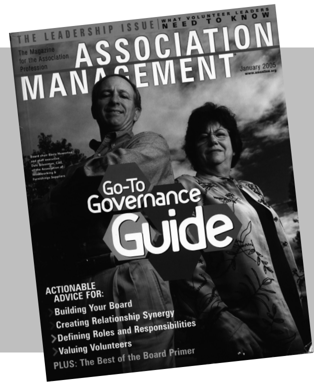

American Society of Association Executives

En Route to Executive Retention

The Board's Role in Retaining the Chief Staff Leader

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

Why is it that so many executive director trains leave the station full of enthusiastic supporters only to be derailed by the end of the first contract term? Two factors are often at play: 1) failures on the chief staff leader's part, such as inadequate relationship management, lack of flexibility in style, or the inability to operate in a dynamic environment and 2) the board's ambivalence toward addressing these potential performance issues early enough to allow for constructive course corrections. Boards that address values conflicts, performance expectations, and style differences in a positive manner can keep their CEOS on track and on staff. After all, frequent changes in top staff leadership are clearly detrimental to the organization.

Research published by Compass-Point Nonprofit Services, San Francisco, in its 1999 study "Leadership Lost: A Study on Executive Tenure and Experience" indicated that, in most cases, nonprofit organizations benefit from executive tenure of at least three to five years. A series of successive, short-term executives can do lingering harm to an organization's culture and performance. Thus, taking the time early in the CEOs tenure to nurture effective relationships can help the association avoid chaotic disruptions further down the line.

"The cost of executive derailment is tremendous in terms of both organizational disruption and lost leadership potential," confirms Rita Harmon, president of Harmon Consulting, LLC, and former executive director of Fight for Children, which has offices in Vienna, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. "Often the executives who lose their jobs are highly talented leaders who were simply not given the tools they needed at the right time to maximize their effectiveness," she says of her experiences working with numerous youth service organizations both locally and nationally.

Boards have a major responsibility not only to get the board-CEO relationship off to a smooth start but also to promptly correct performance issues. In my experience, four common board failings contribute to short executive tenures:

1. Neglecting to give timely and candid performance feedback. Multiple reasons explain this oversight. Board members may be eager to avoid conflict, preferring to give the staff leader an extended honeymoon in the hope that he or she will somehow *read the tea leaves* if things aren't going well. Or perhaps the executive is a friend of a key constituent or supporter – or has a wide sphere of influence, a fact that may generate fear that any action will snowball into a public relations crisis. Or the problem may be as simple as the board's unwillingness to admit making a hiring mistake.

At the same time, performance review, at best, are difficult instruments. However, when used properly, the board can make them into a valuable tool. "Organizational review processes in most cases miss the mark because they are too perfunctory," says Harmon. "They don't drill down to the level of detail that is going to give the staff executive the straightforward feedback he or she needs to operate effectively. I've heard stories about executives receiving glowing reviews only to find themselves in hot water six months later. Many organizations have become so concerned with the legal ramifications of personnel reviews that they have lost the ability to talk straight. No one wants to give tough feedback, but that's the role of board leadership." And that starts with early, informal discussions of performance issues. You don't have to wait for a scheduled appraisal.

2. Failing to renegotiate goals. "Although boards are usually good about defining their expectations initially, as circumstances change in the organization or environment, they don't always go back to address the necessary change in direction," says veteran board member and association executive Pamela Hemann, CAE , president, Association Management Services, Inc., Pasadena, California.
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be lulled into a false sense of security – reinforced by superficial cordiality and a lack of candid feedback. The likely result is an inability to build the coalitions necessary for effective problem solving and decision making.

3. Expecting a jack of all trades. The typical CEO rarely has skills in *every* area. The CEO's talents must be balanced by the strengths of others in areas where the new leader is weak or has inadequate experience.

4. Taking too little time to orient the new staff leader to the organizational culture. In my work with nonprofit organizations, when staff executives are asked about the one point they wish that they had known when they first arrived, many state that they could have benefited most from deeper understanding of organization and community culture.

Warning: Breakdown Ahead

Is your board-executive relationship a wreck waiting to happen? Answer these questions to find out:

- Do you sit in board meetings with your arms folded across your chest, trying your best not to make eye contact with the staff leader?
- Do you or other board members leave the room while the staff leader is talking or making a presentation?
- Are there lots of sidebar conversations while the staff leader is speaking or presenting?
- Do you no longer ask questions of the staff leader?
- Has the board withheld resources tied to the chief staff executive's execution of the strategic plan?
- Have you or other board members heard reports of passive resistance from staff?
- Do subordinates go around the staff leader and come directly to the board to complain?
- Is the board going directly to the staff and leaving the CEO out of the loop?
- Are you or other board members reluctant to approve a previously discussed raise or bonus for the staff leader?
- Has the board delayed the CEO's performance review or provided only a perfunctory review?

If you answered "yes" to more than a couple of these questions, your association may be on its way to turnover in the top position.

Task for boards

Don't let your board make these mistakes. Even the most highly qualified, widely experienced staff leader needs coaching and support in a new role. To get past the first contract term, it is critical for boards to take an active role in these areas:

Provide orientation. Start with a comprehensive orientation for the new CEO. Set expectations and provide him or her with information about the role, culture, and performance-review process. Newly appointed administrative leaders need to know about the realities of decision-making and problem-solving processes. They also need to be informed of any conflicting management styles or unwritten behavioral norms.

The board chair of one professional leadership development association, for example, gave the new CEO documents covering the history of the organization and the roles of the board, the chair, and the staff leader, in addition to meeting with the new CEO over an extended lunch. In this informal meeting, the board chair reviewed institutional and board culture, the need for style flexibility, unwritten norms and expectations, pros and cons of the association's current problem-solving process, political issues relating to each board member, and the communication style preferences of individual board members.

Offer role support. Schedule periodic role-support sessions so that the executive director and board chair can have frank discussions about expectations and requirements of mutual support. "One of the disconnects that occurs early on, usually in the second year, is insufficient discussion and clarity about the roles of the board and the executive director and the boundaries of their respective responsibilities," says Harmon. "Obviously these issues are discussed in the abstract when a new staff CEO is first appointed, but they must be periodically re-examined to allow course corrections based on real-time circumstances. The disconnect happens most commonly around strategies for achieving the organization's mission. The executive director may be pursuing strategies which, for whatever reason, are not in line with board expectations or within the scope of the executive director's responsibilities as perceived by the board." In these cases, "role and shared responsibility charting is helpful," she says.

Give feedback. Provide timely and direct feedback about performance issues. And do so in a way that will be perceived as coaching or mentoring rather than punitive. Develop a clear plan of action and measures of success.

For instance, the board of an educational nonprofit association successfully uncoupled its CEO's annual performance review (tied to salary) from the professional development performance review. Based on feedback the staff leader had received, the board chair and staff leader customized professional development action plans using a format that tied the professional development strategy to specific actions and desired goals. Such a strategy-action-goal format is simple to use. If the goal is style flexibility, for examples, a strategy might be to complete a leadership style inventory, and a related action might be to practice various leadership styles with board members.

Don't wait for the annual performance review to make mid-course corrections. Action coaching must occur at the time a problem is spotted. For example, if the staff leader responds combatively or defensively to questions in a meeting, the board chair should take him or her aside for immediate coaching after the meeting.

Develop and mentor. Early coaching and informal mentoring are imperative. A mentor can create a safety zone in which the new leader is shown the ropes and can ask questions. Never assume that a new staff CEO knows how to lead the organization based on prior experience.

In smaller organizations, the board chair may serve as mentor, and the mentoring process can be as simple as the board chair meeting with the staff leader over coffee on a regular basis. If the mentor is not the board chair, it should be someone whose deep knowledge in the field fills a gap in the staff leader's repertoire. For example, a staff leader who is not proficient in government relations or public policy may be paired successfully with the head of the advocacy committee or an external lobbyist. Because the mentoring agenda evolves from the CEO's needs, the mentor must have the expertise and portfolio to fill those needs. Never assign a mentor on a random basis.

I've observed the board chair of one association use a particularly creative approach to mentoring. She helped the CEO develop a personal advisory council consisting of eight professionals that the CEO had met previously and come to admire. The group's wide range of expertise provided the CEO with rich resources for framing and solving challenges. Never hesitate to invite qualified people to serve on such a council. People are flattered to be asked – and it's simply good practice for a CEO to have an external sounding board available to provide opinions on complex issues or experiences with best practices.

Develop rules of engagement for the CEO and the board chair or full board. It takes a serious dialogue to decide what the board and CEO are wiling to commit to in order to maximize their effectiveness in working together. Examples of rules of engagement include getting issues on the table early enough to make course corrections; being open to shared problem solving; respecting confidentiality; letting go of assumptions; tackling the problem, not the individual; committing to active listening; and taking ownership of decisions. "There has to be a good deal of trust between an executive and a board," says Hemann. "Board meetings must be a forum (in which) to speak freely and get to the heart of things. The culture has to be one of honest dialogue, not gamesmanship."

Keep the staff CEO informed. "Both the board and the executive director need to make a commitment to continually scan the environment and have a dialogue about it," says Hemann. "Board members particularly are in a good position to see new developments in the profession or industry that may not be visible to the executive or the staff. They have to be the eyes and ears in the field and be diligent about relating that information to the executive director. Without an eye on the current environment, the organization can all too easily focus on the past rather than on what lies ahead."

Hemann also suggests that the board chair encourage the CEO to step back occasionally from the day to day and take time for creative thinking. Says Hemann, "Finding time for reflective and strategic thinking is difficult, but absolutely essential. I use my time on airplanes to read a new book, catch up on *Harvard Business Review*, or just sort out ideas. Others I know schedule reflection time at their offices, even if it's on weekends."

Add an evaluation element

Assessment is a critical tool for keeping staff leader trains on track. Unfortunately, nonprofit boards often resist testing assumptions, deep-seated beliefs and traditions. Reasons for this neglect may include a desire to maintain the status quo or overconfidence in board members' knowledge of the organization's history upon which they base future direction and goals. Customized self-assessment programs such as those published by the Leader to Leader Institute, New York City (www.leadertoleader.org), can be invaluable in gauging the board's and the organization's effectiveness, as well as in identifying ineffective strategies that can no longer be justified in today's dynamic leadership environment. Used on a regular basis, assessment tools can help boards and staff keep strategic organizational objectives up to date and lay out the clear plan of action, including measures of success, that sets the direction for the staff leader's execution of organizational goals.

Assessments can result in dramatic changes. For example as a result of its self-assessment, one board clarified board and staff roles and developed a new committee structure, a new format for the agenda for board meetings, and more effective communication feedback loops. Qualitative measures of success included lack of conflict, the degree to which committees were accomplishing their work within established time frames, and greater speed of moving through agendas.

Another organization's assessment resulted in new vision and mission statements, an entirely new strategic plan, and new priorities based on rethinking the group's client base.

By focusing on swift orientation and early relationship building, providing support and mentorship, and mustering up the courage to conduct frank discussions when issues dictate, the board can have much more control in keeping the staff leadership train on track.

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