

Insight and Ideas for Nonprofit Governance

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✧ TRY THIS ✧

Beating the Odds



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According to recent studies, nearly half of all new executives fail in the first 18 months. The problem? Nine out of 10 say they arrive at the top feeling they lack the know-how and tools to succeed. What's more, most don't get the organizational support they need — starting with the boss.

These new leaders are also surprised to discover that what got them there — from working nonstop to sweating the small stuff — isn't enough to *keep* them there. Their organizations pay the price, too — turnover is expensive monetarily and in terms of staff morale and missed opportunities.

The good news? What it takes to make it as an executive *can* be learned. It's a matter of picking up new skills and strengths and letting go of old ones — even if they've driven your career success up until now.

- **Let go of self-doubt.**
An insecure executive makes a lousy leader. Put confidence in your presence and purpose, even if it doesn't come naturally at first. After all, they hired you, didn't they?
- **Let go of running flat-out until you crash.**
Working 24/7 may have made you a superstar. Keep it up at the top — where the expectations are enormous — and you'll burn out. Break the cycle by scheduling regular time for recovery and renewal.
- **Let go of one-size-fits-all communication.**
Customize every message for the group and goals at hand. Less is more, so become a master of the headline and need-to-know details for each audience.
- **Let go of self-reliance.**
Replace "me" with "we." You may have advanced here on your own, but now you are only as good as your team.
- **Let go of the urge to tell "how."**
Micromanaging is a sure way to fail. Set the agenda for *what* gets done and leave the *how* to your team.

- **Let go of responsibility.**
Don't sweat the small stuff. Responsibility for a *few* results belongs to your team. Accountability for *many* results belongs to you.
- **Let go of only looking up and down.**
There's more to consider than what's up with the board or what's going down with subordinates. Look left and right, too. Why? Partnerships with peers provide valuable information and advice you won't find elsewhere.
- **Let go of an inside-out view.**
An innermost perspective may have served you in the past, but it won't now. Lead with an outside-in view by understanding what else is happening in both the internal and external environment.
- **Let go of the small footprint.**
Your days of being "low-profile" are over. At the top, you act and speak on behalf of your entire organization.

Establishing Executive Presence

Peak performers are often promoted to the senior ranks and then left to sink or swim on their own. To stay at the top, you have to act like an executive — even when you *feel* like an imposter. Take charge of how you "show up" — for yourself, your team, and your organization.

- **Trust your gut.**
Heed your instincts. When that inner voice sounds a warning signal, be sure to stop, look, and listen.
- **Take action.**
Plan the work and work the plan — yet be willing to execute *before* you feel completely ready. Executives don't always have the luxury of time.
- **Get your ego out of the way.**
It's not about you anymore. Spend time and energy boosting your team members — not competing with them.
- **Address problems quickly.**
Don't waffle. If someone or something isn't working, take action immediately — and respectfully.



- **Bond with the board.**
Talk early and often with your board chair. Come up with a plan for ongoing communication that is easy and effective for both of you.
- **Mind your manners — and your messages.**
Political savvy is a must. Be visible and accessible, but stay mindful of *everything* you say and do.
- **Repeat: "I am not my job."**
Be true to you. You are an executive because of what you do — and who you are. Realize your potential at home and in your community. Strive for balance.

RESOURCES:

The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success by Scott Eblin. Davies-Black, 2006.

The Nonprofit Chief Executive's Ten Basic Responsibilities by Richard L. Moyers. BoardSource, 2006.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

The chief executive's actions and attitude resonate throughout the organization. The executive who works 60-hour weeks and never takes vacation, cuts ethical corners, or makes disparaging remarks about board members and colleagues will be observed and eventually imitated by staff. Demonstrating — and encouraging — an appropriate work-life balance, modeling ethical behavior, and setting a positive and professional tone for the organization are critical, and often overlooked, responsibilities.

Excerpted from *The Nonprofit Chief Executive's Ten Basic Responsibilities*.