

PROJECT SUMMARY

JULY 2022

Pathways to Leadership Transition and Leveraging Executive Director Expertise

“Pathways to Leadership Transition and Leveraging Executive Director Expertise” engaged experienced executive directors (ED) of farm and food system nonprofits in an exploration of the dynamics that frequently lead to ED burnout and departure. From the outset, the project organizers acknowledged that there are challenging structural conditions within the nonprofit sector that are outside the control of any single executive director or organization. Within this context, Pathways focused on actions that individual EDs and other organizational stakeholders such as board members, other staff, funders, et. al., can take.

During a one-day facilitated convening EDs discussed components of their roles that serve as **both sources of satisfaction and challenge**. While virtually all EDs work through these areas of responsibility every day, they can become particular barriers to preparing for an effective, orderly leadership transition. The table below summarizes the root causes and suggested interventions to improve conditions for executive directors.

Managing Staff

Root Causes: Culture of selflessness and prioritization of mission over self-care; limited HR and personnel management experience; inadequate staffing. (Each condition exacerbated by pandemic and societal upheaval.)

Interventions: Regular professional development opportunities; requiring use of job benefits such as vacation and sick time; use of real-time communication tools to address emerging issues.

Managing the Board

Root Causes: Mismatch between the skills of those who serve on the board and the organization’s needs. High-functioning boards are the exception.

Interventions: Accurate job descriptions for board members; recruitment to align board member skills with organizational needs; regular board training.

Fundraising

Root Causes: Most EDs’ limited exposure to or comfort with wealth; situating responsibility for fundraising solely within ED role; insufficient funding for operations.

Interventions: Regular professional development for ED; increased involvement by board and staff in fundraising; hiring of dedicated development professionals whenever possible.

Wearing All Hats

Root Causes: Belief by EDs that they need to be involved in all elements of the organization; inadequate staffing to accomplish organizational goals; limited funding for administration and HR.

Interventions: Develop and regularly update job descriptions for board and staff; develop internal communications systems to ensure all understand the “big picture” and how their roles fit together.

EDs shared that the challenges they encountered when initiating their leave-taking ranged from the organizational to the personal. **Actions that eased the departure process for their organizations** included ensuring that staff and board understood their respective roles in the transition process; thoughtfully managing internal and external communications with regard to their departure; and documenting and sharing their job functions and external relationships with others in the organization to reduce workflow disruption and facilitate onboarding of a successor. **Actions that helped them manage the personal implications** of their departure included taking time to process the vagaries of their tenure and to name and celebrate their legacy; exploring new professional options before leaving; and securing a transition mentor. **To support their successors**, participants recommended bringing on organizational development consultants before hiring a new ED; supporting a coach for the new ED; and, when possible and desired, offering clearly-defined options for the continued involvement of the former ED.

**FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT OR THE FULL REPORT, PLEASE CONTACT
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