

Executive Coaching Works!

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Being the executive director (ED) of a nonprofit organization can be a very rewarding experience but it can also be fraught with frustration, high stress and the sense of never accomplishing enough. No matter how many hours EDs spend working each day and despite all they do accomplish, they invariably go home with a laundry list of unfinished items and unresolved problems they couldn't get to, were avoiding, or didn't quite know how to handle.

On a good day they may go home exhausted but at least are able to get a full night's sleep. On a "not so good" day, EDs may find themselves waking up at 2 am to ruminate on how they could have handled a certain situation better, to jot down new ideas for programming and fundraising or simply to add forgotten items to a never ending *Things To Do* list.

In a recent national survey of Executive Directors, 35% planned to leave their posts within two years.

Managing complex organizations with multiple and diverse stakeholders, limited budgets and large social change agendas is a formidable challenge and EDs often need coaching but rarely obtain it. Especially in smaller organizations with limited infrastructures, EDs are expected to play multiple roles such as community leader, manager, fundraiser, human resources director, program developer and staff trainer. Assuming so many divergent roles allows little time for EDs to carry out their most important role namely, cultivating strategies to ensure strategic impact and long term organizational sustainability.

In a recent national survey of nonprofits, **nearly two thirds of nonprofit leaders were serving in the role of executive director for the first time.**ⁱ Many receive little or no formal executive director training or mentoring before they are thrust into the position and once on the job, many EDs find it difficult to take time out for nonprofit management training.

Moreover, even when they are able to avail themselves of training opportunities, it is often too little, too late and too abstract. EDs often claim that one shot trainings can be ineffectual because it doesn't allow sufficient time to integrate new knowledge and skills, and doesn't provide the ongoing guidance needed to change behaviors and institute organizational change.

Against this backdrop, it's not surprising that 35% of survey respondents planned to leave their executive director posts within two years and **less than half of all executive directors planned to take on another executive director job after leaving their current position.**ⁱⁱ

Are we hiring executive directors only to burn them out? And in so doing, are we shrinking the pool of experienced candidates capable of running our vitally important, nonprofit organizations?

Executive coaching can make the difference. Executive coaching is a customized approach to leadership development that helps EDs increase their self awareness,

become active learners and develop advanced problem solving skills and strategies necessary to achieving their social change goals. Whether provided on an individual basis or through an Executive Coaching Group (ECG), coaching enables EDs to access a seasoned professional that can help them objectively analyze the problems and challenges they face and develop innovative yet realistic strategies and solutions.

Thus a relatively small financial investment in executive coaching significantly increases the odds of EDs becoming better and more effective leaders. Evaluation findings of the Executive Coaching Project sponsored by CompassPoint Nonprofit Servicesⁱⁱⁱ illustrate this point.

EDs identified numerous benefits from executive coaching:

- ➔ Improved ability to exercise leadership on a daily basis;
- ➔ Increased ability to exercise leadership in the face of challenges & obstacles;
- ➔ Greater efficacy in moving the organization towards its goals;
- ➔ Better delegation of tasks and responsibilities;
- ➔ Increased productivity and better time management;
- ➔ Completion of high priority tasks in a timely manner;
- ➔ A clearer organizational vision and stronger staff/board alignment;
- ➔ Improved personnel practices;
- ➔ Greater clarity with respect to decision making processes and staff roles & responsibilities; and
- ➔ Improved fundraising capability.

Moreover, the increased self confidence and job satisfaction derived from the ability to more effectively manage complex challenges actually reduces the chances of ED burn out and contributes to higher ED retention rates in the nonprofit sector.

Given the benefits, why don't more EDs avail themselves of executive coaching? Many nonprofit executives are concerned about the expense but are we being penny wise and pound foolish? The reality is that far more costly management mistakes could be avoided or ameliorated through executive coaching. Executive coaching can help to strengthen ED leadership skills and can provide specific guidance on how to avoid fiscal mismanagement problems, lost funding opportunities, help to address low morale and program efficacy concerns.

Another and often unstated reason why coaching is not readily sought after relates to the ED's ability to manage unrealistic expectations of the community, board and staff. The ED is often looked upon as the sage organizational leader who is expected to know how to handle each and every problem or challenge that comes along no matter how complex. Against this backdrop, asking for help from a coach may be perceived as a sign of weakness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. EDs who seek out executive coaching are deeply committed to their organizations and are being proactive – seeking new ways to improve their performance and leadership abilities -- in service to their communities.

Most certainly, executive coaching can play a pivotal role in helping organizational leaders to articulate a clear vision for the future and in developing the best possible

strategies for success; an investment well worth the consideration of nonprofit organizations, large and small.

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ⁱ Jeanne Peters et al., *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experience* (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Peters, *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experience* 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harder+Company Community Research, *Executive Coaching Project: Evaluation of Findings* (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2003).