

5 Ways an External Interim CEO Can Improve Leadership Transitions

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By: David Westman, CAE and Robert Van Hook, FASAE, CAE

During times of leadership transition, professional interim CEOs can help to ensure that associations maintain forward momentum. Often an interim CEO can provide a fresh perspective relative to association **operations, and in some cases, serve as a “healer” to anxious staff.**

Similar to death and taxes, CEO transitions are a given for organizations. Whether the departure is planned or unexpected, all associations will likely eventually face a leadership transition. Understandably, boards may want to move quickly in finding a replacement. But there is a danger in moving too quickly.

The result can be an insufficiently vetted successor who is culturally unsuited for the organization or overwhelmed with a plethora of **strategic and operating “fires” to address. A corresponding danger is** an association that is just not ready for a new executive. Executive search is a two-way street. The organization may be better served by slowing down the search process in order to assess the current status of operations and governance and fix issues before bringing in a successor.

Regardless of how quickly the CEO position is filled, there is also the issue of interim staff leadership during the transition. Association boards frequently rely on a board leader or current staff leaders to fill this role. Although these options may involve the smallest out-of-pocket expense upfront, they can prove costly in other ways. Such individuals, given the commitments of their other jobs, may not have sufficient time to handle the full-time role of a CEO, especially if the association is facing a highly competitive or turbulent operating environment.

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Many associations find that engaging a professional interim CEO is a good choice for a transition. Such an individual is experienced in entering organizations during transition and not encumbered with a permanent role. Professional interim CEOs have a job to do, they do it in a relatively short time, and then they move on to a new role with another organization. Here are five ways that an external interim executive can add value during leadership transitions:

1. Conduct independent organizational assessments. Any incoming CEO would find it helpful to take the pulse of the current operating environment from the perspective of stakeholder groups. An interim CEO can offer the tools and independent perspective to assess:

- governance structure and operations
- member perceptions

- staff morale and engagement
- external stakeholder perceptions, including corporate supporters, advocacy partners, and entities teaming with the association on educational content development

2. Expedite governance and operational improvements. Interim CEOs bring previous experience in the CEO role and significant consulting experience with similar organizations. They are well-positioned to extinguish fires and identify opportunities for structural and performance enhancements that can be expedited during the transition period.

3. Make tough staffing decisions. Some executives leave their organizations with one or more poor-performing staff members. An interim staff leader is highly qualified to undertake independent staff assessments and make tough decisions when necessary. This allows the successor to start with a clean slate rather than wasting political capital on difficult staffing decisions.

4. Identify and groom the right candidate Many organizations focus only on external candidates. During one of our recent interim CEO assignments, we early-on identified a “diamond in the rough” and convinced the board that they had a CEO candidate in-house. This individual was well-respected but lacked leadership experience in several critical areas. The board embarked on a two-year mentoring program with specific development activities and milestones for the candidate.

5. Spend time on the executive search. Rather than rushing an executive search, an interim CEO can give an association the luxury of time. Within a three- or four-month period, associations can

- initiate changes to make the organization more attractive for potential candidates;
- have thorough discussions and reach true consensus on the ideal candidate profile;
- consider both internal and external candidates;
- be confident with an important decision for the organization.

Depending on the circumstances, the interim CEO may be well-positioned to provide input to the search committee regarding the CEO position or about specific candidates and their perceived fit with **the association’s needs. Although external interim executives are not the right solution for every** transition, they should be considered and may pay dividends beyond their service.