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Six Ways to Know If It's Time to Leave

By *Tim Wolfred, Psy. D.*

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*Are you tired, a bit listless? Maybe the demands of the job seem ever more burdensome, or the board seems increasingly dissatisfied, or your retirement clock is ticking. Do you need more than a megavitamin? Even better is this advice from **Tim Wolfred**, a pioneer and leader in the field of nonprofit executive transitions, on how executives can weigh both the organization's needs, and the needs of their own heart.*

Executive directors don't have term limits. Although some executives are fired or forced out by boards, most executives make the determination themselves of when and how to leave. Like other life decisions, it takes awhile to come to the decision to leave, or to come to the decision to stay.

So how can you tell if it's time to leave? Based on research and consulting with hundreds of nonprofit executives struggling with this question, we've developed six indicators -- each with some follow-up steps -- to help you with your thinking process.

Do one or more of these statements resonate with you?

1. I keep returning to this thought: the organization needs to go in a new direction (or to a new level) and I'm not the right person for it.

This is the most common reason given by executive directors who have decided to leave their positions. As just one example, a very successful executive had led a large mental health agency for 25 years. The organization's quality and success had led to both external and internal pressures to grow even larger, but the executive just knew he wasn't the person to do it. His working style depended on having his finger on everything, and simply put, he didn't have any more fingers. When he thought about trying to control and lead a larger organization, he just couldn't see himself in the picture.

In another instance, an organization knew that its next phase would require instituting a fundraising program that would go beyond the government contracts and foundation grants on which the organization had been built. The executive director, highly talented in multiple ways, just couldn't get herself behind the idea of major gifts and individual fundraising. She knew it was the right step for the organization, but she wasn't up to taking that step herself.

If this sounds like you: Start preparing yourself and your organization for your departure. For yourself, have coffee with executives who have left their jobs: you'll learn how it felt and get ideas about what to do next. For the organization, have a talk with the board leaders about an intentional process of transition. Take pride in the fact that you are leading the organization in a crucial way through a thoughtful and planned departure.

2. I'm burned out and I know it. Some executive directors fantasize about a fire destroying their office. More than one executive director has even confessed to a secret desire to get cancer because "it would be a way out." In the mornings, the thought of going to work seems like a horrible drag. One minute you hate the funders, the next minute the board, the next minute the staff. Especially that *****ing idiot!

You may be wishing you could leave, but your financial situation means you can't quit without having another income in place. Test yourself with this question: "If someone offered me a job that looked less stressful but paid the same, would I jump at it?"

If this sounds like you: If you can, take a sabbatical of at least two months. Get outside the situation to allow yourself a different perspective. Use the time to talk with a career counselor about what else you might do.

Find the right person to talk with: perhaps a thoughtful friend, perhaps a therapist, perhaps a nonprofit consultant or coach.

It's also possible that you may just have to leave. By now, you've probably tried many ways to reduce the stress, but none of them have worked well enough or long enough. Your physical and mental health and your personal relationships may be suffering from the stress you are experiencing. Your organization will find its way.



3. I don't think I'm burned out, but other people think I am. Many executive directors are often so committed and so busy that they may not realize that they are losing energy and freshness, and that not only are they suffering personally, but that the organization is experiencing the diminishment of their talents. Do you find that you're not as present at meetings? Less available to others? Are you frequently impatient, or crankier than usual? Do your co-workers ask you if you're tired, ill, distracted?

If this sounds like you: Reach out to the people in your life who can help you reflect on your situation and who will push you to think it through (not just sympathize). Consider getting an executive coach to help you figure out how to renew yourself, and/or what else you can do. But don't just try to power through it. This is an organizational matter as well as a personal one: give it the attention it deserves.

Reach out to executives you know who have left their jobs, and ask them how they knew it was time to leave. Ask them what they regret about leaving, and what they don't regret. Find out what they're doing now. Their answers will spark new ideas you haven't thought of.

4. I can't stand my board anymore . . . and/or, I can't seem to please the board no matter what

I do. I'm sick of them. Nothing I try works. I feel alienated from them. Why do we have to have boards anyway? Feelings like this often emerge after a couple of years of a slow deterioration of the executive-board relationship. Executives often blame the board for the poor relationship, and it's hard to know which side is right.

If this sounds like you: Consider this . . . maybe it doesn't matter who's right. By now you've tried many things that haven't worked. Maybe both you and the organization will be better off if you go off and start fresh somewhere else with new people.

Alternatively, you can decide just to live with it. Perhaps you have little influence over board recruitment, and you don't see much hope for the future. Just as some people accept working for a bad boss because they love the work, maybe a bad board is simply the price of having a job you love and work you find important.

Finally, consider making one last big effort to change your relationship with the board. Push for a serious conversation with the board leaders, acknowledging that both you and they feel uncomfortable with the relationship. "Maybe I should be leaving, but I need to hear directly from you what you're thinking." Take responsibility for changing the situation; ask yourself, "What can I do differently to change this situation for the better?"

5. My clock is ticking. For executives who have been on the job 20 years or more, the question naturally arises: is it time for the organization to have me leave, and/or is it time for *me* to have me leave? Executives with tenures of 10 or more years who are in their early 50's or older also start to hear a ticking clock. It isn't always a good idea to leave just because of your age or tenure. There are effective, always-fresh executives who are in their 70's or even 80's, or who have been on their jobs 30 or 40 years. But for most people, tenure or age raises the question of a timeline for departure.

If this sounds like you: Ask yourself: Would I contribute more to the cause in another job or role? Is there something else I want to do before I retire or become less vigorous? What can I be doing on the job within the next year to prepare myself for the next phase of my life . . . whether in one year or ten years?

6. Family roles are calling me. Many executives want to stay on their jobs, but they have family responsibilities that pull at them. Maybe one of your grown children needs you to watch the grandchildren so that she can focus on her own career. Maybe you have a child who needs more attention and time than you've been able to give, or a family member who is ill. Perhaps you have an aging parent who needs you to move nearby.

If this sounds like you: Remember that leaving your job or even leaving the workforce isn't necessarily a permanent decision. Maybe you can leave the workforce for a few years, or move to another state for a few years. One executive returned to her childhood home to be with her mother for the last two years of her mother's life. She then returned to the city where she had been living, found a new job, and is grateful she made the decision to spend the time with her mother.

Lastly, taking on the executive position in a nonprofit takes a lot of courage and requires a wide range of skills. It also takes courage and smarts to know when to give the reins back to the board

as they direct the organization's next phase. For the good of the cause and the constituents, the wise leader regularly checks for the signs that it's time to transition to something new.



Tim Wolfred, Psy.D., has a new book out: **Managing Executive Transitions**, which looks thoughtfully at all aspects of executive director departure (buy [here](#) [4]). He is a Senior Project Director at [CompassPoint Nonprofit Services](#) [5] in San Francisco, and consults across the country to nonprofits and funders in leadership development. He is a former executive director, former interim executive director (in 16 positions), and former elected official. When he meets with executive directors who are weeping, he usually picks up the check. :)

See also:

- [Succession Planning for Organizations of All Sizes](#) [6]
- [Succession Planning: Building Leaderful Organizations](#) [7]

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