

The Principle Responsibilities of an NGO Executive Director

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In an NGO, the executive director is crucial in terms of leadership and management and holds many responsibilities that are essential in maintaining the sustainability of the organization. It is important that the executive director possess strong overall knowledge and personal skills in many different areas in order to be a successful and efficient leader.¹ Though the roles of executive director greatly differ depending on the size, structure, and purpose of an NGO, there are some common characteristics that would be beneficial for most directors to be aware. The following presents five core responsibilities or guidelines that executive directors may explore in trying to assess their priorities in successfully running an NGO.

Create a Vision

First and foremost, a successful executive director must create a clear vision that is shared with others in order to provide unity within an organization. This vision must be singular and the executive director must make sure that his/her coworkers understand the vision and are inspired by it. This will keep them motivated and enthusiastic about their responsibilities and what is expected of them.² Creating a vision includes thinking about the future—anticipating where the organization is going and what opportunities lie ahead. It is helpful to envision a goal and what the organization needs to do in order to be proactive and attain that goal.³

Creating a vision also comes hand-in-hand with having a strong and thorough understanding of the organization's mission. It is important to understand that the mission statement differs from the vision in two ways: it may be created by the board of directors rather than the executive director, and it encompasses what an organization's purpose is and what activities they partake in rather than what is going to be implemented in the future.⁴ The executive director must be deeply committed to the mission and the context in which it operates. This is highly significant in guarding against “mission drift”—when an organization begins to stray and get distracted from its crucial programs and activities by partaking in activities that do not directly fulfill its purpose.⁵ Following and staying committed to the mission of an organization helps the executive director stay on track with the vision and allows him/her to more effectively accomplish future goals.

Lead and Manage

The most significant part of an executive's job is leading and managing the organization. This part of the job includes outlining all the tasks that need to be fulfilled in the organization and

¹ McNamara, Carter. (1997-2008). “Basic Overview of Role of Chief Executive.” Adapted from the *Field Guide to Leadership and Supervision* and *Field Guide to Developing and Operating Your Nonprofit Board of Directors*. Retrieved June 9, 2008 from Free Management Library: http://www.managementhelp.org/chf_exec/chf_exec.htm.

² Di Frances, John. (2005.) *The Six Essential Leadership Attributes*. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from http://www.difrances.com/articles/six_essential_leadership_attributes.pdf.

³ Wolf, Thomas. (1999). *Managing a Nonprofit Organization in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

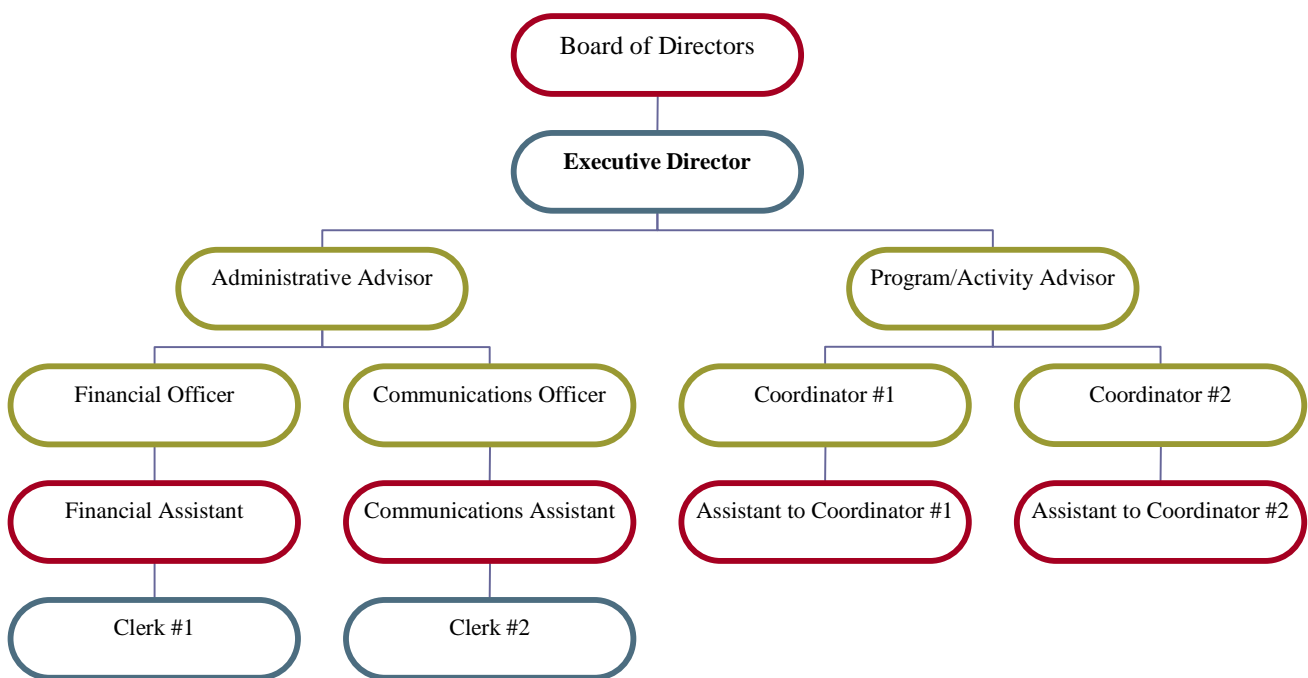
⁴ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

⁵ Moyers, Richard L. (2006). *The Nonprofit Chief Executive's Ten Basic Responsibilities*. Washington: BroadSource.

referring back to the vision in order to help complete the tasks.⁶ It is important for the executive director to think about:

- What tasks are being fulfilled now?
- What tasks are not being fulfilled that need to be?
- What new activities and tasks need to be redefined and changed?⁷

The role of executive director also entails hiring and managing the rest of the staff. (This **excludes** the board of directors who are above the executive director and are responsible for hiring him/her. The primary difference between the two jobs is that the board of directors *governs* and deals with problems that the director brings to their attention, while the executive director focuses on *managing* the organization and staff.)⁸ In doing so, the director should make sure that programs are being efficiently run and that the staff is fulfilling their responsibilities, whether in teams or individually. One way to ensure this is to prepare an organizational chart that institutes lines of authority. This provides the executive director with an understanding of to whom his/her employees should report when they have fulfilled a task, or to whom they should talk to when they are having problems with a person or responsibility. The following is an example of such a chart:⁹



This chart helps organize an executive officer's responsibilities in that he knows with whom he directly deals. For example, the executive director would not deal directly with the financial officer because this would undermine the authority of the

⁶ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

⁷ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

⁸ Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. *Governance: Basics*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from http://www.mncn.org/info/basic_gov.htm.

⁹ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

administrative advisor; he/she is responsible in speaking to the administrative advisor, who would then deal with the financial officer.¹⁰

Lastly, the executive director's management of the staff also includes:

- Motivating employees by being inspiring and remaining optimistic even when challenges are being faced.
- Encouraging good performance and values.
- Allocating resources and supplies to the staff in order to make sure they have the correct equipment to complete their responsibilities to the highest potential.
- Making sure that programs and activities are being laid out efficiently and as effectively as possible. Ensure that the activities implemented are of good quality and relevant to the mission and vision of the organization.
- Advocating and embracing change.¹¹
- Being a leader by setting high standards and living by these standards, mentoring and instilling hope in coworkers and followers, and making hard decisions and critical choices.¹²

Engage the Community

Engaging the external community is a core responsibility for an executive director because it is crucial in building essential relationships for the NGO. The director should be invested in building relationships with both the outside community and with the population that the NGO is targeting. Promoting awareness of the organization to the outside community is essential in recruiting donors and volunteers in order to help assist the organization. Furthermore, the population that the NGO intends to aid must feel genuinely supported and connected with the people, vision, and mission of the organization.¹³

The executive director is responsible for promoting this connection and is, therefore, the public face of the organization. The director must advocate him/herself as a spokesperson that both listens and communicates through physical and verbal language. He/she must also implement relevant activities and programs that benefit the target community.¹⁴ Responsible and effective ways to do this include:

- Listening to the community's needs.
- Recognizing and supporting change within the community.
- Utilizing essential interpersonal, communication, and listening skills.¹⁵
- Supplying the community with necessary financial, human, and technological resources.
- Using the information gained through community programs to promote greater public awareness of relevant issues.¹⁶
- Assessing whether programs and activities have been successful by talking to community members and getting their feedback.

¹⁰ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

¹¹ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

¹² Di Frances, John. (2005).

¹³ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

¹⁴ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

¹⁵ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).

¹⁶ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

Manage Financial/Fundraising Affairs

While there will most likely be a comptroller or financial bookkeeper in an NGO, the executive director is still responsible for making daily and monthly financial decisions. He/she does not need to have all the skills that a book keeper would have, but it is important to basically understand finances and accounting.¹⁷ It is also crucial to understand how to manage finances and generate financial statements in order to recognize what kind of financial situation the NGO is in. Basic financial analysis is also beneficial in terms of monitoring cash flow and understanding financial trends.¹⁸ The executive director is responsible for presenting the annual budget on time and making sure that all other financial tasks are completed in an efficient and timely matter. Lastly, he/she is responsible for protecting the assets of the NGO against fraud and financial abuse.¹⁹

Involvement in fundraising affairs is also crucial to an executive director's position. It is essential to create a strong fundraising plan with the help of the board and fundraising staff in order come up with a strong program that services an NGO.²⁰ In overseeing the fundraising aspects of an NGO, the executive director should ensure that:

- Fundraising programs are carried out with high ethical standards.
- There are clear policies in regard to fundraising activities.
- Funds are being accepted and used responsibly through communication with individual contributors and contributing organizations.²¹
- All board members have made a financial contribution.
- He/she has identified fundraising strategies that benefit and complement the mission and vision of the NGO.
- Donors are kept happy and are regularly informed about the organization.²²

It is very common for an executive director to overlook many of these financial and fundraising responsibilities, leaving them for the administrative staff, while focusing on other issues more directly related to management of the NGO. However, management of finances and fundraising are both crucial to the sustainability of an NGO. The executive director should take the previous section to heart in assessing whether or not he/she is fulfilling all of his/her job responsibilities.²³

Support the Board of Directors

While the board of an NGO is essentially responsible for organizing itself, it cannot effectively fulfill its job without information, help, and support from the executive director. It is essential for the executive director to have a good relationship with an NGO's board members by supporting their operations and administration.²⁴ The following are responsibilities that the executive director has to the board:

¹⁷ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

¹⁸ McNamara, Carter. (1997-2008).

¹⁹ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

²⁰ McNamara, Carter. (1997-2008).

²¹ Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

²² Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

²³ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

²⁴ McNamara, Carter. (1997-2008).

- Maintaining structure by sending out notices, providing agenda, and coordinating meetings.
- Respecting them and facilitating discussion on important topics relevant to meetings and structure of an NGO.
- Keeping them informed of decisions and changes.
- Making sure he/she is not dominating the board; letting the board do their job effectively without too much intervention.²⁵

An NGO cannot run effectively and successfully without the role that the board of directors plays and it is important that the executive director is aware and respectful of this.

The preceding five sections provide a brief set of “how-to” guidelines that may be useful in prioritizing the responsibilities of an executive director. Overarching themes present in all five sections are that it is crucial that an executive director act as a mature and well-articulated leader. He/she must be inquisitive, clear, creative, must be comfortable with and open to change, and must be willing to listen and communicate effectively with others.²⁶ Most importantly, an executive director must be both professionally and personally motivated.

²⁵ Moyers, Richard L. (2006).

²⁶ Wolf, Thomas. (1999).