

The Nonprofit ED's FIRST 100 DAYS

by Oliver Tessier and Ruth McCambridge

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AS AN INCOMING LEADER, YOU ARE THE subject of unrelenting scrutiny while on one of your steepest learning curves. Much like the first 100 days of a new presidency, you will need to exhibit vision before you have answers, to be solid yet porous enough to absorb a sea of information, and to inspire a bit of awe without sacrificing accessibility. Above all, you will need to connect with those you will lead to earn their trust and cooperation. Meanwhile, your staff will have an urgent itch to find out if you're someone with whom they can work and whether their futures are secure. Internal and external observers will watch your every action and reaction. Challenging? Undoubtedly, but you were chosen because you're up to a challenge. Let's look at ways to get the best return on your huge investment in the success of this moment.

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Arm Yourself with Information

Ideally you have already looked at financial information, annual reports, strategic and program-related information, and also familiarized yourself with the nonprofit's primary constituents. Beyond making immediate communication with your staff easier, a rich background in the agency's history indicates that you know what's important to your staff and where it has put its efforts over the past few years.

Few things are more valuable than knowing where an organization stands in terms of its financial picture. This gives you the opportunity to spend your first days listening and learning rather than implementing layoffs or suspending pensions. The board of a small literacy program that hired a bank executive who wanted to change careers didn't know what it didn't know—and, to paraphrase Olympia Dukakis in *Moonstruck*, that was a lot. The cash situation was so bad that the new executive could not make the first payroll after being hired, and she went through an excruciating first few years. She focused a great deal of her attention on making a broken financial model work. Luckily the staff included several longtime employees who understood their jobs, which gave her time to negoti-



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ate out of an expensive lease and then work through broken relationships with funders. Wisely, she talked through decisions with staff and board.

When cash was tight, one of this executive's tactics was to pay herself last. This symbolic move delivered a message to the organization about what people could expect from this new leader (see "Eleven Questions for a New Leader" on page 42). Whether or not people agreed with the act itself or with her making it public, it was a powerful statement.

This executive admits to not having done some things well, however, including not asking funders for help during a crisis. Keeping quiet about the problem distanced her from funders, raised questions among them, and forced the organization into a more extended period of frugality than might have been necessary. For this organization, such early decisions about how to handle leadership had long-lasting implications that were both positive and negative.

You Can't Anticipate Everything

No matter how much information you gather beforehand, you'll likely find surprises that test your mettle in unexpected ways. One woman said that as she prepared the annual grant application for her organization's primary funding source, she realized that the statistics from the past year had no relationship to the statistics cited in the prior year's grant application. She called the old director, whom everybody adored and who was terminally ill, and asked, "What am I doing wrong?" "Oh, I always lied about those," he said, "It doesn't matter." Another new director found that the board had neglected to inform her about a pending—and serious—sexual harassment suit.

Yet another director, recruited from the board, knew everything there was to know about her new organization. She knew the nooks and crannies of cronyism and the lack of accountability, and she also knew the desire of the staff to do the right thing. She was motivated by the community's faith in the agency, and she sensed that, with patience, the situation could be handled. What she did not anticipate was that the local United Way would object to her move from a long-standing position on the board to the executive director position. The agency was put on probation until she proved

herself. Not the most auspicious entrance, but it made the board angry enough to unite behind her leadership. In the end, it was a slap and a gift.

An executive who had served at the helm of several agencies related this story, which may resonate for many. "I was told that my predecessor was inaccessible and distant from the staff, which numbered in the hundreds," he recalled.

So my first task was to go through the entire place, meet everyone, shake everyone's hand, let them know that I would be open and approachable. When I came to one unit, a woman there waved me over to her. I smiled and reached out my hand, which was hardly her interest. She looked at me and said, "I know that you'll try to get rid of me, just like your predecessor did and his predecessor did too. And just like I'm here now, I'll be here when you're gone too." [Taken] aback, I said something like, "Thanks for the advice." And she was still there when I left office four years later. I had encountered my first taste of the deep-seated culture of the agency that was, like this staff person, more than likely destined to outlive me.

Sometimes we have to work hard to remain calm, confident, and accessible. "Going to the balcony"—periodically taking ourselves out of the immediate action and reflecting on how the system operates—is a useful approach. It's the mark of a good leader, and if done well, it inspires confidence.

It's important to have a few trusted outside confidants to test your perception and ideas and help recognize patterns. Choose wise people who understand the kind of organization you have joined, who know your blind spots and analytical failings, and who will both challenge and support you.

Trying to Get It Right

When David Schutt arrived at the Society of Automotive Engineers International (SAE), he was new to the organization, the town, and the position of CEO. A strategist by nature, Schutt realized that everything he said and did would lay the foundation for relationships that would sustain his future and the future of the organization. He advanced his start date to avoid being out of town at a conference on his first day of

work. "What message would it send for me to be away from the office on my first day?" he asked. Within weeks, Schutt integrated himself into his team by meeting individually or in small groups with every SAE employee. "I wanted to be in the same room with them to learn what's on their minds and to let them know what I'm thinking," he explained. By offering immediate evidence that he's on the ground with his staff, Schutt indicated that he's interested in them, approachable, and that he expects interaction.

Schutt conveys optimism and enthusiasm; he believes that those on his staff will do great things. He will undoubtedly find opportunities to express that confidence, but regardless of what he says, people are likely to perceive what he feels. Communications expert Martha Miller cites evidence that our "internal expectations leak out through our nonverbal communication." Since Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, first published in 1872, scientists have theorized that facial expression and gesture complete the story conveyed by speech. Humans are extraordinarily adept at testing for consistency between what they hear and what they observe. If we sense a discrepancy, it needn't rise to the level of conscious awareness for us to know that it's not safe to let down our guard. When it comes to someone with as much influence over our lives as a new leader, our attention is fully aroused.

'Tis Better to Be Silent

When you first join an organization, your tasks are to seek to understand, to insert yourself into existing social networks, and to get a feel for the culture at work. Spend time with people, comfort them with information, laugh with them. They'll be anxious. You may want to ask people to tell you the best things they've achieved or perhaps the silliest things they have done at the agency. This prepares you for hearing stories from the perspective of others and gives them ownership of their concerns. Employees at every level will have stories to explain what you see in the organization itself. Some may be cautionary tales, such as stories about the previous director. These folks are trying to get your adherence to their interpretation of things, and while it is important to have this information, you cannot take it all at face value. Take your time processing information. Resist the lure of aligning your-

self too closely, even with board members, and go for a common story once you have been there long enough to be certain it's true. Most important, avoid criticizing your predecessor. It is tempting at times, but it sends a bad message.

As you listen, try to discern the "song beneath the words," as Ronald Heifetz calls it. Wise leadership evolves from seeing these patterns. Once you see a pattern, you can choose to reinforce it or break it. And you can choose your timing and make decisions about which organizational patterns are most important to address. Again, this requires composure as the situation is revealed to you.

While you're getting your footing, embrace your ignorance. By asking for your team's help in creating solutions, you affirm that you're in it together. Balance is important, though. While you and your team are indeed in it together, you aren't equals. You are the leader. This is why confidence and humility need to be evident. Your staff will be reassured by your invitation to work together, but they want the security of knowing that you're going to lead. You can exhibit this leadership role by articulating your vision, feeding a coherent picture back to them once you have the lay of the land, and inviting them to continue to embroider on the view you now have.

In the context of nonprofit organizations, you will also need to work extensively with external partners: funders, constituents, public officials, and other organizations that have important perspectives on the organization, what it has achieved and how, and what it needs to do going forward. Approaching these partners early and often ensures that you get the complete picture and that you factor in myriad views as you shape the future path of the organization.

Your questions to staff send a message. Thomas Neff and James Citrin's *You're in Charge—Now What?* draws on the experience of outstanding CEOs to identify questions like these to pose to new staff: "What do you most want to preserve about the organization? What do you hope I'll do? What do you fear I won't do? What do I need to know? What advice do you have for me?" Consider the balance of external information and emotional content these questions invite. Asking consistent questions among different groups gives you valuable comparative data; meanwhile, the questions you choose signal what's important to you. If you listen to

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Eleven Questions for a New Leader

1. How should I sequence these first 100 days?
2. Am I confident that I understand the organization's current situation? What should I know about my new organization that I have not yet asked?
3. What are this organization's top three opportunities and challenges? To what extent is there agreement, dissent, or indecision about priorities?
4. Which relationships are most critical for me to sustain? Who would expect to hear from me early in my tenure?
5. How should I allocate my time among internal and external relationships? How do others view this distribution?
6. What information and sources of information do I need to master to understand the field and environment of this organization?
7. Does my newness open avenues for changed relationships, new support, or repaired bridges?
8. What symbolic moves could I take to denote a new era?
9. Who else applied for this position whom I should now call on?
10. What might I later regret that I didn't do early on?
11. What weaknesses in my own personality or style do I need to compensate for?

the tapestry of answers, you learn about organizational issues (where the board fits, where conflicts arise, what funders do), as well as those you talk to and the work culture to which they are accustomed. This gives you a map or blueprint for action.

And you're not the only one gathering information. Your new colleagues have reason to be more than casually curious about you. If you meet with one program director more often than others, if staff meetings involve your reports to staff with only a nominal invitation for questions, if you continually talk as though your assumptions are shared, your behavior will be noted and stories will be built around that behavior.

Identifying how you want to begin your leadership helps immensely, especially if it calls all parties to their highest aspirations. Nancy Petrisko, executive director at the BlackRock Center for the Arts, used her passion for the mission to explain herself and to energize staff. "I told them right away that what excites me is the future, my vision of where we'll be able to

go. I'm better at getting the big ideas across than the little ones," she said. "My job as a leader is to keep us all focused on what we're about. I count on you to figure out how you'll contribute to getting us there." To have staff take responsibility for reaching goals, Petrisko urges them to look for solutions themselves before they come to her. "I want to encourage the team to be self-sufficient. I'm there if they need me, but I want them to rely on their own creativity." This sends a clear message about a preferred style of management. But once the message has been sent, we need to watch the outcome carefully. Does your style mesh with staff expectations? If not, can they adjust, or do they need help? Are your ideas and approach right for the situation?

No matter how clear your vision or how careful your plan, some of your expectations may crash on the rocky reality of your new situation. Flexibility and patience are key. As you gather knowledge and build political capital, your ability to assess and forecast will improve. When you hear your team's concerns, ideas, and interests, some easy wins will present themselves, as will some serious flaws. You may want to respond immediately, but bide your time. American Moving and Storage Association CEO Linda Darr advises, "Don't underestimate the people on your team. Get to know them. Give them long enough to prove themselves. I listened and watched for a hundred days before I made any major changes."

Of course, some members of an organization may not be the right ones to see the organization to the other side. Some of the hardest decisions for incoming leaders involve people, and sometimes leaders must change roles or make the decision that some employees are simply not right for the job ahead. How you handle these

decisions tells the organization a lot about you, so be conscious that your actions will set the tone for the future. Don't let that paralyze you, but move strategically and with care, particularly if the situation is not urgent.

Sociology tells us that revolutions occur when expectations are raised and then dashed. Be careful to commit only to what you know you can deliver. Until you're on solid ground, it is wise to promise process rather than outcomes. "I am going to take on building the donor base" may be safer than "I will increase our donor base by 20 percent" unless you know the situation well. Offer time frames you're confident you can meet; no one benefits from a missed deadline.

If you're prepared to lead before you have all the answers and you're willing to ask questions with genuine curiosity, people will see you as engaged. Listening actively makes your interest in your staff even more evident and opens the door to shared, fresh ideas. Understanding the power of gesture amplifies your ability to send and receive messages. You don't have to focus on everything at once, but thinking about these issues and raising their profile in your operating system primes you to build relationships that work. "I was initially met with fear," says Linda Darr. "I could tell people were very uneasy because I'm so different from the last CEO. But the fear soon changed to anticipation and then to excitement. Now all people talk about is opportunity."

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas J. Neff and James M. Citrin, *You're in Charge—Now What? The 8 Point Plan*, New York, Crown Business, 2005.

Do you have an experience as an incoming leader that you would like to share? Write us at feedback@npqmag.org. Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150107.

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