

From Leadership Transition to Transformation: Preparing for a Successful Executive Search

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An executive search represents a significant investment of time and resources for an institution, as well as an opportunity for the right hire to substantially move an organization forward. While a leader could depart at any time and for any reason, searches sometimes take place at pivotal moments in the trajectory of an organization, ranging from an extraordinarily ambitious endeavor to a time of internal crisis or external uncertainty. For many reasons, vacancies can carry significant risks as well as opportunities, and it is important for institutions to give exceptional consideration and care to the search for their next leader.

This edition of *Arts Insights* outlines the steps that institutions can take to prepare for a successful outcome, including those that should routinely be undertaken before a search is needed. These initiatives help to build engagement and consensus about the organization's strategy, structure, and vision. In the event of a vacancy, these aspirations will inform the search committee on the type of leader that is needed to achieve those future-oriented goals. Leadership transitions are more than just a personnel change. If handled well, a successful search can propel an organization forward with new programs, community engagement, and opportunities for revenue generation. When organizations take the time to crystalize strategic goals, the search itself can be a catalyst to shape and transform the organization.

Organizational Readiness Lays the Groundwork

The most successful searches start before organizations are actively engaged in an executive search process. There are several techniques that organizations can use to regularly support their current leaders and maintain readiness for healthy transitions. These methods include prioritizing personnel-related tasks and maintaining documentation. For example, organizations should conduct annual performance reviews for their current leaders, and job descriptions for all executive and artistic leaders, as well as senior staff, should be updated annually. Documents such as strategic plans should also be regularly updated and communicated internally.

In addition to providing a valuable forum for communication and support for current executive leaders, these processes represent an important opportunity for the board, artistic, and staff leadership to engage on institutional priorities and the individual priorities for each role that support strategic initiatives. This work is also rewarding outside of transition planning, as organizations that have structured processes for goal setting have higher levels of employee engagement, optimism, and performance.¹

Another important way for organizations to prepare themselves for change is by performing board and organizational assessments for any areas that may need to be strengthened. Assessments can be used to help evaluate a variety of areas, and often, external consultants are asked to provide objective research, market analysis and recommendations. Frequent topics for assessments include organizational structure, availability or overlap of services, strategic planning, capacity building, and benchmarking against other organizations in the industry. Performing fact-based assessments and engaging employees in strategic goals are two important ingredients in readying an organization for change.²

Interim Leadership is Vital

Once an executive or other senior leader has given notice of their departure, no matter the reason, the effects will reverberate throughout the institution. It is important for boards to support their artists, staff members, donors,

¹ Academy of Organizational Culture, Communications, and Conflict, *The Relationship Among Goal Setting, Optimism, and Engagement: The Impact on Employee Performance*, Bobby Medlin and Ken Green, Jr., 2008

² McKinsey and Company, *Losing from Day One: Why Even Successful Transformations Fall Short*, McKinsey survey, Michael Bucy, Bill Schaninger, Kate VanAkin, and Brooke Weddle, December, 2021

strategic partners, and other constituents by addressing vacancies quickly. In an ideal scenario, an effective interim leader is put in place to support the organization during the transition, while a search is simultaneously launched for the permanent executive. Several consulting firms have a roster of individuals who are interested and available for interim leadership roles, and there can be many synergies involved when working with the same firm to quickly place an interim leader while advancing the search for the permanent executive. It signals to prospective candidates that the organization is in good hands, and that they will not necessarily be walking into an emotionally charged organization with significant rebuilding needed.

Organizations can be greatly strengthened during times of transition by the effective use of interim leaders who bring fresh perspectives, ensure stability, and reinforce organizational culture. With sudden or unexpected departures, many individuals might be facing some form of the five stages of grief, so an interim leader who can bridge the gap between initial stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression to prepare the organization for acceptance³. By the same token, executive search firms embedded in understanding the social and psychological elements bring a humanist approach and typically use objective tools and subjective conversations to bring people to acceptance. The elements of doing the work and providing a forum for healing are vitally important to support staff and operations during times of transition, and to prepare for the arrival of the next leader who will inherit a healthier organization.

Preparing for the Search Itself

When engaging an executive search, organizations should carefully consider elements such as specific industry expertise, whether the firm has a deep network within the sector, and how effectively they focus on building consensus among various stakeholders who sometimes have complementary yet competing priorities for the new leader. Boards should look at the firm's processes, success rate, values, and capabilities in recruiting a professionally and personally diverse slate of highly qualified candidates.

Once engaged, effective search firms will guide organizational leadership through an engaged process from start to finish. One of the initial steps is to carefully consider the makeup of the search committee. Boards should consider inviting participants that represent a diverse group of stakeholders with a variety of lived perspectives. Board, staff, artists, and community members who are invested in the organization's future and the next leader's success are ideal search committee members.

Another early responsibility of the search committee is to help define the job description and the type of person who would best fill this role. Perhaps the best way to delineate these elements is to think about what the organization wants the individual "to do" in roles and responsibilities as well as the "to be" in their competencies, communication styles, and motivations as a successful leader at a unique moment in time. The goals for the position and person must be clear at the start, so that the search firm can deliver an exciting and marketable position description that also reflects the organization's strategies and opportunities, all of which are critical to attracting talented candidates.⁴

Additionally search consultants will also offer specialized training to the search committee to help guide them in best practices for interview questions and the law, how best to avoid unconscious hiring bias, and a commitment to confidentiality. It is important for committee members to carefully read all materials about the process and the candidates. The time invested by the search committee has a major impact on the quality of later candidate interviews and in producing the most meaningful interview results. Candidates also value the opportunity to engage in a well-informed, elevated discourse with the search committee as they consider the organization, the community in which it exists, and their next career steps.

Anticipate the Search Timeline

While the time invested in a search from launch to conclusion varies, in most cases a new leader can be expected to arrive on-site within approximately six months. The search will typically start with a discovery process where the consultants meet with the organization's leadership to learn as much as possible about the organization, its culture, and the role. This will often be done through a series of interviews prior to the creation of a formal job description. Once this is finalized, the search is announced publicly through a variety of means. In the second and third months of a search, the consultants are focused on researching, recruiting, interviewing, and performing due diligence on prospective candidates before presenting a first group of candidates to the search committee.

³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 5-15

⁴ Harvard Business Review, *How to Write a Job Description That Actually Gets People to Apply*, by Rebecca Knight, January 2025.

By about the fourth month of a search, organizations are deliberating between several strong candidates for the role, and the search firm is guiding the move toward identifying semi-finalists with the search committee. In the following month, the search committee is actively interviewing the strongest finalists for the role on-site to ensure that individual connections are made and the parties understand the human dynamics involved. Meanwhile, the consultants are also engaged in conversations with references and ensuring all legal due diligence has been completed for these finalists. Organizations will typically reach their decision by the end of the fifth month and will prepare to announce the new leader shortly thereafter. In the last month of the process, the organization will be fully engaged in voting upon, welcoming, and onboarding their new leader and setting them up for success. Most professional search firms remain involved at some level in the ensuing months from the public announcement of the selected candidate through to periodic touchpoints with the selected candidate and board leadership.

Leveraging Transitions as a Catalyst for Growth

If an unexpected vacancy is not handled proactively and with intention, it could strain operations, cause low staff morale, and even create—or exacerbate—financial uncertainties. Instead, institutions have an opportunity to stabilize and strengthen their operational and human elements by engaging stakeholders in visionary discussions to effectively inform their search process. Organizations that can skillfully navigate this period by building consensus among leaders and empowering staff and artists will place themselves in a strong position to recruit an executive or artistic leader that aligns with their values, strategic direction, and program goals. This leader, inspired by the opportunity presented, can then hit the ground running with a shared—often transformative—vision for the future of the organization.



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Dr. Bruce D. Thibodeau founded ACG in 1997 and has guided hundreds of nonprofit, university, and government clients in achieving effective leadership transitions, planning cultural facilities, increasing revenues, developing dynamic institutional brands and messages, crafting strategic plans and business models, and revitalizing board governance practices. He has also conducted extensive research in a threefold exploration of stakeholders, nonprofit arts management, and cultural facility project management and has facilitated numerous community engagement processes that have increased the public dialogue and stakeholder awareness of the arts and culture sector's value and impact on communities. As both a researcher and practitioner, his expertise highlights the important roles of project champions and followers as they overcome inertia and gain momentum derived from their social connections, personal

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Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization achieve effective leadership transitions and team capacity building.

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