



Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson 14: Don't Accept Mediocrity in Staff
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I have learned as an Executive Director, a board member, and as a consultant working with dozens of organizations.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in another series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go Off Course Lesson Fourteen is: Don't accept mediocrity in staff.

Time and again, when I've seen organizations flounder and been able to poke under the hood, I encounter Executive Directors and other staff with what I would describe as poor leadership skills that plays out in mediocre employee performance.

Of course, mediocre Executive Directors tend to accept mediocre staff. Indeed, mediocre Executives may prefer to surround themselves with others who won't outshine them.

So how can boards identify if they are heading off course in this way?

And how can strong Executive Directors ensure they surround themselves with strong staff?

Diagnosing mediocrity

Start by learning how to spot and/or define "mediocrity" in staff.

Here are some tell-tale signs to look for:

- Does the employee always seem to meet minimum goals, but never exceed them? Put another way, are they managing their own performance to just be good enough and then going home.
- Do they have a bias against action? These are people who are always finding reasons *not* to do something. On the plus side, people who are overly cautious generally don't make mistakes. But it's usually via mistakes that we learn. And in the meantime, the bias against action usually leads to a failure to seize opportunities. I have personally watched organizations flounder when led by Executive Directors who are so petrified of failure that they need do anything bold.
- Are they overly sensitive responding poorly to feedback? In my experience, people who are overly sensitive make it difficult for teams to have honest debate that is necessary to find the best outcomes.

- Are they more focused on procedure than outcomes? There are some roles where procedures are extremely important, like accounting. But for most nonprofit employees, love of procedure is a sure sign that they are missing the forest for the trees.
- Are they focused on the right tasks? Often times, mediocre employees will pick out aspects of their job they can do well and blow them out of the water by putting extra time and attention to those tasks. They may even be working longer hours than their peers. Of course, in the process, they are neglecting bigger, more challenging tasks that are more important to the organization's success.
- Do they have tunnel vision regarding their own role? I've experienced mediocre employees who do their own role well, but in ways that fail to take into account the organization's mission and the reality that they are part of a team where everyone plays an important role?
- Do they overly resist change? In my experience, nonprofits that don't change quickly become stagnant. But some employees are more focused on doing things the same way than thinking about whether something new would work better.

Avoiding mediocrity

The easiest way to avoid mediocre employees is when hiring. Here are three hiring practices to consider.

First, make sure you're broadly distributing your job announcements so you draw from a bigger potential pool of talent.

Second, stop focusing your hiring attention exclusively on the experiences/skills needed and focus more on behavioral traits. Not that skills don't matter. But it's much easier to train a strong employee in a new skill than it is to turn someone with "mediocre" behavioral traits into a strong performer.

Third, don't be desperate. If your first round of interviews doesn't yield someone who's an "A-level" performer, don't complete the hire. Relist the position. Better to have your existing staff overworked a couple months more than add someone mediocre to the mix. Top talent prefers to work with others who are top performers. This is triply important for boards when hiring Executive Directors.

Beyond hiring, you need to more clearly lay out the expectations you have for employees for what it means to excel. What are the core behavioral attributes you're seeking in all employees? Potential examples include attributes like: strategic thinking, strong sense of personal accountability, risk-taker, etc. Pick 4-7 such attributes, not 20.

Then figure out how to track and evaluate these behavioral traits via your employee evaluation process. If someone isn't displaying them, offer coaching/training where appropriate.

This is easier for an Executive Director to do with other staff than for a board of directors to do with its evaluation of an Executive Director. But boards can use confidential input from staff and allied organizations (so-called 360 reviews) to get a handle on how their Executive Director behaves (or doesn't behave) outside of board meetings.

In the end, whether as an Executive Director overseeing staff or a board overseeing an Executive Director, the acid test comes when you've identified an employee as mediocre, offered them coaching/training, and they remain mediocre after a reasonable period of time has passed.

This is where you need to ask the question: how can we best serve the mission over the long run? The decision to let someone go can cause short-term pain. But a willingness to do what's best for the organization is essential for an organization to thrive.

And in the end, many of those you let go will understand that. I once had someone who I had fired come up to me at a public event a year later and tell me it was the best thing that ever happened to him, giving him the kick in the pants necessary to move in a different career direction.

I also know a former Executive Director whose board let them go who is now ecstatically happy in a new, non-Executive role.

Of course, I suspect a couple others who I let go for poor performance still have negative feelings towards me. But your responsibility as a nonprofit leader is not to be universally loved. Your responsibility is to serve the organization's mission. That means building a team that excels and moving aside those who don't. Organizations that fail to develop this ethic, tend to go off course.

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