

Acting ED vs. Interim ED

Board Decision Support Worksheet

A self-guided worksheet for boards navigating an ED transition or temporary leave.

Purpose of This Worksheet

This worksheet helps board members assess whether their organization needs an **Acting Executive Director (ED)** or an **Interim Executive Director (ED)** by exploring:

- Timelines
- The organization's stability needs
- The degree of change required
- Staff implications

1. Understand the Two Roles

Acting Executive Director

- Maintains continuity and daily operations during a short-term gap ("keeps things steady")
- Has limited authority as boards typically restrict budget, staffing, and restructuring decision-making ability
- Often an internal staff member familiar with operations and culture

Interim Executive Director

- Usually for longer-term absences of leadership (e.g. parental leave, an ED hiring process, etc.)
- Brought in when change, repair, or transition management might be needed
- Has broader authority from the Board to lead transitions, assessments, and make improvements
- Is usually an external person to help provide neutrality and fresh perspectives

2. Explore Key Decision Questions

A. Time Horizon

How long will the ED be absent or how long is the organizational transition?

- Under ~1 or 2 months → consider **Acting ED**
- Over ~ 2 months → consider **Interim ED**

B. Stability vs. Change Needs

Is the priority stability, or does the organization require assessment, repair, or possible cultural reset?

- Stability, continuity → often a better role for an **Acting ED** with an internal candidate
- Transition, culture challenges, governance clean-up, reset → often better for an **external Interim ED** who is trained and experienced in change management

C. Internal Culture and Relationships

Will internal staff dynamics support or hinder an internal temporary leader?

Risks of appointing internal staff include:

- Challenges shifting from being a peer to being a supervisor (puts social capital at risk)
- Difficulty having hard conversations or challenging entrenched practices because they are a part of these systems too
- Potential lack of desire to return to their old role

If these risks feel high, an **external Interim ED** may be a safer option. An external Acting ED could be an option, too, however it can be challenging to find someone who is willing to take on the role for such a short time.

D. Staffing Capacity Implications

Can the internal person's substantive role be paused or backfilled?

An Internal Acting ED must put the work of their substantive role on hold to be the Acting ED. This can mean:

- Neglect of original portfolio (no one can take on the role in their absence, nor can/should they try to do two jobs)
- Increased workload for other staff trying to fill the gaps
- Program slowdown due to lack of capacity or leadership

If the role cannot be backfilled or put on hold without significant negative consequences, consider an **external person** for the **Interim ED** (or **Acting ED**) if possible.

Does the Acting ED role provide a current staff member a chance to advance their skills, competencies, or experience?

Opportunities for professional development, growth, or advancement in organizations can be limited, particularly for people in senior level roles. An Acting ED role can provide a chance to practice or gain new more senior skills. However, being in an acting role can also lead to a person not wanting to return to their substantive position, or if they do, not being satisfied by it for long. As a result, former Acting EDs have a slightly higher tendency to leave an organization for a new opportunity elsewhere. An organization may want to consider alternate pathways for someone after an Acting ED role to both capitalize on their new skillset and their career interests. Special Projects positions or director-level roles may be a good alternative.

Note: Sometimes being in an Acting ED role can confirm for someone that they like their substantive job more and don't want to become an ED, thus increasing their commitment to the organisation.

E. Recruitment Integrity

Will appointing an internal Acting ED create perceived conflicts of interest?

An internal Acting ED can risk:

- Perceived favoritism by the Board or organization in other processes (e.g., promotions, raises, selection for committees or travel, etc.)
- "Inside track" concerns about access to personnel files/information
- Difficulty remaining impartial going forward (when they return to their old position)

Of course, these risks could be worth the gains made by having an internal person in the Acting ED role and are therefore included here for consideration.

3. Make the Final Decision

Given the impact on staff, challenges with returning to their role, and potential need to make substantive high-impact decisions, TREC does not usually recommend an internal Interim ED but does see the appropriateness of an internal Acting ED in some situations.

Choose an Acting ED if...

- The absence is short (<1 month)
- The organization is stable and primarily needs continuity
- The internal candidate can pause their role without major harm or additional workload being added to them or passed on to others
- No significant cultural reset is needed
- Recruiting for the permanent ED is straightforward and likely to be relatively quick

Choose an Interim ED if...

- The transition will last more than 1 or 2 months
- The organization needs assessment, repair, or potential restructuring
- Culture, governance, or staff dynamics require external support
- There is an opportunity for growth or building a stronger organization through the transition

General Considerations

- Neither an Acting ED nor an Interim ED should be a person competing for or being considered for the permanent ED position.
- If an internal staff member takes on the role of the Acting ED, they should be given financial compensation for the time spent in the higher paid position.

- Prepare additional budget for a transition as interim leadership often costs more than the substantive position (e.g. the fee for an interim leader is usually higher than the salary for a permanent ED because it is a short-term contract position).

Final Reflection Questions for the Board

ED Transitions are a significant and often unexpected burden on a Board. While the initial impulse is to want to move quickly and hire a new ED immediately with limited interruption, it can be more strategic and beneficial for the organization to bring on an external Interim ED to allow for a more spacious process. It can create breathing room for a more thoughtful and intentional ED search and transition process. It can add capacity and give the organization time to use the transition as a strategic opportunity versus simply as a moment of change in leadership.

The following are a few additional questions to consider during a transition to support Boards use a transition as an opportunity for growth or change:

- What is the organization's most pressing priority right now—continuity or transition?
- Are there systemic issues within the organization that we have routinely avoided or not addressed well? Do we need someone who can challenge entrenched practices?
- Can we extend the hiring process and use the transition as chance to slow down, repair, reset, or rebuild?
- Are there ways we can use this transition or interruption to create new opportunities for staff (to prevent loss or turnover)?