

Worksheet: The First 12 Months of a New Executive Director

The aim of this worksheet is to support Executive Directors (ED), who are new in their roles, with work planning and prioritizing their first 12 months.

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The Three Buckets

There are many parts of an organization to keep track of. It's possible to break them down into three big buckets or areas of work:

- People (organizational structure, HR, culture, values, etc.)
- Money (financial, fundraising, systems, etc.)
- Programs (campaigns, mission, vision, etc.)

All of them are important and interrelated. But as a new ED, you may find that certain bodies of work might need to be prioritized over others at distinct times in your first year. For example, 50% of your time might be focused on one bucket, while the other two buckets get between 20–30% of your attention.

Use this template as a guide. Choosing which bucket to focus on might need to shift based on urgency or strategic need. However, focusing on these core sections may help you stay focused and not get pulled into areas that might feel urgent because they are the loudest or most obvious. It might reduce the feeling of 'drinking from the fire hose'.

[TREC's Health Review Assessment](#) tool has assessment questions for each of the three buckets, People, Money, and Programs. It is a useful compendium to this guide. It might help you identify areas of greatest need. Use these two tools together.

PART I: The First 30 Days — Relationships & Culture

Primary Bucket: People

In the first 30 days, a new ED may want to prioritize building relationships with staff and understanding the organization's culture. When things get tough or there is conflict, we lean heavily on our relationships with each other. Correspondingly, an organization's culture is one of the primary lenses that people are looking through when assessing situations. Meeting staff and Board members one-on-one will begin to help you better understand the organization and what people care most about. This is particularly needed for people you don't supervise and might have less direct contact with later.

1. Build Relationships

- ☐ Meet 1:1 with all staff
- ☐ Meet Board Chair and key Board members
- ☐ Identify informal leaders

Ask each person questions like:

- What's something you've done or achieved in your role that you are proud of?
- How do you feel about your workload (capacity)?
- What does success look like for you in your role?
- Is there any training or support you are hoping for?
- What builds trust for you? What breaks trust for you?
- What's working well at the organization?
- What's not working well at the organization?
- What should I absolutely not change about the organization?
- What do you wish leadership understood?
- What do you need in an ED?

2. Identify Personal Workstyles & Development Goals

Based on your conversations, what did you learn about people's personal workstyles and development goals, or other significant information? Document it.

Staff Member	Workstyle	Development Goals	Capacity Concerns	Other Notes

3. Identify Tensions & Resource Gaps

- Where is there conflict?
- Are there mismatched expectations?
- Is workload realistic?
- Are there enough (or the right) resources?

What themes did you find:

4. Clarify Mutual Expectations

- What does the team expect from you?
- What do you expect from them?
- How will you give feedback?
- How will they give feedback to you?

Key findings

-

See [TREC's resources on giving and receiving feedback.](#)

5. Understand Organizational Culture

Based on your conversations, what did you learn about the organization's culture?

Symbols

- What rituals, stories, language, or traditions matter?

Norms

- How are decisions really made?
- How is conflict handled?
- What behaviors get rewarded?

Assumptions

- What beliefs guide how people work?
- How is power perceived?

Key findings

-

See [TREC's resources on building an inclusive culture.](#)

6. Supervision Check-up

It is helpful to have a sense of how supervision take place at your organization.

- Who are the supervisors?
- What is the supervision structure of the organization, and does it feel adequate (e.g. no one is supervising more than 3 people, etc.)?
- What is the approach to supervision at the organization (e.g., culture, core responsibilities, etc.)?

Key findings (include any possible changes that might be needed)

-

See [some of TREC's resources on supervision.](#)

7. Policy Checklist

Do an HR policy scan to ensure your organization has the policies and procedures it needs. The following is a list of a few important policies that are sometimes overlooked.

- ☐ Anti-harassment and bullying policy
- ☐ Anti-retaliation policy
- ☐ Annually reviewed compensation policy
- ☐ Grievance policy or other clearly articulated conflict resolution process/policy
- ☐ Equal Employment Opportunity policy
- ☐ Inclusive holiday and leave (family, illness, jury duty, civic time) policy
- ☐ Disability accommodation policy

Two processes that are helpful to review are:

- ☐ Annual performance review process
- ☐ Hiring process

You may also want to investigate if there have been any grievances filed in the past 3 years, if anyone was let go and why, and if any staff have been on performance improvement plans (or similar) and what the outcome was.

Key findings and next steps

-

8. Understand your role & the Board's

Clarify expectations for your authority and responsibilities versus the board's governance role. Establish clear reporting protocols with the board chair.

- How often will you meet (recommend at least monthly)
- What are the standing agenda items
 - Give/received feedback
 - Any staffing or program changes
 - Staff requests/needs for the Board
 - Board requests/needs for the staff
- Clarity on what are Board decisions (governance) and what are staff decisions (program and operations), and what might be points of collaboration (with clear decision-making authority)
- Clarity on how the Board communicates with staff (e.g. through the ED) and how the staff communicate with the Board (e.g. through the Chair/President).
- Set dates and process for 6-month and 12-month review.

Key findings

-

See TREC's resource on [the Board and ED relationship](#) and [which policies should be governed by the Board or overseen by the ED](#).

9. Partnerships & Mentorship

Based on your conversation with staff and Board, what are:

Potential external partnerships

-

Internal mentorship opportunities

-

Peer support for yourself

-

Summary of People Review

Key findings

-

Report Back (End of 30 Days)

As part of your commitment to accountability and transparency, provide a report back to staff on what you heard or learned, what next steps are, etc. It may be written, given verbally, or some combination.

Key themes you heard/learned

-

Next steps

-

What will NOT change (respect the past)

-

Ideas you have about the future, etc. (be clear on the certainty e.g. is this subject to change or fixed)

-

PART II: 30–60 Days — Structure & Financial Review

Primary Bucket: Money

While you will have most likely started to dig into some parts of structure and financial assessments in the first 30 days, it becomes a core focus in the 30 to 60-day period.

Use insights from culture work as a lens as you read the strategic plan, annual reports, bylaws, and financial statements. This provides a formal overview of the organization's history, goals, and fiscal health.

A. Structure Review

- ☐ Does the org chart reflect reality?
- ☐ Are decision making processes clear?
- ☐ Are roles aligned with skills?
- ☐ Are expectations documented and accessible?

Structural Assessment

Areas working well:

-

Needs adjustment

-

Immediate action

-

B. Financial Review

- ☐ Review cash flow
- ☐ Review balance sheet & long-term forecast
- ☐ Understand revenue mix (grants, earned, individual donors, investments, etc.)
- ☐ Review expense reports line-by-line

Financial Snapshot

Monthly burn-rate (monthly fixed costs + additional average monthly program expenses):

Cashflow status (adequate/inadequate to cover monthly burn rate):

Number of months of cash on hand:

Number of months in the reserve fund:

Major revenue risks

-

Major expense pressures

-

Reporting risks

-

C. Fundraising Review

- ☐ Map grant/reporting deadlines
- ☐ Learn major donor history and donor personal stories and interests

Grant applications and deadlines (next 12 months)

-

Reporting deadlines (next 12 months)

-

Top Five Major Individual Donors (and their relationship to the organization)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Donor engagement plan for the next 12 months:

-

D. Fundraising and Financial Challenges

While answering questions about the financial health, it is also important understand the past. It can be particularly helpful to understand any challenges or losses.

Did the organization lose any many funders over the past 5 years (e.g. foundations, major donors, government grants, etc.)? If so, why? What did the organization do to either fix the situation or fill the gap?

-

Has the organization ever needed to use money from its reserve fund? If so, why – what happened? What did the organization do to either fix the situation or fill the gap?

-

Summary of Money Review

Key findings

-

See [TREC's resources on financial management.](#)

Report Back (End of 60 Days)

As part of your commitment to accountability and transparency, provide a report back to staff on what you heard or learned, what next steps are, etc. It may be written, given verbally, or some combination.

Key themes you heard/learned

-

Next steps

-
- What will NOT change (respect the past)
-
- Ideas you have about the future, etc.** (be clear on the certainty e.g. is this subject to change or fixed)
-

PART III: 60–90 Days — Programs & Strategy

Primary Bucket: Programs

Understanding the people, culture, and financial situation of the organization helps you reduce the risk that there are critical issues lurking in the shadows. This next phase focuses on understanding the programs and mission work of the organization to help you begin to formulate your strategic vision and identify potential early wins. It includes learning more about who else is working in this space and what makes your organization unique (e.g. your special sauce).

1. Learn the History

To examine the current state of the organization, it's important to know the history.

What have been some of the major programmatic successes in the past 5 years?

-

What is the organization known for in the community for winning or for having success in?

-

Were there any campaigns or programs that either failed or needed to be dropped/let go?

-

2. Program Assessment

Place all programs onto the Core/Not Core vs. Funded/Not Funded Matrix

- Mark the programs that are mission-critical
- Mark the programs that are grant-driven (but not mission-critical)
- Identify any programs that are being subsidized unintentionally

Are there any programs that feel out of alignment with your mission and might need more investigation?

Can you see any programs or areas of work that should be considered (gaps) or re-considered (unnecessary)?

Summary of program assessment:

Key findings:

-

3. Organizational Strategy

What is the organization's objective or overall goal?

- What are our outcomes or sub-goals (short and long-term) on the way to our big goal?

Does each program area have a clear, articulated strategy?

- Is the target/decision-maker clear for each program (e.g. we know who can make our dreams come true)?

What is our theory of change or mode of change (how we make things happen; how we influence the decision-maker)?

- Are tactics aligned to our strategy and theory of change?

Summary of strategic findings:

Key findings:

-

4. Right People, Right Roles

Do staff skills match tactics?

Where are we overextended?

Where are we underutilizing talent?

Summary of people and strategy assessment:

Key findings:

-

5. Landscape Analysis

What other organizations are working in this space?

- What are peer organizations doing?
- Where is duplication happening?
- Are there partnership opportunities?

What is missing or needed that is not currently present in your organization or other organizations?

Summary of landscape analysis:

Key findings:

-

See [TREC's resources on campaigns and organizing](#).

Report Back (End of 90 Days)

As part of your commitment to accountability and transparency, provide a report back to staff on what you heard or learned, what next steps are, etc. It may be written, given verbally, or some combination.

Key themes you heard/learned

-

Next steps

-

What will NOT change (respect the past)

-

Ideas you have about the future, etc. (be clear on the certainty e.g. is this subject to change or fixed)

-

PART IV: By Day 90 — Draft Organizational Assessment

Prepare a Preliminary Assessment Document

You've got the data. You've taken the time to assess the people, money, and programs. Now it's time to create your plan for the next 9 months and to articulate your vision. This will include any changes you are planning (and why), and the roles people will play. Also include how the plan will be reviewed and if/when/how people can give feedback or make suggestions (e.g. how they will or can be involved).

Ideas of things to include:

- Organizational strengths
- Core risks
- Early wins (0–6 months)
- Long-term priorities (6–24 months)
- Immediate structural adjustments (if needed)

1. Strategic Priorities for Next 9 Months

Early Wins Planning

Identify a few early wins you think would be possible, being clear on the timeline and who will be involved.

Early win:

Why it matters:

Timeline:

Decision-maker and/or who is accountable for getting the work done:

Who else will be involved and how:

What's Changing; What Isn't

What is the organization going to keep doing:

-

What is the organization going to less of, do differently, or stop doing (change):

-

What are some new things you'd like the organization to try (test):

-

2. Visioning for The Next 1-3 Years

- What will be true in 1 year?
- What will be different in 3 years?

Your Draft Vision Statement:

3. Leadership Accountability (Your 3 Goals)

What are three things that you commit to doing that the staff and Board can hold you accountable for?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

4. Establish Annual Review Process

Sample Staff Review of the ED for Year One (simplified)

- How did you do with respect to your 3 Goals?
- What should you do more of?
- What should you do less of?
- What should you do start doing?
- What should you do stop doing?
- Are there ways you could be a better support to the staff member?

For year two and beyond, the annual ED review should be more robust. See TREC's ED Evaluation resources.

5. Reassess Blind Spots & Workloads

Where am I over-involved?

Where am I under-engaged?

Who is overloaded?

What can be paused or delegated (and to whom)?

6. Report Back to Staff & Board

Using all the information you've gathered and prepared over the past 90 days and all the sections of this guide, it's time for one final report back to staff. You may want to include:

- A summary of what you learned or what you heard
- Your goals for the organization in the next 9 months
- Where you see the org in 1-3 years
- Your three personal goals
- Any changes to the org
- How folks can give feedback and how it will be used (clarify expectations)
- Next steps

You may want to also include notes explaining your strategic thinking, why you made the choices you did, as well as clarify any possible trade-offs you consciously made. Most importantly, be clear on how people will be involved in your plan (e.g. what roles they play, how they can give feedback, etc.).

Draft Report Back to the Staff and Board

PART V: Quarterly Reflection

Be sure to reflect on your plan regularly to make sure it's still true. Your understanding of the organization and issues will deepen, and so will your short and long-term goals.

- Has anything changed since the last review?
- Am I spending equitable time in each Bucket (Program, People, Money)?
- What feels like it has improved?
- What still feels unclear?
- Are there any new tensions emerging?
- Is there anything I am avoiding?
- Are there any additional supports I need (e.g. coaching, training, capacity, etc.)?

Reflections

Date:

Additional TREC Resources

Leadership

- [Leading in challenging times](#)
- [Intentional Leadership tools](#)

Building Trust

- [A tutorial](#) on the management arrow
- [A brief summary](#) of the Lencioni pyramid and this 6min video on [Lencioni's 5 Dysfunctions of a Team](#)
- [Summary of the William Bridges transition framework](#) and a [short article on three questions to ask about change](#)

Supervision

- [Human resources and supervision tools and templates](#)

Conflict

- TREC has a whole toolkit of resources for [managing conflict](#). This includes the [diagnosing conflict tool](#), [tips for mediating a conflict](#), etc.
- *The Essential Workplace Conflict Handbook*, by Barbara Mitchell and Cornelia Gamlem. It's a great resource for any manager.
- [This webinar on managing conflict](#) also includes two tools below it. One is on [DARCI](#) (a decision-making tool), and the other is on [POPP](#) (bringing clarity to meetings).
- To support clear communications and feedback, we have [this webinar](#) and this [COIN resource](#). We also have a resource for [how to give and receive feedback](#), and [how to create a feedback rich culture as a manager](#)
- [The Results Model](#), along with this resource on [Stop, Challenge, Choose](#), are TREC staples.

Decision-Making

- [Decisiveness and decision-making](#), which can be helpful with trying to make difficult decisions or deciding where to focus to make cuts
- The [Eisenhower matrix of important/urgent](#) can also be helpful

Fiscal Management

- [Fiscal Management resources](#)
- [Fiscal strategies in this current time](#)
- [Financial management 101](#) including how to read financial statements and use the information to make decisions

Boards

- [Board resources](#) of every shape and size
- [Board/ED working together](#)
- [Board 101](#) (which might be helpful to have your Board watch) or [bringing out the best in your Board](#)
- Consent Agendas: here is an article from [BoardSource](#) and another from [Board Effect](#). There are multiple ways to use them, but the goal should be to help the Board stay focused on what matters and not spend all their time reading reports out loud at meetings
- The Board Chair/ED meeting and having a clear agenda. [This article by Joan Garry](#) has a great template. I'd just add a "Feedback" item so that you have space for that every time too

Health Review and Annual Reviews

- [Organizational health review](#)
- [Annual reviews](#) or [360s](#) and creating/updating [workplans](#) and [growth plans](#). The idea is that annual reviews shouldn't feel scary or punitive. If you are regularly [giving and receiving feedback](#) (if it's [part of your org culture](#)), there should be no surprises, meaning the time can focus more on growth and moving forward. AND [you should have an annual review](#).

Strategy and Strategic Planning

- The difference between strategy and planning ([video](#)).
- It's important to be clear what your org needs and then create a process that does just that. Maybe you need a [Theory of Change](#) review instead? Some folks are using [these instead of the classic strategic plan](#).