

Tips on Volunteer Leadership Succession for Nonprofits

by Norman Olshansky

Leadership succession planning in nonprofit organizations is a critical and high stakes endeavor. Too often nonprofit organizations struggle to fill vacant top leadership positions. The consequences of poor succession planning can be devastating.

Every organization has a unique culture and history. When there is a lack of succession planning, organizations find it difficult to fill positions and often recruit individuals to serve in key roles who have minimal experience, few leadership skills or history with the organization. Problems often develop when new leaders are asked to take on major leadership roles without significant prior involvement within the organization. Relationships can become problematic between new leaders, key staff and past leaders.

This article focuses on the volunteer president/chair of the board position (chair). Even the most extraordinary nonprofit president/CEO/executive director (ED) cannot achieve the organization's fullest potential without a good board chair. All major leadership positions (officers, committee chairs such as development, planning, marketing, finance, program, etc.) are similarly impacted. The following are recommendations I often make as a consultant to nonprofit organizations related to succession planning:

1. Bylaws

The bylaws of the nonprofit should be clear regarding the organization's leadership structure, process for nominations, elections, and responsibilities of leadership.

2. Job Descriptions

Nonprofits should have a clear and realistic job description for each leadership position that outlines the duties, responsibilities and expectations for each position.

3. Governance/Nominating Committee

A governance/nominating committee should be tasked with the responsibility to identify potential candidates for leadership positions, interview those candidates, review roles and responsibilities with the candidates and obtain their permission to submit their names for consideration for leadership positions within the nonprofit. This committee should obtain input from leadership and staff in order

to determine the type of skills, experience and leadership that is most needed to address the current and future needs of the organization. Determining where the current gaps are and how to develop existing leadership in addition to determining who to recruit, should also be part of the charge of the governance/nominating committee. While being considered, the candidates should be provided with an opportunity to meet with existing leadership and key staff to learn more about the expectations of the position.

More on this process can be found at <http://nfpc consulting.blogspot.com> See article titled “How to Develop a Strong Fundraising Board.”

4. Performance Tracking

The ability of the governance/nominating committee to be successful will be greatly enhanced if the nonprofit has a system in place to track the involvement, relationships and performance of volunteers and supporters. The more information made available to the committee, the better they can identify and recruit the best potential candidates.

5. Orientation

Once the positions are filled, there should be a formal orientation process and where possible, the assignment of a seasoned veteran leader to act as a mentor for each new leader.

6. Chair/ED Consultation Input

Both the current chair and ED should be consulted for input throughout the process and play a major role in the orientation of new leadership.

7. Chair/ED Working Relationship

After the election and preferably before the new term begins, the new chair and ED should meet privately and discuss how they can best work together. This is a time to review in more depth any special needs or suggestions either has related to their working relationship, style, frequency of meetings, best ways to communicate, immediate priorities, etc. This meeting is an important start to the development of the lay/professional partnership between the new chair and ED.

8. V.P./President Elect

I often recommend when each new chair is identified, that a V.P. be identified as the individual to be groomed to be the next chair. Often the by-laws identify one position on the executive committee as president elect, which accomplishes the same goal. During the course of the board chair’s term of office, the individual being groomed (the president elect), becomes a key player on the executive committee and board, acts in the absence of the chair and is encouraged to attend as many key meetings as possible related to planning, problem solving, community affairs, etc. The time they

serve next to the chair provides an opportunity for in-depth mentoring, education and hopefully, a smoother and easier transition upon moving up to the chairmanship. During the time being mentored a determination can be made of the strengths of the next chair and what areas of knowledge or leadership he/she will need to further develop prior to beginning their term as chair.

9. Past Chair

The outgoing chair is often overlooked as part of succession planning. Many organizations keep the outgoing chair on the Executive committee and board for one additional term in an official “past chair” position. Past chairs who so desire, can be a tremendous asset to the organization following their time in the leadership position. However, there can be problems if the transition is not handled well. The extent of involvement of the past chair is usually determined by the new chair. Often the new chair wants to establish their own identity and will want the past chair to play more of a behind the scenes role. Other new chairs seek out and encourage past chairs to play a more active role.

10. Past Chair Transition

The transition out of the chair position can be a difficult time for the individual. In most cases they have been heavily involved with the organization for many years and it has become a major part of their lives. I have seen outgoing chairs struggle with the sudden loss of intimate involvement with the organization. They miss the frequent contact and counsel with the staff and other leadership. They miss being the “go to” person or visible leader for the organization. How an organization handles those leaving a key position is just as critical as how new leaders are handled. It’s an important aspect of an organization’s overall volunteer human resource and stewardship process. Often the ED is the person who has the closest relationship with the outgoing chair and needs to be actively involved in the transition and stewardship process.

11. Recognition and Stewardship

All outgoing leaders need to be recognized for their contributions to the organization and be part of an ongoing stewardship program.

When a nonprofit utilizes a well planned and implemented leadership succession process it sets the course toward future success.



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Norman Olshansky, President of [NFP Consulting Resources, Inc.](http://www.nfpconsulting.com), has over 30 years of professional and executive level leadership and consulting within both the not for profit and for profit sectors. His clients have included both large and small service, cultural and faith based organizations ranging from local and national home health care companies, to hospitals and health care systems...from community centers to national membership organizations...from military and law enforcement agencies to botanical gardens...from public school systems to State Universities...from human relations organizations to faith based social service and religious entities throughout the U.S., Canada and Israel. He recently served as President and CEO of the Van Wezel Foundation and continues to provide them with consulting services.

Mr. Olshansky has received national recognition for his work in human service and executive leadership. A frequent lecturer at Universities, he has also published a syndicated column, is a national book reviewer for CharityChannel, and is active as a volunteer in several civic, religious and professional organizations.

Norman Olshansky is one of the editors of the CharityChannel Press book, *You and Your Nonprofit*, and is a contributing author to the book. He is also the author of many published articles on nonprofit management, leadership and fundraising. Check out some of his articles at www.nfpconsulting.blogspot.com or on his web site at www.nfpconsulting.com.