



Three Phases of Executive Transition

Boards must prepare for a transition thoughtfully and allow enough time for a careful and smooth process. Transitions, especially one for a founder or long term executive, are one of the most challenging tasks that a board of directors undertakes.

Executive transitions pass through three distinct phases, each building on the one before. Following are key issues faced by nonprofits during each of these phases.

Phase I: Getting Ready

Key Considerations and Decisions

- Deciding short-term who's in charge of what (if applicable)
- Hiring an interim manager, particularly if not ready to hire or in crisis
- Assessing organizational priorities and health
- Articulating clear goals and expectations for new executive
- Developing profile of new executive attributes, knowledge, skills
- Setting a competitive compensation strategy
- Saying an appropriate goodbye to the departing executive
- Understanding and dealing with departing executive legacy, particularly a long-term executive or founder
- Being transparent about role of departing executive in next steps

Tendencies and Obstacles

- Rushing to hire
- Making hasty decisions without assessing needs
- Becoming frozen and indecisive: too much process
- Employing overly rational process that ignores feelings of loss, anger, etc.
- Underestimating time and help required
- Not asking for help when needed
- Denying real condition of organization
- Recruiting too soon
- Misreading needs of the organization; attempting to hire executive exactly like (or opposite of) departing executive
- Hiring an inappropriate interim manager, often someone liked and admired on staff or board but not experienced in what's needed

Phase II: Recruiting

Key Considerations and Decisions

- Agreeing on a recruitment strategy, including diversity outreach
- Proactively seeking candidates
- Screening and ranking candidates against profile
- Completing thorough reference checks before final interviews or selection
- Spending informal time with finalists and introducing to key stakeholders
- Selecting and negotiating
- Having a back-up plan if first candidate declines
- Completing letter of appointment

Tendencies and Obstacles

- Advertising a non-competitive salary, limiting applicant pool
- Expecting a diverse pool without outreach and networking
- Getting buried in resumes and process with inadequate systems
- Appointing “obvious successor” with insufficient thought or checking
- Doing reference checks too late to influence finalist selection
- Appointing a new executive with board divided on decision
- Not fully disclosing to finalist condition of organization and first year expectations

Phase III: Post Hire

Key Considerations and Decisions

- Welcoming and introducing new executive
- Orienting new executive to organization and community
- Providing support for success of new executive
- Setting benchmarks for new executive for three-, six- and twelve-months
- Agreeing on executive evaluation process
- Executive development planning by new executive with board support
- Agreeing on when to revisit strategic plan and direction of organization

Tendencies and Obstacles

- Not welcoming or introducing new executive to community
- Succumbing to exhaustion and abandoning new executive during first 30- 60 days
- Micromanaging
- Giving insufficient priority to shifting roles and relationship building in first month
- New executive becoming overwhelmed, ignoring board and stakeholder relationships, staff or administration; having difficulty in balancing all three
- Curtailing surprises for new executive and board
- Paying no attention to work plans or evaluation system