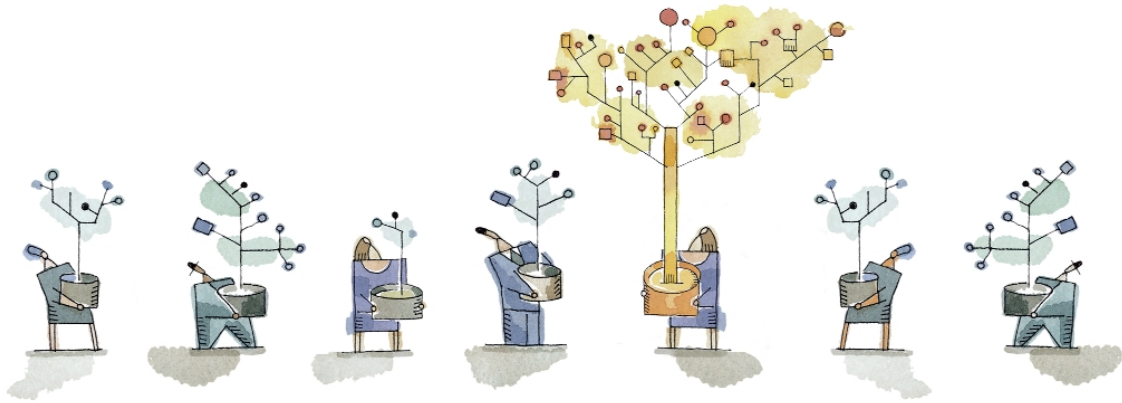


What Does It Take?

Attributes of Effective Community Foundation Chief Executives



• TRUSTED • VISIONARY • EXPERIENCED • INCLUSIVE • SMART • MANAGER • FUNDRAISER • JUGGLER • COMMUNICATOR • STEWARD •

BASED ON LESSONS FROM THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS INITIATIVE



THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

Big Decision, Little Information

The single most important decision facing a community foundation board is that of selecting a chief executive — a president, CEO, or executive director for its organization. Unfortunately, board members are often left to their own devices when recruiting time rolls around. While much is known and written about desirable characteristics for chief executives in the *private sector*, and a growing body of knowledge is being generated regarding leaders of *nonprofit organizations* in general, relatively little has been recorded regarding attributes that translate into effective leadership of *community foundations* — a distinctly different animal within the nonprofit arena.

Lessons from the Community Foundations Initiative

This report originated with an evaluation, conducted by Public Policy Associates, of The James Irvine Foundation's Community Foundations Initiative (CFI). A seven-year effort begun in 1995, the initiative has supported seven California community foundations seeking to accelerate growth, build capabilities, and generally become more effective philanthropies. CFI evaluation concluded that chief executive skills were an instrumental (perhaps *the* instrumental) factor influencing the success of participating community foundations.

“There is a huge question today about leadership in nonprofits generally, and community foundations are not immune. I’ve often wondered what it would take to develop and get agreement on a set of core competencies for executive directors.”

Barbara Kibbe
Consultant

This report seeks to fuel board discussions and decisions regarding the hiring of community foundation chief executives. Many people who work for and with community foundations are hungry for information on this topic. We learned this by talking with twenty individuals in a variety of roles: community foundation staff and board members, as well as consultants to community foundations, leaders of community foundation associations, and program officers at private foundations. We asked these players to identify areas in which the field needs more knowledge. The importance and attributes of effective community foundation chief executives emerged as a hot topic.

This paper is a step toward addressing this topic. It seeks to build upon the solid body of leadership information generated by *BoardSource* and other nonprofit resources, and to sharpen the focus of this work for community foundation boards by

providing perspective and examples garnered from the CFI evaluation, as well as by drawing upon the experiences of CFI participants and their consultants. In this latter category, the work of Julie Drezner of *Foundation Strategies Group* and Alan Pardini of *Community Planning & Research LLC* has been especially helpful to this paper.

What's so different about community foundation leadership?

The answer to this question follows naturally from the answer to another question: What's so different about community foundations? We can cite five aspects of community foundations that result in special requirements for their chief executives.

- 1. Community foundations are *complex entities*.** They are unique, multi-faceted organizations requiring competence in fund development, grantmaking, investment, administration, finance, and more. Community foundation chief executives are ***skilled managers***. Each needs to be able to see, and care for, both the forest and its extraordinary variety of trees.
- 2. Community foundations are *community organizations*.** They are institutions of the public. They are inclusive by definition. They have multiple constituencies and serve the many voices shaped by an area's unique history, geography, culture, and needs. Community foundation chief executives are ***caring stewards***. Each needs to recognize that the foundation belongs to the community (it is *not* the chief executive's institution), invite and value public involvement, and engage and empathize with the diverse populations that make each locale special.
- 3. Community foundations are *philanthropies*.** They achieve community impact by generating and applying financial contributions from community members. Community foundation chief executives are ***chief development officers*** and ***nonprofit partners***. Each needs to be able to oversee the development function, actively participate in the fundraising effort, and relate to donors in the most positive and constructive way. Plus, each needs to interact with local nonprofit organizations to form strategic grantmaking relationships, develop creative approaches to solving local needs, uncover ways to better leverage existing resources and programs, and construct the critical bridge between donor contributions and community impact.
- 4. Community foundations operate in *dynamic, politicized environments*.** They seek to make a difference in a continually changing world. Their policies, programs, and initiatives can be dramatically affected by changes on a macro level (new federal tax laws and economic conditions, for example) as well as by a myriad of local shifts in everything from the makeup of area governments and nonprofit boards to the emergence of new community issues and coalitions. Community foundation chief executives are ***capable navigators***. Each needs to be a trusted, effective relationship builder and an adaptive thinker with a steady sense of purpose.
- 5. Community foundations are *high-potential enterprises*.** They are exceptional entities positioned exceptionally well to engage new resources and facilitate lasting change in their communities. Their potential for good is virtually unlimited. Community foundation chief executives are ***energetic entrepreneurs***. Each needs to be a person of vision, capable of identifying opportunities and mobilizing resources to turn these possibilities into realities.

Catalyst considerations

Community foundations that seek to play an active role in convening and facilitating groups to address community needs should consider an added attribute for their chief executive: knowledge of community organizing and/or community development. This attribute can prove very valuable in the process of continually building — and rebuilding — the community relationships that undergird catalyst work.

Let's get specific

The set of desirable attributes for a community foundation chief executive is extensive. While no single candidate is likely to possess all of these attributes, it can be instructive to consider each of them when recruiting and selecting a leader. To help sort these elements, this list has been divided into three component parts.

Personal character(istics)

- *Committed*: an abiding belief in the public good and a passion for community
- *Confident*: a faith in self and abilities as well as a positive outlook
- *Creative*: possessing an inventive mind, finding solutions to problems and better ways to achieve results
- *Empowering*: a habit of sharing information and authority, enabling and encouraging, and directing the spotlight onto community organizations, donors, staff, and others
- *Inclusive*: a genuine desire to involve others, seek out different opinions, and ensure that all affected parties are engaged in decision making; the ability to work with people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds (age, race/ethnicity, gender, occupation, etc.); an open communication style
- *Inspirational*: the ability to affect others in a positive way, translating individual belief into enthusiastic action by many
- *Integrity*: a sincere and trustworthy nature with high standards for honesty and fairness; a desire for accountability
- *Intelligent*: a keen intellect and powers of reason, perception, and understanding
- *Productive*: self-motivated, energetic, organized, focused on outputs
- *Quality mindset*: able to recognize the importance of details and to set a high standard for the work of the community foundation
- *Unflappable*: able to respond to surprises with calm analysis, to keep many balls in the air at one time, and to operate under stress

Professional skills

- *Board sense*: able to work well with a volunteer board of trustees, demonstrating understanding of the relationship between a chief executive and board, providing gentle leadership, and helping the board improve its ability to move the community foundation forward
- *Communications*: a good listener and clear, persuasive presenter in one-on-one or large group settings; excellent written and oral abilities; media savvy

It's often a team effort in smaller community foundations

Some community foundations may not be able to afford a candidate with all of the chief executive attributes they desire. In these cases, boards can identify the primary attributes required for leadership in their organization, recruit and select a chief executive with several of these attributes, and ensure that board members and/or volunteers with experience and skill are actively engaged to supplement this executive in all other required areas. This approach to sharing leadership responsibilities is a practical path for many newer or smaller community foundations. In these cases, boards are wise to recruit candidates with the potential and interest to grow into all desired chief executive attributes as they help their community foundations grow.

Let's get specific

Professional skills *(continued)*

- *Management*: able to direct staff, oversee operations, build and administer budgets, and assess and address infrastructure requirements, especially related to technology (an area of rapid growth and importance to the community foundation field)
- *Facilitation*: capable of convening others, defusing emotionally charged situations, and helping divergent factions find common ground
- *Financial acumen*: able to understand and work with highly specialized community foundation planned giving, investment, and accounting practices
- *Relationship building*: able to understand and connect with others, including staff, donors, nonprofit organization leaders, community leaders, and members of the community at large, as well as attract talent, form coalitions, and mobilize action
- *Politically adroit*: sensitive to shifts in the community and its political landscape, demonstrating dexterity to maneuver through this landscape
- *Strategic thinking*: ability to assess situations and opportunities, and develop appropriate goals and strategies

"The capability of the community foundation leader cuts across all aspects of the organization, its roles, and, ultimately, the amount of good it accomplishes. This topic needs to be further explored."

Elan Garonzik
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Prior experience

- *Executive responsibility*: senior management position and accountability, preferably in an organization with multiple, varied components
- *Nonprofit sector know-how*: leadership experience in a nonprofit entity as a staff executive or board officer
- *Program development*: hands-on experience creating and implementing community programs
- *Fundraising*: active involvement in financial development campaigns

A strong leader will bring change

Keep in mind that a capable chief executive will lead change in your organization and community. The complexion and personality of a community foundation will ultimately mirror that of its leader. Working closely with an engaged board, a new chief executive will often reposition the foundation in its community, and guide its evolution to embrace new values, priorities, and roles. Board members should think about and discuss the potential for change inherent in the selection of a new chief executive, articulate the values and aspirations of your organization, and candidly explore the future direction that is likely to accompany each candidate you consider.

Tailor this document to fit local needs

Of course, one size cannot possibly fit all when it comes to identifying the requisite attributes of chief executives in community foundations. These unique organizations are products of their unique communities. Some community foundations are urban, some are rural. Some are large, some are small. Some are new, some are old. Some are focused on endowment, some on donor advised funds, some on both. Some are visible community catalysts, some do their work behind the scenes. The list goes on, and the ideal attributes of any community foundation leader need to be customized to the local mission and environment of each organization. The attributes presented in this paper are intended to provide a helpful starting point for this process.

Contributors to this paper

The James Irvine Foundation is an independent grantmaking foundation dedicated to enhancing the social, economic, and physical quality of life throughout California, and to enriching the state's intellectual and cultural environment. The Foundation was established in 1937 by James Irvine, the California pioneer whose 110,000-acre ranch in Southern California was among the largest privately owned land holdings in the state. With assets of \$1.2 billion, the Foundation expects to make grants of \$51 million in 2003 for the people of California. For more information about The James Irvine Foundation, please visit www.irvine.org.

Public Policy Associates, Incorporated (PPA) is a national public policy research, development and evaluation firm based in Lansing, Michigan. The firm serves clients in the public, private, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision-making. For more information about Public Policy Associates, visit www.publicpolicy.com.

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