

SECTION B: WORKING WITH A NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The early period in an executive director's tenure provides abundant opportunities for the board to engage with them and set a strong foundation. The first 100 days on the job are especially critical. A fundamental goal for the board is to work closely with the new ED to set them up to succeed.

The board holds ultimate accountability for the ED's performance. Creating a culture that supports timely and direct feedback goes a long way toward setting your ED, as well as your and organization, up for success.

Boards may want to consider developing an “ED Mandate Letter” that articulates the priorities for the first six months of the ED’s term. Think of this not as a rigid list but as a starting point for a conversation with the ED. It can also be used in conjunction with the six-month probationary period that is commonly part of hires.

Clarify the role and authority of the new executive director

Unless you hire from within, even the most well-qualified and energetic new executive director will be unfamiliar with your organizational history and current activities. The new person will be looking to the board for information, introductions to key members of your community, expectations, and direction. A go-to person or a small transition committee can help assure that the new ED has someone to turn to during their first days, weeks, and months.

Provide as much information as possible about your group, its history, programs, and current circumstances. The information should include internal documents like strategic plans, budgets, and program information, but also extends to articulating the organization's place in the ecosystem of local, regional, and national groups.

Clarify the roles of board members. Your executive director most likely will walk into a situation that is new for them — new people, new goals and objectives, and new issues. One of the first ways to help them is to clarify who does what, not only amongst staff but on the board as well. What committees do people serve on? What strengths do individual board members bring?

It is a good idea to designate a few people from the board and staff to act as the liaison for orienting your new ED.

If your board does not currently have a clear sense of roles, then this is an ideal time to consider defining them. The injection of fresh energy from the new ED is an excellent opportunity to investigate how the board has been operating and how this might be improved. The board should be clear about what authority it is giving the ED and which it is retaining so that the ED can work within these boundaries.

Expect it to take 3-6 months for the new ED to become familiar enough with the intricacies of running the organization to be able to respond to questions about staffing, or to be able to make fine distinctions about policy or strategy.

Define transition plans

The board can be tremendously helpful in the new executive director's first weeks and months by guiding the plan for their transition into the organization. Thinking through what needs to take place for a smooth transfer of authority to the new person will provide welcome guidance and quicken their integration.

Consider the dynamic of your organization that the new executive director inherits. Was there conflict with their predecessor and staff, board or partners? Are the staff and board in disagreement about any lingering issues and their resolution?

Take the time to develop a list of people whom your new ED would benefit from meeting and then make introductions.

Major donors, funders, coalition allies, agency partners, advisors, and members of the community will want to meet your new leader. Whom else would they benefit from meeting?

If your new executive director is an external hire, providing a lay of the land, as well as support to resolve any lingering challenges, is invaluable. If the new executive director is an internal hire, they will most likely have history and a point of view on what came before their promotion. It may be a good idea to explore this perspective with them as they take on the ED role so that the board is aware of any issues and can proactively support a path forward.

Develop a communication protocol with the new executive director

Specify when, how, and in what format the board wants communication from the ED. During the ED's early tenure, it is helpful for them to have a primary contact on the board, as this allows for better communication on matters both routine and critical.

Clarify your expectations of the new executive director both in terms of the actions and outputs you are looking for, as well as the type of communication you expect from them and when.

It is also essential for the new ED to develop a strong foundation of communication with the board. What schedule of meetings, briefings and informal check-ins will work best for all parties? Who should be involved in each?

Develop comprehensive work plans and goals

Set performance expectations

Anyone starting a job wants to know what is expected and how their performance will be measured. A clear, explicit, and concise outline of the board's expectations benefits not only the new ED but your organization as well. Much of this will be documented in a general way by the letter of hire, but more specificity is now required.

A valuable place to start is with a work plan for the executive director. In this, the board and the ED will agree on their goals and objectives for the probationary period and a specific period beyond. If it is the practice in your organization that all staff develop and follow specific work plans, then the one drafted for the ED should match in style and format. If this is a new practice for your organization, you may want to incorporate this kind of performance planning into the ED's mandate, so that for several years there is consistency throughout the organization in the use of such management devices.

The responsibility for writing their work plan resides primarily with the ED, but board input is essential. Plan to have one or more board members set aside ample time to review the new ED's work plan. The co-creation will build alignment around and confidence in the plan, and support a positive working relationship between the ED and board.

Expectations on organizational culture

Are there certain values and principles that your organization prioritizes? Much of this should have been conveyed in the interview and hiring process, and it is important to reiterate it in the probationary period. This allows you to establish a strong understanding of shared values that can be carried through check-in conversations and performance reviews.

Plan for development

Everyone has strengths to lean into and challenges to overcome. Professional development and support is a powerful way to support your new ED.

There are almost certainly larger development needs for your ED. It is important to consider these as part of your long-term strategy. Skills in fundraising, for example, or in public speaking may take longer to cultivate, but can produce significant gains. Plan and budget for these as well. *Be sure to check all of the capacity building resources that are available to your organization through your funders and partners.*

After the new ED has been on the job for at least six months, TREC recommends conduct a 360 review. The 360 review allows the ED to gain perspective on how they are perceived by multiple audiences – staff, board, allies, coalition members and funders.

TREC has extensive experience with 360 reviews and may be able to help you decide when this tool might be appropriate for you and your ED.

THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF YOUR ED'S TENURE

A powerful way to support your new ED's success is to check in regularly about how they are:

- **Building their team**

What are they doing to get to know each person in the organization, identify change agents, build relationships, and develop trust?

- **Working with their board**

How are they proactively getting to know board members, including their talents, roles and interests? What formal and informal opportunities can they seek out to build these relationships?

- **Keeping their balance**

What practices is your new ED employing to maintain their well-being and resilience?

- **Securing their success**

Where can you your ED identify opportunities for early success and concentrate on accomplishing them? This is a great place to under-promise and over-deliver. Support your ED to check in regularly with stakeholders to get their feedback, document what's working, and what needs to shift.

- **Accelerating their learning**

What does your new ED need to know about the past, present and future of the organization, and how can they access that information? Encourage them to try things and be ready to fail fast, learn quickly, and move on.

- **Developing their support system**

What kind of peer network of support does your ED currently have? What could they do to enhance that network? How can the board support them?

EVALUATE THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S PERFORMANCE

Evaluating the executive director should be transparent, thoughtful and proactive. This includes realistic performance expectations expressed in observable, measurable behavioral statements.

TREC believes that the most enduring organizations are ones that creates cultures of both performance and development. This requires an atmosphere of open dialog and feedback, where all employees work within defined expectations and receive frequent feedback from one another on what is working and what can be improved.

When determining what to evaluate, remember that it is not only progress against specific program or financial goals that matters. These are undeniably essential, but evaluating the ED on their leadership behaviors is also critical. Consider items such as alignment of actions with values, commitment to equity and inclusion, communication style, teamwork, and other factors. Though these can be harder to measure than things like fundraising success, they are equally important in the long run, and everyone benefits when these elements are clearly articulated.

If your organization is up-to-date on its mission, vision and values statements, then the process of incorporating these into reviews is relatively straightforward. However, if you have not reviewed your mission, vision, and values in some time, even your current staff may not be aware of these foundational pieces. You may want to update and clarify these basic elements of organizational culture. *If you are a current Wilburforce grantee, TREC may be able to assist you with this.*

Well-managed evaluations have a defined timeline and process. The annual cycle of reviews and the documentation that goes with them should be in your personnel manual. If these procedures need an upgrade, now is a great time to do that. Most organizations hold reviews on an annual cycle that is tied to the fiscal year or planning cycle. It is worth noting that more frequent performance check-ins or “mini reviews” may be valuable for both your ED and the board. Consider holding these check-ins quarterly.

As you begin the evaluation process, spend time exploring exactly what leadership you expect from the ED. What are your desired leadership qualities? What are the indicators of success? Additionally, how do you plan to communicate your board's vision of leadership to staff, donors, and beyond? Share your vision with the ED.

As with other employee evaluations, it is best if a single person manages the evaluation process of the executive director. This needn't mean that only one person provides input, but that there be a key liaison for this important process. Typically this will be the board Chair or President, but could be delegated to another board member.

Feedback involves both the acknowledgement of successes and progress, as well as challenges. While it can sometimes feel challenging to do both, it is one of the greatest gifts that we can give our staff. Giving timely and direct feedback with specific examples makes the process more successful.

SUGGESTED TIMELINE FOR EVALUATIONS (Formal and Informal):

1. Evaluation during probationary period

At a minimum, this would consist of one person from the board reviewing the ED's workplan, evaluating progress on specific issues, and identifying ways to support the ED in any areas that they might be finding challenging. Assuming the probationary review is satisfactory, it indicates a milestone in the executive director's tenure in their position, changing their status to regular or permanent employee. If it was written into the employment offer, this might also trigger a raise in compensation or benefits. The conclusion of the probationary period is a milestone for the organization as well and provides an opportunity for recognition and celebration. Make this a moment to acknowledge and thank everyone involved.

2. At six months, conduct formal review

Ideally this process would involve several board members, and possibly one or more senior staff. It would follow the format of whatever review process is already in place for the organization and potentially include a 360-review, as previously mentioned. All topics mentioned in the probationary review apply here as well. The result of this review should be included in the ED's personnel file. This should also include discussion of updated goals and objectives for the next review period. If possible, this would align with the organization's overall schedule and procedure for work planning and reviews. Approval of the ED's workplan happens during or shortly after this meeting.

3. Quarterly

Informal quarterly checkins are invaluable for ensuring that the board is informed of how the ED and the organization are performing, what challenges they are facing, and how the board can best support them. These shorter, more informal conversations go the distance in ensuring alignment and reducing potential tension down the road.

Possible topics to address in informal check-ins:

- Report from the ED on their transition into the organization. What is going well, and where are challenges appearing? How can the board help solve a problem or manage a dilemma?
- Report on staff, programs, partners, or funders.
- Report on progress on specific goals in their work plan.
- Report on budget, finances, and fundraising.
- Issues the ED is encountering with partners, projects, funders or others.
- Specific needs the ED has identified for financial or human resources, and other support requested.

ED reviews should include:

- Completion of major projects demonstrating the delivery of your organization's mission
- Delivering on fundraising and financial expectations
- Hiring, turnover and issues with staff
- Progress on projects that build systems, infrastructure and capacity
- Feedback from constituents and partners

Once the review document has been written and approved by the board, it needs to be delivered to the ED.

4. Annually

Once the specific expectations of the executive director's performance are established, the board should review and document them annually, following the standard review practices followed for all staff.

- **The ED's prior year's workplan can be used as a yardstick to measure progress against commitments.**

It also provides a clear record of the executive director's actions and achievements, serves as a way of tracking results for recognition and acknowledgment, and identifying any performance challenges, which could become valuable to have recorded if issues arise.

- **Gain information from multiple perspectives to give a balanced review.**

Consider getting feedback on the executive director's performance the board, staff, peer organizations, and community groups. This can be done through interviews or through a faster but less personal process of employing an online survey tool.

- **Complete and deliver the review**

Providing a performance review that is both accurate and motivational is as much art as science. The data noted above is an important foundation for the discussion. This data is best matched with other observations of the more subtle impacts the ED has on the organization through their personal presence and skills interacting with people.

- **The review should be written up and shared with the ED verbally first, then in summary in writing.**

Specific, dated, written documentation is essential if any performance issues arise in the future.

Once the review document has been written and approved by the board, it needs to be delivered to the ED.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:
Cultivate methods that allow the executive director to give the board feedback. This would include their perspective on the board's contribution to strategic planning, fundraising, program direction or other responsibilities to which the board has committed. The ED will see these issues from a different point of view, and expressing this might be important to his own sense of satisfaction. It can also funnel important information from staff to the board. Gaining the ED's perspective could also have a significant effect on the board's view of itself and its role in moving the organization ahead.

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR PERFORMANCE REVIEW:

Choose an appropriate time and place

Show the ED respect by scheduling the review at a time convenient for them, and with adequate lead time for them to prepare. It is best not to tack this onto a busy board meeting where your evaluation comments may be brief or lack focus. Choose a neutral venue that will be private and without distractions.

Write-up your the review prior to the meeting so that you are prepared and address all critical topics

A well-managed review process ensures that you are able to stay on track, which serves both the ED and the organization, so it is best to have your notes prepared in writing in advance. You do not need to share them with the ED prior to your meeting, though you will want to share a written copy afterward to be signed and placed in their file.

Emphasize the positive

Regardless of whatever need there might be for corrective feedback, acknowledging successes and accomplishments is important.

Deliver any bad news unambiguously

If there are difficult issues to discuss, be direct in bringing them up. Don't shy away from potential conflict out of fear of being seen as critical. The board is responsible for maintaining the long-term health of the organization, and this means providing course corrections when needed. Your desire for changed behavior needs to be specific and actionable, and is best written as specific requests.

Allow adequate time for questions and discussion

Budget sufficient time with the executive director for a full conversation about the review. It may be a good idea to have a second meeting scheduled as a follow-up so that all involved feel that whatever issues have surfaced are adequately addressed.

Look ahead to the next review cycle

Throughout the review, look ahead with the executive director to where they and the organization are going. Talk in terms of what is possible and how the ED can continue to build forward momentum. Ask them to continue to set goals to strive for during the next review period.

End on a positive note

Regardless of the specifics of the discussion, do your best to finish the conversation on a high note recognizing where goals have been met or strengths shown.

Follow up from the review

Whatever action items come out of the review, it is a good idea to stay in contact with the executive director about them throughout the year. Reinforcement of positive behavior and reminders of performance goals are always helpful, and frequent communication is more effective than infrequent conversations.

There is a relationship between the competence, success, and tenure of your executive director and the frequency with which you need to schedule performance check-ins. Someone new to the job, or faced with performance issues, requires more frequent discussions than the same person might once he has more experience and has dealt well with challenges the job brings. Create a check-in schedule that reflects your best assessment of the needs of both the ED and the organization.

Executive director input to the board can be collected and delivered in several ways. The ED could provide this as a written report, to the full board in person, or through one person such as the chair. It can also be done through an informal conversation with one or more board members. However this is done, providing this opportunity to the executive director throughout their tenure can offer a valuable exchange of viewpoints.

Provide feedback and confront issues

No matter how careful you are in clarifying expectations and supporting your new ED, it is possible that challenges or issues will develop. If they do, it is important to act thoughtfully and promptly. In the unlikely case that the board is concerned about severe misconduct, please see Section C of this guide, which addresses termination.

Provide feedback. Feedback is simply information about how our actions are impacting our work and colleagues. Creating a regular practice of giving and receiving feedback normalizes one of the most useful ways to improve our work and relationships.

Giving feedback falls into two categories: positive feedback, and feedback for improvement. Providing positive feedback is critical. Lookout for successful moments in the ED's performance and let them know that you have noticed and appreciated them.

We all need correction from time to time. Even the most stellar performer needs to know when they may have missed the mark on an expectation or an outcome. Often they may not have registered where they were off target and will appreciate the guidance that pointing it out provides. Other times we may come face to face with a person's resistance to hearing what they may or may not be aware of. Developing an honest and functional relationship requires that we not shy away from providing feedback for improvement because we don't want to confront a situation or a person's actions.

Informal feedback to the ED can come from any member of the board. For more celebratory or serious moments, it may best come from the board chair. Getting in the habit of providing feedback will serve you well when it comes time for performance review, or if significant performance issues do arise.

TIPS FOR ADDRESSING PERFORMANCE:

Over-communicate: *Strive to minimize ambiguity. Write out all your key points, even for a verbal warning. Discuss them with another board member to check for accuracy and tone. Visualize yourself receiving the message. How do you want it to be phrased and delivered?*

Know your standards and stick to them: *It is important to recognize any tendency to ignore or minimize concerns with the ED's performance. This can be common as many of us find conflict challenging. However, holding your ED to your organization's standards around behaviors and ethics is one of the board's most critical roles.*

TIPS FOR GIVING FEEDBACK TO YOUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

- **Be involved.** Make it common practice for all members of the board, and especially the Chair, to make note of successes as well as concerns and convey them to the ED.
- **Be specific.** Effective feedback must be specific. Generate an accurate description of what happened in a particular situation, what effect it had, why it worked and, if it didn't, what other action you might recommend. For instance, saying "thank you" is always appreciated, but it will have a much greater effect if you can communicate what you're thankful for. Evidence becomes especially important in the case of feedback for improvement.
- **Be fair.** Take the time to understand as much of the situation as you can, so that your feedback is balanced and takes into account the context of the situation and the actions of others. You may need to talk with staff or members of the community or research the particulars of the situation.
- **Be prompt.** Whatever the message, it is best to get it to the ED as soon as possible.
- **Deliver negative feedback one-on-one, except as outlined below under Progressive Discipline.** Negative feedback delivered as a group, especially if coming as a surprise, could cause a severe blow to your relationship with your ED. Be considerate of how the message is being delivered.
- **Document it.** Documenting feedback is an excellent habit to develop, as it can serve you well throughout the executive director's time with your organization. A file folder of notes of appreciation from funders and partners, for instance, comes in handy when writing the annual review. Documentation of problems and issues becomes necessary evidence should serious performance issues arise.

While performance reviews can sometimes be difficult, they are essential for supporting the development and growth of the organization and the ED. It is through performance reviews and feedback that we are able to offer information about how someone's intention may not match their impact, or how they might better support the organization's mission.

PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE

If providing feedback for improvement fails to yield the outcome you desire, create a defined path leading either to demonstrated improvement in behavior or to termination. This process is seldom easy or comfortable, but following it is necessary to support your organization's mission. We highly recommend that this process be outlined in your organization's personnel policies. As in all sensitive personnel matters, it is wise to consult with an attorney competent in labor law to ensure you are following both the letter and the spirit of the law in your jurisdiction. TREC does not provide this kind of legal advice; the information provided here is for your education only.

Steps for progressive discipline:

- **First verbal warning** - If the executive director has not corrected a situation raised through feedback that is serious enough that it could lead to unacceptable outcomes if not addressed, the first step is to have a formal conversation discussing the issue and clarifying what is at stake. Be specific, evidence-based, fair and prompt. It may be a good idea to have two people deliver the warning to the executive

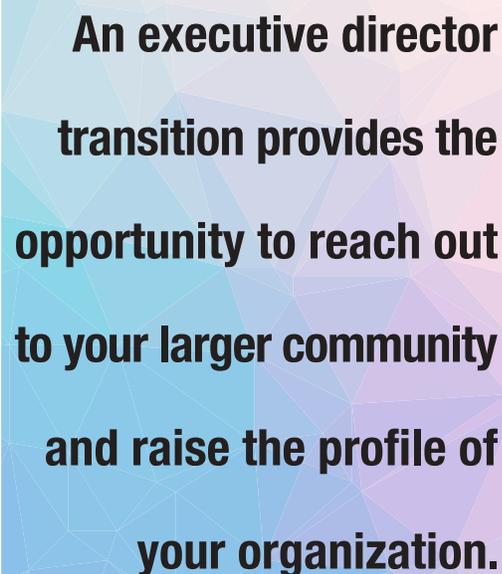
director. This ensures that the message is effectively communicated and that there is a witness to the conversation. Notes should be taken during the discussion, and documentation completed as soon as possible afterward.

- **Second verbal warning** - If the issue is not resolved, all of the suggestions pertaining to the first verbal warning apply here as well. In this conversation, the message needs to be crystal clear for the executive director: here is the problem, here are the steps necessary to address it, and here are the consequences of inaction or not meeting the specified targets. Again, having two people present during the delivery of this message is recommended, as is documenting the conversation. It is probably best that both people present are board members working with the full knowledge of the entire board. There can be no ambiguity in the message going to the ED.
- **Written warning** - If the performance issue persists, it may be necessary to put the executive director on official notice that their employment is at risk. This is done in a carefully worded “warning” document. Often it includes a performance improvement plan that describes as precisely as possible what corrective actions are at the ED’s disposal, and what action is required of them to ensure continued employment.

CREATE A POSITIVE LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

A great deal of attention goes into finding and integrating a new executive director into your organization. A long-term, mutually beneficial relationship is always the goal of any hire. To proactively create an atmosphere of trust and performance, consider the following best practices:

- **Be clear about standards and expectations**
The job of ED is filled with ambiguity and the unexpected. One role of the board is to provide as much clarity as possible. Articulate your desired standards of performance and personal behavior so that the ED has as accurate a map as possible.
- **Communicate clearly**
Lack of regular interaction or clear channels of communication can make any relationship more difficult. Anticipate what the ED needs to hear from you, and vice versa, and strive to set up schedules and systems that allow for this to take place. When in doubt, over-communicate.
- **Correct poor behavior**
The ED is the ambassador for your organization and is highly visible in the community. How they represent you matters. If there are incidents when the ED’s behavior doesn’t meet the standards you expect, you must act to correct the situation. Your organization’s reputation may depend on it.
- **Acknowledge success**
People thrive on accurate and timely recognition. Make it a practice to catch your ED (and all your staff) doing things right. Exercise the power of recognition by saying thank you in ways both large and small, formal and informal.
- **Assume the best** - In almost all cases, the executive director is acting from positive intent and with the organization’s best interests at heart. Recognize this and be proactive in providing the ED positive recognition and support.



An executive director transition provides the opportunity to reach out to your larger community and raise the profile of your organization.