


# Nonprofit News

## Survival Tips for First-Time Executive Directors

by Diane Franklin, PhD



Some great  
reminders  
for all  
Executive  
Directors!

Over the next five years, a large number of baby boomer executive directors will retire from positions they have held for many years and will be replaced by newer, younger executive directors who may never have run a nonprofit organization.

Although many of these new leaders will have academic training or nonprofit experience in other positions, they will not have experienced being the person ultimately responsible for a nonprofit organization.

If you find yourself in this position, here are 12 tips to help you survive and ultimately thrive:

**1. Be clear about expectations.** One of the biggest pitfalls for new executive directors is not achieving clarity about expectations. Work with board members to develop objectives that are mutually acceptable to you and your organization. Understand which objectives are crucial for you to accomplish and which are desirable, but not essential. Also, expectations are a two-way street. If you have expectations or concerns, clearly state these when you negotiate your contract.

**2. Become aware of any organizational red flags that must be addressed immediately, and then address them.** As organizations approach leadership transitions, they sometimes let things slide or sweep them under the rug. Find out if there are any organizational issues that need to be addressed sooner rather than later. Do this by having individual conversations with staff and board members as well as with outside constituents who know your organization well. Anything that is likely to impede the organization's ability to receive continued funding, jeopardize its nonprofit status, or keep it from accomplishing its basic mission must be addressed as soon as possible.

**3. Learn about your organization before you make major changes to it.** Some

executive directors are so eager to make their mark that they make major organizational changes before learning enough about why things are the way they are. With the exception of critical issues, making changes too quickly can lead to major mistakes as well as annoy long-time staff members. By instituting change gradually, especially in non-critical areas, it will be easier to enlist the help and support of staff and board members, use their considerable expertise and knowledge, and ensure their cooperation.

**4. Establish your authority as soon as possible, but do so gently.** As a new executive director, it is necessary to make it clear that you are now the person in charge. This will require building credibility and establishing your authority with staff, board members, and outside constituents. However you do this, it's important to demonstrate your leadership skills and establish your authority within your first few months on the job. This initial period will set the tone for the rest of your time at the organization.

**5. Build trust in all your relationships as quickly as you can.** Board members need to trust that you will serve as the organization's steward, carrying out its mission and increasing its sustainability, visibility, and reputation. They also need to believe that you will behave ethically by taking care of organizational funds and avoiding conflicts of interest. Employees on your staff need to trust that you will serve as their advocate, care about their development, and help them accomplish their work goals and personal objectives. Outside constituents need to trust that you are working on the organization's behalf and see you as a highly visible symbol.

**6. Operate from a strategic place.** There are more demands on an executive director's time than are possible to meet. To be effective in a time and resource-constrained environment, you must operate strategically, in

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936 Easton Rd.  
PO Box 754  
Warrington, PA  
18976

215-343-2727

[www.catalystnonprofit.com](http://www.catalystnonprofit.com)

## Is Your Mission Statement Too Wordy?

### *25 Mission Statements from Top Nonprofits*

<http://topnonprofits.com/examples/nonprofit-mission-statements/>



**Mission Statement (What You Do):** A one-sentence statement describing the reason an organization or program exists and used to help guide decisions about priorities, actions, and responsibilities.

Many nonprofit mission statements succumb to an over use of words in general, but especially jargon. Good mission statements should be **clear, memorable, concise**. Some might also add “inspiring” to the list of descriptors.

#### **General Findings**

The best mission statements are clear, memorable, and concise.

Average length for the 25 organizations below is only 9.5 words (excluding brand references)

The shortest contains only two words (TED)

**TED:** Spreading Ideas. (2 words)

**Smithsonian:** The increase and diffusion of knowledge. (6 words)

**USO** lifts the spirits of America’s troops and their families. (9 words)

**Livestrong:** To inspire and empower people affected by cancer. (8)

**Invisible Children:** To bring a permanent end to LRA atrocities. (8)

**The Humane Society:** Celebrating Animals, Confronting Cruelty. (4)

**Wounded Warrior Project:** To honor and empower wounded warriors. (6)

**Oxfam:** To create lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and social injustice. (10)

**Best Friends Animal Society:** A better world through kindness to animals. (7)

**CARE:** To serve individuals and families in the poorest communities in the world. (12)

**The Nature Conservancy:** To conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. (11)

**JDRF:** To find a cure for diabetes and its complications through the support of research. (14)

**Environmental Defense Fund:** To preserve the natural systems on which all life depends. (10)

**Public Broadcasting System (PBS):** To create content that educates, informs and inspires. (8)

**Nat’l Wildlife Federation:** Inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children’s future. (9)

**American Heart Assoc.:** To build healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke. (10)

**Heifer Int’l:** To work with communities to end hunger and poverty and care for the Earth. (14)

**ASPCA:** To provide effective means for the prevention of cruelty to animals throughout the United States. (15)

**Kiva:** We are a non-profit organization with a mission to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty. (16)

**New York Public Library:** To inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities. (10)

**Defenders of Wildlife** is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. (15)

**March of Dimes:** We help moms have full-term pregnancies and research the problems that threaten the health of babies. (16)

**Monterey Bay Aquarium:** The mission of the non-profit Monterey Bay Aquarium is to inspire conservation of the oceans. (12)

**Amnesty International:** To undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights. (15)

**American Diabetes Association:** To prevent and cure diabetes and to improve the lives of all people affected by diabetes. (16)

## Survival Tips continued from page 1

*Diane Franklin, PhD*

accordance with a written strategic plan if one exists, or by using the initial expectations that you set with your board as a guideline for focusing your activities until a more comprehensive strategic plan is developed. In addition to helping you decide how to focus your own time and energy, a strategic plan serves as a blueprint for the entire organization, keeps board and staff members focused on the same goals, and provides decision-making guidelines that help allocate resources most effectively.

**7. Keep a laser focus on what is essential.** Although it's tempting to learn as much possible about everything in the organization and spend time improving things that may have been neglected, resist those tendencies. Instead, focus on the things that are most essential. In today's competitive funding environment, it's important to concentrate your initial efforts on the things that will ensure your organization's sustainability, help retain valuable employees, and increase external visibility.

**8. Seek the appropriate balance between "inside" and "outside" work.** Figure out the appropriate balance between inside and outside work, especially if your organization needs a lot of internal improvement. Most likely you've been hired to increase your organization's visibility and resources, both of which require that you spend much of your time out of the office. Focus only on those internal tasks that you alone can do and delegate the rest.

**9. Leverage your board.** Having a good relationship with your board is crucial for your success as an executive director. On the simplest level, the board is your "boss," and it's important that board members are aware of and happy with your work. On a more strategic level, your board is one of your greatest resources, and, if properly leveraged, can contribute immensely to your organization's sustainability and growth. Learn your board's strengths and weaknesses and then capitalize on their strengths, and work to remedy their weaknesses, using the support of your board chair.

**10. Communicate.** Frequent and transparent communication is essential for effective organizational leadership. Communication, coupled with a clear strategy, holds organizations together and allows people to work toward common goals. The more that board and staff members know about what is going on in their organization, the more they will be able to act coherently to accomplish the organization's mission. Good communication also decreases rumors and reduces the time wasting that occurs when people believe essential information is being withheld.

**11. Develop the talents and skills of your staff.** Pay attention to staff development. Take advantage of free or low-cost training opportunities, and then expect staff who attend such trainings to share what they have learned with other staff members. The more staff members learn and grow, the more satisfied they will be with their jobs. Satisfied staff tend to stay longer, reducing the time and money spent recruiting, hiring, and training new staff and the loss of institutional knowledge that occurs when staff leave.

**12. Begin succession planning immediately.** Just after you start your new position, you and your board should plan for the day that you step down. While this may seem strange, it reflects the reality that most organizations do little succession planning despite the fact that the average tenure for executive directors is a little more than three years. Successful succession planning requires having a current strategic plan, guidelines for recruitment, hiring, evaluation and compensation, and a strong board.

*Diane Franklin, PhD is a retired nonprofit sector consultant. She currently is enjoying her career as a fiber artist.*

### SAVE THE DATES FALL 2015 Management Training Seminars

**October 20, 2015**

**9:00 am-12:00 pm** (registration begins at 8:30 am)

**Learning from The Future**

*Susan Berg, Ph.D. Compass Associates*

**Registration fee \$0**

thanks to our corporate sponsor



*Encore presentation from Nonprofit University 2015*

**November 17, 2015**

**1:00 pm-4:00 pm** (registration begins at 12:30 pm)

**How to Stock Your Technology Pantry**

*Matt Cherepanya, Inverse Paradox*

*Chuck Hall, Your Marketing Exec*

Register via our website at: [www.catalystnonprofit.com/training](http://www.catalystnonprofit.com/training) Full descriptions to follow.

Seminars will be held at the PA Center for Biotechnology, 3605 Old Easton Rd., Doylestown, PA

#### Questions?

Contact Liz Vibber  
at  
215-343-2727  
lvibber@bbco-cpa.com

## Community News

### Welcome new Executive Directors

**Nancy Wolf**, Libertae

**Erin Lukoss**, Bucks County Opportunity Council

**Colleen Miller**, Child, Home & Community

**Suzanne Owens**, Peter Becker Community

**Dean Stoesz**, Indian Creek Foundation

### Child Abuse Clearance Fees Waived for Volunteers

effective July 25, 2015. In addition, the fee will be reduced for all other applicants from \$10 to \$8.

Additional information about clearances required under the Child Protective Services Law are available at [www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov](http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov).

### Check out these resources:

**Good360** <http://www.good360> Good360 is a nonprofit that connects companies who have goods, with nonprofits in need and individuals who want to help them

**Bucks County VOAD** <http://www.bucksvoad.org/>  
Post your organization's volunteer needs or look for an opportunity.

**Charity Miles app** <http://www.charitymiles.org/>  
Through corporate sponsorship, the Charity Miles app pays money to good causes based on how many miles you're prepared to run, walk or bike.

**SafeNight app** <http://www.caravanstudios.org/#!safenight/cfvg> Alert individual donors to fund hotel rooms when local domestic violence shelters are full.

### Giving USA: Americans donated an estimated \$358.38 Billion to charity in 2014

The 2014 total jumped 7.1 percent in current dollars and 5.4 percent when inflation-adjusted over the revised estimate of \$339.94 billion that Americans donated in 2013, according to *Giving USA 2015: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2014*.

In addition, 2014 marked the fifth year in a row where giving went up; the average annual increase was 5.5 percent in current dollars (3.4 percent when inflation-adjusted).

All four sources that comprise total giving—individuals (72 percent of the total); corporations (5 percent); foundations (15 percent); and bequests (8 percent)—upped their 2014 donations to America's 1-million-plus charities, says the report, which is the longest-running and most comprehensive of its kind in America.

Source: <http://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2015-press-release-giving-usa-americans-donated-an-estimated-358-38-billion-to-charity-in-2014-highest-total-in-reports-60-year-history/>



**Congratulations to Bee, Bergvall & Co.** recognized by Smart CEO magazine as a finalist in the CPA & ESQ. Awards for our nonprofit practice.



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Catalyst Center for Nonprofit  
Management  
PO Box 754  
Warrington, PA 18976

