

Governance

Board engagement is key to successful succession planning

Succession planning is a leadership development strategy that identifies an executive who can step into the administrator's role when the current executive director steps down, said Leslie Bonner, a consultant, coach and facilitator at Bonner Consulting.

"It's important to have this conversation with your board," said Bonner. "Ultimately, the decision about who replaces the executive director [belongs to] the board, whether you look internally or externally for the next leader ... and such planning frees up the CEO to face other challenges at the organization."

The consultant said the board's role in the succession planning process includes:

- owning the executive director succession plan,
- recognizing succession planning as a strategic goal for the organization,
- budgeting for succession planning and
- conducting the search for a new executive director.

One way to get board input into the process, Bonner said, is to enlist the board's help in writing a job description for the CEO position. The job description will act as the basis of the new executive's responsibilities when the organization has a vacancy to fill at the top, she said.

Bonner suggested that organizations concentrate their efforts on CEO skills such as managing board relationships, recruiting board members, developing current board members and understanding the characteristics of good governance, because these are the sorts of challenges the next leader will face.

"This is one of the areas where there is a big difference between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors,"

Bonner said. "It's unique to the nonprofit sector."

Any effective newcomer to the CEO's position must possess a variety of work experiences, Bonner said, so be sure to identify those that are most important to the organization. She recommended valuable experiences such as:

- fundraising and revenue generation;
- board recruitment, managing board relationships and engaging board members;
- programmatic experience;
- visibility and experience in the community and nonprofit sector;
- broad management experience; and
- leading organizational change.

Other benefits of succession planning will include organizational sustainability, because the organization's "human talent" must grow as the nonprofit's mission and programs grow, and sound risk management, because it's essential to transfer knowledge about the organization, Bonner said.

This article was adapted from "Plan for Succession Now or Pay the Price Later," originally published in sister publication Board & Administrator for Administrators Only.

For more information

Leslie Bonner is a consultant, coach and facilitator with over 25 years of experience working with and in a variety of organizations, including nonprofits, financial services, energy, professional services, health care and small business. To learn more or to contact Bonner, visit <http://www.bonner-consulting.com/>. ■