



## Conducting an executive director search

Chuck Pappalardo | October 28, 2011



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Once it's clear that a new executive director is necessary, the search begins -first for the ideal recruiting firm and then for the ideal individual.

For a nonprofit board, the following six recommended steps are critical to successfully finding the best leader for your organization.

### **Establish a search committee that reflects the board's strengths**

When establishing the search committee, the first individuals on your list should be the chair and possibly the vice chair.

Others on the committee should include the hardest-hitting, most committed individuals, provided they are able to attend the weekly progress calls.

Do not consider inviting an employee to the search committee, no matter how much you regard his or her ideas and intellect.

If your search committee is large or geographically spread out, it isn't necessarily important that each committee member conduct an initial interview with each candidate, but it is important that the search committee leaders do.

### **Put a high priority on creativity when choosing a search firm**

The challenging step for your board is to identify the search firm that's right for your organization.

The search committee should generate a list of qualifying questions, such as, Do you have any "hands-off" agreements that preclude you from approaching certain organizations? How might you expand the search universe beyond the obvious? Can we talk with a current client?

When evaluating a large firm, make sure you're asking these questions of the individual(s) who would be actively conducting your search.

It's imperative to believe in and feel you can develop a relationship with the people actually working on your behalf.

When evaluating a boutique firm, you will likely speak directly with the individual who would handle your search, so there's immediate transparency.

One question to ask is about capacity. How many searches are they actively carrying?

Additionally, since boutique firms tend to be more specialized than large search firms, it's critical to ask probing questions regarding past experience.

That said, the most important ingredient for effective searches today is creativity.

In light of increased accessibility - including social networks and other online search tools - it's relatively easy to find names of potentially suitable candidates.

So it's critical to assess the firm's passion for the "art of search." Can he or she choose a candidate that matches and illuminates your canvas of an idea?

### **Be transparent with your employees about the search**

Inform your employees of the decision to search for a new executive director immediately.

Not only can employees be helpful in suggesting possible candidates, the transparency gives them the profound feeling of being involved and trusted.

If you are not inclusive with regard to the process, employees can feel uncertain about the organization's direction.

### **Refer competitive internal candidates to the search firm, but the search committee should handles expectations**

A true internal executive director candidate can be ideal, but you should still have the search professional conduct an objective evaluation.

Additionally, determine which search committee member will act as the emotional liaison to the candidate.

The recruiting process can be very stressful and the search professional's job is to evaluate the employee, not necessarily support him or her.

### **Treat unqualified internal candidates with candor**

If an internal candidate who is not qualified for the executive director role expresses interest in the position, determine which search committee member will handle delivering the truth in the most frank and judicious manner.

The search committee member should be qualified to manage the employee's career expectations in thorough way. Be aware that the search process and the search professional will not solve the issue.

### **Be clear about executive director's fundraising requirements**

The chair of the board must be extremely open about the organization's fundraising experience and expectations.

It seems intuitive that a candidate with a great fundraising track record would be the best choice, but that's not always the case.

Often, the best executive directors are those who have had a taste of fund raising, aren't afraid of it, have good contacts, are good leaders and have perhaps sat on a board before.

Great fundraising executive directors generally don't follow up a challenging fund development position with another one. There's often a shelf life for how long someone can aggressively fundraise.

Most boards recognize the importance of being actively involved in the executive director search process.

Following these six steps will ensure the search goes smoothly.

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