

Moving Up: Can Seconds-in-Command Make the Transition from Manager to Leader?

Why do so many seconds-in-command have trouble when they're promoted?

By Joseph C. Santora & Gil Bozer

We're all familiar with the vital role seconds-in-command play in making nonprofit organizations effective. These are the people who often hold the organization together. They're the people that executive directors trust to manage the organization's operation and daily routine. Seconds-in-command also serve as a bridge between the executive director and staff to ensure that staff concerns are heard and resolved. For sure, seconds-in-command are indispensable members of nonprofits.

But what happens to seconds-in-command when they're appointed to fill an executive vacancy in the organization? Are they effective in this new leadership role?

The answer isn't self evident. While a second-in-command may have an excellent understanding of how the organization

works operationally, many fail as executive directors – at least in the short run.

Why does this happen? The answer lies at the core of the executive director's role. This role is less about functional tasks like fundraising, planning, and engaging with external stakeholders. Instead, it's more about assuring overall effectiveness and responding to a changing environment.

When selected to be the new executive director, many seconds-in-command have trouble in three vital leadership areas:

Leadership Area 1: Defining a vision, including a mission statement, core values, and a strategy for the future. They're often unclear about this vision and have a myopic view of the organization. In their second-in-command role, they focused




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on programmatic and technical details. This new big-picture view often pushes them out of their comfort zone.

Leadership Area 2: Communicating with staff so that they understand and fulfill the mission statement. Communication is about presenting information so that it's clear and understandable. It's about using feedback to be sure employees comprehend the message. Helping staff understand why a new organizational direction has been charted, for example, creates “buy in” rather than staff “push-back.”

Leadership Area 3: Motivating and empowering staff to become the best they can be through self-actualization. Newly appointed leaders often fail to engage staff enough to build the necessary consensus. Staff are the lifeblood of the organization. Leaders can't exist without good followers. New leaders need to nurture staff, offer them intrinsic rewards, and empower them to make autonomous decisions. Such an approach promotes more than just good will between leader and followers. It creates a real sense of community and organizational accomplishment.

Seconds-in-command who replace departing executive directors bring many strengths, including familiarity with the mission, organizational culture, and environment. It's important to recognize, however, that they also bring some potential weaknesses. The transition may be bumpy, but

seconds-in-command can become effective leaders by focusing on the three key leadership skills described here. Doing so will ensure a successful transition from manager to leader. 

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How Does a Manager Become a Leader?

For more on transitioning from management to leadership, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at NonprofitWorld.org/members:

How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate? (Vol. 13, No. 1)

Use Employee Ownership to Motivate People & Gain Revenue (Vol. 22, No. 4)

Transforming Your Organization from the Inside Out (Vol. 25, No. 4)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture (Vol. 31, No. 2)

Use Coaching to Retain the Leader's Edge (Vol. 28, No. 3)

Free Webinar Recording for Members: Succession Planning. Learn techniques for building your talent pool in line with your strategic goals.

What Makes a Leader?

It's imperative that nonprofits equip seconds-in-command with essential leadership skills. The way to do so is by creating a climate that promotes personal leadership development. Here are the fundamentals:

1. Think strategically: Work with others in the organization to establish organizational goals and objectives.

2. Act systematically: Tie everyone's work to the organization's mission, vision, and goals. Help people see how the organization's values align with their own personal values.

3. Learn by doing: Foster an environment of continuous learning, including opportunities for personal growth, for everyone in the organization. Leadership development is a form of life-long learning.

4. Lead by walking around: Leadership begins and ends with relationships. Connecting with key players in a personal way helps gain commitment and energizes employees to develop shared aspirations.

5. Guide by providing and seeking constructive feedback: Let go in the doing but never in the guiding. Being aware of yourself and how you affect everyone around you is essential for effective communication.