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VIDEO

## The Great Nonprofit Leadership Turnover

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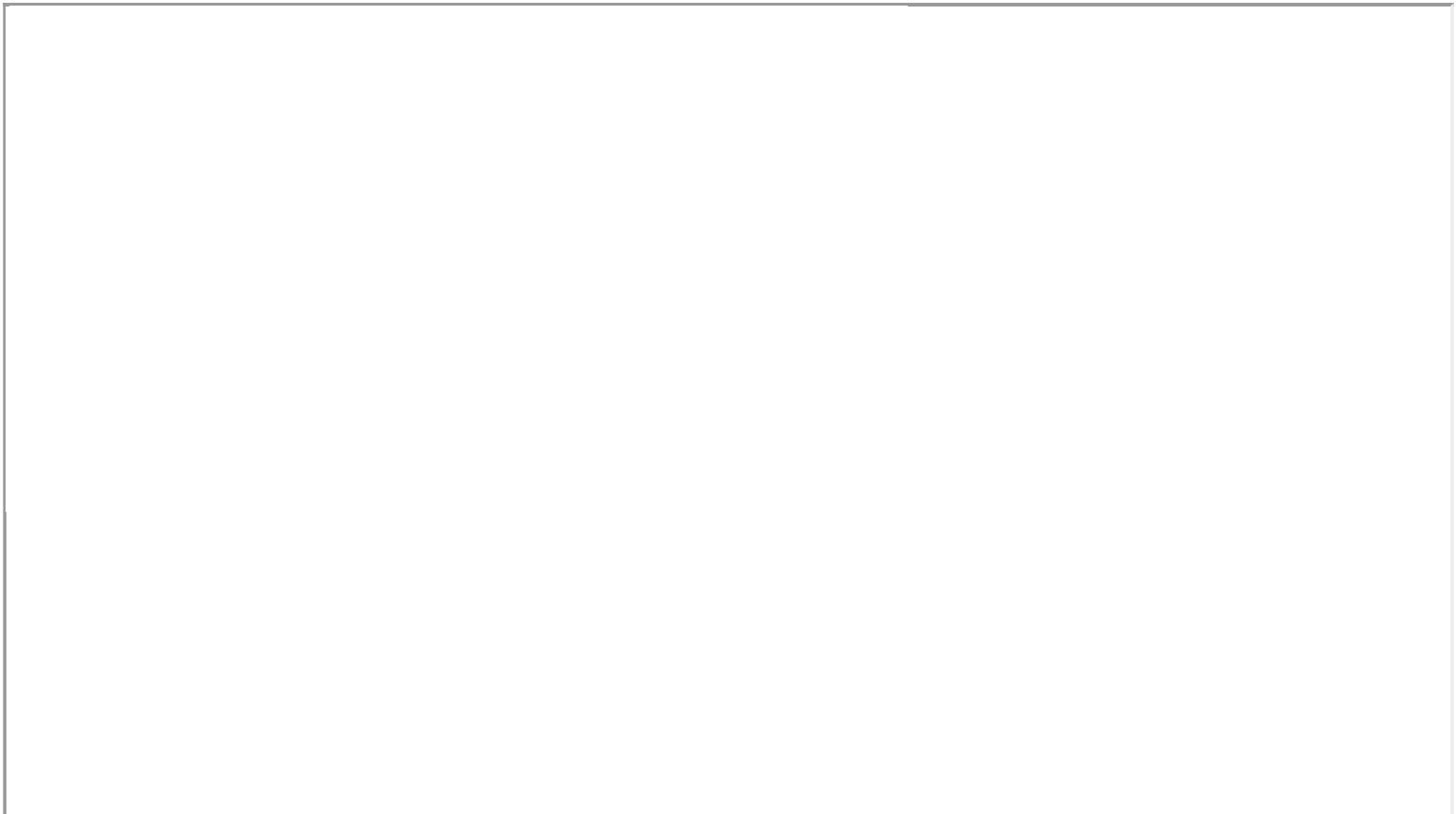
As nonprofits struggle with high levels of staff turnover and fierce competition for leaders, a group of experts joined the *Chronicle* to discuss how to train and retain chief executives and how to cope with the so-called Great Resignation.

“Remember: Good candidates have choices,” says Jan Cohen, a consultant who provides interim executive services to nonprofits. Cohen has served in that role during leadership transitions for 19 organizations.

While widespread [staffing shortages](#) have affected hiring at all levels of the nonprofit work force, finding and transitioning new executive leaders has become especially challenging, says Cohen. In many cases, executives are retiring or leaving the nonprofit world altogether to become consultants, driven by burnout and the pandemic’s lingering impact.

“There are way fewer experienced executive director and CEO candidates than there have ever been before,” says Cohen, who also noted that this makes preparing for transitions more important than ever.

Cohen was joined on the panel by Kevin Dean, chief executive officer at Momentum Nonprofit Partners, which provides services to nearly 1,000 nonprofit partners in the mid-south, and Thuan Nguyen, chief executive officer at AVID, a professional development nonprofit that trains more than 80,000 teachers a year. The session, “The Great Nonprofit Leadership Turnover,” was hosted by Jim Rendon, senior writer at the *Chronicle*. Read on for highlights or watch the video to get all the insights.



## Create a Succession Plan

Leadership transitions can be highly disruptive to strategy, programming, and revenue streams, so it's important that nonprofits plan ahead, says Dean, who previously served as executive director of a literacy nonprofit.

“Succession plans are like insurance for your organization,” says Dean, who emphasized that a smooth transition “includes transitioning with your donors and making sure donors and their communities and your stakeholders are all on the same page.”

Dean recommends that nonprofits start by establishing specific processes for a transition, including who will be in charge of the selection committee and budgeting. Groups should also strive to recognize and nurture the potential of existing staff members, who might be able to take on a leadership role in the future.

“You have to identify and develop your rising stars within your organization,” says Dean. “It's better to hire internally than externally.”

Nguyen worked at AVID for five years as executive vice president and later as chief operating officer and president before becoming the chief executive in April 2022. He spent much of that time working closely with the executive board and staff throughout the organization to consider and prepare for a possible transition.

“It pushed me to think about the job differently,” says Nguyen, who decided he would definitely accept the chief executive position 18 months before he began the role. That gave him time to go through a formal transition with guidance and support of other staff and the departing chief executive.

For some nonprofits, hiring an interim executive director might be a good option for coping with unexpected departures or preparing a group or setting the groundwork for a leadership transition.

“Some exits aren't planned,” says Cohen, who warned that it can take longer than you think to fill the top job, and during the hiatus it's important to keep operations running smoothly.

When she assumes a new interim-executive role, Cohen typically spends the first month completing an analysis of the organization. She says that board members are typically more amenable to suggestions from interim executives, who are able to look at operations with fresh eyes and that the changes can make the group more appealing to potential hires.

“Let's get this in good shape before the new person's hired” is how Cohen describes the role of an interim executive.

## Invest in Developing New Leaders' Skills

Nguyen has only been working as chief executive officer at AVID for six months, and despite the years he spent preparing for the transition, he is still discovering new skills he needs to master for the role. He spends a lot of time hosting listening sessions with staff about the transition as a chance to collectively think about what's next for the organization.

"It's an opportunity to reset and lean back into what our priorities should be," he says.

The relationships he cultivated with board members in his previous roles have also helped in his transition, he says.

According to Cohen, budgeting for professional development can make a big difference for new leaders. In some cases, Cohen has connected new hires — especially those who are new to executive leadership — to mentors to help guide them through their new gig.

Board committees should also be thoughtful about their hiring processes and when the role is filled, avoid micromanaging new leaders, says Cohen.

"What I find is that the search committee either wants a clone or the opposite of the person that was there," says Cohen. Instead, she says, board members should reflect on the direction in which they'd like to take the organization as the selection is made and then trust in the strengths of the chosen leader to guide that journey.

Dean says that finding a mentor and professional development opportunities can be especially important for supporting new leaders of color, especially if an organization has an all-white donor pool or one with longstanding biases.

"It's important to make sure that they have somebody that has experience with the same challenges and the same setbacks and can help them navigate it," says Dean. He recommends the [Building Movement Project](#) for tools and best practices for supporting leaders of color.

Dean also emphasized the importance of salary transparency and fair negotiations, noting that their absence puts people of color, women, and other groups at a disadvantage.

## New Leaders Need Grant Maker and Board Support

When Dean assumed his first executive-director role in 2011, he struggled to retain donors, who were nervous about investing in a new leader.

“They played the wait-and-see game with me,” he says. “We were fighting for money.”

The challenges of securing funding during his first two years on the job ultimately led to Dean’s decision to leave the nonprofit at the end of his five-year contract. Before accepting his executive role at Momentum, he made sure that several grant makers were committed to continuing to support the organization throughout the transition.

He ultimately secured six months of general operating support, during which the group was able to develop a new strategic plan, including updated operations, staffing, and board composition.

“It very important not only to continue committing to these organizations even during a transition but also that you make sure that you are investing in them so they have the ability to succeed,” says Dean.

Donor relationships are also top of mind for Cohen when she begins work with a new nonprofit. During her first few weeks, she typically asks board members to introduce her to key donors and stakeholders. She repeats the process with new permanent hires once they begin their own transition. This helps to pre-empt donors’ concerns about continuing to support an organization in transition.

“They see that here’s a person and he or she is competent — it’s going to be fine. I don’t have to wait with my money,” she says. “It’s giving them confidence that things are going to be OK.”

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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Sara Herschander is a breaking news reporter for the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

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