

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION BARRIERS IN SMALL NONPROFITS

Why it matters and what you
can do about it!

Matt Kramer, EdD.

June 26, 2014

Introduction



Common sense tells us that a Board that plans for leadership transition, on a regular basis, will be better prepared when such a transition occurs.....

Really?

Does this resonate with you?

Importance of this session

- Board chairs of nonprofits agree that hiring an executive director is the most important thing that they can do during their board service
- Yet research shows nonprofit boards regularly avoid any discussion of leadership transition
- When chairs are faced with a transition, they invariably express relief that the transition went well, as if luck played a part

Today we will

- Better understand which barriers exert a stronger influence on board inaction with respect to the executive selection process
- In turn, suggest specific actions that boards and executive directors can take to mitigate the influence of these barriers

Do Boards care about Transition?

- Boards regularly report that hiring an executive director is their most important job
- But Boards:
 - Underestimate the challenges of hiring an ED
 - Are typically unprepared for the process
- Board members routinely see themselves as serving an organization...not leading it
- When boards lack aligned organizational identity, transition planning becomes even more difficult

What barriers exist to transition planning? (Tactical)

- Lack of Board Training
 - Little provided
 - Focused on operations, not on board roles and responsibilities
- Informal versus formal processes
 - Reliance on informal creates uncertainty/doubt
- Human Resources anxiety
 - Fear that HR discussions will trigger ramifications

What barriers exist to transition planning? (Strategic)

- Poor understanding of organization's mission
 - Multiple interpretations from different board members
- Board diversity is neither planned for nor leveraged
 - Board recruitment is based on self-selected interest, not on strategic analysis of board needs

Agree? Disagree? Why?

- Do you experience these findings in your organization?
- Do you agree with the findings?
- Which one surprised you the most?

Implications for Leaders



- Awareness of barriers creates opportunity to:
 - Minimize anxiety by discussing and creating processes for the board to follow on leadership transition planning
 - Formalize processes that build on board history and provide context for future board deliberations
 - Create formal training/handbook for board members
 - Educate members on board roles and responsibilities as linked to organizational mission

Summary



- Leadership Transition Planning creates the context for:
 - Board analysis of future direction
 - Assessment of leadership strength
 - Board engagement in the organization
- Board engagement strengthens potential for positive leadership transitions
- Barriers are relatively easily rectified