Exploring Nonprofit Executive Turnover

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Projections of executive turnover loom over the three sectors with aging baby boomers filling many executive-level positions, and research into causes, outcomes, and processes of turnover are timely inquiries. Yet, scholarly attention into nonprofit executive turnover has been limited to date and has not sufficiently examined actual turnover events. To help address this gap, forty nonprofit organizations that had recently experienced executive turnover were selected from a national random sample, and the current executives participated in an interview. This qualitative data was analyzed to identify factors and dynamics that define nonprofit executive turnover. These findings both confirm practical knowledge and offer new insights relevant to future research and practitioners alike.

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EXECUTIVE POSITIONS ACROSS THE PUBLIC, private, and nonprofit sectors are occupied by aging baby boomers, and labor forecasts predict significant turnover in coming years. For the nonprofit sector, a 2011 survey found that 67 percent of executives were planning to leave their position in the next five years (Cornelius, Moyers, and Bell 2011). Not surprisingly, considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to executive turnover, but much of this empirical research is from the public and for-profit sectors. Although professional literature does describe an "aspirational portrait" of nonprofit executive turnover, empirical research has been limited to date (Dym, Egmont, and Watkins 2011).

Executives hold extensive responsibility for the management and operations of an organization, and executive turnover has implications for what Weber referred to as the "routinization" of leadership (Helmich and Brown 1972). An executive transition is inevitable if an organization is to survive, and the high-stakes nature of the position makes it the most important turnover an organization will face (Grusky 1960). Executive turnover is not confined to the transfer of authority from an outgoing executive to an incoming one, but instead must be understood as a process—nestled among personal, organizational, and process factors and complete with a "before," "during," and "after" (Kesner and Sebora 1994; Lundberg 1986).

The field of executive turnover research has been described as lacking an "overarching framework" that would tie together the various elements and present a "consistent model" for theory building (Dyck et al. 2002; Kesner and Sebora 1994). More specifically, Dyck et al. (2002, 145) critiqued that "we know very little about the actual succession process, including

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the role played by both successors and incumbents." Nonprofit research on executive turnover has primarily described the scale or scope of anticipated turnover (Cornelius et al. 2011; Kunreuther 2005; Masaoka 2007; Tierney 2006), and the few empirical studies are limited to case studies or small samples (for examples, see Balser and Carmin 2009; McKee and Driscoll 2008; Smith, Carson, and Alexander 1984).

To help address this research gap, the current study explored nonprofit executive turnover using qualitative data collected from a random sample of forty nonprofits that had recently experienced turnover. The current executives of these organizations participated in semi-structured interviews, and, though limited in their role to the "during" and "after" of turnover, offered their insights into nonprofit executive turnover. These interviews highlight differences among organizational capacity, the role of the board in managing executive turnover, and procedural elements such as the transition climate, as well as the "taking charge" process of the new executive. These findings have considerable theoretical and practical relevance because they detail actual events of nonprofit executive turnover and help inform a research agenda.

Literature Review

Turnover events have some common elements, such as the outgoing executive's departure and the selection and arrival of a new executive. The variation is found among the contextual factors that define these reasons for leaving, how the turnover proceeds, and what difference the executive change makes in the life of the organization. The study of outcomes, or outputs, of turnover has distinguished among personal, organizational, or process factors (Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz 2005). No two turnover events proceed the same way, and personal and organizational factors have bearing on the outcomes of turnover, as do the elements of the process itself. In this article, I review existing executive turnover research along with considerations unique to the nonprofit sector. Given that this study engaged the current executives of nonprofits that have experienced turnover, this review focuses on what happens after the triggering event, and, in doing so, helps inform the analysis of the interview data.

Personal Characteristics

Projections of executive turnover for the nonprofit sector forecast a "leadership deficit," as expected vacancies outpace the "bench strength" of the sector (Tierney 2006). Recoined in a recent article as the "leadership development deficit," the sector was critiqued for insufficiently grooming heirs to the executive office (Landles-Cobb, Kramer, and Smith Milway 2015). Interpreting this leadership—or leadership development—deficit through the lens of prior research on executive turnover leads to expectations about the relationship between the person who fills the executive office and the process of turnover and associated outcomes.

Prior research has found that an executive's skills and background, such as education level, experience in the executive office, and even experience with executive transitions, are positively related to turnover outcomes (Cannella and Rowe 1995; Hashemi 1983; Pfeffer and Davis-Blake 1986). Further, research has documented that seamless transitions, when an heir apparent is in line to succeed, also relate positively to organizational performance post-turnover (Zhang and Rajagopalan 2004). A significant volume of research has also attempted to distinguish outcomes dependent on the origin, either external or internal to the organization, of the executive, but has generally had mixed findings (for examples, see Bommer and Ellstrand 1996; Borokhovich, Parrino, and Trapani 1996). Collectively, this research asks not just if a different executive matters but what are the characteristics about these executives that influence outcomes.

In a nonprofit context, we know that most executives fill the role only once in their careers and come with little previous experience in identical positions (Allison 2002). Research on essential skills of effective nonprofit executives has documented that relational skills, such as board leadership and navigating the political dimension of the nonprofit executive office, are necessary in addition to an executive's mission expertise and business acumen (Heimovics, Herman, and Jurkiewicz 1995). We also understand internal lines of promotion to the nonprofit executive office to be weak, implying that many executives have external origins (Landles-Cobb et al. 2015). Johnson (2009) raised that the nonprofit sector must think broadly about executive recruitment by considering volunteers, board members, and even executives from other sectors. With a nonprofit executive serving as a public representative to stakeholders, including donors, external executives may come with networks and relations, but also may be unfamiliar with a nonprofit's existing relations (Heimovics et al. 1995). Further, executive origin may have implications for local networks of nonprofits, because turnover may be triggered among locally operating nonprofits when an executive is "poached."

Research has also considered the effect of the outgoing executive's tenure and whether he or she was the organization's founder. Prior research among for-profit corporations has found that long tenures of outgoing executives were associated with declining organizational performance, which may present a turnaround challenge for a new executive (Eitzen and Yetman 1972; Hughes et al. 2010). Others have documented the long shadow of a founder's departure and that special care must be given to stakeholder relations that endure after the founder has departed, stressing the importance of an incoming executive's relational "soft" skills (Masaoka 2007; Redington and Vickers 2001). Further, research on founder transitions in for-profit firms found that the new management styles and strategic orientations of incoming executives may present a hard adjustment for the firm and be reflected negatively in its performance, even contributing to firm demise (Haveman and Khaire 2004; Tashakori 1980).

Described as "founder's syndrome" by nonprofit research, a founder may hold an "unhealthy" level of power and prestige among board members and stakeholders, allowing the founder to overstay and even continue on in an unpaid role, such as a board member, after the founder steps down (Block and Rosenberg 2002, 354). An outgoing executive holding a long tenure may also be overly relied upon by the board, making for a "CEO-dominant" power dynamic in the shared board–executive leadership structure (Iecovich and Bar-Mor 2007). Accordingly, board members may be ill equipped for their leadership role and miss the opportunity to lead a strategic organizational change through the executive transition (McCanna and Comte 1986). The nonprofit executive has been described as central to operations (Heimovics et al. 1995), and organizations overly reliant on the outgoing executive may be more susceptible to disruption brought upon by turnover.

Organizational Characteristics

Research has also documented organizational qualities that buffer against turnover's disruption. Organizations of a certain size and age have been found to have structure and staffing, even prior experience with executive turnover, that enable continuity between executives (Day and

Lord 1988; Grusky 1961; Haveman 1993). Relatedly, organizations equipped with succession plans are found to have stronger outcomes following an executive transition (Behn, Riley, and Yang 2005; Trow 1961). Boards of directors are responsible for hiring and supervising executives and have been studied to understand how they monitor performance to appropriately prompt turnover as well as their role in managing transitions (Fredrickson, Hambrick, and Baumrin 1988). For example, a board composition balanced toward outside members has been found to be independent of executive control, and, as such, more effective at performance monitoring and managing of executive transitions (Huson, Malatesta, and Parrino 2004; Nguyen 2012; Phan and Lee 1995).

From a resource-dependency perspective, nonprofits are vulnerable to disruptions in operating environments, and an executive turnover, even in the best-case scenario, creates a period of "organizational instability and uncertainty" (Gibelman and Gelmen 2002, 66). Executives play a significant role in fundraising, and transitions may mean that donative revenue streams are disrupted (Froelich 1999). Further, leaner or smaller nonprofits may not have the resource buffer that a larger nonprofit has, and a larger organization may have a hierarchy of management that has capacity to take the reins during a transition and help orient a new executive (Bowen 1994; Froelich, McKee, and Rathge 2011). Prior experience with executive turnover, or stability associated to the nonprofit's age, may also guide or mitigate the transition. Nonprofits may also not be equipped with a succession plan; survey research found that while many understand the importance of succession planning, relatively few have undertaken any proactive steps toward developing one (Froelich et al. 2011). A board's leadership during normal operations may be indicative of its capacity to lead and manage the logistics of an executive transition. For example, a survey of nonprofit executives found that nearly half of respondents had not had a performance evaluation hosted by their board in the past year and of those who did, fewer than half found it helpful (Cornelius et al. 2011). Accordingly, a nonprofit's capacity, in resources, experience, and volunteer leadership, may equip it to navigate the uncertainty and instability of an executive transition.

Process Characteristics

An executive transition has many moving parts, people involved, and decision points, which Dyck et al. (2002) described using the analogy of a relay race. Prior research has studied the triggering events of turnover and found that a planned or routine turnover, such as a retirement, when an "heir apparent" is in place prior to the departure of the outgoing executive, or an incoming executive overlapping with an outgoing executive, proceeds more smoothly (Mahajan and Lummer 1993; Wiersema 1995; Zhang and Rajagopalan 2004). A seamless hand-off between executives may give stakeholders confidence in both the management of the leadership transition and the newly appointed executive (Dyck et al. 2002). Research has also studied the use of an interim executive and found that although organizational performance may weaken under interim leadership, the interim role may prove helpful when the outgoing executive is forced from the office (Intintoli, Zhang, and Davidson 2014). The timing of a departure may also have bearing on organizational outcomes; studies on turnover at sports teams found that turnover between seasons correlated to higher outcomes than did frequent or in-season turnover (Allen, Panian, and Lotz 1979; Rowe et al. 2005). Garbarro (1988) referred to the "taking charge process" that extends beyond the appointment of the new executive, and others have studied social capital to understand how new executives gain traction and authority among internal staff and external stakeholders (Greenblatt 1983; Messersmith et al. 2014).

A nonprofit executive turnover may not proceed as worst-case scenario, but caution balances the ideal dynamics described by the professional literature. With limited bench strength, nonprofit boards may lead an executive search akin to a "horserace" as opposed to an executive relay (Bailey and Helfat 2003, 349). Boards, constrained by their own capacity or failure to view turnover as an organizational change, may be pressured, even hasty in their recruitment, rather than conducting a comprehensive search or retaining an executive recruiter. Nonprofits operating in resource-constrained environments may not have the luxury of hiring an interim executive, and boards or other paid staff may assume interim functions, which may prove to be less than ideal coverage. The timing or duration of turnover may further complicate dynamics and outcomes, as nonprofits, reliant on donor calendars or program timelines, may suffer operationally without stable leadership. A new nonprofit executive may make an abrupt entrance and not be afforded an "acceleration zone," because the volunteer board may be wearied by the search and appointment process (Dyck et al. 2002, 147).

In the reality of turnover, boundaries among personal, organizational, and process factors are often indistinguishable. Nonprofit professional literature is thorough in detailing what is expected to transpire during an executive turnover event, but these factors have not been sufficiently empirically examined to understand what actually transpires. Accordingly, this research was exploratory in nature.

Methodology

This research was implemented as part of a mixed-methods study that explored outcomes of nonprofit executive turnover and contextual factors that helped moderate disruption. The forty interview participants were the current executives of nonprofits that had recently experienced executive turnover. The current executive enters "during" the turnover event and is then responsible for the "after"; prior research on the process and outcomes of executive turnover has documented the current executive as a valuable key informant (Dyck et al. 2002; Handler 1992).

Developing the Interview Sample

I identified the forty organizations using the following sampling criteria. First, the National Center for Charitable Statistics Core Data Files for 501(c)(3) public charities operating within the United States and filing Internal Revenue Service 990 forms during the period of 2005–12 formed the sampling universe. Second, to sort through the nonprofit sector's diversity, and following Thornton (2006), sixteen "mission markets" were drawn from the subsector listing of the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities. These markets fall among three major groupings: arts, culture, and humanities; health; and human services. Third, and following Seaman, Wilsker, and Young (2013), the sample was limited to the top twenty metropolitan statistical areas in order to identify nonprofit organizations that operate in similar urban areas.[1] The final sample included 13,902 nonprofits.

To identify executive turnover, 2,000 organizations were randomly selected, and personnel information was collected from GuideStar.org.[2] GuideStar is a nonprofit organization that compiles information from nonprofit 990 forms, including the executive director's name. Executive names were compared across years to identify turnover, which followed previous research from the business sector (Coughlan and Schmidt 1985). Of the 2,000 nonprofits, 441 were identified as experiencing executive turnover at least once during the panel time period.

Data Collection

Organizations with turnover in recent years (2010–13) were targeted for interviews so that the turnover experience would be more current for the interviewees to recall ($n = 233$). These nonprofits were randomly ordered using Stata software.[3] Executives were contacted using phone and email outreach. As executives responded, interviews were scheduled, and a total of one hundred organizations were contacted to garner forty interviews. A summary of the organizational characteristics of the interview sample with the full 2,000 organization sample as comparison is included in Table 1.

Because this research was exploratory, interviews were semi-structured and asked broad questions about the circumstances of turnover that brought the current executives into their positions; the outcomes of turnover for the nonprofit; and what helped or hurt the nonprofit during the transition. While the interviewee spoke, the interviewer typed notes, primarily verbatim, and asked prompting follow-up questions as appropriate. Interview notes were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis was twofold. I distilled factors describing these executive turnover events from the sampling and interview data; these are summarized in Table 2. As was possible, these factors were used to sort data into groups, such as the size of a nonprofit or nonprofits that hired executive recruiters. Bivariate analysis was used to identify statistical differences in means across groups and helps infer whether there are significant differences in turnover experiences among these various factors. Whenever statistical differences were found, this analysis is highlighted so that these relationships may be considered by future research utilizing larger samples. Interview notes were also coded in NVivo into broad themes, which were informed both by the literature review and reoccurring remarks from interview notes. The findings reported here extend the discussion among existing research and professional literature about factors and dynamics defining nonprofit executive turnover.

Organizational Size

Organizations in the sample ranged in size from more than \$10 million to less than \$100,000 in annual revenues, and turnover processes are expected to vary based on organizational size. For example, succession planning was found to be more prevalent among the largest nonprofits in the sample (revenue over \$10 m; T-statistic: 2.42 with 36 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0208). Interviewees described how executive searches differ in larger nonprofits that conducted national searches, whereas smaller nonprofits select from candidates they know, even though they might not have the best fit of skills. Executive recruiters were more commonly used by larger nonprofits as compared to nonprofits with revenues under \$500,000 (T-statistic: 2.122 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.033).

Table 1. Organizational Characteristics of Interviewed Sample and Full Sample

		Organization Age		*Board Size*		*Total Revenue (Millions)*		*Operating Expense (Millions)*	
	N	*Mean (SD)*	*Med*	*Mean (SD)*	*Med*	*Mean (SD)*	*Med*	*Mean (SD)*	*Med*
2,000-organization sample	2,000	22.28 (15.51)	18.95	11.81 (11.01)	9	4.95 (30.0)	4.39	4.70 (27.7)	4.46
Interviewed sample	40	29.67 (17.99)	26.9	15.3 (8.69)	14	4.64 (6.18)	1.44	4.61 (5.95)	1.29

Interviewees offered mixed reflections about organizational size, focusing on structure and staffing aspects, but not raising any considerations of financial resources as a buffer for transitions. For a small nonprofit without management hierarchy, "uncertainty" surrounding the turnover event may get "sort of toxic," because lower-level staff are not protected from changes in the top executive position, but executive change may bring stability to a small nonprofit (Interviews 22, 37). Executives of large nonprofits described entering organizations slow to change and with structure and programs challenging to trim.

Interviewees with large nonprofits described executive teams (that is, more than one paid staff member listed on Form 990 with a leadership title) as built-in capacity to lead during an executive transition, but also potentially challenging to rein in once the new executive was in place. Executive teams were more common among nonprofits with more than $500,000 in revenue, again pointing to a difference of size and capacity to manage executive transitions (T-statistic: 2.2931 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0275). Interviewees entering nonprofits with executive teams raised considerations of how to work with the team they inherited, highlighting a need to build trust, manage fallout from the search process, and even engage a consultant as an unbiased guide. For example, an interviewee described entering the "Wild West," because no one was coordinating the executive team during the transition, ultimately retaining a consultant to align the team (Interview 5). Executive teams may also provide boards with confidence to take supervisory action, because nonprofits with executive teams more commonly lost an executive due to dismissal than did nonprofits without executive teams (T-statistic: –2.3576 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0236).

Board Capacity

Professional literature emphasized, and interviewees confirmed, that board capacity and engagement is critical to effectively managing executive transitions. *Capacity* refers to board members' background, skills, and tenure, and interviewees praised board members for professional expertise and experience, but they gave mixed reviews of long tenures. Although one interviewee said, "Long tenures are not helpful," others described long-serving, even emeritus, board members as holding a helpful perspective (Interview 18).

An *engaged* board was reported as helping buffer the disruption of turnover, and interviewees spoke repeatedly to the "Goldilocks" spectrum of board involvement—too much, not enough, or just right. Interviewees made clear that executive transitions can stretch, even test, board capacity, because transitions are time- and human resource–intensive. Boards sometimes appeared challenged to step up during transitions, which may be due to their volunteer

Table 2. Organizational Profile of Turnover for Interview Participants

Profile Characteristic	*Number*	*Percentage*
Mission Area		
Arts	10	25%
Human services	23	57.5%
Health	7	17.5%
Revenue Group		
Over $10 million	5	12.5%
$5–9.99 million	8	20%
$1–4.99 million	7	17.5%
$500,000–999,000	7	17.5%
$100,000–499,000	12	30%
Under $100,000	1	2.5%
Reason for Turnover		
New job in nonprofit sector	4	10.5%
New job in for-profit or public sector	1	2.6%
Retirement—voluntary	9	23.7%
Retirement—involuntary	2	5.3%
Personal reason	5	13.2%
Mutual agreement of executive and board	6	15.8%
Dismissal for wrongdoing	8	21%
Dismissal for no cause	2	5.3%
No reason given	1	2.6%
Outgoing Executive Characteristics		
Average tenure of outgoing executive (years)	10.6	—
Outgoing executive was nonprofit founder	4	10%
Outgoing executive remained involved in nonprofit after leaving executive position	9	23%
Board of Directors		
Average size	15	—
Meetings per year	8	—
Members attending regularly (%)	—	81%
Interim director used	17	43%
Executive recruiter used	12	30%
Incoming Executive Origin		
Internal	13	32.5%
Nonprofit in service area	19	47.5%
Nonprofit outside service area	6	15%
For-profit	2	5%
Nonprofit Characteristics		
Nonprofit has strategic plan	26	68%
Nonprofit has succession plan	5	13.2%

Table 2. (Continued)

Profile Characteristic	*Number*	*Percentage*
Board completed performance evaluation with executive in last 12 months	15	57.7%
Staff turnover followed executive turnover	24	62%
Voluntary turnover	6	25%
Involuntary turnover	8	33%
Both voluntary and involuntary	9	38%

status and qualifications for membership; poor understanding of board responsibilities during normal operations; and misconceptions of role boundaries in relating to executives. For example, when interviewees were asked if they had a performance evaluation completed in the previous twelve months, just over half had, and many evaluations had occurred at the interviewees' own request.[4] Interviewees indicated, though, that they do undertake various strategies, including communications and training, to proactively encourage the "just right" level of board involvement.

Interviewees were candid in describing where the limitations of board capacity intersected with how the turnover was managed—or mismanaged. Reflecting on repeated turnover in his nonprofit, Interview 39 said the board was "culpable" because they "can't assume that every one of my predecessors was an idiot," and "turnover forced the recognition that the status quo [among the board] was not working." Interview 37 also reflected:

> Boards have unrealistic expectation that the new person is going to solve it—the mythology and the mistake. The board is not shouldering their own mistake in this—the new person is going to be great and the issues pre-date the person so how do we look at this together and look at ourselves? It's a time for board to look at their own strengths and weaknesses.... All conversations about executive leadership have to do with the board.

The majority of boards managed the transition independently or in consultation with the outgoing executive; executive recruiters were used in only one-third of transitions (twelve, or 30 percent), and all of these searches resulted in the selection of an external candidate. Even when an executive recruiter was used, the incoming executive was often known to a board member, implying the importance of board connections in executive recruitment. Further, less than half of the nonprofits (seventeen) appointed an interim executive during the transition, and even among the organizations with a gap between executives (more than one month), five (29 percent) did not have an interim executive but appointed other staff or board members to cover the executive function or even left the function unassigned. Accordingly, the nonprofit's leadership needs may have been inadequately attended, and interim roles may require hands-on board leadership, which, as a few interviewees described, may be challenging to let go of once a new executive is in place.

Transition Climate

Challenging to describe in quantitative terms, the climate enveloping executive transitions was commonly remarked upon, both directly and indirectly, by the interviewees. Interviewees hinted at how the reason for turnover and selection politics set the transition climate. Executives replacing long, successful executives operated in the outgoing executive's shadow, and an executive following a dismissal due to impropriety faced a cautious, verging on micromanaging, board. Similarly, abrupt executive departures triggered uncertainty among staff, even unrest for an executive who had to be a go-between for the unsettled staff and board. Interviewees described the land mine they encountered due to residual staff politics stemming from the selection of an external candidate (that is, the interviewee) over an internal candidate, and another executive was met with contention from board members harboring dissatisfaction with the executive's selection.

With 62 percent of nonprofits reporting staff turnover, executive entrances were commonly accompanied by staff exits, even described by an interviewee as the "great exodus" because more than half her staff elected to leave (Interview 16). Reasons for this turnover were both voluntary and involuntary, and 38 percent of the nonprofits experienced both reasons for staff turnover. Conversely, nonprofits hosting a smooth transition, marked by a positive turnover reason, a continuing role for the outgoing executive, or even a positive relationship between the outgoing and incoming executive, had lower rates of staff turnover (T-statistic: 2.5062 with 37 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0167; T-statistic: 2.3409 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0246; T-statistic: 2.6094 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0129, respectively). Staff turnover was more prevalent among the nonprofits employing an interim executive, signaling a possible indirect effect of the duration of an executive transition or an interim mandate to clean house (T-statistic: –3.3066 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0021). Although staff transitions may be "healthy," these transitions may also speak to an "unhealthy" climate of organizational change. Two interviewees were also surprised by seemingly disgruntled staff choosing to stay on board. Although one worked within these staff dynamics, Interview 28 relayed her decision to terminate staff because when she made the direction of the nonprofit clear, some staff did not "get with the program," making "a case" for their dismissal.

The need for external and internal transparency was raised by interviewees and may help shape the transition climate. Stakeholder outreach was engaged by 80 percent of the nonprofits in the sample and ranged from staff to donor communications. Interview 38 described an executive turnover as "really about communication, and since this is a leadership transition, it is the board's most critical function and has to do with the strength of the board leadership." Directed to internal and external stakeholders, communications publicized logistics and actions taken or planned, allayed concerns, and built trust and rapport with new executives. Stakeholder engagement was examined to understand whether variations in organization size, board participation, reason for leaving, or executive origin could explain different strategies of transparency. Of the factors examined, only a personal reason for the outgoing executive's departure was statistically different, with nonprofits losing an executive for this reason engaging stakeholder outreach less (T-statistic: 2.5166 with 38 degrees of freedom, p-value: 0.0162). Because personal reasons are often just that—personal—perhaps nonprofits managed these executive transitions in a particularly sealed fashion. Yet, as the professional literature has cautioned, executive transitions are inevitable and not taboo, and for the turnover scenarios described as going less than ideal, transparency and communication were often missing or underappreciated elements.

Taking Charge

Interviewees also described that an executive's selection does not signal the end of the turnover process. An orientation and taking charge process followed as the executive got familiar with the nonprofit, and, in turn, the board, staff, and stakeholders got to know the new executive. Interviewees described a long road laid with intentional efforts—hosting strategic introduction meetings, offering assurance, stepping up to meet resistance and stepping back when there was nothing to be gained, and even calling in consultants when an outside voice was needed. Many executives were introduced to donors and stakeholders as part of communication strategies initiated either by them, their boards, or the outgoing executive. These introductions ranged from personal meetings, to written communications, to events that celebrated outgoing and welcomed incoming executives. Other executives made the rounds among donors to introduce and reinvigorate relations, focusing more on trust building than fund seeking.

In this early phase, interviewees recalled how their leadership approach had to align with the transition climate. For example, an executive recalled entering an environment that had been hurt by a culturally insensitive outgoing executive, so she took steps to reenergize the culture and renew relationships. Other executives described human resource and personal—not necessarily personnel—strategies to engage employees and revive organizational culture. One such executive followed an outgoing executive who had been fired by the board abruptly, and he purposefully made gradual changes following a long assessment period. Another interviewee relayed how seemingly minor staff policy changes, such as dress codes, parking rules, and smoking regulations, can prove to be major when implemented under the compounding factor of a new executive. Interview 13 elaborated, "To address the culture factor, you must extend the olive branch to everyone—those who wanted you and those who didn't. The most important thing we did was to say we are leaving all the baggage at the door. I want us all to start with a clean slate. . . . Celebrate the past, build on the foundation, do not try to pick it apart and go forward."

The outgoing executive supported—or, in some cases, compromised—this taking charge process. For example, one interviewee faced a survival scenario due to problems left by the prior executive but was cautious of publicly criticizing the outgoing executive because he was long serving and beloved by the board. Outgoing executives held the position 10.6 years on average, and 25 percent of the interviewees followed a short-lived executive with tenure of fewer than three years. These short-tenure executives were often described as a poor fit with the responsibilities of the position or organization, and in four cases could be described as rebound executives, implying an impaired capacity of a nonprofit to attach to a new executive following a long-serving executive. Interviewees described that if an outgoing executive is expressing sour grapes, he or she best be left alone lest the executive become a hurdle. For example, an interviewee reached out to the outgoing executive for assistance, but quickly learned he was not willing to help and had not voluntarily retired. Recalling this phone call, she said, "I found out just how well [the board] had handled" the departure and "was like a lamb led to slaughter" (Interview 16). Interviewees also remarked upon the hand-off between the outgoing and incoming executives. For example, an internally promoted executive negotiated a contract with a long-serving outgoing executive, because she wanted the executive "available and accessible for what [she] knew [she] didn't know yet" (Interview 2). Another executive offered caution in setting up such an arrangement as "the outgoing needs to get out of the way and needs to be available as a resource to the incoming but not to the whole organization" (Interview 22). This distinction between resourcing incoming executives versus organizations appeared critical for both this nonprofit and others that maintained a connection with the outgoing executive. Five of the interviewees described scenarios, none of which would be found in an executive leadership handbook, of how outgoing executives, with or without board support, architected an arrangement to hang on to the position. For example, an interviewee reported a "very complicated situation" with both the outgoing executive and the outgoing's predecessor remaining involved, which has been an "Achilles' heel" to her tenure as she operates in their shadows (Interview 5). Other interviewees described outgoing executives who consulted staff, served on boards, or even criticized the new executive to staff, all of which undermined the incoming executive's authority.

Interviewees also shared war stories that tell about how taking charge processes may be complicated by factors unrelated yet uncovered by an executive transition. For example, one executive assessed a legacy program of the outgoing executives to be outside the nonprofit's mission and unsustainable, and he had to be the "bad guy to kill the project," which effectively "killed the relationship" with the outgoing executive and ended financial support from her and her contacts (Interview 8). Further, disbanding this project consumed his first year and a half. Another executive described receiving notice early in his tenure that the nonprofit had accrued a $4 million debt due to government overpayments under the previous executive, who was both loved and retained a seat on the board. The current executive, now five years in, remains in "survival mode" as the hundred-plus-year-old nonprofit struggles to meet payroll as it pays down this debt (Interview 11). When questioned whether they knew what they were getting into, Interview 11 responded, "Listen, I think boards figure that if they give a recruit the total picture they might not be able to recruit someone," and Interview 19 responded, "The naiveté is the only way to get into the [executive] position because if you knew you would never get into it."

Interviewees also spoke to their own need for personal support, giving the sense that the position was isolating, and personally as well as professionally taxing. In a particularly candid moment, Interview 36 said, "I just really want to know we are normal.... For now we just want to make it to a new day." Interviewees reported books they read on the executive function or local roundtables of nonprofit executives that they attended for mutual support and feedback. Interview 6 described that these other executives will relay "I have been in your shoes, it will get better," which is "nice to know you are not the only other one, because you know it's lonely at the top." Executives also draw strength from their nonprofit's mission. Interview 17 said, "Every time I get frustrated or get down, I walk through the waiting room, and see all the people we help and that helps me recover."

The same support that secured the new executive the position should follow him or her into the position, but a third of interviewees spoke of one of two extremes: receiving support from the board and even the nonprofit's staff and stakeholders or generating their own support and even fighting against opposition. And of the eight interviewees who spoke positively, their remarks indicated it was more about the personal support of the board rather than the board's capacity to manage the transition. Although many considerations, even politics, figure into selection and support, boards appear to smooth transitions when their vocal and visible support for the executive follows the selection. Related, incoming executives who respected these sociopolitical dynamics appeared to help smooth their own transitions, and, by extension, the organizations' readiness to accept the changes they introduced.

Conclusion

This article synthesized interview data collected from forty nonprofit organizations that had recently experienced turnover. Although not inconsistent with what is anticipated or described among existing professional literature, factors and dynamics raised by interviewees are instructive, even discussion starters, for nonprofit leaders, and help inform an agenda for research.

Interview remarks confirmed that executive turnover events proceed differently according to the nonprofit's size and capacity, but what these differences mean in terms of outcomes following turnover remains unanswered. C-suites (CEO, CFO, COO, and so on) or executive teams are emerging across the professionalized nonprofit sector and may help bridge leadership needs during transitions, but they may also complicate the taking charge process of a new executive. Executive turnover also has implications for how we understand the uneven board capacity of the sector and the role of governance in managing organizational change, and particularly if turnover is a challenge that tests the limits of volunteer leadership. Further, how board composition, as well as imbalances in the shared leadership of an executive and board, impairs or assists a board's capacity to manage transitions should be empirically examined. For example, several interviewees remarked on singular board members who made the difference in how the transition was managed as well as how the new executive was welcomed. The climate that frames the transition event was raised among the interviews, but we know relatively little empirically about such factors. Although retirement predictions dominate expectations about executive turnover, reasons among the sample revealed predominately forced transitions, even noting some retirements as involuntary. In these uncertain conditions, research should investigate differential factors, both organizational as well as personal to the executive, that prevent unnecessary staff turnover and expedite new executives gaining authority in the position. From a more practical perspective, this research describes turnover as not ending with a new executive's appointment, and instead highlights how taking charge processes may prolong the turnover's disruption. Investigating board–executive fit may elucidate what prevents attachment of executives during the early stage and contributes to short tenures and successive turnover events. Further, with 12 percent of the executives replacing an executive who left for another position, exploring movement of executives between organizations will help explain network implications of the sector's limited bench strength as well as career paths of nonprofit executives.

In closing, this analysis is not without its limitations, and a few are raised here. The interviews engaged current executives of nonprofits that had recently experienced turnover. Although executives proved to be insightful and knowledgeable into the "during" and "after" of turnover, other informants, such as board members or outgoing executives, would hold other perspectives worthy of future research. Current executives may have a positivity or revisionist bias, but were also found to be remarkably candid and not always providing a glowing report. Further, this research joins others that have relied on current executives as key informants, including research specifically about executive turnover (Dyck et al. 2002; Handler 1992), and more generally about the operations of the nonprofit, which described the executive as a nonprofit's "agent" and qualified to speak on its behalf (Balser and McClusky 2005, 300). This research also faced the dilemma of other qualitative research in how to summarize the diverse remarks of interviewees. I analyzed and synthesized hundreds of pages of interview notes in preparing this research article. The findings sorted among organizational size, board capacity, the transition climate, and the taking charge process were raised above others because they both were repeated by interviewees and helped extend the discussion of executive turnover. Although much has been said about nonprofit executive turnover, much is still to be understood to inform a nonprofit-specific framework and prepare sector leaders for inevitable turnover at the top.

Notes

1. For the purpose of other analyses in the study, the sample was also limited to include sufficient observations in the panel time period (at least three observations) and to drop year observations that had error-prone financial data (Tinkelman and Mankaney 2007; Trussel and Parsons 2007).

2. The full sample ($n = 13{,}902$) was random ordered using Stata random number generator. The first 2,000 organizations were selected for additional data collection.

3. This subset included only one organization with less than $100,000 in annual revenues. This organization was not in the top hundred organizations following the random ordering, so it was purposefully sampled and invited to participate in an interview.

4. Only twenty-six of the forty interview participants were asked whether they'd had a performance evaluation, because this question was added after fourteen of the interviews had been completed.

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