



# The Nonprofit Whisperer

Changing a bad practice in an unaligned organization takes time and capacity, so if these are not available, try getting a mandate from the top; but even if you can get that, warns the Nonprofit Whisperer, expect pushback as you sort things out. And how does one move forward after the loss of a larger-than-life executive director? Give yourself time and space to process the loss, identify an interim team, create a leadership transition plan, and come up with a six-month work plan. And be prepared to feel off-kilter for at least a year as you grieve the loss.

**D**EAR NONPROFIT WHISPERER,  
*I work for a healthcare system with nursing homes in several different states.*

*We are trying to professionalize our grant writing and step up the quality of the proposals that are submitted. I took over this new position in November, only to find out that many of the homes have no one assigned to grant writing or have someone who occasionally writes grants but wears many other hats. Several of the homes do have development officers who write grants. One of them has someone who submitted well over two hundred grant requests last year. Many of those were denied because they were not in the foundation's area of focus or were not geographically pertinent.*

*I had a conversation with this person and the administrator of the facility, explaining why this "spray and pray" technique is not appropriate, is very probably not tailored to the requirements of the grantmaker, and certainly discredits the healthcare*

*system as a whole. The person persists in requesting approval to submit grant proposals that are not appropriate.*

*How can I get this person to see that what is being done is unethical and could easily jeopardize the grant requests that other facilities in our healthcare system might make? I should add that this person's requests are almost exclusively for \$5,000 or \$10,000 for hospital beds—fifty-two beds requested this year so far—rather than one big grant to cover the facility's needs.*

*We are going to be asking for copies of the grant proposals that are being submitted, but we expect pushback from some of the facilities that are not used to any central oversight. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated!*

*Concerned*

Dear Concerned,  
You are quite correct that "spraying" applications indiscriminately across multiple funders—regardless of the funders' geography and strategies—is

a completely ineffective approach and waste of resources. I do not think it discredits healthcare as a whole, but it certainly does make this branch of your organization look bad.

So, you are in the right—but your letter indicates that you do not have the power to step in and simply change procedures, and that you expect "pushback" on completely reasonable suggestions. This speaks to the grant-writing issues as symptomatic of a bigger problem—an unaligned organization. Are you in a position to manage the culture change obviously required in your organization? Your organization's system of nursing homes needs to come under one mission with shared vision, values, and strategy that will then set the tone for cohesion in your communications and fundraising work—and there is very likely a need for alignment in your human resources regarding expectations, clarity in decision making, and effective supervision. This would take time but would be the deepest work toward changing the foundation of how the organization works as

a whole and in its parts, creating clarity for your potential funders and likely many others, including staff.

If time or capacity does not permit the tough work of culture change, then simple mandates from the top regarding the grant writing are the quickest path to stopping the poor practice. If, as your letter suggests, you are not in a position that would allow your proposals for change to become commands, can you speak to the person who has the power to formulate a mandate about grant writing? This could result in your getting the space and time to create the needed alignment around grant writing and quality of proposals. You'll need the ongoing backing of that person to ensure that those who think they can do whatever they want out in the field begin to see the light: that they are part of a bigger system and not lone actors. Expect more pushback as you sort this out.

*Dear Nonprofit Whisperer,*  
*My organization just lost its executive director to a fatal illness. He was one of those larger-than-life people—a big personality inside the agency and in our networks. There was little warning, and once we did all know he was ill we managed to fill the gap from inside the agency. So much was already in motion, all it took was carrying it all forward—he did not hold things so close that we did not know the terrain.*

*We were not certain he would recover, so facing our future was both frightening and sad. I am not sure how the board will handle this, and I have to admit to being a little shell-shocked and frozen, and beyond heartbroken—and I think others are dealing with the trauma in their own ways.*

*The problem is that we are smack in the middle of a very large project that*

*was long a dream of the ED and the agency as a whole, and it is unclear what we must do to make sure we do not lose our community's opportunity. The project will take a lot of nurturing of partners and funders. Is there any kind of guidance you can give us along the lines of what needs to be done first, second, and third in such a situation? And maybe some words for what we might have done differently?*

*Friend in Need*

Dear Friend in Need,

This is one of the hardest situations staff and board members of a nonprofit can go through. I feel for you all. It sounds as though you were fortunate in that your “larger-than-life” leader did not hold things closely but shared his vision and distributed leadership to some levels, and that all of you carried on admirably. The only thing the organization could have done better was to ensure that there was an emergency transition plan in place for all senior staff. Perhaps you did have one—but even then, no one is really prepared for this kind of situation.

It is very difficult when an organization must manage with a leader who is seriously or terminally ill—you want to be supportive, especially if the person still has hope and plans to return—but the day-to-day dictates triaging until there is clarity about the future of the individual. You made it through that phase.

None of this speaks to the enormous grief staff and board members must be holding as individuals and collectively. I would suggest that your first priority is to give yourselves space and time to process what has happened. Are there good process-oriented consultants or grief counselors in your area who know how to gently hold the staff—or even staff and board together—in a meeting

and allow people to speak about how they are feeling? Remember, you are all both individually and collectively likely to be experiencing the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. What is most important is carving out time together to talk. Your experience of your departed leader is uniquely yours—so, tell stories, laugh and cry together, absolutely carve out that time for remembrance and love.

And after that happens, please be prepared for folks to be human; there may be some unaccountable behavior, so just be careful to call things quickly and kindly and with as little drama as possible—bringing the group back to vision and task in that order. You may wish to hang on to that consultant for a while.

Back at work, you will want to have another kind of conversation—consider what you do not want to lose and what of your leader's legacy you want to carry forward as organizational principles. This is an important conversation that helps to replace some of the glue that he was for the group.

In the meantime, you will have communicated with all stakeholders that although all have experienced a great loss, you have things well in hand and that the staff and board are a team in pursuing the organization's plans. See Kim Klein's “Mission, Message, and Damage Control” for an in-depth discussion of this.<sup>1</sup> Also, there will be expenses of many different kinds—from consultants to interims to overtime, et cetera. Do not feel shy about reaching out for financial support; this should be a simple ask of a dedicated funder—nothing that requires more than a quiet letter and response by check.

Then, getting on with the work is the best way to honor your former executive director. If the board was a “following board” or strictly involved at the policy

level and not very in tune with day-to-day work, they must rely on staff for the next steps. Organize a meeting among senior staff with the executive committee, and cocreate several plans:

1. Identify an interim team from within or plan to hire an interim executive director.
2. Create a leadership transition plan; do not rush to hire a permanent director after losing such a strong leader. If you can afford to hire a nonprofit transition consultant, this is the time to do it. He or she can take a burden off the board and staff by helping to define the transition steps—organizing people and helping the organization to not feel rushed to hire when, in the absence of your leader and during a possible change in management structure, you need space and time to sort through vision.

3. Create a work plan for the next six months that prioritizes what needs to be accomplished, by when, and by what key people. If the board is a take-charge-type group (ideally, they are working together with senior staff to cocreate these plans), then make sure that they are doing the work described in Steps 1 and 2 at some level and asking (delegating to) staff to come up with the six-month prioritized work plan.

All that said, things will feel off-kilter for at least a year as you grieve this loss. Those who take leadership may be seen as interlopers. When the permanent leader or leadership team finally comes in, remember that he or she or they cannot replace your departed leader, and it would be a mistake to expect otherwise. The new leader or leadership team must be given a chance to help

stabilize and move things forward, and it will take time for your organization to settle in/adapt to the new situation. My sense is that you and your coworkers have done a wonderful job shouldering work during your leader's illness, and I have full faith in your will and capacity to steward the organization into the future and honor your fallen leader in all the best ways.

#### NOTE

1. Kim Klein, "Mission, Message, and Damage Control," *Nonprofit Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009), nonprofitquarterly.org/2009/09/21/mission-message-and-damage-control/.

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