

BOARD GUIDANCE: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ONBOARDING



National Alliance on Mental Illness

Board Guidance for ED Transitions

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Introduction

Onboarding a new Executive Director (ED) is a great opportunity for an organization. Proper planning can help ensure stability, consistency and organizational well-being throughout the transition period for existing staff and volunteers, as well as external stakeholders. The more organized and relevant the information is that is provided to the new ED to get them oriented to their new role, the less time they will need to spend looking for information or recreating the wheel. This will also allow the ED to sooner delve into the important work of moving the organization forward.

When planning for an ED transition, think critically about what can be put in place to ensure the stability and sustainability of the organization and document it in a plan that can be easily accessed by Board leadership. Here are some items to consider when developing a plan:

- Is there information that only the current ED is privy to or has access to that will be lost when they leave?
- What information would the new ED need to know to maintain or move the organization forward?
- What actions can the Board take to help set the new ED up for success?
- How will you know that the new ED is successful?
- Are there any specific goals or unique circumstances that will need to be addressed early on?

It is good practice to create a leadership transition group or committee focused on preparing for, as well as mitigating the risk of and/or responding to any challenges that surface during the transition period. The transition group or committee may include Board members, key current staff members, and other stakeholders who have working knowledge of the ED role and can contribute to the transition process, including the transition plan, onboarding plan, press release/communication strategy, and other relevant tasks to help ensure a smooth leadership transition.

Introduction, *continued*

In accordance with [NAMI's Roles and Responsibilities](#)¹, if you are a NAMI affiliate, we encourage you to reach out to your NAMI state organization regarding leadership changes and needs for support. If you are a NAMI state organization, please contact NAMI National's Field Capacity Building team at fieldcapacity@nami.org and we can put you in touch with your state's point of contact.

Transition Plan

The transition group should work together to create a transition plan for the new permanent or interim ED that may include the following components:

- Basic organizational information
- Key relationships, and
- Leadership roles.

1.) Basic Organizational Information

- a. A brief history of the organization;
- b. Important documents such as the organization's bylaws and strategic plan;
- c. Recurring expenses and annual budget;
- d. Existing systems the organization uses: donor tracking, email marketing, data collection, HR-related, etc. Include a list of passwords and locations of important forms and documents;
- e. Important dates for the organization in chronological order: Include dates related to nonprofit status, finances, events, advocacy, fundraisers, grant reports, and grant submissions; and
- f. Separation of organizational operations duties: Who approves expenses? Employee time off? Who needs to review bank statements? Who gets the mail? Who has spending power? If these tasks are the responsibility of the new ED, ensure there are clear instructions for how to accomplish them. If tasks are delegated to others, provide any relevant information about how they are performed and by whom.

2.) Key Relationships

- g. Board information: List Board members, their position on the Board, length of time on the Board, term dates, and affiliation, as well as any helpful information about how the Board functions. What has engagement with the Board looked like? How often does the ED meet with the Board chair? When does the ED report to the Board? Are there forms of communication the Board prefers?
- h. Grant contacts: What are the organization's sources of grant funding (state, private foundations, community foundations, NAMI National)? List the main contact info for each grant, as well as the requirements for each grant to maintain funding.

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Transition Plan, *continued*

- c. Top funders and how they prefer to engage with the organization: It can be helpful for the new ED to have information on what funders have historically supported the organization and how. Has company XYZ historically sponsored the conference at the highest amount? Are there certain donors who will only donate once a year to the NAMIWalk?
- d. Coalitions/committees: Information about current participation in coalitions and committees can be helpful for a new ED in learning who they can engage with outside the organizations. What relevant coalitions are the current ED, Board members, and/or staff involved in? What backstory can be provided to the new ED on each coalition/committee? (purpose, frequency of meetings, etc.)
- e. Key staff and/or volunteers in different areas and their contact information: This will help the new ED quickly get a sense of who is currently doing what work. Who is the person who will help plan an event? Help organize an advocacy initiative? Spearhead a new NAMI program? Who are the key program leaders?

3.) Leadership Roles

- a. Interim ED roles and expectations: If there will be an interim ED, clarify their role and expectations. If there is not a plan for an interim position, detail how will work be divided, maintained, and monitored until someone is placed in a permanent position.
- b. Documented agreement on current ED's future role: Will the current ED remain at the organization to help onboard the new ED? Will they take on the role of an advisor? Will they be compensated for this work? If so, how much? Will this role be part-time or full-time? We encourage you to iron out these details so everyone is on the same page.

Onboarding Plan

The new ED should have an onboarding plan on their desk on day one. This should be developed with input from any current ED, staff, the Board, and/or other key stakeholders. The onboarding plan should be a clear, comprehensive, phased out plan that helps the new ED prioritize the areas to address during their onboarding in accordance with a timeline. It should include materials related to being a new employee of the organization (employee handbook, benefits, technology, etc.). It should also include where to find information, documents, and resources that will help them as they learn their new position. Note: the NAMI ED onboarding toolkit can be utilized as a framework for this onboarding plan, however, there will be information specific to the organization not captured in that document.

Communications Plan

Good communication during a leadership transition is critical for managing emotions, assuring trust, and promoting a belief in the future of the organization among different stakeholders. A general rule of thumb is overcommunicating is better than under communicating.

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Communications Plan, *continued*

The transition group should plan for **internal and external communications** regarding the ED transition. How will communication with staff about the transition be handled? What information will you need to share a consistent message? Do you need to communicate in different ways/different timelines for different stakeholders (major funders, partners, etc.)? Who will do what? Who is the designated spokesperson regarding the transition? If there is time between EDs, who will speak to the media during this transition?

The plan should include the who, what, and when of how communication will be carried out during the transition. For example, one step of your plan may be for the Board president to reach out to key external funders within two weeks after the new ED starts and make introductions. It may also be helpful to craft some talking points regarding the transition to facilitate consistent messaging.

A critical component of the communication plan is a press release announcing the new ED. This is something the Board should prepare in time for the new ED's first day and determine to whom and how the announcement will be shared. By doing this, the Board shows, through both internal and external communication, excitement to onboard the new ED, and it's one less thing the new ED needs to do when they start their new position.

Evaluation and Onboarding Support

A critical role of the Board is to evaluate the ED. Six months into the new ED's position, as well as annually, the Board should evaluate the new ED. It's important to note this time frame can vary depending on the organization's policies and can be more frequent than this general guideline.

At six months, the new ED is still getting an understanding of the organization, the community, NAMI, and the ED role. Create a fair and objective process for evaluating their performance and fit for the role. Document the evaluation and use a standardized process. An ED evaluation could cover the following areas:

- **Accomplishments:**
What has the ED been able to move forward during this time? What wins occurred under their leadership? Celebrating these accomplishments will help create a more well-rounded reflection process.
- **Opportunities to support:**
These evaluation times can also allow space to identify any opportunities for the Board to support the new ED. For example, is there an easy win the Board could help with?
- **Goals, areas of strength, and areas of growth/improvement:**
Discussing these three areas should be done early on and in alignment with the strategic plan.

While most evaluations happen at the six or twelve month mark, it is helpful to do some reflecting earlier in the new ED's tenure. Through this process, you may find the newly hired ED could use some additional support. Taking the time to reflect earlier on, 30 to 60 days into the new ED's role, will help you learn in what areas they could use support and intervene earlier.

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Evaluation and Onboarding Support, *continued*

Here are a few questions the Board should consider asking within the first 30-60 days:

- Did the ED meet with each staff member or key volunteers (if the organization has no other staff) and Board member?
- Has the new ED taken the opportunity to gain insight from staff and Board members regarding key stakeholders to meet with or their thoughts on the future of the organization?
- Do they understand and can they articulate the organization's current financial situation?
- Are they able to articulate the mission and vision of the organization to potential volunteers, donors, etc.?
- Have they identified the organization's top strengths and areas of opportunity?
- How are staff and external stakeholders responding to them?
- Have any of their decisions negatively impacted the organization's operations, brand, or reputation?

When answering these questions, it is important to discern whether something is a red flag or just a culture change and part of the adjustment process. If the ED is jeopardizing the mission and long-term wellbeing of the organization, this is cause for concern. One unfortunate possibility you may encounter is an ED may not be a good fit for the organization. If you sense this is a possibility, work with the transition team to determine next steps.

Expanded links:

¹ https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMInet/Ops-Gov/Roles-and-Responsibilities-in-the-NAMI-Alliance_6-20-2017.pdf

Resources

Links

For additional resources on managing ED transitions, see the resource list below.

Nonprofit Toolkit

<https://www.kansascityfed.org/Community/documents/82/nonprofit-resources-NONPROFIT-TOOLKIT.pdf>

Communicating Planned CEO Transition

<https://boardsource.org/communicating-planned-ceo-transition/>

Emergency Leadership Transition Plan

<https://boardsource.org/emergency-leadership-transition-plan-ceo/>

Executive Evaluation Compensation

<https://boardsource.org/fundamental-topics-of-nonprofit-board-service/executive-evaluation-compensation/>

Simple Executive Director Performance Review

<https://www.joangarry.com/video/simple-executive-director-performance-review/>

CEO Core Competencies

<https://boardsource.org/ceo-core-competencies/>

Terrible New Executive Director?

<https://www.joangarry.com/new-executive-director-terrible/>