

HONOR THE MISSION

All participants agree that the executive director must be the keeper of the vision for an organization, understanding and accepting the organizational mission as the guiding force for everything.

“The executive director must embody the mission. That’s the single most important thing, that the executive director embody the mission and be able to articulate it . . . through leadership.”
(board member)

“Once the organization has grown to where there is a staff, a big part of the job is keeping people on the same plane, going in the same direction, understanding why. A lot of time is spent teaching, so that people really, at a deep level, understand why you’re doing things, why you are making certain decisions.” (former executive director)

“The number one job for a director these days is inspiration. Really putting a fire under everyone to be on the same page about where the institution is moving.” (emerging leader)

STAY STRATEGIC, FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

A corollary to having vision is being able to make that vision a reality. Board members want an executive director who can lead the organization in developing and executing a strategic plan, while lower-level staff and the organization’s other constituencies need a leader who directs the group toward its goal.

“I think one of the keys is to [see the] big picture, to really have an understanding of the scope, and to think strategically but still be capable of dealing with the tactics. It’s very important for the executive director to stay on the strategic plane.” (board member)

“Most of the day-to-day business is done by the deputy director, but [the executive director] provides the vision. Every once in a while, he’ll throw an idea on the fire and say we’ve got to do this, and then we figure out how to do it while he’s raising money.” (emerging leader)

LOOK OUTWARD, NOT INWARD

The executive director is the organization's connection to the outside world.

"Our director is primarily the figurehead for our organization. She spends [most of] her time . . . in development, a little bit in choreographing how our new facility works, and is very involved in board relationships. I see her as more disengaged from the program things we do, and really out there." (emerging leader)

"There's an ambassadorial role to the outside world and the national community and the field—the opportunity to be around the table at foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts as well as all the organizations in your field. That was a big part of the job." (former executive director)

"Our managing director is someone who knows the theatre world very well, and that's important because we need to have those contacts." (board member)

BE AN EXCELLENT FUND-RAISER

A key part of outreach is fund-raising. No matter how strong the organization, there is always more money to raise.

"It doesn't matter how much you grow. You get one great grant, you have to go get the next one. There didn't seem to be an end to that." (former executive director)

"You set the direction and identify what resources are necessary in order to do that, then figure out how to get those resources. Some of it is about getting money, some is about getting board members, some might be about managing and making good use of volunteers." (board member)



BE MULTIDIMENSIONAL

When asked to describe a typical day, former executive directors spoke about their involvement in all aspects of the organization. In new or small organizations, the executive director is a jack of all trades. As the organization grows, the executive director becomes the leader or facilitator of the rest of the staff, but still has to know at least a little about many different functions.

“You start out in the beginning with everything from sweeping the floor to setting up microphones to doing arts management, but in the later stages it’s more about board development, strategic planning, and fund-raising.” (former executive director)

“You need to be responsible for supervising things you don’t know much about, and you need to either learn quickly or surround yourself with people who do know what they are doing.” (former executive director)

“It’s a little like a spider in the middle of a web. You have all these inputs coming in from the external side, from the community, and internally from the various departments reporting to you, and it all flows and you redirect and make connections crossways, whatever. It really is the center core.” (former executive director)

WORK WELL WITH PEOPLE

Dealing with and motivating staff is a big part of the job, from hiring and training to handling problems to filling in when someone leaves. In addition, the executive director works closely with board members and other volunteers, and must be able to motivate and direct their actions.

“I spent an inordinate amount of time investing in the staff. There’s a lot of turnover in small arts organizations, so you’re constantly trying to find people, trying to keep good people.” (former executive director)

“When you’re running on such a lean basis, having to weather through staff changes is difficult. A lot of times, executive directors fill the gap, because they’re the ones who know what’s going on.” (former executive director)

“There’s the inspiration part. To be a really good executive director, I think that’s necessary. To keep the staff together, in place, so you don’t have so much attrition, you have to keep everybody happy and free to do their work.” (emerging leader)

HOLD UP UNDER PRESSURE

Managing the people involved in the organization can be stressful. A successful executive director not only handles stress but, ideally, thrives on the pressure of the job.

“The hours were ridiculous, just like everyone was saying. My typical day was from about seven in the morning till nine o’clock at night. But it was an adrenaline rush all the same, most days, because of feeling like I was having an impact, feeling like there’s a lot of balls in the court.”
(former executive director)

“What I’ve always found fascinating is the sheer complexity of what is going on. You’re dealing with so many issues, all hitting you. I’ve always threatened to put up a deli sign, you know, now serving number forty-two. The complexity is what I find so fascinating.” (former executive director)

“I found troubleshooting to be a big part of the job, where you have to deal with crisis or opportunity on a daily basis. I referred to it as being in the stock market, but you’re not moving money around, you’re moving human resources and opportunities. I found that an exciting part of the job.”
(former executive director)

“I always felt [that] the most difficult part of the job is the emotional drain of dealing with human-resource issues. I don’t mean just employees but also volunteers and board members. It takes so much out of you to deal with people’s strengths as well as their weaknesses, their skills as well as their personal attributes. It’s so consuming, and it takes so much patience. It’s such a delicate balance.”
(former executive director)

BE AN EXCELLENT FINANCIAL MANAGER

In many organizations, a big responsibility is allocation of scarce resources.

“You spend inordinate amounts of time on fiscal issues, budgets, chronic cash crunches. As cash becomes less, you spend more time on it. You have to deal with budgets, cash flow, and who gets paid and who doesn’t.” (former executive director)



BE MOTIVATED BY INTANGIBLE REWARDS

When asked why someone would want the executive director job, most talked about the nonfinancial rewards of the position. Some are dedicated to the mission of their organization, while for others, doing significant work and feeling responsible for the development of good art are appealing aspects of the leadership role.

“For me, it’s the mission that played a critical role in driving me to do that for so many years. I don’t know if I would have done the same thing for another mission.” (former executive director)

“A lot of it was the feeling that I had a shared vision with a group of people who [felt] passionately about how my organization was going.” (former executive director)

“I do it because I love putting people together. I love making matches that result in something sort of magical, no matter what level you do it on. The opportunity to make matches that result in art is why I do it.” (former executive director)

BE EGO-DRIVEN, BUT ONLY A LITTLE

Some executive directors admitted that being seen as the guiding force of their organization was gratifying.

“Something that became apparent right away, that really fed me in a very egoistical way, was that I got a lot of credit, a lot of recognition, for the kind of work that I did. That was incredibly gratifying. Ten minutes of getting recognition for the work, whether it was your own or someone else’s, sometimes outweighed five hours of misery. It really feeds you, or at least it did me.” (former executive director)

Others cautioned against deriving too much enjoyment from taking credit, because such behavior can backfire. Better, they said, to know what you contributed to the accomplishment of a mission and enjoy it quietly.

“I’ve seen a lot of executive directors who have gotten themselves in trouble because they’re very much driven by their egos and their image instead of letting other people take credit and stepping a little more in the background.” (former executive director)

“I’ve always been very comfortable not taking a public role. Generally, it’s better with the massive egos involved if you don’t have to. But you’re sitting there in the back of the theater and you’re watching the curtain go up and you know that you’ve had an integral part in making that happen. Ninety-five percent of people will never understand that, and that’s okay. It’s really buying into what the organization’s all about.” (former executive director)