- expedite the interview process;
- develop a competitive compensation package;
- and transition the new executive, post-hire.

For more information, visit www.lasallenonprofitcenter.org/. ■

Otten admits that leadership transitions are strenuous for everyone involved, and despite the advantages, organizations should go into the interim process with their eyes wide open. Stakeholders, employees, the community and even some funders may have negative perceptions of interim executives. In these situations, the director said it's important for the board to move quickly—in less than one year—and then make a permanent hire.

“Do a complete review of the literature, seek out interim programs and consultants in your community, and investigate all of your options,” Otten said. “The move should be seen as a positive alternative—a best practice.”

For more information

The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University's School of Business combines both an in-house team of experts in a wide range of issues with a diverse corps of professional consultants and instructors whose collective expertise gives them the broadest range possible in their scope of services for nonprofit organizations. For more information, go to www.lasallenonprofitcenter.org/. For questions about interim executives or the Interim Executive Director Program at The Nonprofit Center, contact Lori Moffa, consulting director, at (215) 951-1709 or moffa@lasalle.edu. ■

Advocacy

Recognizing 'slactivist' motivations keeps generation engaged

Young people today are perhaps the most tech-savvy, socially aware generation to ever volunteer or donate to a cause. This new group, sometimes known as “slactivists,” was born between 1982 and 1992 and can easily retrieve information on issues from environmental concerns in the Gulf to poor standards of health care for women and children in Africa. And thanks to the emergence of social media sites like Facebook and MySpace, these interested twentysomethings have an easy and accessible place to share their interests and opinions with countless friends and like-minded acquaintances the world over.

However, for nonprofits, converting this heightened awareness into concrete action has proven challenging.

“Young adults are changing activism, redefining it,” said Eliza Esquivel, the planning director of advertising agency TBWA and author of a new study on how to engage young adults.

The study, conducted with research partners Flamingo and Changing Our World, looked at which social issues were most important to today's twentysomethings and identified ways in which nonprofits could motivate the demographic enough to get them off their computers and into the field. Among the study's suggestions:

- **Take the time to understand what motivates twentysomethings.**

- **Identify places where young adults get their information online, and get your message in those venues.** Online news sites or blogs discussing the issues of concern to your nonprofit are excellent places to seed information about your organization and cause.

- **Highlight your corporate support.** A full 75 percent of young adults believe corporations have the material resources to help, and 60 percent think corporations have the knowledge and expertise to address social issues. Highlight how your corporate supporters, if any, are helping to address the issue.

- **Overcome the barriers.** The top three reasons young adults don't get involved are time constraints, skepticism that they can make a difference, and lack of opportunities for engagement. Therefore, cause-marketing programs need to make involvement easy—both in terms of time flexibility and discovering service opportunities.

The full study, *Social Activism 2.0*, is available for purchase at www.adage.com.

This article is adapted from "Demonstrating Impact Key to Engaging 'Slactivist' Generation," published in sister publication Corporate Philanthropy Report. ■