

# Common Ground

A Publication of the N.C. Center *for* Nonprofits



Volume XXI, Number 1  
Winter 2012

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## Why and How to Hire an Interim Executive Director

Leadership change is often marked with emotion, tension, and stress. If the director's departure is forced, emotions may be particularly high for staff and board members.

Externally, some funders, donors, and volunteers may take a "wait and see" approach, putting their support on hold. This can put a strain on resources, further taxing your nonprofit.

Research suggests that a skilled interim executive director (ED) helps nonprofits to emerge stronger, more fiscally sound, and with higher levels of optimism. She takes the helm and lays the groundwork for the next leader's success by:

- ▼ Serving as a bridge, giving the board time to conduct a thoughtful search process.
- ▼ Managing the day-to-day by examining the organization objectively, leading anxious staff, reassuring wary funders, and keeping finances and revenue generation on track.
- ▼ Helping the board clarify its vision and future leadership needs.
- ▼ Modeling excellence in management and leadership.
- ▼ Mentoring the new ED once appointed.

Some tips for hiring an interim ED are:

- ▼ Begin with the end in

mind. Your board should determine what's most critical to the nonprofit's success over the next few months.

- ▼ Identify urgent issues or challenges facing your organization.
- ▼ Review the departing ED's job description, determine priorities for the transition, and draft an interim job description.
- ▼ Seek an interim ED with solid skills in management and transitions. This is more important than familiarity with your nonprofit or its field of work.
- ▼ Keep in mind that the assignment is temporary (usually four to eight months). The individual shouldn't be a candidate for the permanent position.
- ▼ Realize that, due to the unique demands of the role, interim EDs are usually paid higher on an hourly basis than permanent EDs. But, they may be part-time or receive reduced benefits because of their temporary status.

INTERIM CONTINUED ON P. 12



Jeanie Duncan (left) shares a moment with Ashley Brooks, executive director of the Women's Resource Center of Greensboro, at the N.C. Center's conference. Don't miss your Public Policy Forum for Nonprofits on May 29 and NC Nonprofits Day at the legislature on May 30! Photo: JLS Photography

# Always on the Record: Crisis Communications

Every nonprofit needs a crisis management plan, even if it's short and simple.

**Start by understanding the media.**

Reporters generally look for juicy stories and try to identify the heroes and villains.

Media outlets compete to be the first to report a story, and reporters are under constant deadline pressure. They usually can't wait for all the facts to come out. Your story will be reported, with or without your assistance.

It's rarely wise to refuse to cooperate or to say, "No comment." It sounds bad and many will assume you are hiding something. And, there is no such thing as "off the record." If you say it, it's fair game.

Some practical tips:

**1 Be clear about what you want the media to know.** You control what you tell them.

**2 Always tell the truth.** Mike Seymour and Simon Moore in their book, *Effective Crisis Management*,

call this advice the critical "Three Ts" (Tell The Truth).

**3 Don't feel the need to tell the media everything.** This could be dangerous, since reporters can pick sound bites that may hurt you when taken out of context.

**4 Stick to the prepared text.** Your fact sheet is an essential survival tool. It's more than a list of talking points; it's your script.

**5 If you don't know, say so.** Say, "I'll get back to you."

**6 Be sincere.** Choose a spokesperson who is convincingly trustworthy.

**7 Accommodate reasonable requests.** If a reporter asks to tape a story in front of your building, or hold an interview "on location" rather than an office, do so if you can without jeopardizing your crisis communications plan.

**8 Admit when a mistake has been made.** This may be the first step to re-establishing credibility and confidence with key constituencies.

**9 Don't ignore media requests or evade interviews.** Playing hide-'n'-seek can do a lot of harm. The reporter will find *someone* to



Melanie Herman

speak to about the situation. That someone should be you or a colleague who's a prepared, effective representative of your organization and position.

**10 Designate a backup spokesperson** in the event your spokesperson is unavailable or is the subject of the crisis. Both the spokesperson and the backup should be trained, articulate, sincere, and persuasive. ■

– Melanie Herman

*Adapted with permission of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (NRMC), led by Melanie Herman. For more on this topic, see Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving a Crisis in a Nonprofit ([www.nonprofitrisk.org/store/pub\\_detail.asp?id=32](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/store/pub_detail.asp?id=32)).*

*The N.C. Center for Nonprofits is a satellite office of NRMC and offers deep discounts on its interactive tools for managing nonprofit risks. See [www.ncnonprofits.org/benefits/nrmc.asp](http://www.ncnonprofits.org/benefits/nrmc.asp).*



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INTERIM CONT. FROM P. 1

▼ Tap local resources for potential candidates: retired EDs, college nonprofit degree programs, consultants serving the nonprofit sector, local nonprofit networks, and the Jobs Board of the N.C.

Center for Nonprofits (<http://nccenter.brinkster.net>).

There's great power and potential in this "neutral zone" – the space after one leader leaves and before a new leader begins. Transitioning nonprofits are more open to change. Leverage the opportunity! ■

– Jeanie Duncan

*Jeanie Duncan, CFRE, is president of Raven Consulting Group in Greensboro and specializes in organizational transition and leadership development in nonprofits.*