

Why Mission-Driven Organizations Need Better Searches

A parable based on a true story.

All was well at Hope Center. The organization was growing and making an impact. The staff loved their jobs. The Executive Director had demonstrated tremendous leadership, inspiring the staff and donors to follow a vision and make a difference. A new facility had just been built. Bright days were ahead. Then out of the blue, something unexpected happened.

The Executive Director announced that he was leaving for another organization.

After the shock wore off, the board was faced with the task of replacing their beloved Executive Director. People were heard saying, "This won't take long. Everyone knows us." "Our reputation is outstanding." "We have a big organization with a brand new facility." "We have talented people on our board who will be able to find an Executive Director quickly." "We pay well." "Folks will line up to apply."

Twenty-two months later, the organization had a new Executive Director. During that twenty-two month lapse, the board met over 50 times. They spent nearly \$100,000 in costs for their search. The eleven board members took lots of time away from family, flying all over the country, with an aggregate of almost 100,000 miles, 100 hotel nights, and way too many resumes of candidates. Fatigue from working on the search process set in, as other responsibilities fell through the cracks. During that 22 month lapse, the organization lost momentum. Revenue fell. The donor base shrunk. Staff members lacked direction and lost some of their job-satisfaction. Initiatives were put on hold until the new Executive Director was found. Other vacant staff positions remained unfilled, as candidates wanted to wait for the Executive Director post to be filled before signing on.

The same year that the Executive Director of Hope Center resigned, a major university's football coach stepped down for another coaching spot at a rival school. His post was filled 30 days later. Also during that year, Coca-Cola's CEO retired. He was replaced in two months.

Once the new Executive Director of Hope Center arrived, things went well for a while. Folks were enthusiastic, excited about the organization again, and lost ground was regained. The business started growing again, but a portion of the staff never quite fit with the new Executive Director. Internal conflict grew alongside the growth of the organization. Only three years after his arrival, that Executive Director left under duress. Hope Center is now nearly two years into another search, with no end in sight. Four of the last seven years of the organization's history have been spent searching for a senior leader.

There has to be a better way. A better way to spend money and resources. A better way to steward board members' time. A better way to find a match for a mission-driven organization. There has to be a way to trim the sails and make leadership transitions easier and less frequent.

A Better Way to Find High-Capacity Leaders

The parable above is based on a true story—a story that's all too common among mission-driven businesses. In fact, it is a rather peaceful story compared to many leadership transitions. Replacing key staff has become more and more difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. At the same time, many would say that internal searches are less and less effective. A senior leadership position was once viewed as a lifetime position. Nowadays, turnover is more common and tenures are shorter. “Mismatches” happen far too often, and organizations are left inert during the process.

What has worked for secular corporations for nearly 40 years is now being adopted by many mission-driven organizations. Similar to the growth of professional consultants, fundraising consultants, and other outsourced services, what was once an innovation and solution for businesses—executive search—is now becoming well known in mission-driven businesses.

Executive search firms are able to utilize all their efforts, databases, resources, and expertise to get to know an organization, its needs, and the available candidates. They are focused on one task only and can hone their expertise, network, and resources toward finding the best match of an inspired leader to an organization. They are then able to help the organization interview a short list of qualified candidates, run professional reference and background checks, and help negotiate compensation. Top-quality retained search firms even guarantee their process for up to a year.

Answers to Common Executive Search Myths

MYTH #1: “WE CAN'T AFFORD TO HIRE A SEARCH FIRM.”

Actually, you can't afford *not* to hire a search firm. Simply put, a thriving organization cannot afford a bad hire. Terminating key staff in a mission-driven organization is not easy and is often more challenging than terminations in corporations. Partnering with Vanderbloemen Search Group greatly increases your chances of making the right hire. We believe in our process and results so much that we guarantee it. If your organization retains Vanderbloemen Search Group, we will guarantee our placement for the first twelve months. If employment is terminated during that period, we will perform another search for free.

A lengthy and poorly done search can produce very unhappy results for an organization including unexpected costs, lost momentum, lower revenue, and a staff without a leader. Money for hiring a search firm is usually already in the budget. When a staff position is vacant, that position is normally already budgeted as if someone was employed within the position. Money that is set aside for the open position's salary should more than cover the cost of hiring a search firm. Additionally, organizations cannot afford to devote precious staff and board hours to the work of a search. When it does, initiatives slow or stop and focus is lost.

MYTH #2: OUR ORGANIZATION IS BIG ENOUGH TO SURVIVE A LONG TRANSITION.

The bigger the organization, the more urgent is the need for a timely, well-executed search. One might assume that large organizations would have an easy time without a leader. The opposite is true. Small organizations have proven to be quite resilient between leaders. Leaders come and go, and folks are able to chip in and help the organization get by. By contrast, when a large mission-driven organization is without a top-level leader, it can lack direction and leadership for the myriad of tasks and initiatives that result from the size of the organization. If key staff positions are vacant for long periods of time, an organization can quickly lose direction, momentum, and vision.

MYTH #3: "WE PROBABLY HAVE THE TALENT AND RESOURCES WITHIN OUR ORGANIZATION TO DO THIS OURSELVES (AND AVOID PAYING A FEE)," OR, "WE HAVE A HUMAN RESOURCES TEAM. THEY CAN HANDLE A SEARCH PROCESS ON THEIR OWN."

Human Resources teams of organizations performs vital and foundational tasks, but they are not search professionals. A search firm like Vanderbloemen Search Group has a time-tested process for searching that has had demonstrated success. Furthermore, Vanderbloemen Search Group has a full-time focus on the task of searching for the candidate who will be a perfect fit. Human Resources teams already have significant full-time responsibilities that prevent them from focusing solely on the search process, and they may not be able to travel or host candidates. Once Vanderbloemen is retained, your organization will have a trained professional at your side from the beginning to the end of your search process.

MYTH #4: "WE HAVE ACCESS TO THE SAME POOL OF CANDIDATES YOU DO."

Perhaps the highest value of a retained search firm is the ability to reach candidates that your organization may not know exist. Because of our reputation and our confidential process, we are able to talk with high-capacity candidates that might never talk to a committee, respond to an ad, or put their name forward. In short, we are able to get to the candidates that you may not be able to reach. Also, Vanderbloemen Search Group is able to connect with candidates quickly. With our team's combined network and candidate database, our staff has ready access to many leaders'

email addresses and private phone numbers, and we generally have our calls returned in short order.

MYTH #5: "HIRING A SEARCH FIRM WILL JUST ADD MORE PROCESS, MORE LAYERS, AND MORE TIME TO OUR SEARCH."

Actually, hiring a search firm will reduce the time you spend looking for a key staff member. Ordinarily, from the time Vanderbloemen Search Group is hired until the time your organization will have someone on site working is about six months. This may seem long, but it pales in comparison to the 18 - 24 months that a senior leader search usually takes when conducted by the organization itself. Searches for top-tier staff can take as little as three - four months when conducted by Vanderbloemen Search Group.