

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

## **Nonprofit Executive Transitions: A Glimpse at My Life's Work**

*By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE*

At some point, a job is going to end. It's a harsh reality that is likened to considering one's own death, but can occur several times over a lifetime. For anyone who faces transition, whether voluntary or not, a complex, emotional, and consuming situation unfolds.

Executive transition in the nonprofit sector is an especially difficult subject. Many leaders of community causes are drawn to their work more for purpose than profit. Their liberal and fine arts educations find unique homes to pursue their interests with the additional reward of having a hand in advancing society. Many speak of their work more as a calling than as a career.

That's not to negate or diminish the same high levels of commitment, accomplishment, and sacrifice that leaders in business, industry and government also contribute to their jobs. However, the fate of a nonprofit leader's career rests in a few more hands.

Being cross-wise with a board member, contributor, employee or community member, if not managed well, can ignite a continuum of visible results ranging from passive-aggressive relationships and public displays of displeasure or disparaging remarks, to a witch-hunt that can haunt an executive for the rest of his or her career. "Behind closed doors" is a dangerously naïve leadership assumption in any nonprofit organization.

In my experience, most mid- to late-career nonprofit executives rarely lose their positions for technical deficiency or blatant wrongdoing. It's usually the result of not seeing the severity of a political situation, procrastination with retirement planning, or not recognizing it's time to move on.

The departure of an executive through retirement or involuntary release has natural stages for both the leader and the organization. For the people involved, the journey can resemble a process introduced by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to describe the phases of living with terminal illness: Denial, bargaining, anger, sorrow and acceptance. The bargaining phase is often an Achilles' heel in the nonprofit sector as "keeping the leader on in some capacity" is the natural conciliation that stops and mutates effective transitions.

For some transitions, the situation can closely resemble addiction recovery as some executives can become addicted to their jobs. The notion of making someone go "cold turkey" without some thoughtful help is neither a matter nor a sentence to be taken lightly. Some leaders of causes are unable to contemplate life without the deep professional satisfaction, personal identity, notoriety, and daily routine their jobs have afforded them. It can be equally challenging for the co-dependents and enablers in their organizations that fed the addiction over a course of many years.

These examples of the complexities of nonprofit executive transitions aren't unique only to the executive. Board members without term limits, senior managers in their positions for decades at the same cause, or volunteers involved in a process for many years are destined to go through similar stages with the same high potential for organization mayhem.

Bringing any kind of a relationship to a conclusion is not an easy task. For a nonprofit organization, the focus during retirement or involuntary transition, if not managed well, can easily migrate to managing the drama of severing rather than fueling the passion for serving.

Executive transitions that seem to go as well as could be expected appear to have four practices that were put into place long before the separation occurred.

The first is a commitment to an annual executive performance review with at least a mid-term performance discussion to avoid fatal surprises. The second is a continuing discussion about succession planning for all key leadership positions. The third is supporting a coach or mentor for the nonprofit executive so that a professional relationship has developed over time to promote success while in the job as well as success in leaving it. The fourth is a board culture that focuses on leading the organization as opposed to managing it.

Having witnessed too many badly managed transitions, and seeing the casualties and catastrophes each has created, it was clear to me something needed to be done. Reducing the emotional costs for the people involved, preventing avoidable attrition, reducing organizational set-backs during leadership change, and protecting the community equity that an organization has built over years not only became my job, it became my calling.

*(Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE, is president and chief executive officer of The Third Sector Company, Inc. Join in on the conversation about this article at the Long Beach Business Journal website [www.lbbusinessjournal.com](http://www.lbbusinessjournal.com))*



PO Box 19796 – Queen Anne Station  
Seattle, Washington 98109  
(206) 457-4993