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Informational Report

Executive Leadership

By Ajax Rangel & Paulina Doran

Worldwide, most NGOs' (Non-Governmental Organizations') executive directors will leave within five years. How to reduce this rapid turnover and burnout to preserve talent and momentum.

Challenges and problems in your nonprofit with effective leadership?

“According to a global study, two-thirds of executive directors will vacate their positions in the next five years.”



In the nonprofit industry, leadership can often be unstable. This is often due to a heavy turnover of Executive Directors (EDs), which is typically related to mistakes made in hiring leadership and an inability to properly encourage their organizational heads with lesser experience ⁽¹⁾.

In fact, according to a global study, two-thirds of EDs will vacate their positions in the next five years. Others may not seek opportunities to advance due to the fundamental pressures of running a nonprofit ⁽²⁾. Why are EDs having such difficulties in that role and in leading their organizations?





In many ways, trends show that many EDs are having trouble working with boards of directors, who lack much understanding of their counter-part's functions and duties. And that in turn creates internal conflict. Only 20% of EDs are reported to be highly content with their boards ⁽¹⁾. In addition, new leaders typically have no outlined strategy or guidelines to follow in leading their organization to success, which puts them at a huge disadvantage right from the start.

The mechanisms in place to provide directors support can often be inadequate. The Meyer Foundation and CompassPoint, a management consulting organization, reported that only one out of ten NGO directors had access to a specialized trainer to guide their processes. Because of this, EDs often lack the proper instruction to make impactful decisions.

In fact, the Center for Creative Leadership has noted that leadership aptitude has been diminishing in the potential applicants up for hire for ED positions ⁽³⁾. Most people are not able to satisfy the prerequisite skills that nonprofits desire. And those involve a lack of in-house guidance and helping their group to thrive in an environment of surmounting obstacles due to inefficient degree programs that provide inadequate leadership training.

This is worsened in environments where resources are scarce and monetary revenue is highly restricted. With the burden of economic stressors and less money to be allocated toward organizational operations, leaders tend to have considerable levels of anxiety and greater professional strain. They may even become more defensive with their staffs when challenged about their weaknesses or feel remorseful over poor outcomes, preventing them from moving forward and accepting and adapting to criticism.

Becoming a leader also involves restructuring one's professional identity. Instead of directly helping and assisting people, EDs assume a role that distances them from the people they are serving⁽²⁾. In this new role, EDs may be unable to change priorities and gauge new and different responsibilities.

When they first entered the field, nonprofit leaders probably assumed that their major professional goal was to help and better global society. But this core objective often does not match the concerns in leadership roles, which require managing resources and overseeing others. This internal battle can give way to confusion and doubts on whether unexperienced executive directors truly aspire to expend energy in leading their NGOs to a more promising future.





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In addition, turmoil and confusion also result when a single leader must direct and supervise diverse departments, each with specific values, that often disagree on the solutions to key problems. In situations like this, leaders have little room to investigate the most effective routes for their NGOs' optimal performance. This hindrance is often paired with a short supply of resources when it comes to staffing, hi-tech equipment, and serviceable assets as well as increasing limitations. These include lack of funds to fulfill



structural costs and operating expenses, excessive stakeholder anticipations, and the vast liabilities of supervising a nonprofit ⁽³⁾.

In turn, an executive director is in charge of not only filling the gap of required assistance, but also deciding who will receive help, determining staff requirements in both number and purpose, pursuing the best courses of action for organizational success, and confirming results with the utmost transparency.



These deficits and instabilities in employees taking on leadership roles can significantly affect an NGO's ability to meet the requirements of its clientele, donors and stakeholders, and providing them with adequate services and products. For example, in a survey of nonprofit human service organizations in 2013, over 56%



failed to help all of their clients and could not keep up with the number of people requiring their services. This finding is troubling when current data has suggested that overall demand for nonprofit assistance through financial aid and civic work has substantially increased.

It is clear that leadership is a skill that needs to be fostered in nonprofits and organizational cultures. Executive directors must know how to grow into roles of authority, make effective choices, manage their staff and resources wisely, handle fluctuations in technology and the industry, and work with their boards to better service their constituents ⁽³⁾. These goals can only be done when EDs have the appropriate leadership development training with evolving materials integrated into their organizational culture with one-on-one instruction and user-friendly applications.

Strategies to be a successful leader.

When assessing how to become a more powerful leader, an executive director must consider strategies to implement widespread organizational changes and creatively accommodate staff and stakeholders. One of the most important goals is to have a clear picture of all employees' responsibilities, their work motivations, and individual staff obligations leading to advancement and accomplishment of an NGO's mission ⁽⁴⁾.

With this knowledge, leaders must be educated and well-versed on the purposes and goals of their nonprofit. All decisions and actions should be propelled by the mission. A leader should also create a cohesive identity and trademark style for an NGO, ensuring that the public identifies it in a certain way with a unique voice and that its messaging or values are integral with the leader's own beliefs. It is imperative that executive directors pay attention to both the way they individually relate to the underlying cause as well as how they relate to their NGOs in a business context.



“Executive Directors should model their own conduct after those individuals who have shown effective management techniques in past work environments and left a good impression on their staff...”

Furthermore, Executive Directors should model their own conduct after those individuals who have shown effective management techniques in past work environments and left a good impression on their staff, encouraging them to succeed. Following the example of others can include observing a mentor's work day and processes. By watching someone in his or her real environment, it is easier to pick up best performance practices, the most valuable methods for the greatest outcomes, and role expectations. Becoming a member of a nonprofit leaders' group to discuss internal procedures can also be helpful in learning best practices to develop a successful NGO. This prevents a new leader from wasting time on fruitless pursuits, falling into a routine of indecision, or making countless errors.





Nonprofit success may also be decided by the competencies of an ED ⁽⁵⁾. Typically, it is important for leaders to have several pertinent assets to strengthen their efficacy. These can be monitored early in one's career and assessed on a yearly basis to evaluate one's growth as a nonprofit executive. By looking closely at these leadership skills, individuals can see where they are faltering and plan how to address those shortcomings.

To begin, leaders must have a clear vision for the future and be able to communicate their observations enthusiastically. When EDs have passion for their plans, the staff will adopt a similar attitude. Next, any plans adopted should be consistent with the requirements of the targeted communities so that all constituents are kept updated, involved in the process, and given the tools to understand the underlying strategy. At an organizational level, EDs also comprehend the environment they are working in and can explain the customs of an NGO to people who are unfamiliar with them.



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When monitoring employee performance, the success of fundraising or marketing campaigns, or any other necessary outcome, thriving executive directors look to find the best way to quantify any results and defines the necessary standards to evaluate any operational assessments. In addition, successful EDs speak candidly to sponsors or investors to recognize specific problems and examine how their NGO can address particular demands.



EDs should make it a priority to share their ideas and plans with the majority of their staff, so that they can participate in implementing a developed strategy for positive results.

With this goal, they also ensure that employees are aided in doing their jobs and are held accountable for their responsibilities, and that the board of directors, volunteers, and any other constituents are governed with the utmost diligence.



Leaders must also be conscious of their reputation in the community at a local, national, and international level, ensuring that the organization is recognizable by the people who need to see it and that the public admires its initiatives. An important part of this objective is ensuring that external partnerships are made with an array of organizations, both for-profit and non-profit, with the goal of amplifying one's purpose. This has the added benefit of potentially boosting financial gain and revenue.

However, a business mindset only goes so far. Leaders with the best results tend to realize their place in the grander scheme and empathize with the people they are supporting. Leaders are confidently focused on promoting and supporting their cause through networking with investors and other charities to fulfill their mission. They are always modifying their procedures within and outside the NGO to ensure the organization prospers and their target audience's needs are addressed.



Competent leaders ensure that everyone and they themselves are nurtured and cared for. They, in turn, become exceptional examples to their entire staff and board of how to perform in the workplace.

It is also possible to train oneself and other departmental heads via conferences and workshops on different subjects of management and leadership. These can be extremely beneficial to attend during off-seasons for skill-building purposes. Routine topics that are discussed at these events include management techniques, campaign funding ideas, tactical preparation, accounting procedures, collaborative ventures, and group synergy development. These tend to be led by community groups and local nonprofits, which provide networking opportunities with people who have similar passions and professional goals.

Support groups and postgraduate certificates can also be a strong asset for EDs' personal growth, where classes or sessions can be attended physically in real time or behind a computer screen for one's convenience.



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In addition to training and mastering leadership techniques, personal and professional development on an individual level can be helpful to ensure one is mentally prepared for the job. Constructing an identity as a leader is a multi-step process. EDs must balance the position by adopting contextual rank and a social rank⁽¹⁾. They must first belong to the group. This can include helping with donations and connecting with their target communities to build contextual rank. When EDs better relate to their client's customs and beliefs and personally connect with staff, they create lasting ties.

However, it is also important to stand out from the crowd to build social rank, so that staff, donors, volunteers, stakeholders, and clients realize that EDs provide direction and guidance. This means that you have power and authority over others who look to you on how they should behave and approach their duties. New organizational heads may have to manage losing some contextual rank and gaining more social rank, while also practicing supervision skills by taking advice from other leaders and seeking collaborative partnerships for growth.





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In formulating a sound leadership persona, maintaining equilibrium between personal goals and professional goals for the NGO can be helpful. Successful leaders desire to make the workplace follow principles such as equality and inclusion. They are interested in the opinions of others, encourage group participation and act as advisors or mediators between departments, but still maintain power and have the last word in all matters.

Leaders also use their collective approach to ensure networking is a priority and that inventive answers are developed to solve any organizational, stakeholder or client concerns about the newest technology⁽³⁾. They also advocate for sharing and distributing resources for widespread success of all groups acting in benefit of their cause.

“They must be able to examine where they were responsible for organizational faults, and act accordingly to dispel the errors and move forward.”



It is also advantageous to develop a persona that can firmly make choices for the organization and champion its ideas and others' ideas with ease. This may require testing methods to maintain staff attention, developing resolutions to meet a specific environment, and being able to handle negative assessments of performance. All of these elements go into instilling confidence in taking ownership of the job.

Finally, EDs must polish their ability to contemplate their place in the organization, knowing how they are different from other employees and how they can relate to others. They must be able to examine where they were responsible for organizational faults, and act accordingly to dispel the errors and move forward. They understand that they are only human and can fail, but that failure can reinforce growth and transformation for attainment of goals.



Supervising managers and employed staff.

Relationships with staff and supporting their growth can be just as fundamental as learning from adept directors ⁽⁴⁾. For this reason, executive directors must assess which employees have specific strengths and how they can be capitalized. A productive leader always inspires and emboldens employees within the organization to reach out of their comfort zones and attempt innovative assignments, allowing them to function flexibly and independently and without imposing his or her power.

On the other hand, executive directors should communicate with their employees and learn from them new skills that could be assets to the broader organization and one's own professional development. Just by paying attention and recognizing the insights of one's staff, stakeholders, members of the board, professional associates, and other constituents can make a world of difference in applying organizational transformations.

Executive Directors can design several techniques and types of programs to build managerial competencies and aptitudes, allowing leadership traits to extend outward to other departments of an organization ⁽⁶⁾. To begin, managers should design professional development curricula for their operations and actively participate in the trainings.



Furthermore, executive directors' instruction on leadership should address the pre-determined problems of the NGO. Lessons should also be personalized and focused on working with individuals on a one-on-one basis for improvement, evaluating their performance.



One successful program is a three-part instruction series, which allows managers to work with experienced experts in the field (visiting speakers), gain more information on leadership skills, and apply the concepts they have learned in a simulated setting based on real life. Managers can discover how to upgrade their leadership abilities, interact with external contacts, administer tasks, and decipher interactions among board members and executives. These types of development initiatives give managers more power in planning departmental proposals, supporting others, operating within policy guidelines, employing necessary resources, requesting grant money, conducting risk-benefit evaluations, and overseeing constituents (such as donors and volunteers).



With this instructive series, managers - instead of acting impulsively or going into full-force emergency mode - are better able to supervise their departments in coordination with wider objectives and make necessary transformations to lead their staff. Executive directors can also help advance organizational aims by focusing on building up independent sectors' performance, consistency, and development in a way that respects employees' customs and values.

This type of module also safely allows participants to convey their feelings about key transitional initiatives in their nonprofits, and see how to integrate others' ideas into their own endeavors. Similarly, managers can better understand their operations more broadly rather than solely concentrate on their own behaviors or subdivision functions.



They can also ponder their own strengths and weaknesses. When managers better understand their roles, others' responses to their behaviors, and the underlying forces shaping their NGOs, they become self-assured and confident in their capacity as leaders.

Other helpful elements that can be used in professional development training include 360-degree feedback and action learning projects. Both ask managers involved to actively contribute and play a part in their growth.

In 360-degree feedback, individuals can learn how to handle criticism and gauge their internal and external functioning. They can talk to others about what they need to work on and what they are doing correctly, and learn how to give their own opinions to coworkers.



In action learning projects, individuals can concentrate on refining and cultivating their work behaviors to ensure an NGO operates successfully in a manner that best fits their own needs.

Finally, simulations and organizational inclusion can help the teaching process, since they apply knowledge and integrate staff into a program's framework. Managers can dramatize and recreate circumstances that occur on a day-to-day basis in the nonprofit industry and get insight from their colleagues through debriefing sessions on how to react to certain crises. Managers can also reflect on staff practices to ensure that ideas and concepts can be logically carried out.

Moving forward, when preparing for transitions in leadership, current executive directors must also be aware of their responsibilities in the hiring process and supporting succession ⁽⁷⁾. Understanding the components of one's NGO and reflecting on the needs of the organization and individual personal goals are also important.



As a side note, delineating and assessing the traits of a model executive director during any succession in leadership can also be constructive. Finding a person with the skills compatible to an NGO's purpose and initiatives can ensure its successful transition.

Managers should ensure that the rest of board members and staff will accept new leadership. They should cultivate the significance of the NGO's operations, desire to incorporate fresh perspectives on leadership and new candidates into leadership roles, and welcome teamwork in the decision-making process. Ensuring that procedures for sustainability, growth, and transition are written down, so that employees and stakeholders can evaluate them and use them later, can ensure the implementation of expected policies. Research has shown that only 17 percent of nonprofits record their transition procedures, which is extremely low considering their value ⁽¹⁾.



“This process should be private and confidential, allowing staff to note their reactions and criticism of current trends in the organization.”

Even when a new individual is selected for the executive role, prior leaders can ensure operations are advancing suitably and ask employees their feelings and viewpoints concerning the transition and lead figures. This process should be private and confidential, allowing staff to note their reactions and criticism of current trends in the organization. This data and information can then be forwarded or overviewed by a committee or agency evaluating the succession, so that they can make necessary structural changes, decide staff shifts, and provide new leadership with mentoring tools or clearer expectations.



“The jobs of invested leaders continue even after departure, where they maintain their involvement and assume a new advisory role in the organization...”



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The jobs of invested leaders continue even after departure, where they maintain their involvement and assume a new advisory role in the organization to increase the chances that the organization will continue to flourish. Leaders also attempt to counsel and support new directors, communicating and sharing their expertise, wisdom, talents, and professional connections. Doing so ensures that an NGO retains its core objectives, stays true to its underlying mission, and prepares green candidates to undertake a pivotal role.



Burnout: Causes and how to avoid it.

It is not enough to simply advance one's leadership skills or train managers to effectively govern their departments. Productive leaders also are aware that when their physical or mental health declines, the rest of the organization is liable to falter. Thus, they must be focused on ensuring work-life balance and managing stress to prevent burn out.

EDs of nonprofits often have difficulties with this balance. They end up occupied in their responsibilities until the late hours of each day, prioritizing their professional lives over their personal lives ⁽⁵⁾. When they sacrifice their ability to relax and take time for themselves, directors start to become disillusioned and dissatisfied with their jobs. They lose the enthusiasm they once had for amplifying their cause and helping others, and they no longer feel motivated to complete organizational tasks. Instead, their workload becomes too great, and they consistently feel cynical about the direction of their professional life.



On top of this, executive directors can feel pressure from and conflict with the board of directors with whom they are supposed to be collaborating ⁽⁸⁾. Some EDs may feel

like the board is constantly intruding or hindering progress. Others may try to independently operate and complete assigned tasks, with superiors constantly micro-managing how assignments should be approached or carried out. These types of board behaviors have been known to amplify burnout and jeopardize executives' well-being.

These negative outcomes can be furthered exacerbated by excessive requirements and inadequate resources. In addition to their large amount of work, leaders may also become too crunched for time or feel too much tension from coworkers. With this, EDs feel the difference between the ideal and the reality, leading to less productivity.



Avoiding burnout requires incorporating safeguards to repair and prevent these broken and dysfunctional patterns.

In terms of board interference, executive directors should delineate the unique roles of each party, so that both entities understand their responsibilities and functions. In addition, board members should openly and unobtrusively convey their expectations of the executive director. Doing so can help reduce conflicts on how to accomplish mission initiatives and reduce a board's unrealistic performance expectations.

Executive directors can also apply some simple techniques as they work to limit burnout. The simplest practice is to make time to leave the office or take a time out from work. By leaving one's desk, even on hectic days, executive directors can find some personal space and get a breather from their weighty responsibilities ⁽⁵⁾. In addition, going outdoors or walking in nature may help leaders recapture their underlying motivations and original passions.



Other preventive tips for reducing burnout include establishing a pre-determined time to reflect on issues that have caused EDs to lose sight of their vision. Retreats, for example, can allow leaders to figure out encouraging motivators, reasons for dissatisfaction, solutions to burnout, and the resources or personnel that can help in this process. Retreats can even be applied to larger groups, where employees can communicate their own nonprofit motivations, help the director regain focus, and expand these powerful insights throughout the organization.



The payoff.

In general, it is important that executive directors acknowledge their value within the organization and how they are changing lives or making progress.

Executive directors can help their NGOs run smoothly by creating a concrete strategy to improve their leadership skills, maintain competencies over time, assist other leaders develop professionally and run their departments effectively, allow for restorative breaks to recover lost motivation, and reflect on accomplishments.

More resources to check out.

Developing and crafting perfect go-to leadership skills is not a one-and-done process. It requires the ability to keep up with the latest trends in nonprofit management. Thus, it is essential that directors spend time perusing articles, books, and digital content connected to their NGOs' initiatives at least once a week for half an hour. A plethora of free or extremely cost-effective executive resources is available ⁽⁹⁾.

Examples are best practices websites that delineate the model behavior of a leader managing NGO predicaments such as money trouble or operational deficits. Other free or cost-effective resources include digital magazines and journals with informative articles such as *Blue Avocado* and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* as well as valuable community forums and networking tools such as *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge* and *Independent Sector*.

These resources provide educational books and workbooks, webinars, podcasts, training opportunities, how-to guides, abstracts of research studies, opinion pieces, case studies, virtual labs and other helpful materials on subjects of leadership, management, sponsorship, and more. A more comprehensive list of useful websites and platforms on the next page.



Nonprofit leadership websites.

<i>BoardSource</i> (boardsource.org)	<i>National Council of Nonprofits</i> (councilofnonprofits.org)
<i>Independent Sector</i> (independentsector.org)	<i>Leadership Learning Community</i> (leadershiplearning.org)
<i>The NonProfit Times</i> (nptimes.com)	<i>Harvard Business School</i> (hbswk.hbs.edu)
<i>The Chronicle of Philanthropy</i> (philanthropy.com)	<i>Blue Avocado</i> (blueavocado.org)

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Ayax is a foreign language professor at the Defense Language Institute in Fort Bragg, NC. In this capacity, he imprints language and cultural competence on Special Operations Forces Soldiers of the US Army. Himself a war veteran with seven years of military service, he was honorably discharged in the fall of 2017 with an exemplary record. In his last role, Ayax was responsible for managing a portfolio that included: personnel recovery, training procurement, foreign language readiness, and equal opportunity for 1st Battalion, Psychological Operations (PSYOP), US Army, assigned to South America as its primary area of responsibility. Associated duties required constant vigilance of political developments abroad and assessment of threats posed to fellow deploying service members.

Other assignments within the organization include an overseas deployment to the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, as a program manager for a PSYOP team and a rotation in 5th Battalion PSYOP, requiring military training in Asian regional studies and Chinese Mandarin.

Before his arrival to PSYOP, Ayax deployed as an Infantryman on a combat tour to Kandahar, Afghanistan in the summer of 2012 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom with the 3rd Infantry Division.

Ayax has further distinguished himself as an active member of his community. He currently serves in the NCPTA Board of Directors (2018-2020 term), in the Resource Development, Governing Documents, and Executive Committees, and has been appointed a Human Relations Commissioner for the City of Fayetteville, NC (2018 - 2020 term). In 2018, Ayax received the honor of being selected to the Fayetteville Observer's 40 under 40 for distinguished community service.

He is also a volunteer at the Auerbach Global-Impact Foundation (AGIF), a nonprofit. As Director of Research some of his duties include developing plans of action, conducting target audience analyses, producing reports and targeted messaging, training and supervising staff, and collaborating with the Executive Director on strategy and delivery.



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Paulina Doran



Paulina is a recent graduate from Drury University, who received her Bachelor of Arts in psychology and writing. During her time in academia, she facilitated a support group for clients with chronic illness and physical disabilities at Circle on the Square, a holistic life center and mental health facility, using therapeutic coping techniques from positive psychology. She was also vice president and secretary of her local Sigma Tau Delta chapter.

Currently, she is a fellow at The AGIF, who assists the research department in collecting data for their library of tools and resources geared toward marketing, leadership, human resources, strategic planning, and data management for nonprofits. She also has assisted in devising strategic marketing plans by conducting analyses for key target audiences. Her other duties include planning and implementing usability studies and surveys for website development.

In her spare time, she does independent contracting with companies like UserTesting, participating in usability tests and moderated studies for UX design, development, and research of applications and websites. In addition, she runs her own online retail and consignment store, where she resells vintage goods and inventory to the public on the Poshmark app.

In the future, she plans to eventually pursue a career in user-experience research and obtain her master's degree in human-computer interaction. She hopes to focus her studies in exploring accessible features for individuals with auditory and visual disabilities, providing them more functional tools to navigate and interact with mobile and desktop platforms.

