

Interim Executive Management: Seven Benefits to Consider

By Jackie Eder-Van Hook, PhD

A nonprofit organization that loses a top leader (e.g., chief staff officer, CEO, executive director, executive vice president) faces an anxiety-producing situation even under the best circumstances. But losing an executive without a succession plan in place can be particularly agonizing.

In such a situation, a nonprofit's board may feel forced to begin an immediate search for a new executive without reflecting on how it might best fill the short-term gap to give it time to consider the organization's longer-term future.

To help bridge these gaps and create the necessary pause, organizations increasingly are engaging professional transition consultants as interim executives. These consultants offer nonprofits a viable alternative to entering recruitment mode immediately or to appointing a staff or board member simply to "hold down the fort." Transition consultants have chosen interim management as their careers, preferring to help organizations bridge gaps in time or talent rather than running for the long-term top job. As a result, they can provide the board with more time to choose the best leader for the organization's future. Organizations that employ transition consultants also can find numerous other potential benefits.

Here are seven of the most common that I have seen through my work with organizations experiencing leadership transitions.

Benefit #1: Rich set of experiences. Organizations often look for interim executives who bring specific expertise and/or a rich set of experiences from working with multiple organizations. These consultants' long careers as nonprofit executives let them be leaders on Day 1 and often provide them with specific skills to solve organizational challenges. For example, someone with the proper experience or technical skills could help an organization quickly solve infrastructure issues or provide sage advice on exploring processes and tools.

Benefit #2: Independent assessment. Professional interim executives don't have a stake in the organization and can assess it objectively, reassuring stakeholders (e.g., donors, clients, and members) that results won't be subject to internal or external political influences. For instance, an interim executive could provide objective advice on how to improve financial training and reporting to help the organization best communicate financial standings to stakeholders.

Benefit #3: Board and staff development. Many board and staff members learn on the job. While experiential learning can work, it also means that people learn different information at separate times based on current circumstances and who did the teaching. Interim leaders, meanwhile, can have conversations with the staff and the board, learn what they know and don't know, and then help the organization determine development priorities. The interim executive even can help the board determine whether proper development might let it hire the organization's next leader from within.

Benefit #4: Determining needs. Executive departures are inevitable, and an interim executive gives the board time to consider the organization's goals and determine what type of executive will help it achieve its imagined future. The board knows that pausing long enough to answer these questions will help ensure that its new executive doesn't become an *unintentional* interim.

Benefit #5: Calming emotions. Regardless of circumstances, an executive's departure causes anxiety among staff members, who suddenly find themselves forced to make sense of new ways of working, their new status, and what the future might hold for them. During the transition, staff members often jockey for position, burrow in, or disengage. There can be a loss of morale, discord, and organizational entropy. Board members may feel abandoned, disappointed, relieved, or even angry. An interim executive can provide much-needed ballast during the transition and quell the organizational turbulence.

Benefit #6: Trying on a new style. Every leader has a particular style that becomes woven into the fabric of an organization's culture, especially if the executive has had a long tenure. Over time, the board and staff become accustomed to the way the executive works. They create workarounds and may even offer excuses for an executive who is tardy, overly gregarious, conflict averse, disorganized, or prone to micromanagement. An interim executive can give the board and staff an opportunity to try on a new executive style *before* the wedding.

Benefit #7: Time for a break. Sometimes boards labor unsuccessfully for months or years to try to make their executive relationships work. They coach, they cajole, they threaten, and finally, they terminate. This effort is very hard work for the board and staff. Sometimes the organization has just gone through an extremely turbulent period of change capped by the executive's departure. Or when an organization has had one executive for many years, it can just be time for a break. Regardless of the reason for the termination, an interim executive can step in to work with the board to make sure it knows how to develop and support the next executive relationship in a way that is beneficial to the organization, its new executive, the board, and staff.

Guidelines for selecting an interim executive

- **Interview references.** Speak to at least three recent client references.
- **Ask probing questions about his or her work style.** For example, what is the interim executive's measure of success? How has he or she helped other nonprofits in transition? How does he or she handle conflict? What is his or her decision-making style?
- **Determine cultural fit.** What are his or her values and beliefs? As you listen to an interim executive's language and stories, do they seem congruent with your organization? A "numbers person" in a highly interpersonal organization might not be the best match, for example. But, on the other hand, an interim might help an organization become more numbers oriented.
- **Consider personal characteristics.** Ideally, your interim will be self-aware, a quick learner, and a good listener. He or she should also ask probing questions about your organization and its needs, and be willing to readily share his or her knowledge to address them.
- **Explore experience and knowledge.** A professional interim executive is well versed in the nuances of the nonprofit world. Do you believe he or she can help with the organization's particular issues? Does the person sound and seem credible? The decision is largely intuitive.
- **Clarify logistics.** Your interim's attention should be on your organization. If he or she has a busy consulting practice, it will be difficult to focus on your needs. Inquire about scheduling and flexibility. The average interim assignment lasts 9 months, with a range of 4 to 22 months.
- **Clarify the terms (purpose, duration, fees, and prohibitions) and execute the contract.** Consider hiring a firm with a network of interim executives, giving you easy access to colleagues who can provide support, recommendations, and fill in, if necessary.

When an Interim Executive Works Best

In many ways, interim executives provide much-needed support when an executive leaves unexpectedly or when the board and staff need fresh perspectives on how to take the organization forward. The relationship often is most beneficial when an organization is ready to look critically at the organization and willing to make necessary changes. This allows the board, staff, and interim leader to apply their collective talents preparing the organization for regular long-term leadership. It also is advisable that the interim doesn't have a stake in the organization and isn't a candidate for the full-time position, so he or she can objectively help the organization navigate any potential issues, such as internal political challenges, and offer an honest assessment of the organization and its potential to reach short- and long-term goals.



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