Interim Executive Director Considerations and Guidance

Background

From time to time a CCE association Board of Directors may have need for interim executive leadership. Typically this occurs when the incumbent executive director (ED) leaves and there is insufficient time to complete the search and hiring process for a replacement.

An association’s interim executive leadership needs will depend on circumstances. If there is a veteran staff, there are no major issues and the duration is short, the interim ED may only need to fill a minimal administrative role. If there is insufficient staff leadership capacity below the ED level or if major challenges are on the horizon (such as a difficult county budget season) a more substantial ED role and specific skill set may be required. Sometimes the Board may want to accomplish certain tasks during the interim period such as a major restructuring that “set the table” for a new ED. In any event it is important that someone be officially designated as the executive director in order to execute certain administrative functions such as approving payroll.

The appropriate State Extension Specialist is available to work with the Board in identifying specific interim leadership needs and options for meeting those needs, including potential candidate individuals. In compliance with statutory requirements the Director of Extension at Cornell University must approve interim executive director appointments.

Options

Depending on need and circumstances, interim EDs are often drawn from the following ranks:

- Former executives from CCE or other organizations
- Senior program leaders from among current association staff
- Current CCE EDs “on loan” from another association

Each of the above examples brings its own set of considerations, discussed below. Once a candidate individual has been identified and approved, the State Extension Specialist and Shared Business Network (SBN) Human Resource Lead should be consulted for examples and situation-specific assistance such as drafting agreements and initiating HR system transactions.

Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.
General Considerations

Interim executive leadership arrangements are often less than full-time; typically 2 or 3 days per week. In such cases the Board may want to consider appointing a “staff coordinator” to provide a point of contact when the interim ED is not available. A temporary salary “add-on” may be warranted, at the Board’s discretion. Consideration should also be given to how other staff members may need to adjust or take on new responsibilities during the interim period. Expectations and agreements should be as specific as possible and summarized in writing.

It will be especially important for the Board President to communicate regularly with staff and external stakeholders, assuring them that the association remains in good hands and that the Board is working actively to secure a sound future for the organization.

Special Considerations

Current Internal Staff

If he or she meets the minimum qualifications for the position, a current internal staff member may be appointed to the interim ED position for a maximum term of up to 6 months plus a potential extension of an additional 6 months. Such an appointment is NOT recommended if the internal employee intends to apply for the regular position. In any case it should be made clear in writing to the employee that an open, competitive search will be conducted and that being appointed to the interim position does not imply favored consideration for the “regular” position.

Former EDs

Former executive directors from CCE or other organizations often possess a skill set and experience level that can be “just what the doctor ordered.” The Board President typically negotiates an agreement with the individual, to include hours per week, maximum term, compensation, travel reimbursement, and specific duties or expectations. If the individual is a retiree they should be encouraged to seek advice from their attorney or tax preparer with respect to income limitations or other considerations that may apply in their particular situation.

Due to the nature of the position an external interim executive director is NOT, in most cases, considered an independent contractor under federal and state labor laws and will be put on the payroll in a “Temporary Professional” CCE job classification.

Shared ED with Another Association

CCE associations often help each other out in times of need, including sharing staff. EDs from nearby counties who have several years of experience in the system make strong candidates for part-time, interim ED positions. Typically the respective Board Presidents negotiate the details of a memorandum of agreement between the associations, including amount of time (on-site and availability by phone or email), duration and compensation for salary and other expenses. The State Extension Specialist can supply examples.

Conclusion

Leadership transitions are stressful and time-consuming under the best of circumstances. However, they also present opportunities to reflect and move in new directions. The breadth and maturity of the CCE system provides a wealth of “lessons learned” that are freely shared.

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