

Top 10 Tips for New Executive Directors

8 min read



Whether you're a first-time-ever executive director or it's your first time acting as an executive director at a new organization, your new position is going to have some major challenges.

Key Takeaways

- **Be Honest With Yourself About What You Don't Know:** No executive director is 100% well-rounded and well-versed in every single aspect of their job, management, leadership, human resources, the organization...
- **Adopt a Mentor and Find a Network of Support:** There's a lot you can learn from the experience of someone who has already been in your shoes. Attend events for nonprofit leaders so that you can...
- **Hire Right and Invest in Your People:** When hiring, credentials and experience are important, but they are not as important as...

Running a successful nonprofit is not a task for the faint of heart, and being at the forefront of a nonprofit's leadership is an enormous responsibility.

Considering the following tips for new executive directors can help you start out on the right track, set a solid foundation for your management strategy, and position you and your NPO for success.

10 Leadership Tips for New Nonprofit Executive Directors

1. Understand That You, Yourself, Are a Big Change

Your nonprofit organization has a new boss, and it's you! (Congratulations!) As a new executive director, though, it's good to understand that any change in leadership is going to cause a lot of anxiety among your employees. You can take steps to set them at ease by establishing trust; it's essential that you trust your staff and that they trust you.

In order to gain their trust, you need to be a good listener and establish open, clear, and transparent lines of communication. Take the time to hold frequent update meetings with

your staff. Additionally, provide them with opportunities to submit questions, comments, or feedback.

It's also a good idea to shadow all of your employees. This will help you get to know them all on an individual level while also introducing you to the ins and outs of your new organization's operations. Plus, shadowing gives you an opportunity to assess the jobs your employees are doing and help provide solutions to their individual pain points and frustrations.

Once you've listened, be a strong leader. Establish a strategy with your board of directors and communicate that strategy clearly, firmly, and transparently to the staff. Make sure everyone understands their roles and responsibilities going forward and be sure you provide them with the tools and resources they need to accomplish their new goals.

2. Be Prepared to Manage All Kinds of Relationships

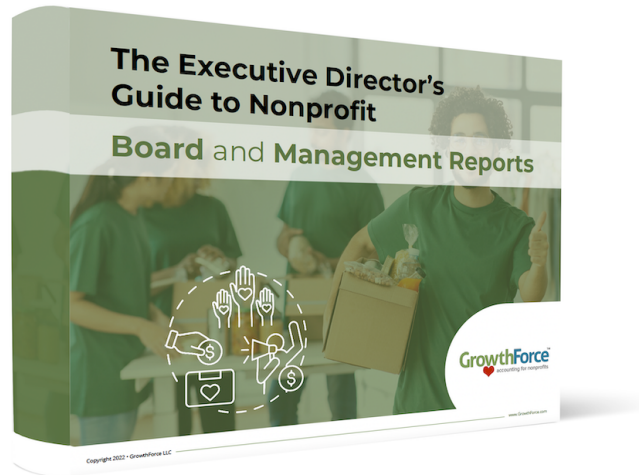
As an executive director, you're going to spend the majority of your tightly booked schedule managing relationships – all sorts of relationships. Executive directors need to have good relationships with all of their constituents including:

- Board members
- Staff members
- Volunteers
- Donors
- Potential donors
- Vendors
- Beneficiaries
- Other members of the community you serve

Managing relationships can be a lot to juggle. Plus, you won't always be able to make everyone happy, and you might have to continue getting to know a potential donor for quite a while before they are ready to contribute.

[It's not uncommon for executive directors to not know what to look at to make financial decisions.](#)

It's not taught widely and traditional financial reports are not designed to make **data-driven decisions**...



The Most Useful Reports To Run Your Organization ...

DOWNLOAD an Executive Director's Guide to Board & Management Reports

3. Be Honest With Yourself About What You Don't Know

No executive director is 100% well-rounded and well-versed in every single aspect of their job, management, leadership, human resources, the organization, the market, marketing, outreach, bookkeeping, accounting, operations, the community, donors, vendors, snacks in the breakroom, event planning, and maintaining the office.

Be honest with yourself about what you know, what you could know better, and what you hardly know at all. Then, be proactive about filling in the gaps either by signing yourself up for classes and training or by being sure you surround yourself with the right people who will be able to fill in the gaps for you.

4. Learn How to Set Boundaries and Maintain Balance in Your Life

Just like the average nonprofit budget is accounted for down to the very last penny, your schedule as an executive director will likely be booked down to the very last second. Despite that, you absolutely must make time to take care of yourself, find moderation in your life, and balance your work with your personal life because if you make the nonprofit your whole life, then you're surely going to burn out – and burnout leads to unhappiness in work, lagging productivity, and can take a big toll on the happiness of your staff as well.

Read More: [Bookkeepers vs. Accountants: What Nonprofit Leaders Need to Know](#)

So, whatever you do. Don't overbook yourself. Learn how to say no. Prioritize the most important items on your schedule and delegate the rest. This way you'll have time to hit the gym, walk your dog, read a book, practice meditation, spend time with your family, go out with your friends, or whatever it is that helps you unwind and makes you feel most like yourself.

5. Schedule Time for Your Own Leadership Development

In addition to making time to balance your work and personal lives, you should also schedule some professional time on the clock to work on your own development as a leader. This can look like attending classes to fill in your knowledge gaps, leadership workshops, or reading books on nonprofit strategy.

6. Adopt a Mentor and Find a Network of Support

As a new executive director, there's a lot you can learn from the experience of someone who has already been in your shoes. Attend events for nonprofit leaders so that you can find both a network to rely on and commiserate with in addition to a mentor who can help guide you in your new role.

Read More: [7 Management And Board Reports Nonprofits Should Be Looking At](#)

7. Continue Participating in the Nitty-Gritty

Now that you're at the top of your organization, do not lose sight of the rest of the work. You'll gain a lot of trust among your constituents (and valuable insights into your organization) by continuing to participate in the nitty-gritty or whatever you like to call the business of carrying out your nonprofit's actual mission, serving your community.

8. Use Your Local Nonprofit Association

Find a local nonprofit association chapter and take advantage of their resources. These organizations exist simply to help nonprofits in their areas improve their impact, operations, fundraising, and more. Don't be afraid to use yours.

9. Accept That You're Sometimes Going to Be Disappointing

To successfully manage your nonprofit, you have to stick to your goals, your values, your mission, and your [budget](#). Unfortunately, you aren't going to be able to help everyone or in every situation. Individuals might pitch ideas to you that don't quite align with your mission or that simply don't fit into the budget. In these situations, you're going to have to say no. As an executive director, it's better to get used to letting people down sooner rather than later. If you struggle with this, then apologize, empathize, and explain. Then, try to focus on all of the positive outcomes you help generate through your leadership, instead.

10. Hire Right and Invest in Your People

Employee attrition is one of the most expensive, unexpected expenses any organization can have. For this reason, hiring the right people from the start and then investing in them so that they want to keep working for you is essential to keeping costs low in your nonprofit.

When hiring, credentials and experience are important, but they are not as important as culture. You could hire the most qualified person in the world to fill an open position at your organization, but if they are not a good fit for your [workplace culture](#), then it simply isn't going to work out. When you hire the wrong people for your organization, such as individuals who don't share the same core values as your nonprofit, then you end up with high turnover rates.

Additionally, your current employees need to be engaged, satisfied, and feel fulfilled by their jobs at your organization so that they'll stay. They also need to be adequately compensated and recognized for their hard work. Provide employees with opportunities to train, network, and work on their career development so that they can experience the pleasure of upward mobility in your organization – whether that looks like an upward promotion or an employee's ability to take on new responsibilities that excite them in a slightly different role.

Bonus: Be a Board Report Super-Star With Comprehensive Financial Reports

As executive director, it's also your responsibility to meet with your nonprofit's board of directors to discuss the nonprofit's financial health, plans, budget, and strategies before implementing new strategies with your staff. In order for your board to be able to provide you with the best guidance and advice, they'll need to be able to make data-driven decisions based on timely and accurate financial reports such as your statement of financial position, statement of cash flow, budget vs. actual (overall and by program, if needed), profit and loss statements (overall and by program), and restricted funds budgets vs. actuals.

With solid financial data, you present a solid front of leadership while communicating with your board and leading your team to maximize impact and become a more successful NFP executive director than you ever could have imagined.