



# The Nonprofit Whisperer

If a former leader asks to come back as a board member, this may not be as problematic as once thought. However, there are cautions to attend to: Make sure that you understand the former CEO's motivations; complete as rigorous a vetting process as you would with any other candidate; and make sure that he or she understands the role of a board member with respect to supporting and helping to enable the organization's vision, mission, values, and strategy as a collective—not individual—effort.

**D**EAR NONPROFIT WHISPERER,  
*I was hired three years ago to run a nonprofit. It is thriving. Now the CEO whom I replaced has approached a few board members to see if she can come back as a board member herself. My recollection is that it is not a good idea to have an immediate-past CEO come back to serve when the new CEO is in place. Have you addressed this question before, and do you have any advice?*

*Anxious*

Dear Anxious,

The nonprofit sector has a lot of prescriptive “dos and don’ts” that people sometimes hear and take to heart. Real life is not so black and white, and often the answer to a question like yours is, *it depends*.

Having a former CEO join a board has, for many years, generally been considered not good practice—but this may be changing a bit with studies having found that even the founder and his or her successor can, in fact, coexist in an organization given certain conditions.<sup>1</sup> These studies are worth reviewing before anything progresses any further, and perhaps you could engage your board chair in such a review so that the prospect can be fully discussed in light of what is known about success conditions.

That said, there are cautions to bear in mind when it is the former leader asking to rejoin the effort rather than the organization doing the reaching out. Why does the person want to help out at this point in time? His or her motivation should be crystal clear to all, and when it involves a governance role, the organization must do a rigorous vetting—as with *any* prospective board member—and be able to articulate the “value add” of the new member. The incoming board member must deeply understand that the governance role primarily calls upon collective action and decision making in support of the organization’s vision, mission, values, and strategy, and should never be about promoting one’s own agenda over the organization. And questions about power dynamics should be considered. For example, is the board likely to subordinate its collective wisdom to the incoming board member out of deference to his or her previous position?

There *is* a red flag in your description of the situation, and that is that the former leader seems to be engaging only with the board of directors around this question and not also with you. Indeed, something feels amiss about the former leader not reaching out to you *first* to have a conversation about her desire to join the board. And, if the board brings on the former leader without engaging you

deeply in the conversation, that would be a red flag, too.

Try to connect with your board members before they make their decision, and inquire about the process, criteria, and special situational questions that should be asked of a former leader joining the board. If, from your perspective, it is not a good idea to have this person join the board, hopefully you can nip it in the bud. But if the bud has already begun to bloom, so to speak, I suggest that you invite the former CEO to lunch so that you can create a bridge and set the tone for the relationship and future role definition.

## NOTE

1. See, for example, Mark Leach, *Table for Two: Can Founders & Successors Co-Exist So Everyone Wins?* (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 2009), leadership.intransition.org/docs/tablefortwo.pdf.

**THE NONPROFIT WHISPERER** has over thirty years of experience in the nonprofit sector serving variously as nonprofit staff and board member, foundation staff, and nonprofit management consultant.

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