Your Guide to Nonprofit Succession Planning

Nonprofits rely on staff and volunteers, but many organizations ignore the need for succession planning. Time restraints are a common reason, however, most organizations don't understand what a succession plan is and its significance.
This article will delve into this subject and explain why your nonprofit must have a succession plan. We'll also share the best time to develop a succession plan and a key-step checklist to make one of your own.

Your organization needs to be prepared for when a crucial employee, a board member, or other leadership staff leaves. Having a succession plan in place will ensure that you can tackle this situation with utmost effectiveness by training internal staff or recruiting new talent. Read this blog for a checklist of 5 essential steps to take.

What is a Nonprofit Succession Plan?

A nonprofit succession plan is a strategy to help prepare your organization for when a board member, Executive Director, or crucial staff member leaves.

Nonprofits have limited funds, and high-quality workers are hard to find. It's crucial that your organization has an understandable plan to find and train new staff and board members.

Another reason nonprofits need succession plans has to do with fundraising. If your organization plans to apply for grants, many foundations require organizations to have succession plans for all leadership roles.

The Ideal Time to Prepare a Succession Plan for Nonprofits

The best time to create a succession plan is now! It can take up to six months to find an acceptable candidate and another three months to train them. The sooner your organization plans and finalizes a succession plan for each high-level role, the better.

Your nonprofit should prepare a succession plan when you start the organization. If you're a new nonprofit, now is the time to develop a succession plan for board members, Executive Director, and other staff you need.

If you create a succession plan when starting a nonprofit, you can use the same material to find the right staff members and board members from the beginning.

Think about this when you create your organization's Board of Directors and Executive Director and other staff job descriptions, onboarding, and training materials.

Nonprofit Succession Plan Checklist – 5 Key Steps

Nonprofit succession plans do not all look alike, but there are a few items each must have. The below checklist includes key steps that you must take in order to create an efficient succession plan for your nonprofit.

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1. Determine which roles need succession plans

Before anything else, you must determine which roles you can't live without. The obvious ones are your Board President and Executive Director, but many other roles are crucial to your organization and will take time to find and train.

For example, if you provide services to people program leadership roles are also a crucial part of your organization.

Once you've chosen who needs a succession plan**, you must develop one for emergencies and planned departures.** Employee departures won't always be an emergency, but you must be prepared in case it happens.

Discuss with your team which roles are greater turnover risks. Start succession planning for those individuals first.

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2. Create a succession planning team

Your nonprofit leadership must agree on a vision for your nonprofit's succession plan. The first step to succession planning is to create a team that can outline your nonprofit's goals and develop a plan for all to follow.

The best individuals to have on your team are the board members and staff that need a succession plan. Plan a meeting for your Executive Director, Board President, and other high-level staff and volunteers. During that meeting, you must discuss your organization's culture and values and ask the following questions:

- Which roles need succession plans?
- What are the responsibilities for each of these roles?
- Do you regularly interact with any of these roles?
- What changes would you like to see made to these roles?
- Will they be part of hiring and onboarding for these roles?

After your team members answer these questions, **ask each high-level staff and board member to create their own job description**. They have the best insight into daily activities and long-term goals for their position.

3. Create a system to cultivate internal talent

Most nonprofits don't have excess funds to find high-quality staff outside of the organization. The best option for these organizations is to create a system of cultivation for executive staff and board members.

After determining your wants and needs for each role, create a list of those within the organization that best fit these roles.

- Are they ready now?

- How can you get them ready?

Most states require nonprofits to create terms and elections for board members. This means that after each term, your organization is in danger of losing a board member and in need of finding a new one.

One of the best ways to develop a system to find and train board members is by creating auxiliary volunteer groups. Event committees and young professionals are excellent sources of individuals who could fill the roles with the right training.

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4. Develop your external search phase

In some cases, your nonprofit will not have the staff to fill an open role. In these cases, you must have clear goals and plans. It can take up to six months to find a quality candidate.

You can't waste any time. It's crucial to create and update the position's job description and identify potential candidates if you know a staff or board member is leaving soon. External interviews for most positions will take up to three months.

Pro tip: There is always a chance that you lose a staff or board member without warning. **Your organization must have an interim leader already set up** in case this happens. They will be temporarily looking over the job responsibilities while you work on recruiting a permanent replacement.

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5. Onboard and assess new leaders

Onboarding is vital for every leadership position. Training for leadership staff and board meetings can take three to six months. It will include the role's responsibilities and how they'll interact with other individuals and roles within the organization.

Prepare training and assessment material before searching for this role and make your expectations for the role clear when you hire for the position.

After you hire leadership staff or appoint a board member, follow your pre-determined assessment plans and regularly track how well the individual has acclimated to your organization and nonprofit culture.

Regular communication and guidelines are necessary and appreciated, so be open in your discussions with the individual you hire or appoint. Let them answer questions and find as many ways as possible to make the transition successful.

Source: DonorBox, 2023