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Leading the 21st Century Zoo and Aquarium

Recruiting the Ideal Director of a Changing Industry

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Recruiting and retaining a President is the major challenge facing the board of a zoo or aquarium. There are many factors that make the challenge even greater compared to a search for C-level executives in more traditional businesses; the zoo or aquarium board is responsible not only for the considerable physical assets and the health of the collection, it must also be concerned about sustaining the institution and insuring that the zoo remains accessible and relevant to the entire community. It must be remembered that the director is their representative guardian of the collection and is responsible for insuring that, ultimately, the zoo exists for the greater good.

New and diverse factors are impacting the search in the sector:

- Almost 80% of the CEOs of zoos and other related non-profits plan on leaving their positions within the next seven years, creating intense competition for talent;
- The transition from the municipal zoo to the private zoo model is accelerating, creating the need for directors with a broader and different set of skills;
- The role of the zoo in conservation, its role in species survival combined with protests from animal rights organizations increase the complexity of the director's responsibilities;
- And, advances in technology change the way visitors are entertained and increase the competition for discretionary time and dollars, challenging zoos to engage audiences in a new way.

According to multiple sector surveys conducted by DHR, succession planning in nonprofit organizations is deemed important by more than 75% of those surveyed, but less than 20% of the organizations have a formal succession plan. Fewer have an emergency succession plan. As a result, the internal candidate pool is not robust. Additionally, volunteer boards are experienced in fundraising and financial management but are seldom called upon to search for new leadership.

Understanding the Challenges...

There is no precise formula for identifying the ideal candidate, but the board and the selection committee can take steps to facilitate a successful search for an effective director. Every zoo (and aquarium) has its own culture and set of business challenges. A director effective at one institution may not be so at others. The director of a successful municipal zoo may be excellent in operations, union relations and managing politics, but may not have the fundraising and earned income experience required to sustain a private zoo. A municipal zoo candidate with private zoo experience likely has no experience with unions and working in a government environment. The hiring body's first step is to understand its institution's unique business character and culture.

The type of the collections (for example, marine mammals or elephants in the collection present special challenges), the income streams (the mix of admissions income, tax levy, and or individual and corporate sponsorship), the strength of the board and staff, the size of the exhibit program, and the condition of the infrastructure, are some of the factors that determine the skill sets required of the director. Also, it is important for the board to understand the current culture of the organization and whether that culture needs to be preserved or changed.

...and the Future Opportunities

A zoo's identity is most closely related to its collections and its local, regional or national reputation. Zoos are also defined by their respective, future ambitions. For example:

- One zoo in the Midwest recently completed a five-year strategic plan codifying its aspirations toward conservation leadership. The director of an organization with similar goals must personify those aspirations, clearly articulate them and, through engagement with donors, be the most effective fundraiser.
- A transitioning governance structure will challenge the institution and the new director. A zoo in the early stages of merging its municipal structure and friends group will require a director who can address the sensitivities of those groups who each possess a sense of ownership and must effectively deal with an inherited union workforce. The director must recognize and avoid potential flashpoints, as well as articulate a vision for the future.
- An aquarium about to embark on a capital campaign would benefit from a director with demonstrated success and a keen interest in fundraising.
- A strategic decision to broaden the organization's access and relevance in the community is best driven by a director with exceptional communication and public relations skills who shares those values.

Gaining Consensus

There are a number of tactics and measures that can, and should, be utilized to establish the desired characteristics of an effective director. Though the selection is ultimately the board's decision, it is but one stakeholder. Staff, visitors, the press, other cultural institutions, major funders, volunteers and docents, elected officials and the community at large share a valid voice in selecting this leader. Surveying these groups helps build the profile of the director and elicits perhaps unexpected, but viable, nominations – zoo professionals from the current staff and local potential candidates who may not be under consideration.

Additionally, an examination of the readily available quantitative data is useful in determining what kind of director will be most effective. Of particular relevance is the ongoing change in funding from public to private. The Reason Foundation reports that the vast majority of accredited zoos and aquariums across the United States now rely on private operators, including zoos in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Fresno, Houston and Seattle. The board will benefit from understanding the business drivers critical to the zoos sustainability.

Skills and Experience

Table 1 is a sample list of skills and experiences required of any director. The search committee may choose to select seven to ten on the list and use the grid when evaluating applicants.

Utilizing these diagnostics, quantitative and evaluative, the board may then determine which are the most important behavioral traits, experiences and proven capabilities it seeks in its new director. Selecting and evaluating candidates against that list will help ensure that the search will end with a qualified director.

Assessing the array of requirements against the experienced candidate's skills, successes, and specific career goals helps the board to define the ideal director. No candidate will possess all of the required traits. And undoubtedly, specific areas of functional expertise can complement those lacking in the director: a project manager or capital campaign consultant can be retained for a new exhibit; a lobbyist can assist in the transition from government to private; a strong vice president of collections can be hired if the ideal director does not have a zoological background.

But, ultimately, it must be the director with leadership skills who embraces the strategic direction of the zoo.

Zoo Director Interview Scoresheet

Experience Ratings 1 Unacceptable 2 Minimal 3 Acceptable 4 Strong 5 Outstanding

Category/Question	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
Leading & implementation with vision			
Ability to work with the Board			
Interfacing with stakeholders, media & the public			
Management skills & approach			
Financial oversight			
Fundraising			
Conservation & Education			
Oversight of capital projects			
Other experience and personal characteristics			
Sense of passion & ability to inspire enthusiasm			
Credibility & leadership in the field			
Communication skills			
Emotional intelligence & political savvy			
Personal presentation			
Integrity and values			
TOTAL			

Table 1. Skills and experience matrix

There are three other simple steps that a board can take to assure that their choice in a director is ideal for their zoo:

Check References - Not only should written references be checked, but detailed, comprehensive conversations should be had with those who have managed, worked with and for the potential candidate. And check college degrees and publications. When possible, visit the potential candidate's current institution and get a feel for how the person interacts with anyone from a keeper to a visitor.

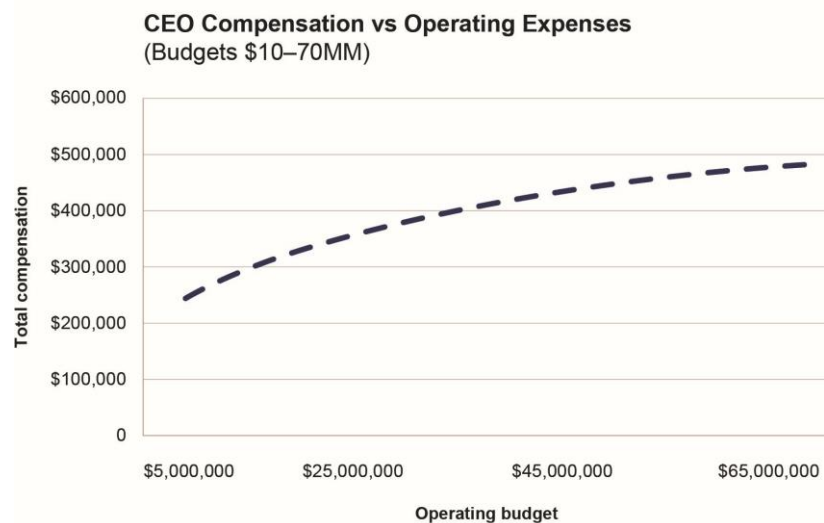
Additional Considerations



Setting a Realistic Compensation - The current compensation of a zoo's long-tenured outgoing director may be below market. Supply and demand forces create strong upward pressure on compensation.

Table 2 represents a regression analysis of the current compensation for US zoo and aquarium directors based on the annual operating budget of their institution. The dotted line represents the regression line and provides the most accurate depiction of current total compensation in the field. Sitting directors are earning near the trend line.

For example, if you were seeking to recruit a director from a \$10 million zoo to your \$15 million zoo, the field of candidates may currently be earning approximately \$225,000 in total compensation. A standard increase of 15% of current compensation would indicate that the new director may command a compensation of approximately \$270,000.



Compensation for zoo and aquarium directors of private institutions

Table 2. *Compensation for zoo and aquarium directors of private institutions*

Total compensation on y axis, operating budget on x axis

Understand the Candidate's Motivation – Increased compensation is not the only reason a potential candidate may accept a new position. The ideal director is one who is challenged and stretched by the new leadership position. While budget size may be a factor, the nature of the living collection, number of visitors, quality of the staff, the potential for new and expanded exhibits and the fundraising ability of the board are all potentially relevant factors in the candidate's decision making. Make sure the challenge, compensation, and other intangibles (such as quality of life) for the potential candidate and family will help to attract the best candidates. *Manage the Transition*- The first few months following the completion of the search can be difficult for the new director. The myriad details and associated politics of assuming this leadership role aside, he or she may be preoccupied with selling and buying homes, moving, selecting schools for the children, and perhaps helping a partner or spouse find a new position. The search committee, the board and its chairperson's responsibilities in terms of implementing a smooth transition includes assistance in these areas that, while not directly job-related, are nevertheless integral to the new director's smooth transition within the institution and community.

Evaluation

The ideal director is one who brings measurable success to the institution. Attendance is up; quality and morale of the staff has improved; systems are working for, not against, the management; and donors are recognizing the quality of the exhibitions with additional grants. By developing a measurable checklist of what the zoo expects of its director and by evaluating and rewarding the director through utilization of that list, the board will be able to measure their own success in terms of hiring the ideal candidate as well as the director's success in his or her new job. That list may then be the basis for a bonus paid to the director as part of a compensation package.

The Candidate Pool

There is a growing gap between the demand for zoo leaders and available candidates. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) has recognized this trend and created an Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP) to train the next generation of zoo leadership. The participants of the program are nominated by their directors, trained and mentored. The dozen or more graduates per year of this program are clearly potential candidates, as are directors of other, usually smaller, zoos and aquariums. Likewise, Assistant Directors of larger zoos, some of whom have been through the ELDP, are likely candidates.

But zoos are more than cherished community institutions, they are functioning businesses. Many search committees ask: why not just hire a strong business person who can learn the zoo business? While there are some successful examples of this approach, at the moment there is not enough evidence to demonstrate this is a guaranteed solution. One criterion often used when evaluating business executives for zoo and aquarium leadership positions, indeed for any nonprofit leadership position, is the candidates' past experience as a nonprofit volunteer or board leader and the potential candidate's demonstrable interest in zoos, conservation or animal welfare.

Other potential candidates that may be qualified zoo or aquarium directors include: executives of conservation organizations; senior executives and elected officials from fish and wildlife agencies; executives from science centers and natural history museums; senior administrators from research universities with subject matter credentials and fundraising experience; and local executives who have a demonstrated life-long interest in the zoo.

Following these steps can enable a board to accurately determine the characteristics of an ideal director, recruit that person and measure the director's success.

By approaching the search process strategically, many zoos and aquariums now enjoy the benefits of healthy, dynamic and effective relationships between their dedicated boards and perfectly matched directors.



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