

The Future Is Now



At crawfordconnect, we love what we do! Finding superb candidates for excellent charitable organizations is highly rewarding. With more than ten years in the business of executive recruitment for nonprofits, we've gained a bird's-eye view of the hiring, orientation, retention and succession planning practices of hundreds of nonprofits.

OK, so you're waiting for us to spill the goods on all the dirt we've scooped. Well, what we see is fascinating: at times solid and innovative and at others unstable and, frankly, worrisome.

For several years, demographic experts have predicted that in the years to come, as baby boomers retire from the workforce, there will be insufficient numbers of younger workers to fill the positions they vacate. That's not news.

What is newsworthy is that in the nonprofit sector, the shortage of qualified leaders is evident even now. There is evidence of a significant number of senior executives in the sector leaving their posts, or contemplating doing so within the next two years – for retirement, to take up consulting, for other positions in senior management, or to step away from the sector altogether.

At the same time, the number of nonprofits continues to grow, as an aging population requires more social and health services.

Leaders are resigning for varied reasons: burnout in the sector is high; some senior executives with long careers in the sector are ready to make a change; some want to pursue options outside nonprofits; a significant number have reached retirement age and are ready to do so.

The rapid and high rate of departure poses a double-edged

challenge: new, effective leaders must be sought, but many nonprofits lack a succession plan and process to replace the departing President, CEO or Executive Director. There aren't enough qualified individuals ready to step into these roles and there are too few processes in place to train and mentor potential leaders or find qualified ones. Where does this leave us? With a looming nonprofit leadership gap, staring us in the face.

Without an effective succession plan, replacing the senior leader in an organization can be a long and cumbersome process. The Board or senior volunteers, busy keeping an eye on other pressing obligations that occur when a leader departs, may not be in a position to give the recruitment process its full due.

There's so much to do: the role and job description of the senior staff leader must be reviewed in order to ensure it is relevant to the current challenges and future direction of the organization. A search and recruitment process must be put in place, involving key volunteers and staff. The search for a new leader from outside the organization, or a thoughtful transition into the role from within must be put in motion. And the ship must keep afloat and stay on course while the captain has taken leave.

What is the cost of the departure of a charity's executive leader and the lack of an effective succession plan? The affects can be significant and damaging.

During this time, productivity can dwindle as leadership disappears and direct reports become demoralized or lose track of goals and deliverables. Leaders drive vision, and without a leader, vision becomes foggy. Fundraising may falter and programs suffer. Charities fall behind on so many fronts when there is a staff leadership void.

This includes discussion around what type of a leader will be sought, whether a potential successor exists within the organization and what type of mentoring and training will be necessary to move him or her into the leadership role. We often recommend a succession planning sub-committee of the board is struck, so that succession becomes a regular part of board meetings and organizational development.

We also urge charities to give all staff an opportunity to witness and practice leadership – even if they are not the most likely leaders. Developing an understanding of the roles of all staff in an organization gives employees a clear perspective of what it takes to effectively provide programs and services and to manage and administer a nonprofit.

One of our highest recommendations at crawfordconnect is that leaders take the time to train, orient and mentor their staff as they move into entry-level roles in the sector and advance within it. Passing on this knowledge and giving staff a variety of learning experiences on the job is invaluable. It's not uncommon in the private sector for staff to work for a period of time in various roles, or shadow managers and other employees, in order to gain leadership skills, an understanding of deliverables within all departments, and an overview of organizational management.

Staff who experience these training and advancement opportunities tend to be more loyal and effective because they feel valued and challenged. With knowledge and a broader perspective of how an organization functions comes commitment and empowerment. Having an opportunity to manage a staff team, even temporarily, gives employees a chance to move beyond their technical skills into the realm of management – just one necessary skill in order to assume a leadership role.

Succession planning, then, is not just a project for a board sub-committee. It must become an inherent part of annual work plans, staff development and organizational culture.

With a leadership void staring us down, it's more important than ever that those with leadership potential

be identified and groomed. Key employees - and some would argue all employees - should gain an understanding of organizational management. Boards need to consider all aspects of succession and the necessary steps for the recruitment and successful transition of the new leader.

A sector without effective leaders would be rendered rudderless, swerving dangerously off course. Let's focus on grooming our leaders and filling the void - our sector both demands and deserves it.

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Recruiting excellence for the nonprofit sector

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