

Succession Planning by Sonia J. Stamm, Principal, The Stamm Consultancy

Q: As an executive director, I'm concerned about what will happen to my organization when I leave; how much notice should I give?

A: Customary business practice suggests that the advance notice employees provide of their departure equal the number of weeks they get in vacation. In other words, if you are entitled to three weeks of vacation, give three weeks' notice. However, nonprofit organizations are typically lax in succession planning, for both staff and board positions, so such departures can cause crises. Boards sometimes rely on strong E.D.'s for so much that they neglect their own management responsibilities, leaving E.D.'s anxious about pursuing other opportunities. While you certainly can play a role in grooming a replacement, it is your board's job to identify and meet its staff leadership needs, which take time.

In a perfect world, the board has already crafted a strategic plan and ensured that the E.D.'s performance is measured annually against the organization's strategic goals. Similarly, the E.D.'s job description incorporates those goals into operational, management and programmatic responsibilities. The board then will have a current picture of the position and the challenges and opportunities facing it, as well as an ultimate vision for the organization. Replacing you will be a matter of establishing a search committee and conducting a search process – not easily tackled, but manageable with reasonable notice.

In reality, many boards must integrate the previously mentioned steps into a long-term transition process, while overseeing the short-term management needs of the organization. Despite the potential drain of time, energy and resources, the process is very worthwhile; organizations that seek short-cuts often find themselves hiring again within a year, which overtaxes their already limited resources.

If circumstances permit (meaning you have the luxury of time and your continued presence will neither thwart efforts to replace you nor cause discomfort to you, the staff or the board), providing 6 – 12 months' notice might be appreciated. That way, your board can evaluate its management options without heightened concern over current operations. If, as in most cases, such a long lead-time is inappropriate or impossible, then offer the amount of notice that seems reasonable and manageable to you.