



# Executive Director Leadership Transitions:

A **Practical Guide** for Non-Governmental  
Organizations

Executive Director  
Leadership  
Transitions:  
A Practical Guide  
for Non-Governmental Organizations



2015 by Martha Farmelo, is under a Creative  
Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This guide was produced with  
the support of the **William and  
Flora Hewlett Foundation**.

The opinions expressed within  
are those of the author and do  
not necessarily reflect the views  
of the Foundation.

This guide is a work in  
progress. Any feedback  
or suggestions for  
improvement are welcome.

Please write to:  
[martha.farmelo@gmail.com](mailto:martha.farmelo@gmail.com).

### **Suggested citation:**

Farmelo, Martha. "Executive Director Leadership Transitions: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations," produced with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2015.

May 10, 2017 / v. 2

# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>How to Use This Guide</b> .....  | 4  |
| <b>Section 1: What's at Stake ... and What Can Be Gained</b> .....  | 5  |
| <b>Section 2: How to Anticipate and Prepare for Leadership Transitions</b> .....  | 6  |
| <b>Section 3: For the Outgoing Director, on Contemplating Departure</b> .....   | 7  |
| <b>e</b> Example: Checklist for the Outgoing Director .....   | 9  |
| <b>Section 4: Key Definitions at the Outset of a Transition</b> .....   | 11 |
| 4.1 Why is There a Transition? What is the Current Situation of the Organization? Considering the Institutional Context ..... | 11 |
| 4.2 Who Should Lead the Process? The Role of the Members' Assembly, Board of Directors and Staff ..                           | 11 |
| 4.3 What Type of Process is Best .....  | 14 |
| 4.4 Does it Make Sense to Work with an External Consultant? .....   | 15 |
| 4.5 The Transition Plan: Roles, Tasks, Persons in Charge and Timeline .....   | 15 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Transition Plan for the Executive Director Position .....   | 16 |
| 4.6 The Ever Essential Communication Plan .....   | 19 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Communication Plan .....  | 20 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Messages and Language .....   | 22 |
| <b>Section 5: The Hiring Process, Step-by-Step</b> .....  | 22 |
| 5.1 The Initial Communication .....   | 23 |
| 5.2 Internal and External Consultations on the Job Description, Qualifications and Selection Criteria ..                      | 23 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Staff Survey on the Job Description, Qualifications and Selection Criteria .....                            | 24 |
| 5.3 Drawing Up the Job Description, Selection Criteria and Job Announcement .....   | 25 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Job Description .....   | 26 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Selection Criteria .....  | 30 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Job Announcement .....  | 32 |
| 5.4 Preparing Communication with the Applicants .....   | 32 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Emails to Applicants .....  | 33 |
| 5.5 Publicizing the Job Announcement and Identifying Candidates .....   | 34 |
| 5.6 Receiving and Recording the Applications and Selection of Applicants to be Interviewed .....                              | 35 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Record of Applicants .....  | 35 |
| 5.7 The Interviews .....  | 35 |
| <b>e</b> Example: Interview Questions .....   | 36 |
| 5.8 Reference Checks .....  | 38 |
| 5.9 Offer and Negotiation .....   | 38 |
| 5.10 Announcing the New Director .....  | 39 |

5.11 Summary of Key Points Regarding Donors ..... 39

---

**Section 6: Farewells, Welcomes and Orientation** ..... 40

---

**Section 7: Role of the Outgoing Director on the Board of Directors** ..... 42

---

**Section 8: Evaluating the Process** ..... 42

- e** Example: Evaluation Survey for Staff ..... 42
- e** Example: Evaluation Survey for the Members’ Assembly and Board of Directors ..... 43

---

**Section 9: Bibliography** ..... 45



---

**About the Author** ..... 45

---

**Acknowledgments** ..... 45

## How to Use This Guide

This guide was originally released in Spanish with Latin American non-governmental organizations in mind, drawing on their experiences, concerns, challenges and lessons learned. Shortly after its publication, we began to receive requests for a version in English. In addition to conceptual analysis and practical advice, **this guide contains several examples of tools or materials that can be adapted by different organizations by simply clicking on the examples marked  Save document to access the documents in Microsoft Word or Excel.** You can also access all the documents by clicking on the clip to the left  to see the attachments.

The chapters are ordered to reflect the most common sequence an organization goes through during a leadership transition, but there is no specific order to follow. We suggest that you skim through the contents of each chapter, but you can also jump from chapter to chapter, taking what you find useful and skipping the rest.

Because the sections and examples are interrelated, they include hyperlinks that skip to other parts of the document to make it easier to navigate and use.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A note on gender: to simplify the use of pronouns, we have chosen to limit the use of “him or her” and to refer generally to the outgoing director as male and the new director as female.

## Section 1

# What's at Stake ... and What Can Be Gained

**For all organizations, executive director leadership transitions are a critical moment with risks and opportunities from which the organization may emerge strengthened or weakened.** Such transitions bring to light the degree and quality of key aspects such as communications, decision-making and internal participation; the solidity of the staff and each area of the organization; and the capacity of the governing bodies for action, accompaniment and leadership. **Ultimately, what is at stake is the organization's future, the well-being of its staff, its credibility, legitimacy and identity as an organization, and how it is perceived internally and externally (and therefore its financial stability).** Each of these will be conditioned by both the transition process and the profile and actions of the new director.

Numerous experiences show that **when managed well, transitions can be an extremely valuable opportunity to identify and improve aspects of organizational health**, culminating in more a consolidated staff and governing bodies, greater relational capital with donors and other key actors, and greater legitimacy politically and vis-à-vis society in general. In the worst-case scenario, a careless or disorganized leadership transition may weaken an organization's stability, political positioning and donor ties, at times even provoking an organizational crisis and endangering its sustainability and capacity to achieve its mission.

Fortunately, many lessons have emerged about how to navigate such transitions effectively and strategically, consistent with the values and characteristics of each organization. While each step and decision in the transition should respond to the situation and particularities of each organization, this guide is intended to share lessons learned and some practical tools to ensure that an executive director leadership transition is, ultimately, an exercise in institutional strengthening.

This guide seeks to take a practical and feasible approach. **It is based on the real-life experiences of organizations, drawing on successful experiences and the needs and challenges identified.** It is based on fundamental principles related to **transparent, flexible and orderly processes**, which, in turn, depend on key elements such as **clarity and consensus about steps and roles, as well as ongoing and timely communication and participation.**

**For transitions to be successful, it is essential to have a members' assembly and/or board of directors that are at least minimally operative and effective (and ready to become strengthened during the process if necessary).** Only their members can hire the new executive director and ensure stability during the transition, in addition to providing legitimacy and credibility.

### Key Points on Executive Director Leadership Transitions:

- Leadership transitions constitute a critical moment that may strengthen or weaken an organization.
- At stake is the well-being of the staff and the future funding, credibility, financial stability, legitimacy and identity of both the organization and the new executive director.
- There are many examples and lessons learned about how to conduct such transitions effectively, strategically and carefully.
- Processes should be transparent and orderly, based on clarity and consensus about steps, roles, communication and participation.
- The members' assembly and/or board of directors are responsible for selecting the new executive director and conferring credibility, legitimacy and stability during such transitions.
- Each step and decision should be based on the specific situation and characteristics of each organization.

## Section 2

# How to Anticipate and Prepare for Leadership Transitions

Most leadership transitions begin when the current director announces his or her plans to leave. Ideally, however, the director and the board of directors are able to plan leadership transitions with lead time, ensuring that the organization is well prepared for the process when the time comes. This generally requires analyzing and addressing the following points:<sup>2</sup>

- 1. Term limit according to the bylaws.** If the bylaws define a term limit for the executive director, it should be known, respected and used as a time frame for preparing the leadership transition.
- 2. Governing bodies.** Is the board of directors and/or the members' assembly aligned with the organization? Are they effective? Do they understand their role and are they prepared to lead the transition? At times, a self-assessment of the governing bodies may be helpful.<sup>3</sup>
- 3. Leadership and internal management.** Is there a management team made up of persons with the experience and skills needed to effectively lead the organization during an executive leadership transition? If not, how can this be addressed? Who are the natural internal leaders and how can they be cultivated?

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, p. 9. The author proposed the following questions for the organizational assessment stage, if it is carried out. Nonetheless, they may be useful as a framework for preparing for a leadership transition.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Board Self-Evaluation in Farmelo, Martha, "Boards of Directors and Governance Systems: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations," produced with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2014, pp. 46-48. Available at: <http://effectiveorgs.org/resources/>.

4. **Financial situation.** What is the current state of the institution's finances? If it is problematic, we recommend making efforts for improvement. If it does not improve, this should be communicated clearly to the candidates, and candidates with solid fundraising experience should be sought.
5. **Strategic direction.** Is the mission relevant? Is there an updated strategic plan that is known and useful for the organization? Are there strategic considerations that need to be defined?
6. **Programmatic situation.** Are there programmatic problems or deficits that need to be solved (for example, commitments to donors not carried out, activities that are behind schedule)?
7. **Operational situation.** Is there some major operational challenge that may cause instability that should be resolved before a leadership transition (for example, internal staff conflicts, lack of administrative/logistical capacity that affects the implementation of projects, etc.)?

For any of these points considered necessary, the organization should draw up an action plan with clear and realistic objectives, action steps, persons responsible and a timeline for addressing the needs detected. Many of these issues may take some time to strengthen or resolve, so you should be realistic and well-organized. The goal is to have your organization be as well-positioned as possible for taking on the transition, within reasonable limits and without letting too much time go by in search of perfection.

### Section 3

## For the Outgoing Director, on Contemplating Departure

### Making the Decision

Making the decision to step down as executive director is not easy. According to several directors who have done so, it involves difficult and at times contradictory considerations and emotions, such as guilt, enthusiasm, concern, relief and burnout.<sup>4</sup>

In some cases, the director leaves when things are going well and he may even be pleased with his work, yet feels that he has completed a cycle, is seeking other challenges, and/or considers that new leadership would be healthy for the organization. In other situations, the departure may be precipitated by exhaustion or some specific conflict. Many different circumstances may generate confusion and uncertainty about how and when to leave.

Coming to this decision requires peace of mind, clarity and courage, in addition to the ability to let go of the reins and make space for the next director. At times the director wants to leave, or has an intuitive sense that the time for change has come, but delays the decision for some reason. The following questions may be revealing and helpful: What do I fear might happen to me, the organization, the mission, or the staff if I go? If I didn't have those fears, would I question leaving? Why do I want to go now? And if I don't go now, why not? And of course: What will I do afterwards? Who is going to help me work this out? With whom can I discuss this?

Transitions may cause anxiety but also hold the potential for significant personal and professional growth and satisfaction. And you're not alone: many directors have experienced such moments. All these questions—and others that may come up along the way—are valid and important.

<sup>4</sup> This section is based primarily on the experiences of directors who have left their position. See also Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, pp. 9-11.

## How to Announce the Decision

Each director will decide whom to report his or her decision to first. Priorities include the board of directors and/or members' assembly, key staff members and the main donors, normally in that order. Confidentiality at such a moment is complex; the less time one tries to keep the announcement secret the better, since such news is hard to keep from getting out—even for just a few days. It is important to be mindful of **how you communicate** the decision to the priority players and the public in general. For the former, if at all possible, personalized communication—preferably in person—tends to be best.

Before communicating your decision, it is best to have key messages prepared for each actor—board of directors, staff, donors and the outside public—including:

- Why I'm leaving and why now
- How the organization is positioned to take on the transition
- Who is responsible for the transition process
- What I am going to do next (and if I don't yet know, say so)
- How I envision my relationship with the organization after my departure

At times, when there is considerable trust with a donor you can let them know ahead of time that you are considering and planning to leave, though it is best to wait until there is clarity as to the planned moment of departure. In any case, you must evaluate what the best moment would be. While the desire to share the news frankly and in confidence is understandable, some donors have commented that the time between finding out that a director was leaving and the culmination of the transition was too long (for example, more than six months), causing discomfort.

**The announcement to the staff is one of the most sensitive and important moments in the transition process.** Ideally, they should hear this news directly from the outgoing director, who should make an effort to convey confidence, serenity and specific information about the process, the timetable, and the roles of the board of directors and/or members' assembly in addition to his or her own participation in the process. The outgoing director's mood and contributions are fundamental throughout the transition process. Staff members should be informed of the transition in a way that buffers the uncertainty and anxieties that are bound to exist on learning of the departure of their director and the arrival of someone new, while also fostering their support for the process and their capacity to manage it in a mature and stable manner.

## How to Manage and Make the Most of the Transition

**How long should the transition last?** There is no clear rule, though in general it should not last more than five or six months. Obviously, it is ideal to have a moment for **a face-to-face orientation of the new director by the outgoing director**, although this may require that the outgoing director come back to the organization to address the tasks of orientation, introduction and handover, possibly with remuneration.

**What is the role of the outgoing director during the transition?** At first, once his decision is communicated to the board and/or assembly, the outgoing director plays a fundamental role in ensuring that the process is well-designed and unfolds as it should, calling attention if necessary to the need to respect the established agreements. Yet from that point on, he should step aside so that the members of the board and/or assembly can play their role of leading the process, and answer questions and offer opinions only when requested. In other words, it is the responsibility of the outgoing director to leave the organization "ready" for a new director, but not to select that person. Throughout the process the director should convey peace of mind and assuredness about the organization's future both internally and externally. The outgoing director should participate in an orderly process of orienting the new director, ensuring that all relevant information is well-organized and accessible, and deal with all relevant legal procedures such as changing signatures at the bank. It is also fundamental that the outgoing director leave a report for the board of directors and the staff summarizing the main accomplishments and challenges pending for the organization at the current moment.



**A new focus.** During the transition the outgoing director's perception that the organization will be able to work well without him may provoke clashing sentiments, from relief to sadness. This is the time for him to think about and anticipate building a new identity for himself beyond executive director. At the same time, it is natural to dedicate time and energy to what one will do after the transition, including applying for other jobs or pursuing opportunities to study. One must strike a balance between these new activities, all healthy and necessary, and the responsibilities related to leading the organization.

### Points to keep in mind:

- No board of directors is perfect, and yours does not have to be perfect to make a good leadership transition.
- If some members of the staff stop sending you emails or consulting you as soon as they find out you're leaving, it's only normal! With a bit of time they will understand until when and how to communicate.
- Some people may not react well to the news that you are leaving. It's normal at first, for while you may well have thought about it for a long time, for them it's new and may be hard to hear.
- It is not possible to resolve and strengthen all aspects of the organization before leaving, and not doing so is not a personal failure.
- Though it may be hard for you to imagine not making decisions about the organization's future, it is likely that it will be surprisingly easy for you when the time comes.
- You need not have all the answers about your future professional life resolved before you depart, since it is normal for them to take shape as you make and implement the decision.
- Not only is there life after serving as executive director, at times that life may be surprisingly engaging and gratifying.

## e Example: Checklist for the Outgoing Director

 Save document

### Checklist for the Outgoing Director<sup>5</sup>

#### On making the decision:

- Why do I want to go now? And if I don't go now, why not?
- What do I want to do afterwards? Who will help me figure it out?
- With whom can I discuss this?
- What do I fear might happen—to me, to the organization, to the mission, or to the staff—if I leave?
- If I didn't have those fears, would I hesitate to leave?

<sup>5</sup> This list is a brief summary to facilitate quick reference. Many of these points are addressed in greater depth in the following sections of the guide.

**Before announcing the decision:**

- What is the optimal sequence and timing for my decision?
- Are my key messages ready for each actor (board of directors, staff, donors and general public)?
  - Why I am leaving and why now
  - How the organization is positioned to take on the transition
  - Who is responsible for the transition process
  - What I am going to do after I leave
  - How I imagine my relationship with the organization after my departure
- Do I have enough information to talk with the staff? If not, what do I have to do to prepare for that conversation?
- How will I convey tranquility and serenity to the staff? And how will I respond to possible anxiety among the staff?

**How to manage and make the most of the transition:**

- Do I clearly understand my role during the transition, and what role I should not be playing?
  - Will I leave behind a report for the board of directors and the staff that summarizes the organization's main accomplishments and pending challenges?
  - Will I have enough time to prepare a report for the new director with all the necessary key data, including programmatic, institutional and financial information and the status of donor relations?
  - What is my list of tasks and my timetable for leaving the organization ready for the handover, for the handover itself, and for the orientation of the new director? What information should I have ready and what details should I have resolved (signatures at the bank, an automated response to my organizational email address, etc.)?
  - What other processes, outputs or tasks do I want to complete before leaving (for example, create a functioning Finance Committee of the board of directors, or consolidate implementation of the new communication strategy) and which ones can I leave for the new director?
  - Do I intend to participate on the board of directors?
  - Am I in a position to leave all the space needed to the new director? Or would it be better not to join the board?
  - With whom can I discuss this?
  - What activities, spaces and moments do I need to create with which individuals and groups for a healthy process of saying goodbye and for closure?
-

## Section 4

# Key Definitions at the Outset of a Transition

Before establishing the details of the step-by-step process and above all prior to announcing the transition to the staff, donors and other outside actors, you would be well-advised to define a series of key points.

## 4.1 Why is There a Transition? What is the Current Situation of the Organization? Considering the Institutional Context

As soon as it knows that a director is leaving, **the board of directors should learn the reason for his or her departure**, and in the event that there is some internal conflict or crisis, should seek out and process relevant information, reflecting on how to resolve and avoid similar problems going forward.

At the same time, it is crucial for the board to analyze how prepared the organization is to make the leadership transition: What is the current situation and what are the current capacities of the current staff, in particular in middle management positions (if any)? What structures and procedures are institutionalized to ensure the continuing operation of the organization? What is the financial situation? Are there staff members interested in applying to replace the director? A more complete list of questions can be found in section 2: **How to Anticipate and Prepare for Leadership Transitions.**

Some organizations perform an assessment of strengths and needs as a way to review their accomplishments, challenges and areas of opportunity. This, in turn, can help identify the priority characteristics and skills to look for in a new executive director. There are many assessment tools and methodologies; the exercise may be led by the board, the staff member entrusted with organizational development issues, if any, and/or an external consultant.<sup>6</sup>

## 4.2 Who Should Lead the Process? The Role of the Members' Assembly, Board of Directors and Staff

One fundamental step for ensuring a transparent and orderly process—and before making any public announcement—is drawing up a transition plan. The main points to define are:

### Who Selects the New Director?

In general, the organization's bylaws should define who selects her. To ensure the legality and legitimacy of the selection, these definitions should not be ignored.<sup>7</sup> Often the decision lies with the members' assembly; in other cases, it vests in the board of directors. All the members of the governing body that makes the decision

<sup>6</sup> We recommend as an option for (facilitated) self-assessment the Organizational Mapping Tool available at <http://effectiveorgs.org/resources/>.

<sup>7</sup> Any inconsistency discovered in the bylaws or any indication that they are not being abided by should be addressed (for example, the time limits for a change in executive director) including amending them, if necessary.

should participate in the decision, independent of whether a transition committee is formed to manage and expedite the selection process. And to ensure healthy, credible and legitimate decision-making, all the members should be involved in specific moments and aspects of the process. It is important that they not merely rubber-stamp the decision of a sub-group, or, worse still, a designation made by a single individual (such as the board chair or the outgoing director).

**The challenges and benefits for the board of directors and the members' assembly.** Selecting the new executive director is one of the most delicate tasks of the board and/or assembly and, in many cases, highlights its level of commitment and dedication to the organization. The process requires a refined understanding of the organizational culture and needs, a fluid relationship with certain members of the staff (for example, the communication and development directors, if such positions exist), and the capacity to take on complex processes that rely on teamwork. It entails being able to communicate well with donors and other key actors, refine the strategic vision of the organization, detect and address institutional weaknesses, and make weighty decisions in a collegial, constructive and healthy manner.<sup>8</sup>

In many cases the leadership transition implies a profound and sudden transformation in the role of the board. This happens frequently with the departure of the founding director: often a weak, incipient or uninvolved board that depended on the visionary leadership of the director all of a sudden must assume a much more active leadership role. This requires the capacity and willingness to convey to a wide array of audiences that the organization is stable and able to continuing operating during the transition.

Less public roles are equally important: for example, if necessary, the board should be capable of detecting when a director is afraid to leave the organization and communicate to him that he has “their permission” or support to leave.<sup>9</sup> The board should also be able to detect and respond to the anxieties and concerns of the staff that may come up as the process unfolds.

In any event, transitions represent an opportunity to strengthen the board of directors or members' assembly that the organization should make the most of. There may be any number of benefits: in the process of assuming their role, members of the board or assembly may come to have more information and a better understanding of the organization; further their relationship with the staff; strengthen their role and credibility with outside actors; and increase their sense of commitment, belonging and contribution to the organization.

## The Role and Makeup of a Transition Committee

The board of directors often forms a transition committee to expedite the work. In general, such a committee is in charge of coordinating and driving the process, generating draft documents (possibly with the support of a consultant or staff members), coordinating internal and external communication, and often selecting a shortlist of finalists or potential finalists after an initial round of interviews. Typically, the committee is made up of members of the board of directors and perhaps a member of the assembly. At times, the **outgoing director participates** with voice but no vote in the committee's decisions, or is simply consulted extensively by its members. You can also consider **the participation of staff members** or different stakeholders. In all cases, it is essential to clearly define the members' precise responsibilities and decision-making powers, and to try to ensure a small, flexible and effective committee.

## Staff Participation

Participation by the organization's staff members is fundamental, first, to have multiple sources of input for making the best possible decision, and also to ensure that they feel taken into account, which contributes to both the stability needed during the transition process and the eventual acceptance and legitimacy of the new director. If communication has been clear and timely and has conveyed stability, staff will be

---

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, p. 10.

able to participate constructively in the process; at the same time, their participation will augment their own peace of mind.

There are many possible mechanisms. For example, the staff may:

- Participate through interviews or a **survey on the priority skills and characteristics that a new director should have**
- Review the job announcement and share opinions and suggestions
- Help disseminate the job announcement
- Suggest candidates

In some cases, staff members have even participated in interviewing the candidates and have been given a formal place on the transition committee. However, you should also consider other channels of participation that do not involve formal participation on the committee, to prevent confusion about the board's or assembly's mandate to lead the process and make the final decision. At the same time, it is important to avoid the perception that certain staff persons have been "privileged" by the board vis-à-vis other staff members.

If you choose to have staff participate in interviews (either by appointing delegates or by a general meeting with the final candidate or candidates and the whole staff), it is important to clarify expectations and communicate the "rules of the game" beforehand. Examples include the selection criteria the board defined as urgent, or the decision-making process (for example, the staff will offer their impressions and the board and members' assembly will seriously consider them but the final decision will be made independently by the assembly based on different factors and input). Once the decision is made and agreement has been reached with the new director, **it is important that the board members communicate immediately** with the staff to convey the basis for their decision.

Of course, the people in charge of communication, finances and institutional development will have a specific role in sharing information or coordinating and implementing actions related to the transition. These staff members may even offer to meet with the semi-finalists or finalists to provide more information about the organization (for example, about the financial situation, programmatic orientation etc.).

## Participation of the Outgoing Director

In general, the outgoing director has much to offer about what type of profile would be best for the organization. The key is to be able to step back from his or her personal involvement in the transition to make a constructive contribution to the process, which requires considerable maturity and ability to take intellectual and emotional distance. If this can be achieved, the consultations should be broad and seek to maximize the outgoing director's input. At times, the outgoing executive director is well-positioned to offer his thoughts about some of the pre-selected candidates, taking advantage of the fact that he may know them well and have legitimate opinions.

For example, you could consider having him participate in the interview of the finalists, sharing his impressions with the board members, as long as it is clear that the board members make the final decision.<sup>10</sup> You can also offer the semi-final or final candidates a meeting with the outgoing director to learn about the reasons for his departure or to gather relevant information about the organization. Afterwards, the director can choose whether or not to share his impressions with the board and/or the assembly, as agreed beforehand. The director should, naturally, avoid sharing any selective or privileged information, taking care that no candidate is on an unequal footing during the application process.

At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation of allowing or asking the outgoing director to become too involved in the selection process of his successor, thus displacing the board of directors or the members' assembly from their fundamental role. This could lead to the outgoing director interfering in the process of analysis and independent decision-making of the governing body in question, and eventually compromise the freedom of the new director to assume and establish her own leadership. Ultimately, the process could

<sup>10</sup> The same criterion applies whether the outgoing director joins the members' assembly or the board of directors; he should refrain from participating in the decision on the appointment of his successor.

weaken and delegitimize the governing bodies, with negative consequences for the overall health of the organization. This risk is particularly sensitive and should be carefully thought out in the case of a departing founding director. In sum, each organization should openly discuss and decide what participation is most appropriate for the outgoing director.

## 4.3 What Type of Process is Best?

### Open or Closed? Wide or Narrow?

Each organization should decide what type of process is best in the search for potential candidates. For example: will candidates from outside the organization be accepted or only current staff members? If accepting external candidates, will the announcement be made broadly, or in a more limited and directed manner?

Unless there are one or more internal candidates who are extremely strong and even obvious, and on whom there is consensus, it is recommended to open the application process to outside candidates. **As a general rule, open processes are usually considered stronger and more credible since they are broader.** At the same time, they can help spread the word in different circles about the organization's work. Interested staff should be encouraged to apply, but they should not be given preferential treatment nor should it be assumed that internal applicants are automatically better. With few exceptions, there is a risk that, without an open application process, questions will arise that seriously compromise the credibility of the process and the legitimacy of the new director: Why wasn't there an open process? Are you sure that there were no suitable external candidates who deserved to be considered?<sup>11</sup> **If the decision is made to forego a competitive process, it should also be transparent and carried out formally with a job description and selection criteria.**

Even so, there may be cases in which a decision is made to consider only internal candidates. This depends on the available candidates, the moment, the needs of the organization and the organizational culture, among other factors. Sometimes there are risks associated with bringing in an outside person and sometimes there are advantages. Each organization should consider in each case if it is really possible to know beforehand whether hiring from within or from outside is the better option.

### The Fundamental Importance of the Pool of Applicants

**A key factor in the selection of a new director is the quality and suitability of the pool of candidates.** Some experts maintain that most failed designations of new directors happen not because the wrong candidate was chosen, but because the pool of candidates was not adequate in the first place.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, open processes are also advisable insofar as they help identify the best group of candidates, which is harder to achieve with hiring processes that exclude external candidates.

At the same time, **it is important to attract good candidates and recognize that various aspects of the process—the content of the job announcement, the communication along the way, the treatment during the interviews—may attract them or push them away.**<sup>13</sup>

---

11 At the same time, the idea of considering only candidates who are invited to apply and not circulating a public job announcement is problematic. When inviting applicants, one has to share the basic information that would be in a job announcement, and if it is not public the process lacks the basic transparency that ensures its legitimacy. And if staff members wish to invite candidates to apply, they, too, will want to disseminate the job announcement; not making it public then becomes unmanageable. And if the idea is that only the board or the transition committee can invite candidates, based on what criterion and on what process will they decide whether a candidate suggested by a board member, staff member, or outside actor is suitable? And who will make that decision? For all these reasons, we recommend avoiding applications by invitation only.

12 Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, p. 81.

13 Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, pp. 83, 94-95.

## Is it Advisable to Create a Shortlist?

Some organizations establish from the outset that the selection committee will present a shortlist to the board and the assembly for their consideration. This could be risky if unsuitable applicants are included just to complete the shortlist. For this reason, it is suggested to avoid this strategy. One alternative is to decide that the selection should be between at least two suitable candidates.

## 4.4 Does it Make Sense to Work with an External Consultant?

The assistance of a consultant is not required for a successful process. But in some cases, it may be useful for the following reasons:

- To help with the design and timely implementation of an orderly process
- To have a designated person manage certain tasks such as writing drafts of important documents or assisting in the management of the hiring process
- To help with the design and/or implementation of a methodology for reflection or **institutional self-assessment** if considered appropriate prior to the selection of the new director
- In the case of processes of analysis and decision-making that require outside facilitation

Some organizations will want assistance designing and implementing the process, while others will look for headhunters to identify and recruit candidates. For organizations with medium to small budgets, the second option is uncommon. In any case, if a consultant is used, it is fundamental to create trust, clarity and agreement about the content and boundaries of their role. It is recommended that you request a written proposal for the purpose of negotiating and documenting the relevant details, including who the consultant(s) will report to and who will be their liaison (generally the transition committee, not the outgoing director).

## 4.5 The Transition Plan: Roles, Tasks, Persons in Charge and Timeline

It is fundamental to define the transition plan in a clear, well-organized and agreed upon document that is approved by the entire board. The format can be very simple, for example, a table with four columns that indicate the tasks, persons in charge, agreed upon dates and any other relevant detail or comment. The plan should describe the key aspects of the process, several of which are mentioned in this guide:

- Who will design this process
- Who will be responsible for monitoring and promoting its implementation
- Roles and responsibilities, including of the members of the transition committee, if any
- Who will participate in searching for and identifying candidates
- The plans and strategies for publicizing the job announcement
- Who will be in charge of receiving and reviewing the applications and selecting which applicants to interview
- Who will communicate with the applicants (or who will sign those communications)
- Minimum number of finalists, if you choose to establish this

- Who will conduct the interviews
- Who will determine the salary offer, and based on what information and criteria
- Who will make the salary offer, along with any related negotiating
- Staff participation
- The role of the outgoing director
- Who will be responsible for the internal and external communication to different audiences, and all other relevant details (to be defined in a **communication plan**)

### **e** Example: Transition Plan

This example comes from an organization that chose to use an external consultant and organized the participation of the staff by having working groups. The process is described and is followed by a table with tasks, persons in charge and dates.

 Save document

---

## Transition Plan for the Executive Director Position [name of organization]

### **Description of process:**

*This plan aims to have a new director selected by June 15, which leaves extra time in case the process takes longer. The communication plan will be produced separately and added as an appendix.*

### **Phase 1: Planning and Summary of Roles (late January to February 11)**

1. The members' assembly, outgoing director and consultant will come to an agreement about this plan including the process, roles and timeline.
2. The members' assembly will create a transition committee of three people including two board members and one member of the assembly. This committee will be in charge of creating the communication plan, job description and other documents needed for the process; selecting the applicants to be interviewed; and creating a shortlist of finalists to be interviewed by the majority of the members' assembly. The members' assembly will be in charge of choosing the new director.
3. The staff will be divided into five groups, each of which will elect a delegate who will be in charge of representing the group's opinion on what characteristics the new director should have. A list will be drawn up in alphabetical order of last names and numbers from one to five will be assigned successively. Each group should come together to elect its representative and determine its method for answering the questions for phase 2 (see below).
4. The committee and the outgoing executive director will create a communication plan (for staff, donors, public, etc.).

### **Phase 2: Internal Interviews and Proposed Job Description, Job Announcement, Selection Criteria, etc. and Determination of the Range of Compensation to be Offered (February 11 to March 20)**

1. The consultant will interview members of the assembly and the board, and the staff delegates:
  - a. What is the desired profile and qualifications?
  - b. What characteristics or skills are a must and which are desirable?



2. The consultant will create a packet with drafts of the following:
  - a. The job description (for internal use, to be shared with finalists, based on the current job description and the previous job announcement)
  - b. The job announcement with the application requirements (cover letter in English, résumé, two-page essay in Spanish about their strategic/political vision for the next five years of the organization and three professional references)
  - c. The selection criteria divided into necessary and desirable (each with a basic definition and weighted, to guide the analysis and evaluation of the candidates being interviewed. This list will guide the selection of the candidates to be interviewed.)
3. The transition committee will meet to discuss and validate the packet.
4. The transition committee will propose the parameters for the compensation offer to finalist based on information about the relevant labor market and what the organization's financial situation permits.
5. The delegates will review the packet and will be able to make comments.
6. The assembly will approve the packet via email or in a face-to-face meeting. If possible, on that occasion it will define the parameters for the offer based on the transition committee's proposal.

### **Phase 3: Identifying the Candidates (March 20 to April 20)**

1. The job announcement will be disseminated widely; at the same time, it will be a priority for staff and assembly members to identify and invite suitable candidates to apply
2. The assembly chair will ask the members to publicize the job opening widely with their contacts
3. The transition committee, executive director and development director will coordinate identifying and contacting external allies who can help identify candidates
4. The staff will be asked to share the announcement widely with their contacts
5. The consultant will receive the applications using an institutional email address and will organize the application materials for review by the members of the transition committee.

### **Phase 4: Interviews, References, Final selection (April 20 to June 15)**

1. The committee members will review the applications and will indicate their opinions about which candidates to interview in an Excel spreadsheet.
2. A face-to-face meeting or Skype call will be held to decide which candidates to interview and to define the questions and dynamics for the interviews.
3. The committee will conduct interviews and decide on the shortlist (two or three candidates).
4. The assembly will conduct the interviews of those shortlisted (two or three candidates).
5. The committee members will check formal and informal references.
6. The assembly will choose the new director. In principle, the decision should be made by consensus, but if there is no consensus, a vote will be held as provided for in the bylaws.<sup>14</sup> If it hasn't done so already, the assembly will determine the parameters for the offer based on the proposal by the transition committee.
7. The board chair will make the offer and negotiate compensation and the start date with the finalist.

<sup>14</sup> From the bylaws: "The decisions of the Assembly shall be made by a majority of votes, and in case of a tie, the Chair or Secretary as Acting Chair shall cast the tie-breaking vote. On an exceptional basis, and by decision of the Assembly, a member may vote remotely."

**Summary of the Consultant’s Role:**

- Listen to ideas, propose and finalize the proposal for the plan (including the communication plan, separately)
- Facilitate, accompany and guide the implementation of the plan by the board
- Hold interviews with the members of the assembly and the staff delegates
- Write drafts of key documents (job description, job announcement, selection criteria), collect input and finalize documents
- Suggest tools for monitoring and organizing application materials and other documents
- Receive the applications, record them in Excel and organize the materials for the transition committee
- Suggest questions for the interviews
- This role does not include identifying candidates or participating in the interviews.

| TASK   | PERSON(S) IN CHARGE                         | DATE        |
|--|---|-------------|
| <b>PHASE 1: Plan and Roles</b>   |   |             |
| Agreement on the plan  | Assembly, executive director and consultant | 01/30       |
| Creation of the committee/election of staff delegates  | Assembly                                    | 02/04       |
| Communication plan   | Committee                                   | 02/11       |
| <b>PHASE 2: Internal Interviews and Job Description</b>  |   |             |
| Meetings with staff groups   | Delegates                                   | 02/11-16    |
| Interviews with the assembly members and staff delegates   | Consultant                                  | 02/11-22    |
| Proposal for packet (job description, job announcement, selection criteria) and proposed emails for applicants | Consultant                                  | 03/05       |
| Committee meeting: approve packet and emails for applicants  | Committee                                   | 03/08       |
| Finalize packet  | Consultant                                  | 03/12       |
| Give feedback about the packet   | Delegates                                   | 03/17       |
| Approval of the packet via email   | Assembly                                    | 03/20       |
| <b>PHASE 3: Identifying Candidates</b>   |   |             |
| Identification-invitation of candidates  | All   | 03/20-04/20 |
| Questions for interviews   | Consultant and Committee                    | 04/17       |
| Deadline for receiving applications 04/20 11pm local time of the organization                                  | (Applicants)                                | 04/20       |
| Receive applications and send out acknowledgments of receipt   | Committee                                   | 03/20-04/20 |

| PHASE 4: Interviews/Final Selection                                       |           |          |
|---|-----------|----------|
| Committee meeting: selecting candidates to interview/agree upon questions | Committee | 04/20-24 |
| Interviews – select shortlist   | Committee | 05/03-14 |
| Interviews with the shortlist – determine the compensation package        | Assembly  | 05/17-28 |
| Review references   | Committee | 06/01-07 |
| Final selection meeting   | Assembly  | 06/08    |
| Offer, negotiation and acceptance of the position                         | Chair     | 06/14    |
| Announcement of final selection   | Chair     | 06/15    |

## 4.6 The Ever-Essential Communication Plan

Transitions may generate considerable uncertainty and anxiety, especially among the staff and donors. Some staff may become worried about changes in the organization and even their personal job situation.<sup>15</sup> Donors often worry about the stability of the organization and ask themselves if the agenda that they are supporting will continue under new leadership. Because of this, **the careful creation and execution of a communication plan is one of the most important elements for the success of any leadership transition.** You cannot improvise: it is worth the time and the effort to carefully think through, coordinate and execute a plan.

The objective of communication is to reduce angst, project stability and professionalism, and provide as much foreseeability as possible. Indeed, well-executed communication can increase credibility, improve the organization's image and contribute to its relational capital. It is better to err on the side of excessive rather than insufficient communication. When information is scarce, rumors and speculation are more likely to take hold. Among the key messages, it is fundamental to communicate that the organization will be fine without the outgoing director as there is a staff and board of directors in place to support the transition.

The outgoing director has the fundamental role of transmitting this message internally to the staff and externally to different audiences. The director should introduce other staff and board members to donors and other key actors so that they (especially the board members) can carry out their own communication—including the announcement about the new director—strategically considering in what order and with how much lead time ahead of his departure.

All of this must be clearly organized and put down in writing in a document that clarifies who will be communicated with (even person by person, when applicable), who will be in charge of this, how, when and with what messages. It is important that the members of the staff, board and assembly convey the same messages. To this end, it may be helpful to distribute talking points or **a summary of the messages and language to be used.** At the same time, **any unexpected changes along the way require especially timely and careful communication,** for example if the job announcement is opened up again due to a lack of candidates, if the time frame for selection is extended to include another round of interviews, etc.

**The most delicate moments are generally the beginning and end of the process.** For these situations, you must think about **who must be informed and in what order** and even be prepared to send simultaneous communications. For example, you cannot risk a donor telling someone from the staff or board that the current director is leaving (or who the new director is) and vice versa, or that the donors finds out informally from a third party. It is suggested that the chair of the board or another suitable person communicate personally with the donors and other strategic partners. At the same time, it is generally advisable to release an official

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, p. 18.

statement on the organization’s website with the information and messages presented in an orderly way to convey calm and foreseeability to readers.

Finally, all public documents (communiqués, the job announcement and the job description, if there is one) should be reviewed by the person in charge of communication or some other suitable person to refine the language and ensure its consistency with all other organizational communications. It’s also important to decide whether to create a special email address for communicating with the applicants (for example, hiring@organization.org).

**e Example: Communication Plan**

 Save document

Communication Plan

Coordinates communication from the board of directors: [name]

Coordinates communication from the staff: [name]

Reviews communication from the staff (if different from the person who coordinates): [name]

Email address that will be used for correspondence:

Signs the emails to the applicants:

Drafts the emails to the applicants:

| Audience      | When  | What                            | Who Communicates, Consults or Coordinates with Whom (if applicable) | How   |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Staff</b>  |   |                                 |   |   |
|               | Beginning of the process  | General announcement            | Executive director and board chair                                  | Email   |
|               | Once the candidates for the first interview have been selected  | Update                          | Board chair   | Email   |
|               | When finalists have been selected   | Update                          | Board chair   | Email   |
|               | Immediately after final selection (negotiation with the person selected if he or she has to first give notice at current job) | Announcement of final selection | Board chair   | Email (after meeting with the staff)  |
| <b>Donors</b> |   |                                 |   |   |
|               | Beginning of the process  | General announcement            | Executive director and board chair                                  | By email or telephone (see separate list of all donors)<br><br>Share summary of transition plan |

|                       |  |   |   |   |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|---|
|                       | When candidates have been selected for the first interview                       | Update  | Board chair<br>Coordinate with development director                                 | By email  |
|                       | Immediately after the final selection  | Announcement of the final selection               | Board chair   | By email, followed immediately by selective calls (calls to key donors may be made in advance of the email) |
| <b>General Public</b> |  |   |   |   |
|                       | Start of the candidate search  | General announcement                              | Chair or member of committee in consultation with person in charge of press         | Communiqué on the website   |
|                       | After the selection, immediately after the announcements to staff and donors     | Announcement of final selection                   | Chair or member of the committee in consultation with the person in charge of press | Communiqué on the website<br>Press release  |
| <b>Counterparts</b>   |  |   |   |   |
|                       | Start of the process   | General announcement                              | Staff members may circulate communiqué to counterparts using their judgment         | Communiqué on the website   |
|                       | After the selection, immediately after the announcements to the staff and donors | Announcement of final selection                   | Staff members may circulate communiqué to counterparts using their judgment         | Communiqué on the website   |
| <b>Applicants</b>     |  |   |   |   |
|                       | Within 24 hours of receiving an application                                      | Acknowledge receipt                               | Committee signs, consultant sends   | Email   |
|                       | As soon as the committee decides   | Invitation to interview                           | Committee signs, consultant sends   | Email   |
|                       | To be decided by the committee in each case                                      | Notify those not selected                         | Emails: committee signs, consultant sends<br>Calls: committee                       | Email or telephone  |
|                       | Post-selection   | Offer and negotiation with the candidate selected | Chair   | Telephone   |

**e Example: Messages and Language**

 Save document

---

Messages and Language  
for the Members' Assembly, Board and Staff

**For the first phase, from the moment of making the initial announcement:**

1. Two points to exemplify the stability and consolidation of the institution:
  - a. The selection process is beginning because the executive director decided that this is an appropriate time to end his tenure as head of the organization, leaving it in solid shape (he's not leaving due to some internal problem).
  - b. Institutional continuity is ensured by internal procedures, the stability and quality of the staff, and the governing bodies (members' assembly, board of directors).
2. Two points on the process:
  - a. The job announcement will be made in late March so as to select the next director in the first half of July.
  - b. The board of directors has hired a professional consultant with extensive experience accompanying leadership transitions for organizations in our region. He is in charge of helping design the process and accompanying and assisting in its implementation. He will ensure that the process will be conducted in a transparent, professional and timely manner, respecting all formal requirements.

And once the job announcement has been circulated, you can add the following:

- c. **Selection.** The selection of finalists is up to the transition committee, which was appointed by the members' assembly. The finalists in the selection process will be interviewed by the assembly, which will appoint the new director.
- d. **Dissemination.** We are seeking the broadest possible dissemination of the job announcement and are grateful for any help in this regard.
- e. **Deadlines.** The aim is to select the new director during the first half of July. The candidate chosen should be available to start work the first week of September.

---

**Section 5**

## The Hiring Process, Step-by-Step

In addition to the definitions mentioned above, the transition plan should include the following steps, generally in the order in which they are presented:

---

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | Preparing and issuing the initial internal and external communications regarding the process   |
| 2.  | Conducting internal and external consultations on the job description, qualifications and selection criteria   |
| 3.  | Drawing up the job description, selection criteria and job announcement  |
| 4.  | Preparing communication with the applicants (generally drafts of emails, including the acknowledgment of receipt, which should be ready before the job announcement is circulated).<br><b>See sample emails for applicants</b> |
| 5.  | Publicizing the job announcement and identifying candidates  |
| 6.  | Receiving and recording the applications, and selecting the applicants to interview  |
| 7.  | Conducting the interviews  |
| 8.  | Checking references  |
| 9.  | Offer and negotiation  |
| 10. | Announcing the new director  |

---

## 5.1 The Initial Communication

This point is so fundamental that it's worth repeating. As soon as the transition plan has been designed, the process begins with the internal and external communications defined in the **communication plan**. This step is deserving of careful attention, preparation and implementation.

## 5.2 Internal and External Consultations on the Job Description, Qualifications and Selection Criteria

Ideally, you should hold a round of consultations with staff, board and assembly members and relevant outside actors (for example, key allies). In addition to inviting their input, this moment of consultation may nourish their sense of participation, which will help ensure they feel comfortable with the final outcome.

This is easily done through a survey or, in exceptional cases, in interviews. You should inform the staff about who will receive the information, ensure its confidentiality, indicate at what moments (if any) they will be able to opine on these issues, and reiterate that the assembly or board will make the final decisions on these documents.

At the same time, the outgoing director can be asked to write up a document that describes, in his words, the organization's history, mission, accomplishments and challenges, as well as the values and vision that he thinks will sustain it in the long run. Such a document can be valuable insofar as it both draws on the knowledge and vision of the outgoing director and makes him feel part of the process. A face-to-face meeting of the outgoing director with the board or assembly to discuss this document is a unique opportunity for him to share information and opinions that may not have been easily expressed before.

**e Example: Staff Survey on the Job Description, Qualifications and Selection Criteria**

Ideally you should use a digital tool (for example Survey Monkey) that aggregates responses, facilitating their reading, analysis and discussion.

 Save document

Staff Survey on the Job Description, Qualifications and Selection Criteria

**As regards the new director:**

In your words:

What background or profile would be preferable?

What skills does the new director need to succeed in this job?

What professional or personal characteristics does the new director need to succeed in this job?

Priority-setting exercises:

The next two questions require setting priorities. Low priority is only relative to the other priorities listed.

Of these **duties and responsibilities**, please mark with an X the relative level of priority (choose two per level of priority) (high, medium and low):

|   | Low | Medium | High |
|---|-----|--------|------|
| Defining strategic guidelines (vision, strategic plan, etc.)                                  |     |        |      |
| Strengthening the governing bodies  |     |        |      |
| Representation, external relations and external communication                                 |     |        |      |
| Planning, management and administration (operational plans, policies and internal procedures) |     |        |      |
| Managing staff teams  |     |        |      |
| Financial planning and management   |     |        |      |
| Financial sustainability and fundraising  |     |        |      |

Of these **characteristics and skills**, mark the relative level of priority (choose six for each level of priority):

|  | Low | Medium | High |
|--|-----|--------|------|
| Formal education   |     |        |      |
| Knowledge of managing social organizations                   |     |        |      |
| Relevant technical, political, social and economic knowledge |     |        |      |
| Knowledge of fundraising strategies                          |     |        |      |
| Communication (in English)                                   |     |        |      |
| Communication (in Spanish)                                   |     |        |      |



|                               |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Strategic thinking            |  |  |  |
| Leadership                    |  |  |  |
| Decision-making               |  |  |  |
| Organizing work               |  |  |  |
| Planning and evaluation       |  |  |  |
| Problem-solving               |  |  |  |
| Shares institutional values   |  |  |  |
| Is flexible                   |  |  |  |
| Is ethical and transparent    |  |  |  |
| Builds positive relationships |  |  |  |
| Is creative and innovative    |  |  |  |
| Promotes teamwork             |  |  |  |

Do you have any advice for the transition committee related to the process of hiring and bringing on the new director?

Do you have any questions about the hiring process and transition? You can send an email or indicate if you wish to speak with a member of the transition committee.

Name [optional]:

## 5.3 Drawing Up the Job Description, Selection Criteria and Job Announcement

The next step is drawing up three documents together and in the following order:

1. **A job description** for the position of executive director
2. **The selection criteria** for choosing the new director
3. **The job announcement**

The selection criteria arise from the job description and the prioritization that is done in the surveys, while the job announcement should summarize fundamental elements of both the criteria and the job description.

This is when the board or assembly (according to the bylaws) should define the type of profile being sought (based on the results of any **organizational analysis or assessment** if one was done). It is important to ask yourself questions such as the following:<sup>16</sup>

1. Of all the following skills and characteristics, which should be accorded priority? (Resist the temptation to say “all of them” and really make an effort to prioritize.)
2. Do we need a director who significantly changes the course of the organization, or a director to sustain and build on what has been done, following the same course? (It is normal and positive for questions to be raised on the profile of the organization, for example whether one should emphasize its local versus national or international work, whether there is a need to deepen ties with grassroots organizations, etc.).

16 Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, pp. 22-23.

3. Is there a need for someone mainly focused on administration, program development, fundraising or some other task?
4. Is there a need for a profile that is more technical, more political or more geared to fostering internal working relations?
5. What values should the new director demonstrate and promote? And what leadership style should the new director have for heading up the organization?

At the same time, it is important to distinguish between essential factors and desirable ones. The key aspect of all these points should be clearly communicated in all three documents (job description, selection criteria and job announcement).

**These three documents should be approved ahead of time by all those who will participate in the final decision on the new director** (for example, the assembly members). Therefore, the transition plan should include enough time for their review and modification. It is up to each organization to determine whether to request comments from staff members on all or some of these documents.

**1. The job description** lists the responsibilities entailed and qualifications for the position. It is generally quite detailed and more internal; normally it is only shared with the finalists. Some organizations opt to produce and disseminate a **“job profile”** that focuses more on the qualifications and requirements, with just a general summary of the responsibilities (instead of a job description), which they disseminate as an attachment to the job announcement. On drawing up these documents it is important to strike a delicate balance between being complete and detailed so as to offer adequate information, and not being so exhaustive or overwhelming so as to discourage potential candidates. The key is to be able to show which aspects are priorities and which are desirable but not essential.

## e Example: Job Description

 Save document

### Job Description – Executive Director

#### Summary

The executive director leads and manages the organization in order to fulfill its mission, goals and other strategic guidelines developed together with the board of directors. The executive director promotes recognition of the organization as a legitimate, innovative and effective actor.

#### Duties and Responsibilities

##### Strategic Definitions and Leadership

- To define the vision, theory of change and strategic definitions that guide the work of the organization together with the board of directors and key staff members, bringing in his or her own perspective.
- To direct and supervise the work agenda in keeping with the annual work plan approved by the board of directors.
- To provide leadership (understood as the capacity to generate unity and enthusiasm in the members of the organization and to exercise a positive influence on others for attaining the results sought); to provide and encourage creativity and innovation.

- To update and use technical, political, social and economic knowledge and analysis.
- To respect and promote the organization's values [spell them out or give examples].

### **Governing Bodies**

- To build a constructive and complementary relationship among the board of directors, the executive director and the rest of the staff.
- To work with the members of the board of directors to ensure that it develops and operates optimally.
- Together with the board of directors, to develop and implement internal regulations for the governing bodies, including the respective roles of these organs and the staff, and a clear conflict of interest policy.
- To keep the board of directors informed of internal and external matters.
- To define and ensure the implementation of organizational policies to be approved by the board of directors when necessary.
- To provide periodic financial and programmatic reports agreed upon with the board of directors.

### **Financial Sustainability**

- To develop and implement a model and strategy for financial sustainability.
- To meet ambitious and reasonable fundraising goals.
- To develop positive relationships with current and prospective donors.

### **Representation, External Relations and Communication**

- To represent the organization in national [and international], forums; should be available for travel [specify time and frequency].
- To serve as spokesperson and representative in strategic settings including [examples].
- To strengthen strategic partnerships and collaborative efforts with peer organizations, donors, political actors and others to achieve the organization's goals.
- To design and direct the communication strategy.
- To ensure internal communication (with the staff, among areas of the staff, between the staff and the board, etc.).

### **Human Resources Planning and Management**

- To determine and implement a human resources plan, attracting and retaining the talent required to meet programmatic and organizational needs.
- To ensure clarity regarding roles and duties and an optimal organizational structure.
- To delegate effectively and ensure ongoing supervision and feedback.
- To establish human resources policies (for orientation, training, salary scale, annual performance evaluation, professional development strategies, etc.).
- To provide adequate supervision and coaching for staff growth and performance.
- If necessary, to discontinue a labor relationship in a lawful, sensitive and appropriate manner.

- To ensure a safe and comfortable work space.
- To establish a positive, encouraging work environment that facilitates ongoing learning.

### **Planning, Management and Administration**

- To conduct annual planning, monitor its implementation and evaluate, annually, the attainment of the strategic guidelines established.
- To ensure that the organization meets the expectations of its board of directors and donors.
- To make decisions responsibly and transparently and to clarify internal decision-making.
- To ensure efficient and effective operations (internal communication, administrative systems, etc.) and to supervise the quality of activities and outputs.
- To supervise the updating of a manual or other written version of basic institutional policies and procedures.
- To see to the security of the files and other organizational information.

### **Planning and Financial Management**

- To prepare a clear and appropriate organizational budget, approved by the board of directors.
- To use a robust accounting and financial management system to ensure proper monitoring and administration of funds and strategic financial decision-making, including cash flow, monitoring of budget execution on a project-by-project basis, etc.
- To ensure internal financial controls and implementation of the annual audit.
- To comply with all regulatory and statutory requirements (tax, labor, etc.).

## **Qualifications**

### **Mission and Values**

- To be passionate about the organization's mission and fully embrace its values.

### **Education**

- A university degree is required in an area related to the mission.
- A graduate degree in [specify] is required, or substantive work experience equivalent to graduate studies; five or more years' experience in managing a civil society organization or in a similar environment desirable.
- Other [national or international] experience desirable.

### **Knowledge**

- Knowledge of issues of [specify].
- Knowledge of digital tools [specify].
- Knowledge of principles and practices for leadership and management of civil society organizations (including financial and personnel management) and for working with the governing bodies.
- Technical, political, social and economic knowledge related to the mission.

## Skills and Experience

- Strategic thinking: evaluate options and opportunities based on the current moment and external changes, and put in place effective strategies in keeping with the organization's vision and values.
- Communication (oral and written): fluent at a professional level in [specify language(s)]; communicate using effective techniques and tools.
- Representation: serve as spokesperson and represent the organization in other activities; be able to articulate the mission; [engage in political advocacy and] position issues.
- Relationships: build positive relationships with internal and external actors and especially with donors; expand external relationships and partnerships.
- Fundraising: draw up and implement fundraising strategies [and generating own funds if applicable] (preferably own contacts with donors).
- Decision-making: make clear and timely decisions to benefit the organization.
- Leadership and managing staff: motivate, inspire, delegate, trust, support and encourage the growth of the staff; facilitate teamwork; ensure internal communication; generate unity and enthusiasm in the members of the organization and exercise a positive influence on others to attain the results sought.
- Organization: establish priorities, give attention to details, oversee attainment of the goals established, organize the internal work.
- Planning: define goals and strategies, create action plans, evaluate processes and outcomes, ensure that what is planned is completed and that emergent ideas are implemented.
- Problem-solving: identify problems, assess causes and implications, process relevant information, generate possible solutions and take effective action.

## Personal Characteristics

- Shares values: is familiar with and shares the organization's values.
- Is ethical and transparent: understands ethical practices and ensures that his or her conduct and that of the other members of the organization aligns with these standards and values.
- Is creative and innovative: develops new ways of improving the organization's work and creates new opportunities for impact.
- Is open-minded and empathetic: listens well and establishes empathetic relationships with the staff and others.
- Promotes teamwork: works cooperatively and effectively with others to establish goals, solve problems and make decisions.
- Is flexible: adapts, is versatile and tolerant and maintains effectiveness and efficiency in a changing work environment.

**Others:** Full workday. Availability for travel. Where he or she should live.

2. The selection criteria are based on the job description and/or profile of the position.

**e Example: Selection Criteria**

It is suggested that a score be assigned to the selection criteria and that a space be left for comments, mainly so that those who conduct the interviews can record their impressions for later use. It is not recommended that finalists be selected solely on the basis of a numerical tally, nor does this tool suggest that the candidate with the most points should automatically be selected.

 Save document

Selection Criteria

**Candidate's name:**

**Name of the Committee member:**

|     | Essential   | Maximum   | Score | Brief Explanation   | Impressions from the Interview |
|-----|---|-----------|-------|---|--------------------------------|
| 1.  | Politically independent   | Yes or No |       | No ties to any political party  |                                |
| 2.  | Ideological compatibility   | 7         |       |   |                                |
| 3.  | Passion for the mission   | 7         |       | What energy and enthusiasm does he or she convey?   |                                |
| 4.  | Technical knowledge and professional expertise in the organization's area of work | 6         |       | <i>(give examples)</i>  |                                |
| 5.  | Capacity for political analysis   | 6         |       | Includes capacity to detect threats and opportunities for advancing the mission   |                                |
| 6.  | Knowledge of the changing context   | 6         |       | Especially nationally   |                                |
| 7.  | Strategic vision  | 7         |       | Creativity, capacity to be proactive based on a reading of the political situation  |                                |
| 8.  | Capacity to lead the staff  | 7         |       | Capacity to understand the organizational culture, lead and manage an empowered staff and problem solve   |                                |
| 9.  | Programmatic/ administrative management capacity                                  | 4         |       | Examples from previous job  |                                |
| 10. | Political engagement and advocacy (local/national/ international)                 | 7         |       | Relationship with various actors (grassroots groups, high-level officials, etc.); political and communication skills for lobbying political actors and others |                                |
| 11. | Strategic communication   | 6         |       | Formulated and implemented complex and effective communication strategies   |                                |

|              |   |                |              |  |                                       |
|--------------|---|----------------|--------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 12.          | Oral and written communication (English)  | 6              |              | Argues clearly; able to write clearly without being edited                                       |                                       |
| 13.          | Fundraising                               | 6              |              | Successful prior experience  |                                       |
| 14.          | Negotiating skills                        | 5              |              | Examples from previous jobs  |                                       |
| 15.          | Availability for travel                   | Yes or No      |              | At least 25%   |                                       |
|              | <b>Desirable</b>                          | <b>Maximum</b> | <b>Score</b> | <b>Brief Explanation</b>   | <b>Impressions from the Interview</b> |
| 16.          | Experience in civil society organizations | 4              |              | Preferably in leadership positions   |                                       |
| 17.          | Contacts and positioning                  | 4              |              | Nationally and internationally; recognition, prior relationships                                 |                                       |
| 18.          | Oral and written communication (Spanish)  | 4              |              | Excellent oral communication without a strong accent; able to write clearly without being edited |                                       |
| 19.          | Capacity to make difficult decisions      | 3              |              | Examples from previous jobs  |                                       |
| 20.          | Solid academic background                 | 3              |              | Preferably at the master's level and publications with solid experience in applied research      |                                       |
| 21.          | Experience with boards of directors       | 2              |              | Interacted with or has served on a board   |                                       |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |   | <b>100</b>     |              |  |                                       |

**3. The job announcement** is a public presentation on the organization that communicates its values and priorities, in addition to the basic information on the position and how to apply. You should not lose sight of its function as a tool for attracting good candidates. Accordingly, it is recommended that you include information on the accomplishments, programmatic opportunities and other key aspects of the organization. It is generally no longer than a page or a page-and-a-half and it contains:

- The organization's logo
- A brief outline of the organization (mission, programs, history)
- Summary of the position (the key responsibilities, in general terms)
- Summary of the qualifications and characteristics sought in the new director
- Location and anticipated start date
- How to apply, including the elements of the application
- Deadline for applying

**The elements of the application** typically include:

- A letter of application with the reasons why one wishes to become the director [specify language]
- Updated résumé
- A two-page essay on the applicant's strategic/political vision for the organization for the next five years or a similar document [specify language]<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This requirement helps minimize applications from persons who clearly lack the qualifications for the position, and to select candidates for interviews. Nonetheless, some organizations opt to leave this requirement for the finalists, since they consider that candidates need to obtain more information to produce it.

- Name and contact information (email and telephone) of three professional references

### e Example: Job Announcement

 Save document

---

## Job Announcement for Executive Director

[Name of the organization] is announcing its selection process for executive director, in charge of planning, leading and managing the strategies and actions of the organization to fully carry out its mission and ensure its sustainability.

[Brief overview of the mission, programs, recent accomplishments and current opportunities]

The executive director should have excellent skills in the areas of strategic thinking, legal and political analysis, engagement with various players, advocacy, communication and representation; should be able to lead and manage the staff of a complex and multidisciplinary organization; and should be able to relate effectively to the board of directors and the members' assembly. Requires fundraising experience and fluency in both written and spoken English and Spanish. Master's-level studies, doctoral studies, or equivalent work experience; having held director-level positions in civil society organizations or a related sector; being able to devise legal and political strategies for strategic litigation; and skills for communicating with the media are all essential.

**Reports to:** Board of directors

**Salary:** Negotiable and competitive, dependent on skills, aptitudes and work experience

**Location:** [city country]

**Availability for travel:** [specify]

**Starting:** [month and year]

**To apply:** Send to [email address]:

- Letter of application in English with the reasons why you would like to become the director of [name of the organization]
- Résumé
- A two-page essay in Spanish on your strategic vision/policy for [name of the organization] for the next five years
- Name and contact information (email and telephone) of three professional references

**Deadline for applications:** [date]

---

## 5.4 Preparing Communication with the Applicants

Communication with the applicants should be clear, respectful and professional, and prevent any possible legal problems. Therefore, it is advisable to reach agreement on the messages for applicants for all the different phases and on who will sign (and who will send them, and at what moment) before announcing the job opening, since applications may come in immediately that require an official response. It is also important



to give timely notice of any delay or change in the process (“Even though last week I informed you that we would be scheduling the interviews this week, we have had to put them off one more week. We will be in touch no later than Monday.”) Adequate communication with the applicants who are not shortlisted is as important as with those who are still under consideration.

## e Example: Emails to Applicants

 Save document

### Emails to Applicants

#### To all applicants: Acknowledgment of receipt of application:

Dear [name]:

I hereby acknowledge receipt of your application for the position of executive director of [name of organization]. We will be in touch with you soon, once all the applications have been reviewed.

Best regards,

[name]

Member of the board of directors and the transition committee

#### For those selected for the first round of interviews:

Dear [name]:

I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected for an initial interview for the position of executive director of [name of the organization].

The selection process will have the following steps:

- a) An initial interview with the transition committee made up of three members of the board of directors
- b) If you make it to the next interview and if you would like, an informational meeting with the current executive director and the person in charge of administration and finance [or the development director]
- c) Selection of finalists by the transition committee
- d) Interview of finalists by the full board of directors
- e) Final decision to be made by the full board of directors

We propose that the interview with the transition committee be [face-to-face or how] on [dates] and we ask that you please inform us of your availability before [date].

Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Best regards,

[name]

Member of the board of directors and the transition committee

**For those not selected:**

Dear [name]:

Thank you for applying for the position of executive director of [name of the organization]. We appreciate your interest in our organization and the issues we work on.

We received more than [X] applications for this position and it has been a very competitive process. While we are grateful to have received your application, it is not among those selected for the next stage in the selection process. We wish you the best of luck in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

[name]

Member of the board of directors and transition committee

**For those who were interviewed but not shortlisted as finalists:**

Dear [name]:

Thank you once again for participating in the interview with the transition committee of [name of the organization]. We very much enjoyed getting to know you, hearing about your work and experience to date, and about your ideas about the future of our organization.

The group of candidates has turned out to be very competitive and we have had to make difficult decisions. I'm sorry to inform you that you were not selected for the next stage of the process. We have no doubt that you will do very well in your future endeavors and we are most grateful for your participation and interest in our organization.

Best regards,

[name]

Member of the board of directors and transition committee [or chair of the board of directors]

---

## 5.5 Publicizing the Job Announcement and Identifying Candidates

This is a key moment in the process because of its impact on the quality of the pool of candidates. In addition to using large-scale means of dissemination, it is essential to make a concerted effort to identify candidates and encourage them to apply and—equally important—to identify persons who may know good candidates and ask for their assistance, be they donors, colleagues in other organizations, or other allies. Of course, the outgoing director, the members of the board and/or the assembly and key staff members should review their contacts as part of this process, and if they themselves will not make the contact, you should determine who will. It makes a big difference to speak with people (including the people who will be consulted for help) instead of just sending them the job announcement.<sup>18</sup> The staff members and members of the governing bodies should clearly understand that **this is *the* moment for making a proactive and forceful effort to create a solid group of candidates.**


---

18 Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, p. 85.

## 5.6 Receiving and Recording the Applications and Selection of Applicants to be Interviewed

The person in charge of receiving the applications should keep an organized record of them that can also be used to coordinate communication with each applicant, beginning with a timely acknowledgment of receipt. This record can also be used to help select the applicants to be interviewed. For example, each person who participates in this process may indicate his or her opinion as to whether the applicant should have an initial interview marking yes, no, or maybe (“I’m not sure”). This expedites the process by limiting the conversation on which ones to interview to those cases in which there is at least one “maybe.”

### e Example: Record of Applicants

 Save document

#### Record of Applicants

The initials JG, MV and SD in this example refer to the members of the transition committee who must decide on the first interviews.

| Name of Candidate | For each candidate, each member places under his or her name:<br>Y=Yes    N=No    M=Maybe |    |    | Add comment with explanation if any doubt | Date of Acknowledgment | Date Email Interview 1 | Date Email Rejection |
|-------------------|---|----|----|---|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
|                   | JG  | MV | SD | Comments                                  |                        |                        |                      |
|                   |   |    |    |   |                        |                        |                      |
|                   |   |    |    |   |                        |                        |                      |
|                   |   |    |    |   |                        |                        |                      |

## 5.7 The Interviews

### Who Conducts the Interviews

The first interviews are generally conducted by the transition committee (or some other subgroup of the board of directors and/or members’ assembly if there are others who are available and have good interviewing skills). Ideally, once the finalists are selected they should be interviewed by all those who, according to the bylaws, will make the final decision (in principle, in a panel-type interview in which all the interviewers participate). While the group of interviewers may be large, candidates for the executive director position should be able to face such a scenario. At times a third interview or consultation is needed to clear up some particular doubt; all the interviewers or a subgroup may participate, depending on the situation. This is entirely normal. It is important to take the time needed for all the steps needed to make a good decision.

As a general rule, it is recommended that you not delegate the interviews to consultants (although they may help prepare, coordinate and document the interviews). It is crucial that those who make the decision are able to meet the candidates, and vice versa. In addition, the perception that someone from outside the organization determines which candidates are shortlisted or chosen may jeopardize the legitimacy of the process.

## Preparing the Interviews

The main goal of the interviews is to determine to what extent the candidates have the essential characteristics that were agreed upon by consensus. To this end, it is useful to focus on the candidates' real qualities and skills rather than on hypothetical answers. In other words, the question is "What has the person done in a real situation?" and not so much "What would he or she do in a given potential situation?"<sup>19</sup> It is recommended that you ask for examples of specific situations, including mistakes or failures and the lessons learned from them.

Before interviewing the finalists, you may want to give them copies of the financial statements, the last strategic plan or certain institutional policies.<sup>20</sup>

If the candidate is not familiar with the organization, an informational visit can be arranged (if this does not pose a problem for the candidate in his or her current position in terms of the confidentiality of the candidacy, or if this confidentiality can be managed with the outgoing director and staff persons who are particularly trustworthy). The objective of a visit could be to meet some staff members (or all of them), or to meet the current director and/or the director for finance, etc. (see comments on the **participation of the staff in the process**). However, if any candidate is unable to visit the office (for example, if he or she lives outside of the country or the city at the time of the interview), it is preferable not to offer this option to anyone to avoid creating inequality among the candidates. If such visits are arranged, it is suggested that you have very careful prior communication with the staff to clarify the circumstances and objectives.

The questions and dynamics of the interviews should be prepared ahead of time, including questions in the second language, on whatever topic you wish, to check language skills. Some organizations prepare a table with each selection criterion and a corresponding question (or questions).

### e Example: Interview Questions

 Save document

Table of Interview Questions

| Selection Criterion   | Question  |
|---|---|
| Passion/commitment  | [In general, this comes up throughout the interview without having to ask a particular question, except perhaps: What aspect of the mission excites you most and why?<br>Or: Why would you like to be the director of this organization?] |
| Up-to-date knowledge and analysis of current events on relevant issues for the organization | [Depends on the issue itself. For example: What is your opinion in relation to some debate or some specific aspect of issue X?]   |

<sup>19</sup> Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, p. 26.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Ideological compatibility  | [Describe a politically charged, high stakes scenario and ask what the candidate would do if he/she felt ideologically X but the organization takes position Y]   |
| English language (and Spanish language)                                    | [Evaluated based on the interview and the documents submitted]  |
| Strategic vision   | What do you see as the most important opportunities for the organization's advocacy work in the next five years?  |
| Vision/skill for ensuring institutional sustainability                     | What is your vision for ensuring institutional sustainability? What are the key factors and how will you address them? Please share examples of your prior experience that demonstrate your capacities in this regard.  |
| Leadership capacity and staff management                                   | What is your experience managing a staff? How would you describe your leadership style, model and practices? How are these reflected on a day-to-day basis?<br>What experience do you have preparing budgets and managing the finances of an organization?<br>What were the amounts? What system did you use? |
| Fundraising ability  | Describe your experience with donors proposing, negotiating and culminating funding, both international and domestic.   |
| Capacity for engagement with wide range of interlocutors/advocacy          | The position requires engagement with actors ranging from grassroots groups to government officials at the highest level.<br>Tell us about your experience in this regard, citing at least one specific example.  |
| Capacity to carry out plans, reports, presentations, executing ideas, etc. | Can you share examples of your strategies for ensuring implementation with plans, reports, etc. and when you used them?<br>Can you share examples of when you carried out a new idea, preferably another person's idea, and what the process was like?  |
| Contacts and positioning   | Can you describe your contacts nationally and internationally and give us specific examples?<br>If we ask a third person about your level of recognition and how you are positioned in the region, what do you think they would say, based on what?   |
| Experience with boards of directors  | Can you tell us of your experience interacting with boards of directors and/or as a member of one?  |
| Experience in strategic communication                                      | Can you describe your experience designing and implementing complex communication strategies?<br>What is your criterion for evaluating them as examples of an effective communication strategy?   |

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Experience in nonprofit sector    | Can you describe your experience in nonprofits or in contact with nonprofits?<br>What positions and responsibilities did you have? |
| Regional/international experience | Give us examples of your experience regionally and internationally on the issues the organization works on.                        |

## Documenting the Interviews

It is important for each interviewer to document, in an organized manner, his or her impressions of each applicant and the basis for those impressions, to ensure an orderly and transparent analysis. To this end, the **table of selection criteria** includes a column for a numerical score and another for comments. Recall that the numbering is only indicative, to record an impression; total scores do not automatically determine decisions.

## 5.8 Reference Checks

At times, it may seem that checking references is a mere formality and does not yield useful information for the selection process. However, there are ways to increase the possibility of such conversations providing valuable input without putting the reference in the uncomfortable position of having to speak ill of the candidate. To this end, the following questions are suggested:<sup>21</sup>

- What aspects of this work is [name] most on top of? If she is selected, on what areas should we focus and support her professional development?
- If you have to name two areas in which [name] could improve, what would they be?
- Some persons have a strong strategic vision but are less skilled in management, while others are very good at managing and heading up a staff but are not as strong on the strategic issues. Which do you think more accurately describes [name]?

Another strategy is to ask the reference to describe the candidate’s most important strengths and see if the prioritized selection criteria come up.

You shouldn’t limit yourself to the references given by the candidates, since they were certainly chosen because they will speak well of the person. If someone in your organization knows others who could provide their views, it is a good idea to contact them and pose these same questions. You can also ask the candidate for more references (“I’d like to speak with your boss at your next-to-last job. Could you please put me in touch with her?”).

## 5.9 Offer and Negotiation

Normally someone (for example, the board chair) is designated to make and negotiate the salary offer. Of course, this should include the baseline compensation and the benefits package, the start date and moving costs (if the person must relocate and the organization can cover all or part of those costs).

After having worked throughout the process to attract the best possible candidates, this is the time to sustain that effort. Some advice in this respect:<sup>22</sup>

21 Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager’s Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, pp. 92-93.

22 Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager’s Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, p. 96.

- **Make the best possible offer.** This is not the time to offer low and then negotiate, but to make the best or almost the best offer you can. Show the candidate that you really want her to accept.
- **Offer some time for thinking it through.** Offer a reasonable time, taking into account the circumstances of both the candidate and the organization.
- **Try to anticipate and understand the candidate’s decision-making process.** Perhaps there is some factor that can be addressed openly, or some doubt that needs to be cleared up.
- **Make it clear that you really want her!** While you don’t want to over-insist or be annoying, don’t be entirely passive: offer to clear up any doubts and convey your enthusiasm.

Once a decision has been made, you should reach consensus on the goals for the first period of the new director’s term and ensure clarity regarding her performance evaluation (when it is to be done, who will participate, based on what criteria, and the process).<sup>23</sup> You can also take advantage of the moment to establish mutual expectations as to the respective roles of the executive director and the governing bodies.<sup>24</sup> You should arrange periodic meetings for exchanges during the first year to ensure the mechanisms for support and feedback are in place (“What turned out to be your most important challenges during this first stage? How can we support you?”).<sup>25</sup>

## 5.10 Announcing the New Director

As mentioned above, this is one of the most delicate moments in the transition process. Even before the selection process has culminated—and despite promises of confidentiality or that one will wait for the public announcement—this information generally moves with impressive speed. You need to be prepared beforehand with **the communication plan** and the persons responsible, as well as having relevant drafts ready (of emails to donors, any internal communication, the announcement on the website or social networks, etc.). It is essential to think about **who should be informed and in what order** and to be prepared to send simultaneous communications. Before doing anything else, first you must inform those not selected (without naming the person selected), followed by an almost simultaneous communication to the staff members and the main donors, giving them the name of the new director. This communication is strategic for the organization and should emphasize not only the qualifications of the new leader but also the solidity of the process and other data that will provide foreseeability, such as the new director’s start date and the last day of the outgoing director.

## 5.11 Summary of Key Points Regarding Donors

Smooth leadership transitions can increase relational capital with donors, while bumpy ones may jeopardize these relationships. There is so much at stake that the relationship requires great care. We suggest you keep the following points in mind:

- Donors are concerned about the stability of the organization and wonder whether the agenda they are funding will be sustained under the new leadership. Accordingly, **carefully designing and implementing a communication plan is one of the most important elements of the success of any leadership transition.** Again, you can’t improvise: it takes time and effort to design, coordinate and implement.

<sup>23</sup> For an example of an executive director performance evaluation, see Farmelo, Martha. “Boards of Directors and Governance Systems: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations,” produced with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2014, pp. 29-34. Available at: <http://effectiveorgs.org/resources/>.

<sup>24</sup> On division of roles, see, for example, Farmelo, Martha. “Boards of Directors and Governance Systems: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations,” produced with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2014, pp. 54-56. Available at: <http://effectiveorgs.org/resources/>.

<sup>25</sup> Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager’s Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012, p. 98.

- The outgoing director should be careful not to share the news of his departure with too much lead time, which only draws out this uncertain period for donors.
- **Communication with donors must be carefully planned, in addition to being individualized and personalized.** Special attention should be given to donor communication, especially at key moments such as the beginning and end of the selection process, and especially if there is any change or delay in the process.
- **It is recommended that the outgoing director introduce the board members and other staff members to the donors** so that they are positioned to engage in their own communication.
- It is recommended that the job announcement be shared with the donors and that their assistance be sought for publicizing it and suggesting possible candidates.
- **The announcement regarding the new director should reach the donors through the board chair or other suitable person,** and never through informal channels or third persons. This should happen almost immediately after the selection has been made.
- For donors in general, and especially the most strategic ones, **it is worthwhile for some member of the transition committee to call them** before sending out the email announcing the final selection.
- **The new director should prioritize contact with donors** in the first weeks on the job, and the board should convey to her the importance of this happening soon enough and in such a way as to convey continuity in the agenda and in the projects that each donor supports (or the organizational agenda, in the case of general support).

## Section 6

# Farewells, Welcomes and Orientation

## Farewell to the Outgoing Director

You shouldn't underestimate the importance of closure and farewell rituals for the outgoing director and for all members of the organization. This is about acknowledging and celebrating his contributions, and ensuring a healthy process of concluding one stage and beginning another. Indeed, solid closure for the outgoing director is fundamental for ensuring the space and climate needed for the new director to get off to a good start. Depending on the size and scale of what you decide to do, the task of organizing the farewell and recognition activities may be delegated to a committee of staff members.<sup>26</sup> During this stage, the outgoing director should also identify what activities, meetings and communications to include to ensure a healthy process of closure for him and for the organization.

## Welcoming and Orienting the New Director

Welcoming moments are important and pleasant, but orientation is fundamental. Unfortunately, **many incoming directors have complained that their orientation was not well-organized or well-implemented.** An insufficient or poorly conducted orientation may lead the new director to feel lost and not integrated, or to make preventable mistakes due to lack of information, which can harm her relationship with the staff and governing bodies. It may also cause problems in relationships with donors, and in general undermine her internal and external legitimacy.

---

<sup>26</sup> Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009, pp. 8, 28.



Obviously, it is ideal to have a moment for face-to-face orientation of the incoming director by the outgoing director. If this is not possible, it is important to find other ways for them to spend time together (for example, the outgoing director could come back to the organization and devote some time to orientation, introductions and handover, possibly for pay).

It is also important for the outgoing director to leave a report for the new director that describes his main achievements and matters pending, both programmatic and organizational, in addition to key information on finances and donors.

The orientation should begin with all the relevant documents, which may include, for example:

- History and mission of the organization
- Strategic plan or organizational goals
- Brief summary of the programs
- Organizational chart and job descriptions
- List of staff members and brief biographical sketches
- Manual of organizational policies and procedures
- Approved budget and financial reports for the last two to five years
- Grant proposals and grant agreements both current and in process
- Fundraising plan
- Organizational evaluations and assessments
- Plan for organizational strengthening
- Financial reports, both organization-wide and by project
- Audit report(s)
- Articles of incorporation/bylaws
- Amendments to the bylaws (or a brief summary)
- Board rules and procedures
- List of board members (indicating officers) and brief biographical sketches
- Conflict of interest policy
- Minutes of the meetings of the board for the last 12 months
- Dates of the next meetings of the board

The orientation may include all or some of the following activities:

- A series of meetings with the outgoing director by topic (programs, staff, board, political discussion, communication/campaigns, fundraising/sustainability, etc.)
- Individual meetings with staff members or meetings by area
- Individual meetings with members of the board of directors (including representatives of the committees of the board, if any)
- Meetings for introductions and transition with the donors (ideally accompanied by the outgoing director to foster and show continuity and a healthy transition, or if that is not possible, and when appropriate, with certain members of the board and/or staff)
- Meetings with the main external actors (journalists, colleagues from allied organizations, etc.)

**Ideally, one person in a high-level position takes responsibility for planning and coordinating the orientation** (for example, the development director or the program director, if such positions exist). The orientation plan should clearly spell out the respective responsibilities of the outgoing executive director and the new executive director if there is a period during which they overlap.

## Section 7

# Role of the Outgoing Director on the Board of Directors

At times the outgoing director (especially when he or she is the founding director) seeks to join the board of directors upon stepping down, or the board seeks his participation. The potential advantages include certain continuity in terms of the founder's leadership, contacts and vision—especially if the organization has been highly dependent on that person to date—and possibly his contributions to board development.

At the same time, the outgoing director's participation on the board poses major risks. It may cause confusion or discomfort for the staff, especially for the new director, who needs the space and freedom to exercise her own leadership and authority. It may also be complicated for the former director to no longer be involved in running the organization, making it difficult to take distance and let go of the reins. Often, it is best to let some time go by (for example, 12 months) before incorporating an outgoing director to the board, to allow him to let go of his previous role and create the space that his replacement needs. The board members should help discuss and decide on his new role, and only approve of him joining the board if they are convinced that it is advisable and feasible.

## Section 8

# Evaluating the Process

Once the leadership transition process has culminated, it is recommended that you undertake a brief evaluation exercise to identify what worked well, what could have been done better and other lessons from the experience. This will make the process a source of learning to improve future transitions.

### **e** Example: Evaluation Survey for Staff

Once again, ideally you may use a digital tool (for example Survey Monkey) which aggregates the responses to make it easier to read, analyze and later discuss.

 Save document

---

### Staff Survey to Evaluate the Process

Dear staff members of [name of the organization]:

Your feedback on the selection process for choosing the new executive director of [name of the organization] will be most useful for the members' assembly and the board of directors, for the consultant and for the institutional memory of [name of the organization]. We would be most grateful if you could answer this brief survey based on your personal experience. If you have no personal experience in relation to a given point, please indicate N/A (does not apply).

At the end of the survey you may choose to identify yourself (optional) and add any additional comments. Thank you very much.

Best regards,

[Name]

Chair of the board of directors [or other relevant person]

**Please rate the following aspects of the process:**

|  | Very Problematic | Deficient or Problematic | Adequate | Went Well | Went Very Well |
|--|------------------|--------------------------|----------|-----------|----------------|
| Planning and timetable   |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Group work on the job description and selection and participation of the delegates |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Preparing the job description and job announcement                                 |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Internal communication with the staff on the process and outcome                   |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| External communication on the process and outcome                                  |                  |                          |          |           |                |

What aspects of the process struck you as particularly positive or negative? What could have been done better or differently?

Any other comment?

Name [optativo]:

Thank you very much!

**e Example: Evaluation Survey for the Members’ Assembly and Board of Directors**

Once again, you may use a digital tool (for example Survey Monkey), which aggregates the responses to make it easier to read, analyze and later discuss.

 Save document

Survey for the Members’ Assembly and Board of Directors  
to Evaluate the Process

Dear members of the assembly and the board of directors of [name of the organization]:

Your feedback on the selection process for choosing the new executive director of [name of the organization] will be extremely useful for the assembly, the board of directors, the consultant and the institutional memory

of [name of the organization]. We would be most grateful if you could respond to this short survey based on your personal experience. If you don't have personal experience on any point, please indicate N/A (does not apply).

At the end of the survey you can choose whether to identify yourself (optional) and add any additional comments.

Thank you very much.

Best regards,

[Name]

Chair of the board of directors [or other relevant person]

**Please rate the following aspects of the process:**

|   | Very Problematic | Deficient or Problematic | Adequate | Went Well | Went Very Well |
|---|------------------|--------------------------|----------|-----------|----------------|
| Planning and timeline   |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Staff participation   |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Preparation of the job description, job announcement and selection criteria       |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Interviews, deliberation and selection in the assembly of [date]                  |                  |                          |          |           |                |
| Internal communication with the staff and the assembly on the process and outcome |                  |                          |          |           |                |

What aspects of the process struck you as particularly positive or negative? What could have been done better or differently?

Any other comment?

Name [optional]:

Thank you very much!

Preparing for a leadership transition—and then going through it—can be a complex, demanding and emotional process, requiring considerable reflection, effort and internal activity. It is both a huge responsibility and an enormous opportunity—to create and demonstrate organizational solidity and maturity and generate an *esprit de corps* around what has been achieved and the challenges pending—while also looking to the organization's future with optimism, emotion and enthusiasm.

## Section 9

# Bibliography

Cooper, Tom R., *Executive Defined Transition Toolkit*, Mindy Lubar Price, editor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, 2009.

Farmelo, Martha, "Boards of Directors and Governance Systems: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations," produced with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2014.

Green, Alison and Jerry Hauser, *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Getting Results*, Washington, DC, USA: 2012.

## About the Author

Martha Farmelo is a consultant focused on strengthening NGOs in Latin America. Originally from the United States, she has lived in Argentina for more than 15 years. She has more than 25 years' experience directing and supporting organizational strengthening processes for NGOs in Latin America and the United States. Before becoming an external consultant, she held programmatic and institutional positions in various NGOs and was a program officer with the Inter-American Foundation. Her thematic expertise is in human and civil rights. She has guided and supported numerous organizations in different organizational development initiatives, including designing and accompanying leadership transitions.

[www.effectiveorgs.org](http://www.effectiveorgs.org)

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Hewlett Foundation for supporting the production of the original version of this manual in Spanish, in particular Libby Haight and Alfonsina Peñaloza for their trust and their many contributions. Many thanks to the Oak Foundation for covering the cost of translation to English.

I am profoundly grateful to the boards of directors and staff members at Conectas Direitos Humanos (Brazil), Fundación Ciudadano Inteligente (FCI, Chile) and Fundar Centro de Análisis e Investigación (Mexico) for the trust they placed in me to support their executive transitions. I would also like to thank the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network and the Hewlett Foundation, respectively, for supporting my participation in those transitions.

In particular, I am grateful to Simone Haf, coordinator of institutional development at Fundar, for her careful review of the draft of this manual and all her contributions. I would also like to thank Lucia Nader, former executive director of Conectas, for her feedback, as well, and for sharing her thoughts so openly and generously in light of her own experience as outgoing director. I would also like to thank Jerry Hauser of the Management Center in Washington, DC for his timely reflections on the participation of the staff and the outgoing director in the process.

Finally, as always, I am grateful to Victoria Wigodzyk, my partner and companion along this journey, for all her support and contributions.