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Project Pointers

Issue 24

Winter 2011

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New Year Planning

I love the holidays, but also enjoy the plans and dreams that accompany early January days. I'm kicking off the new year by meeting with a wonderful group of nonprofit CEOs to discuss **executive succession planning**. The previous edition of Project Pointers addressed issues of organizational readiness, resulting in many positive responses. So let's begin the year by looking at one item on the risk management "to do" list.

EMERGENCY SUCCESSION PLANNING

The fall newsletter discussed the importance of organizational readiness and readers were reminded that succession planning must be part of strategic planning. Once you are confident that succession will be an integral part of ongoing board discussions, you can move past readiness steps to contemplate the unexpected: absences, emergencies, even disasters. And, while we are focusing on the executive director or CEO role, first identify all positions that require an emergency transition plan. Depending on the specialized roles and skill sets, you may need plans for the other two or three top administrators as well. Try to measure the risk of losing a key staff member and then prepare for that sudden vacancy.

SETTING THE CRITERIA

What exactly does the executive director or CEO **do**? Each staff member, volunteer or stakeholder sees the role through his or her own needs or points of interaction. In many cases, executive functions reflect a leader's choices about where and how to direct energy. Looking at a list of the incumbent's responsibilities will eventually be helpful, but this is not the first step.

First, what criteria are essential during an emergency term? What must an executive director do at this organization to support the mission, fulfill all commitments and advance the organization in the community? The board should initiate this conversation and come to agreement on the key requirements. It also must determine how much authority, including speaking for the nonprofit, goes with the interim assignment. Once these have been finalized, specific individuals may be considered for the role.

SELECTING THE INTERIM LEADER

A good emergency succession plan identifies an **internal** candidate or makes it clear that none exists. Often, an internal person has been selected to move into the leadership role if necessary. If this happens, then some or all of their responsibilities must also be reassigned. These changes should be announced to the staff and board to avoid confusion.

The expected length of time the interim serves may not be known, especially if the vacancy results from illness. And, at some point, the board may need to initiate a formal search for a new executive director. But even for the immediate period following an emergency, the interim needs to know if serving precludes him or her from applying for the permanent position and what, if any, assumptions are being made.

If the plan dictates that an **external** person should fill the executive role, then a simple process for securing the talent must be outlined. In most cases, it is helpful to have an objective outsider facilitate this process.

EMERGENCY SUCCESSION PLAN COMPONENTS

The actual document will vary from agency to agency, but some topics are essential for any plan. These include the following:

Purpose This may seem obvious, but the document should briefly describe the reasons the organization needs a plan. This statement

usually includes references to a desire for continuous coverage of CEO duties and services for clients in the event of an unplanned absence. Many also refer to funding and external collaborations.

CEO Duties The easiest way to handle this is to refer to the job description -- and update it if necessary. Even with the job description in hand, the plan should list the leader's key functions. Examples include board development, staff direction, fiscal accountability, and donor relationships.

Time It is helpful to have plans that distinguish between short, unplanned absences and long-term absences. Depending on the units of time addressed (days, weeks, months) the roles of the board's executive committee and the management team (CEO's direct reports) should be clear. Tensions often arise between these two groups and should be prevented.

Who Does What To prepare for emergencies, two people should be named for each role. For example, if an executive director is suddenly hospitalized, the named interim leader may be out of town on vacation. These assignments should also be included in each designee's job description. Given the uncertainty of the situation, the board may want to feel in control, with choices. The language for this section does need to allow for flexibility.

Communication Emergencies evoke emotional reactions. It is likely that the temporary change in leadership will create feelings of insecurity within the organization and perhaps externally. The plan should address the forms of required communication and the audiences. Generally, the entire nonprofit community does not need to know about a temporary shift in duties. But a partner in an initiative may need to know. Certainly, the staff must understand what plans have been made.

A document that incorporates the above ideas will help your nonprofit function steadily when the inevitable happens. The next edition of Project Pointers will begin a succession discussion for planned departures. I'm sending my very best wishes for rewarding moments during the months ahead.

Happy New Year,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mustafa". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Resources

My workshops and past editions of this newsletter have addressed strategies to support sustainability. A new book on this topic is quite helpful: [Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability](#) by Jeanne Bell, Jan Masaoka and Steve Zimmerman (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

WORKSHOP ANNOUNCEMENTS

[Federal Grants Workshop Postponed](#)

The February federal grants workshops have been postponed. Please stay tuned for an upcoming announcement about the rescheduled two-part offering. Marta will focus on organizational readiness while other presenters provide content about securing and implementing grants.

[Project Management Workshops](#)

Marta's Successful Project Management Workshop will be offered on Tuesday, April 5, 2011 - 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. at The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati
3805 Edwards Road, 5th Floor, Cincinnati, OH 45209
Register online at [workshop registration](#)

This workshop will be offered again on
Thursday, December 8, 2011

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