

Hiring Your Most Important Employee: The Quest for an Executive Director

Gerri Thomas and David V. Griffin, Thomas & Associates, Inc.

The hiring of an executive director is certainly a momentous occasion for any museum. In children's museums, the strength of the organization is apt to lie less in any one specialized collection and more in an approach to thematic interpretation based strongly on the views, talents and communication skills of the museum's director and staff. Where a fine arts or science museum may focus on, respectively, Dutch oil painting or the geology of the Americas, a children's museum might be expected to explore both topics and scores of others, tailoring the content of exhibitions and programs for a vitally important audience—the new generation, not merely of art or science lovers, but of fully rounded human beings who are engaged in their social, cultural and natural environments. The search for an executive director affords the board of a children's museum an important and unique opportunity to take the pulse of the organization and to revisit its commitment and success in serving the future generation of leaders.

The Pre-Search Assessment: Who are We and Where are We Going?

The search for an executive director by its very nature provides the board with a chance to reassess the museum as a whole and to reevaluate its needs, goals, strengths and challenges. The need to fill the position of executive director may be pressing, but should also be expected as part of a museum's regular cycle of growth. Considering where the museum is in its life cycle—just starting out with passion and some resources; at a growth stage requiring more structure, complex programming and funding; or fully mature, where the mandate exists to formulate new initiatives, perhaps taking larger risks to energize and sustain the museum into the future—will help the board shape the characteristics it is seeking in a new director.

Establishing the Search Parameters: When Profiling is a Good Thing

Establish a board search committee consisting of no more than five or six people who can devote considerable time and effort to this process. The committee, which might include the chair, members of the executive committee or others representative of the major issues or milestones facing the museum, should then begin to create a profile of the ideal candidate. Input from key staff, donors or other major stakeholders will not only help create a blueprint of sorts, but will help everyone in the organization articulate their own expectations of a new chief executive and reconfirm the needs of the museum. Useful questions to consider include: How did the previous executive director meet, exceed or fail in her or his responsibilities? Under what circumstances did they leave? What was the recent staff experience like and how is morale? What's the financial outlook, the status of programs and are there new initiatives being explored by other children's museums that should be considered? Answers to these questions will help shape the position description and profile. The remuneration and benefits package for the new director should also be reevaluated at this time.

Do-it-Yourself or Get Help?

At this point there are two options for the board: they may hire an outside firm to conduct the search or they can manage the task themselves. A search firm can save the board a great deal of time and work. Too often boards seek out firms that have great successes in private industry, but know little about museums. While museums must function in a business-like manner, their role as social enterprises with a unique mission and vision needs to be understood, as the measure of success is much more elusive than looking only at the bottom line. This is particularly true for children's museums, which emphasize education and experiential learning. If a board decides to get outside help, hiring a firm with a variety of resources for identifying candidates and an extensive network of

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contacts in the museum field is paramount. In addition, an outside firm will have a clear idea of how to best get the information about the job's availability out to the greatest number of people or, if the board prefers, to be more discreet. If a firm is hired, establish a contact on the search committee to structure the process. The contact should monitor and report back on the progress of the search, and be available to answer any questions the firm might have in a timely manner. Whether or not a search firm is engaged, a board search committee that works closely together may find they are better able to identify and articulate issues faced by the incoming executive director, the board and the museum as a whole. Thus the search has the potential of strengthening the board itself. Establish a budget for the search (including expenses for candidates' airfare, if necessary) and other related costs.

Seek and Thee Shall Find

Once the position profile has been established and a job description finalized, create a strategy for getting the word out in an advertisement or announcement for both print and electronic media. Placing an ad in *ACM Forum* or on the American Association of Museums' new online service Museum Careers are standard ways to let the field know of an opening and to reach potential candidates in the industry with your specific requirements. There are other industry-specific, low or no-cost avenues such as posting the announcement on various museum list serves, such as Museum-L or Childmus, or with regional or national museum associations. Don't forget to ask the staff for the names of potential candidates they have worked with in the past. At the same time a letter from the board chair seeking candidates for the executive director position might be circulated among other children's museums and other educational institutions with the understanding that valuable referrals can be provided from directors who are not otherwise interested in the position, as well as from members of other museum boards. Speak to many people about the museum and the search, since the adage of "six degrees of separation" is particularly true for the museum field. Choose a deadline for accepting resumes and credentials and incorporate it into these announcements and letters.

Who are You and Where Have you Been?

As responses to your efforts come in, look for resumes and cover letters from candidates that demonstrate clarity and concision and that balance achievements with ambition. A good resume suggests consistent focus on the part of the candidate and a steady advancement in her or his chosen field, characterized by innovation and a willingness to initiate positive change. As resumes come in, the board should be prepared—to a degree—to both revise and refine its original job requirements. No one resume is likely to cover all of the ideal characteristics previously agreed upon. Likewise, many resumes may suggest new alternatives previously unconsidered—experience with diverse cultures, for example, or work with both children and adults, or involvement with capital campaigns, building programs, or other experience that may be useful for the museum's future plans. The previous pre-search assessment that considers the status of the museum and where it is in its life cycle is particularly important at this stage of the search.

After the deadline has passed, review the incoming resumes and referrals from all sources and select up to seven candidates. Establish a series of questions that will be asked of each selected applicant based on the following characteristics needed to run a museum successfully in the 21st century:

- **Interest in Position:** Why do you want to be the executive director of the children's museum? How does your background relate to this position and how does it fit into your long-term career goals?

- **Leadership and Vision:** Define leadership as it applies to the job of a chief executive of a children's museum. In your current and past positions, give some examples of how you have demonstrated the capacity to make a substantial and meaningful impact on your organization. Describe your philosophy regarding the public dimension of museums. Why do museums matter?

- **Programming Experience:** Describe your experience with complex museum programming involving permanent/temporary exhibitions/programs for children and adults or specific museum experience such as science, natural history, art museum programming. Discuss an innovative way you have defined and developed audiences for an organization. Given what you know about the children's museum, what ideas do you have regarding programming and outreach activities?

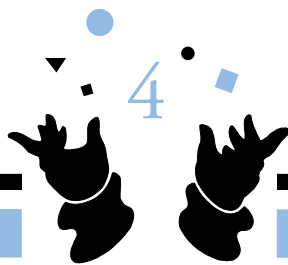
- **Fundraising/Planning Experience:** Describe your involvement and responsibilities in developing plans (long-range, strategic, etc.), policies and procedures for an organization. Our capital campaign is still underway: \$6.5 million raised of an \$11 million goal. It needs to be reenergized. What would you do first as the executive director here?

- **Finance and Budgets:** What role have you played in forecasting, goal setting, preparing, tracking and enforcing revenue and expense budgets? Describe a situation where you had to take a creative approach to a financial challenge.

- **Management and Team Building:** Describe your management style. Provide some examples where you have been instrumental in developing staff. How do you define "energy" in an organization and how would you go about building it and keeping it high?

Call the selected candidates to confirm their interest and conduct phone interviews. Initial telephone interviews are an excellent way to assess interest, whether the candidate is articulate and engaged, and what is motivating the person to seek the position. If the board is conducting the search on its own, phone interviews should ideally be conducted by at least two board members and the same questions should be asked in each of the interviews in order to rank candidate responses. Be sure to ask each of the applicants their current salary requirements and explain the range of compensation that has been decided upon. All too often this important question is overlooked, causing confusion and disappointment for all parties later in the search process. After narrowing the candidate pool to four or so, plan to bring them in for face-to-face interviews. Provide them with all of the materials necessary to understand the museum and its issues in depth: a current annual report and organizational chart; written information and brochures on the museum's programs, membership and fundraising efforts; current financial statements and projections; existing long-range, strategic or other plans or studies; and other information about the city, the state, housing, etc. Prepare an agenda for the day and decide who should meet with the candidates other than the search committee. At this stage, the committee may want to be the sole entity conducting the interviews, or they may feel it is important that candidates meet members of the staff, significant contributors, or other members of the community. Whether this is accomplished now or later after the final selection of one or two choices, it is important that significant stakeholders in the museum and the community have an opportunity to meet the candidates.

A word here should be said about the volunteer or founding director who hopes to become the new salaried chief executive. The volunteer director/founder brings the




obvious strengths of dedication and thorough knowledge of the museum's initial culture to the table, but can also be blinded to problems both new and longstanding by enthusiasm for and familiarity with the organization. Generally, although this person may be readily considered as an applicant, it is in the interests of the museum to compare him or her to other talent and possibilities uncovered by the search.

Obtaining and calling references needs to be handled adeptly, as it is important not to jeopardize the candidate's current position. Ask the finalists for the names of people who can speak about their abilities and accomplishments. This could include former and past directors and senior staff with whom the candidate has worked or supervised and whom the candidate is comfortable with you calling at the pre-offer stage. If the candidate has been a director of a museum, once they have accepted an offer of employment, ask them if you can contact the chair or members of the board where the candidate has been employed

to assess how the person will work with your board. An offer is often made contingent on the outcome of this and other references, background checks, or required drug testing if that is the museum's policy.

Once the search committee has made a selection, work out how the candidate will be endorsed by the full board and how the appointment will be communicated to the staff and community. Review suggestions and requirements from the candidate concerning the employment contract, which should include compensation, increases based on agreed-to goals or museum benchmarks being achieved, benefits package, moving and housing allowances and other relevant contract issues, including the criteria of how the executive director's performance will be assessed and reviewed. Regular reviews of performance are a chance for the board not only to review the new executive director against their original expectations, but for both parties to identify strengths and possible new approaches to issues and opportunities that the museum and staff will encounter.

The process of transition is as important as the search and hiring process. The board should have a clear plan for orienting the new executive director and helping that person to become acquainted with the board, staff, building, collections, donors and the community at large. And celebrate! Have the board chair and/or members of the search committee greet the new director at the museum on the first day. Arrange for a combined staff and board breakfast or some other social gathering to celebrate the success of finding a new executive director and all of the new opportunities ahead for museum. 

Geri Thomas is the President of Thomas & Associates, Inc., and David V. Griffin is a Senior Associate in the same firm. Thomas & Associates, Inc. is based in New York City and offers staffing, consulting and professional development training to museums, nonprofits and art businesses nationwide.