Evaluating The Executive Director: Part 1 - Why Evaluations of the Executive Director Don't Work

By Terrie Temkin
Oct 3, 2002, 8:00am

Ask board members to list their responsibilities and most will include the evaluation of their executive director. Ask why such evaluation is important and in unison one hears that the process improves agency functioning and enhances personal growth. However, ask how many actually do evaluations of their executive director and the number of affirmative responses drops dramatically. And, of those that do evaluations it's rare to find enthusiastic supporters when you ask how many think that the process lives up to its expectations.

I hear many reasons for the disconnect between people's embrace of the concept and their failure to put it into action.

- "Evaluations have never actually been a part of our organizational culture, so the need for scheduling it isn't on anyone's radar screen. I guess it's easy for the process to fall through the cracks."
- "Our board has the best of intentions, but people get wrapped up in their day-to-day activities and time just seems to get away from everyone."
- "I agree that the concept *sounds* good. Most of us don't like to *do* evaluations, though. It's uncomfortable evaluating others."
- "It takes too much time and effort to do it right."

I see many reasons why those who put an evaluation process into action are often disillusioned with the result. The expectations are unrealistic, unclear, too diverse, or always changing.

- The board forgets that while the executive director is ultimately responsible to it, he or she also has responsibilities to the staff, direct service volunteers, clients, community leaders, and funding sources. The Executive Director may be overwhelmed with "priorities."
- The board chooses to measure outcomes that, perhaps, are less significant than other factors that could have a greater impact on the mission.
- The board chooses an evaluation form that has little to do with the executive director's job. Often it is the same form used for evaluating everyone in the organization.
- Even when the board chooses an evaluation form designed specifically for nonprofit administrators it fails to recognize that the job of its executive director most likely varies a great deal from that of the executive director in the organization down the street. Executive directors wear many different hats depending on such things as the size and sophistication of their organizations.
- The availability of "standard" evaluation forms causes boards to believe that executive directors are responsible for clearly defined jobs with a right and wrong way to approach them. This concept is dangerous because it impedes risk-taking and change -- the very qualities that can keep an organization alive and growing.
- Carefully devised, clear, criteria for evaluation turn out to be irrelevant in light of changes that have taken place in the environment during the evaluation period.

- The feedback is sugar-coated to the degree that critical concerns are lost among the accolades. Or, the concerns are not voiced at all until the board explodes in pent-up frustration, causing the executive director to become defensive and tune out the message.
- The board doesn't evaluate itself so the "findings" -- for better or worse -- exist outside a holistic context that could really help the organization move forward.

Yet, the potential consequences of skipping the evaluation process are great.

Lacking mutually defined goals and frequent, frank exchanges of expectations and priorities, executive directors cannot know what their boards want or don't want, what they like or don't like. Forging ahead, they may make decisions that the board members feel could have been made differently.

In many cases, an executive director -- particularly one who is entrenched and used to acting independently -- may make a number of decisions that don't sit right with the board. Those old enough to remember Transactional Analysis may remember the tendency of people in situations like this to collect *brown stamps* rather than confront the issues. Each difference of opinion becomes one more irritant increasing the likelihood that one day the proverbial "*brown stamps* will hit the fan."

The organization then risks losing an inherently good executive who might have happily and easily accommodated the board's thinking early on. The loss might happen either through dismissal, which occurs seemingly out of the blue -- or through paralysis as the executive director shuts down for fear of crossing a line is continually shifting. This situation benefits no one.

While it's easy to understand a board that questions the validity of any evaluation attempt and throws its collective hands in the air -- abdicating its responsibility -- there are techniques that allow a board to do its job effectively. These will be explored in part two of this article, "Making Executive Director Evaluations Effective." (in the next issue of Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review).

Editor's note: Our thanks to Terrie Temkin for her contribution to Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review. More information about Terrie can be found at:
http://charitychannel.com/resources/Detailed/600.html

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Aspen Publications. (1996). *Evaluating the nonprofit CEO*. Akron, IA.

Nason, J. (1997). *Board assessment of the chief executive: A responsibility essential to good governance*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Nonprofit Boards

Pierson, J. and Mintz, J. (1996). *Assessment of the chief executive: A tool for governing boards and chief executives of nonprofit organizations*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Nonprofit Boards