

WHEN AN E.D. LEAVES

SETTING UP AN EXECUTIVE TRANSITION COMMITTEE

The departure of an agency executive demands an increased level of leadership and activity by a board of directors. The obvious task after an executive director resigns is the search for a new chief executive. But a healthy transition in staff leadership usually entails many more tasks as well:

Arranging a proper send-off for the departing executive,

The selection, if needed, of an interim executive,

Deciding on how the search will be conducted and with what outside help,

A thorough organizational audit to determine the key challenges the next CEO will face, and

A carefully structured entry for the newly hired executive that sets him or her up for success--welcoming rituals, community introductions, performance goals, an evaluation protocol.

To coordinate all these facets of an executive turnover, some Boards find it helpful to appoint an ad hoc Transition Committee. The Board's standing executive committee might take on the role of transition leadership. Minimally the committee should include one or two key Board officers. Adding staff members to the committee fills several important needs:

It broadens the perspective of the committee as it looks at current challenges and future vision for the agency.

It communicates to the staff that the Board values their input in charting the agency's future and choosing the new leader.

And it mitigates the anxiety natural in a time of change by giving staff direct access to information on how the change is being handled.

A typical Transition Committee is composed of 4 Board members and 2 staff. Ideally staff representation on the committee will be staff-selected. Staff, by the way, can also provide logistical support to the committee.

The committee should begin mapping the transition activities as soon as the resignation is made known to the board. Boards who delay can find themselves making decision in crisis mode, such as selecting an acting E.D after the resigning CEO has already left the job.

Money is also an incentive to starting early. Many agencies CompassPoint has been working with have been successful in getting special grants from their funders to pay for transition expenses. Foundations who already have made significant programmatic investments in an agency know the value of a well managed CEO transition to an agency's vitality. As part of its

grant application, the committee will be asked to develop its work plan and time line and to identify any consultants it may want to use for transition guidance.

Reassurance to key stakeholders is a major benefit to having a visible and energized Transition Committee. Staff are usually destabilized by the departure of a good leader. Donors can also be lost. A Board decisively swinging into action as a solid bridge between E.D.s gives confidence to all agency sectors that the organization will continue on track under fresh leadership.