

CHAPTER ONE

Succeeding in This Big Job

Leaders at all levels and in all situations must pay close attention to situations in which their most effective option is to follow. . . . Because performance requires them to rely on the capacities and insights of other people.

—DOUGLAS K. SMITH,
“The Following Part of Leading,” *Leader of the Future*

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS HAVE A VERY BIG JOB! If you are currently working as an Executive Director, or have done so in the past, you surely know just how big and complex the position is. You converse with funders and donors, inspire and manage staff, keep Board members informed and involved, listen to clients, raise money, review (and often worry about) finances, articulate the case for your programs and the organization’s accomplishments, and often serve as an accidental technology expert, facilities manager, or HR specialist, and sometimes you even clean the office. Your responsibilities seem to change depending on who needs what. You must be able to prioritize a variety of stakeholders in a multitude of different ways.

Because of all these responsibilities, Executive Directors must lead, manage, and support (follow others) to be successful. We believe that by knowing when to be a

Wisdom

The over-arching role of the Executive Director is to be caretaker of the nonprofit.

leader, manager, or supporter, you can more efficiently focus your efforts, and in many cases delegate to others. As a result you can make more time for a life beyond the nonprofit. In this chapter, we answer these questions:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of an Executive Director?
- What is the difference between a leader and a manager?
- When should an Executive Director lead, manage, or support others?

What are the roles and responsibilities of an Executive Director?

All Executive Directors (paid or unpaid) share one universal role, regardless of where they work. The Board always hires the ED as a temporary caretaker of the mission, entrusting the organization to the ED with the expectation that it will thrive in that person's care. So the Executive Director neither owns nor controls the nonprofit, but is responsible for making it thrive.

To perform this central caretaker role, an Executive Director must have five important characteristics. The strength of each will differ from person to person, but every Executive Director needs some combination of all of the following:

- Visionary
- Change agent
- Relationship builder
- Community creator
- Resource wizard

These characteristics will look different in each person, and in each nonprofit. In some nonprofits, all five characteristics may need to be in evidence all the time, while in others they ebb and flow in the Executive Director depending on the needs of the organization.

Throughout the remainder of the book, we will be describing these characteristics in great detail and offering you ideas on how to apply them in your nonprofit. First, though, to understand them more fully, it's helpful to look at the five characteristics in terms of the Executive Director's responsibilities.

The characteristics of an Executive Director are manifested and become apparent in the responsibilities of the position. These responsibilities generally are listed in the job description or work plan for the ED. They vary from person to person and nonprofit to nonprofit, depending on the size and culture of the organization and where it is in its life cycle. Exhibit 1.1 highlights the key responsibilities of an Executive Director and should be viewed as an illustration of what most EDs are responsible for in most organizations. You may find it helpful to use this chart to create a more specific list of responsibilities for you in your own nonprofit.

Wisdom

Every Executive Director has key responsibilities that relate to being a visionary, change agent, relationship builder, community builder, and resource wizard.

Exhibit 1.1 Responsibilities of an Executive Director

As a *visionary*, an Executive Director is responsible for

- Motivating internal and external stakeholders with a shared picture of the greatness of their nonprofit.
- Inspiring passion to achieve what is possible.
- Bringing focus to the vision with a strategic plan.
- Thinking strategically about the best way to meet community needs.
- Evaluating, on an ongoing basis, the effectiveness of the nonprofit in fulfilling its mission.

As a *change agent*, an Executive Director is responsible for

- Keeping aware of trends in the nonprofit sector to ensure the organization remains responsive to changing community needs, shifting revenue sources, emerging competition, and ever-increasing public scrutiny.
- Monitoring the nonprofit's internal changes and providing the skills needed to lead, manage, and support the organization at any point in its life cycle.

Exhibit 1.1 Responsibilities of an Executive Director (continued)

- Managing internal change processes by working with stakeholders to set goals and outcomes, create plans, and make the change happen.
- Persuading and motivating others to accept change as part of the daily routine in the organization, while also acknowledging people's natural resistance to change.
- Taking risks to try new ideas and take new approaches to achieving the mission.

As a relationship builder, an Executive Director is responsible for

- Communicating successfully with internal stakeholders—staff, volunteers, and Board.
- Managing staff and volunteers in a manner that fosters a healthy culture to ensure that everyone's role on the team is valued and recognized.
- Supporting and at times leading the Board of Directors to ensure they add value to the organization.
- Carrying the wisdom of the organization's Founder while implementing bold new ideas.

As a community creator, the Executive Director is responsible for

- Creating a visible organization with broad stakeholder support.
- Communicating with external stakeholders to ensure continuing interest and involvement in the mission.
- Building partnerships that further the mission through cooperative efforts and strategic relationships.
- Valuing diversity and creating an organizational culture that appreciates and respects differences.

As a resource wizard, an Executive Director is responsible for

- Recruiting, mentoring, and recognizing people who will raise funds that allow the organization to thrive.
 - Communicating and building relationships with funders and donors to gain interest in the mission and support for it.
 - Stewarding and managing funds received so well that the organization's trustworthiness is unquestionable.
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The list of responsibilities in the exhibit may seem like a long one to anyone who has not experienced the job of an Executive Director. The list is long, particularly when you think about the specific tasks needed for each responsibility. Remember, though, that not all responsibilities have highest priority on any given day.

In some smaller organizations that have no paid staff, the Executive Director may struggle to accomplish any of the indicated responsibilities because of the need to handle routine tasks normally performed by others in larger organizations. In this case, an ED needs to remember the core responsibilities as listed here, and work diligently to delegate as much of the other work as possible to volunteers.

Being a successful Executive Director is a learned role—no one starts out in the position as the “perfect ED.” In fact, successful Executive Directors are always improving themselves and taking time to build and strengthen the skills most needed to fulfill their responsibilities and lead their nonprofit to greater success. Remember this if you find yourself doubting your capabilities or feeling inadequate. The very big job of an Executive Director requires an ongoing process of learning and development.

WARNING

Don't view this big job of Executive Director as yours alone to handle. Freely ask for support or advice; if you insist on doing everything yourself, people may let you try—and that will be a disaster for everyone.

What is the difference between a leader and a manager?

These days people constantly speak and write about leadership and management styles. How often have you heard someone described as “a great leader but a weak manager” or “a great manager of people but not a very good leader”? What do those comments mean? The lines between the definitions of *manager* and *leader* have blurred to the point that people often use the words interchangeably. But being a successful manager and being a great leader are two very different roles—and both are required of Executive Directors on a daily basis if they are to fulfill the broader role of caretaker for the organization.

Wisdom

Providing strong leadership must be the highest priority for the Executive Director. Being a good manager and supporter is important, but leadership comes first.

The challenge is twofold: knowing the difference between leadership and management, and discerning when to use one or the other.

A *manager* focuses attention on efficiency, effectiveness, and making sure the right things happen at the right time. This is an essential role for every Executive Director.

You are in a manager role when you set performance objectives with staff, prepare budgets, review cash flow projections, develop action plans, and evaluate programs or fundraising strategies or any other aspect of the nonprofit. Managing may also include doing hundreds of other tasks that require focused and logical attention to the good health of the organization.

On the other hand, a *leader* is a strategist, a visionary, and someone who inspires others to greatness. This is also a critical role for Executive Directors in any organization. You are leading when you share your vision for your nonprofit, or when you bring staff and volunteers together to design a program or develop a strategy or resolve a problem. Leaders motivate staff and volunteers, serve as role models, inspire donors to give generously, build community and capacity inside and outside the nonprofit, and create learning environments in which people can grow and develop themselves without fear. A strong leader will display all of the characteristics discussed in this chapter.

One of our Executive Director colleagues expressed the difference between leader and manager this way: “*When you are a leader, you work from the heart. As a manager, you work from the head.*” Although it is probably more complex than that, the point to remember is the difference between what you do as a leader and what you do as a manager—and the constant need to be able to do both. Furthermore, the head and heart need to be partners, not independent operators.

WARNING

Don't delegate the role of manager or leader without also delegating the authority and accountability to do the job and the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them.

When should an Executive Director lead, manage, or support others?

Executive Directors generally understand they have the roles of leading and managing in the nonprofit. Supporting others and following their lead is sometimes more challenging. There seems to be an unwritten rule that new Executive Directors absorb through their pores—that to be a good Executive Director, you always have to be in charge and responsible for every aspect of the organization. You can throw that out the window now, because it just isn't true. As a matter of fact, the best and most successful Executive Directors are those that seek out and develop leadership and management qualities in paid and unpaid staff and Board members. In addition, they enjoy empowering others, giving them the responsibility and authority to lead the organization. By supporting paid and unpaid staff and Board members, you can try on new ideas, learn new practices, and grow as an Executive Director. At the same time, you will give others the opportunity to take leadership or management roles, to be innovative, and to grow into their own personal style, deepening your organization's leadership reserves so you can concentrate on the parts of your job that matter most—and even develop the breathing room to take some time off.

To discern when to lead, manage, or support, think about your role as ED as outlined in Exhibit 1.2 on page 11.

The lists in the exhibit are not exhaustive and will of course be different for each Executive Director. The main point is that no one person, not even you, can single-handedly juggle all of the required activities effectively. Your primary responsibility to your nonprofit is leadership, and that leadership must include the wisdom to know when to become a manager and a supporter. You must know when to seek out and ask for help and when to take time to develop support that will ensure success for you, your nonprofit, and the community you serve. The following “Story from the Field” illustrates this point.

Wisdom

A supporting role for you is one way to ensure the organization has strong leadership after your departure. This is perhaps your ultimate responsibility as caretaker.

Story from the Field

After graduating from college with a degree in sociology (and a desire to save the world!), Mim applied for her first Executive Director's job at a family health community clinic in Texas. In the interview, she was told that the ten staff people worked together as a collective with equal rights and equal pay, and they only gave anyone the title of Executive Director because federal family planning contracts mandated it. Bravely, she accepted the position and quickly became immersed in issues of authority, decision making, communication, and control.

Mim understood that the clinic needed a manager who could achieve the level of efficiency required by federal contracts. On a much more vague level she understood that the clinic needed a leader who had a vision and could inspire its independent-minded and passionate people.

Mim began her work at the clinic believing that as an Executive Director, she was in charge of everything, responsible for everything and everyone, and of course had little room for mistakes! To follow someone else's lead might be counterproductive, and might in fact badly mess things up for her.

The toughest lesson was recognizing that leadership sometimes includes being a follower or supporter. Because this was a collective of equals, Mim quickly had to learn that effectiveness as a manager and a leader depended on her willingness to be a follower—to let other staff people take the lead with their ideas. It was frightening at first, especially when she found herself clashing with a few of these capable people. The result was an atmosphere of increasing mistrust, disrespect, and internal bickering. Mim began to see how her belief that she had to be in charge of everything was leading to disaster for everyone.

Mim was not the only leader in the nonprofit. Staff, volunteers, Board members, and community stakeholders all knew more than she did about certain aspects of the organization or had expertise in areas where she definitely lacked proficiency. The creative and innovative people around her had great ideas that they were quite capable of implementing.

Fortunately, Mim recognized the value of these resources before it was too late. She saw the fallacies of her initial perceptions of what a good Exec-

utive Director was and learned the value of supporting and following. Her relationships with staff improved and she became a much more effective leader and manager as the staff progressed toward a collective shared vision.

Exhibit 1.2 Executive Director as Leader, Manager, Supporter

You *lead* when your nonprofit needs direction and focus for relationships that create unity within the nonprofit and stronger communities outside, an inspiring vision to generate passion and excitement, resources that support and enhance success, increased capacity to fulfill the mission, and change to stay effective and true to the community.

You *manage* when the nonprofit needs tactical plans to keep programs on track and funds coming in, processes and procedures to keep staff and volunteers accountable, budgets and finance reports to ensure sustainability, and written materials to promote the organization and satisfy stakeholders.

You *support and follow the lead of others* when your nonprofit has Board, staff, or volunteers interested and skilled (or willing to develop skills) in building and sustaining relationships, planning and carrying out programs, making the organization visible, ensuring financial stability and growth, managing internal changes, or tracking external trends.

Learning when to take the support role is important and sometimes difficult for many Executive Directors. Conversely, it is also important to discern who not to follow. Following individuals who do not display the leadership characteristics we described earlier in this chapter, or people who are generally not valued by those in your organization, is a clear prescription for trouble. Taking time to assess these leadership indicators can prove invaluable.

Believing that the Executive Director always has to know the right thing to do in any situation is guaranteed to make the job more difficult than it already is. It's an unfair expectation that too many Executive Directors put on themselves, to the ultimate detriment of everyone.

Wisdom

Supporting others in the organization to take a leadership role is healthy and in no way diminishes or threatens your own leadership role.

Very often, the best leadership practice is to identify knowledgeable, trustworthy individuals to whom you can delegate and then follow them.

The big job of being an Executive Director has its challenges with the overall role of caretaker, and the numerous responsibilities assigned to it. However, the rewards you receive often far outweigh these challenges. Under your care, the nonprofit's programs, staff, Board, and community can thrive. Your own growth as a leader, manager, and supporter can also be viewed as a huge reward on both a personal and professional level.