

Nonprofit Organizational Transitions

and Strategy for Impact

Co-Executive Directors: Publicly Available Data Review & Report

June, 2022



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Methodology & Contents

Glick Davis & Associates (GDA) recently researched the issue of nonprofit co-Executive Directors for discussion with the a client board of directors prior to the launch of advertising for their executive search. According to Charity Village¹:

Co-directing is an innovation that a number of organizations, both for-profit and non-profit, have implemented to share the senior staff responsibilities among two or more individuals. In the non-profit world each of the individuals is given equal status on the organizational chart and each reports directly to the board of directors.

Peer-reviewed, sector research of nonprofit topics is limited, due to the capacity constraints of the sector. Therefore, GDA has reviewed primarily non-peer-reviewed but publicly available sources (often called 'grey literature'), for this topic. GDA has reviewed 11 articles, reports, and blog posts, including some materials from some of the country's leading nonprofit management support organizations, and provides the following summary. Additionally, we have reviewed 2 literature reviews that address the current context of nonprofit management and innovations by necessity, in the sector, as well as co-leadership models in management more generally. All 13 sources reviewed are included as footnotes or endnotes.

This report is presented in the following four sections:

1. Comparison of Co-Director (Co-ED) Model vs Sole Executive Director (ED) Model (including pros & cons)
2. Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Work
3. Disadvantages/Pitfalls of Co-Directorship
4. GDA Considerations for a nonprofit board in approaching the search and hire of Co-Directors

1. Comparison of Co-Director Model vs Sole ED Model

Excerpted from *Nonprofit Leadership Models*¹ by Strela Cervas
for the Asian-Pacific Environmental Network, 2021

The most comprehensive and relevant study that we found in our research was this study performed in 2021. This work compares benefits and pitfalls of a Co-Director model with a sole ED/CEO model, including analysis and recommended best practices for all leadership models.

The [executive summary](#) of this report is worth reading.

The following table and subsequent bullet points broadly summarize the report's executive summary:

Co-Director Model	Sole ED/CEO Model
Main benefits/reasons	
• Better reflects organization's values (e.g., democratic decision making) • Complementary skill sets • Sustainability, by relieving some of the burden that single leaders feel • Challenge to white dominant culture and capitalism • Productivity • Identity: Reflects a diversity of the community served	• People-centered approach • Clear accountability • Clarity of supervision and coordination with the next tier of staff • Main contact for the organization • Ability to also have shared leadership, without full Co-Directorship
Main challenges and pitfalls	
• Lack of alignment about major decisions • Lack of communication compared to daily need for communication • Inequitable roles • Unequal comfortability in power dynamics: Both Co-Directors need to feel equally empowered to be the ultimate decision-makers. However, problems arise if one Co-Director is less comfortable making decisions • Staff deference to Co-Directors • Potential to side with and form alliances with one Co-Director	• Sustainability: Lack of capacity to "do it all" • Expectations too high: It's "a huge job description" • Easily get scrutinized • Potential to be less collaborative

Nonprofit Leadership Models also summarizes issues that apply to both Co-Directors and sole EDs:

- *Decision-making*: There is an underlying assumption that decision-making would be more confusing with a Co-Director model. However, even sole EDs reported that decision-making is challenging for their organizations.
- *Capacity*: Even with any type of organizational restructuring many report that the overall job is still unsustainable.
- *Bias against female executive leadership*: Organizations report challenges of what it means to have female and non-binary executive leadership, especially women of color. Unseen “women’s work” (behind-the-scenes or administrative work) is not valued.
- *Challenge of being a cohesive team for larger organizations*. Lack of centralized direction and oversight.

Cervas’ report states that “There is no one formula for how Co-Directors divide their roles. Some organizations believe in sharing all of the major responsibilities equally, while others have a “lead”. There is no one way for determining who will be the lead. In general, organizations report dividing the responsibilities according to:

- 1) Skill set/expertise,
- 2) Interest,
- 3) Relationships,
- 4) Capacity available, and
- 5) Identity (race, gender, sexuality, etc.).

2. Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Work

GDA cites three sources of tips for making a Co-Directorship work well:

2A. 8 Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Workⁱ is a well researched experiment with co-leadership that describes a strong working relationship, roles and responsibilities between the Co-Directors. **The following excerpts are general guidance:**

- **Trust** the other person.
- **Over-communicate with each other** and **plan, plan, plan for ALL** job responsibilities; who leads on each, who supports
- **Get a coach for the Co-Directors** as a team
- **Check in on the state of your co-directorship with formal, structured weekly meetings and self-assessments at each..**
- **Don't co-everything.** Even though sharing is integral to the co-director position, you still need to develop specialization and a clear division of labor with your co-director.

2B. In *Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership*,ⁱⁱⁱ Meera Chary summarizes how to avoid co-leadership pitfalls:

- **Consider the co-leadership dynamic.** Co-directors... “have been able to work so effectively together is because they had already collaborated closely in their prior senior director roles at the organization.” “We had already done a lot of the messy work of learning what it meant to work really closely with one another, how to resolve differences of opinion and perspectives ... while still maintaining a good working relationship”
- **Don't set co-leadership in stone.** One nonprofit board agreed to co-CEOs, but they did not want to commit to having co-CEOs be a permanent feature of the nonprofit's organizational structure. The board knew that one planned to exit the organization in three

to five years, so they told her that when she left, if the other wanted to continue as sole CEO, they would support her in that role.

2C. The two co-Directors of Trees Atlanta (one of whom wrote about their experience in **Not So Lonely At The Top**)^{iv}, and who had known each other for many years, said:

- “We figured out early on that we need to decide who will be in charge for particular projects and issues, and work together to enable that person to shine” and,
- “Our relationship has worked in large part because we had already established respect and admiration for each other and had worked together to fully vet the structure and decide how we thought it would work. In our minds and our actions, we carry out the idea that our success depends entirely on the success of Trees Atlanta. It is never about us, but about the organization.”

3. Disadvantages & Pitfalls of of Co-Leadership

Based on ***Disadvantages of Co-Leadership***,^v other sources and GDA’s experience with Co-Leadership, we offer the following summary of pitfalls of Co-Directorship:

- **Potential for Conflict:** While primarily this would be between the Co-Leaders, potentially the conflict could occur between one or both Co-Leaders and staff who may feel their voice is muted with *two bosses*, or with board members who feel they are too often helping to resolve a conflict that would not exist with a single ED. A side effect of conflict can be blaming of others.
- **Relationship Among Co-Leaders:** The professional supports noted above in Section 2 from “8 Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Work” are important to minimize the risk of the co-director relationship eroding over time.
- **Increased Time & Expenses:** The extra personnel cost and time to make decisions adds costs, although the cost and time investment can, in the best case, build organizational capacity and best decision-making preparedness.
- **Lack of Accountability:** Either one or both Co-Directors may not “own” the Co-Directors’ decisions. The same can apply to other staff members who could feel disempowered because they feel that their decision-making authority is somewhat minimized with two bosses. Also, GDA has experienced that boards of directors can be called upon to play a tiebreaking role in such a circumstance.
- **Ambiguity of Reporting Centers:** Unless the Co-Leaders are VERY clear about who reports to whom, and whether or not that varies depending on the issue/decision, there is a possibility that some staff could be unclear about who to report to, especially if co-leaders conflict with each other, as employees may feel caught between the leaders’ disagreements. Employees may report to the leader in support of their views and ways of going about the work, undermining the other co-leader.
- **Lack of Transparency/Clarity for External Partners:** Unless clear agreement and communications about who is speaking for the organization and in which circumstances and roles, Co-Leaders could be confusing for community partners.

4. Considerations for Approaching a Search for a Co-Director

Considering the factors described above, GDA offers the following considerations for the nonprofit boards considering executive searches for, or which may include Co-Director candidates:

4A. Considerations During the Search & Interview Process

- i. What are the reasons to do this? And are there better reasons than others? Does the current situation generally fall among the good, or better reasons?
 - a. Share power
 - b. Model collaboration and teamwork
 - c. Avoid burnout
 - d. Better decision making (two heads better than one)

Based on the information gleaned in the organizational assessment to date, the internal candidates' rationale for a Co-Directorship include some of the above, and in addition, this situation offers the possibility of hiring/promoting from within, which is itself a valid reason.

- ii. If a Co-Directorship is viable, then any Co-Executive Directorship should include clear delineation of areas of responsibility, specifically establishing that not everything should be co-directed. Such delineation can, to some extent, begin to be assessed during the interview process, and can be based on:
 - Skillset/expertise
 - Interest
 - Relationships
 - Capacity available
 - Identity

4B. Considerations Beginning with the Onboarding Stage if Co-Directors are Selected

Should Co-Executive Directors be hired, immediately implement the Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Work (from above, such as coaching, weekly meetings) into the employment agreement. Specifically, the following should be implemented as essential elements of the contract, and board and staff communications and expectations:

- i. Develop a process to resolve disagreements between Co-EDs and manage board and staff expectations around such disagreements
- ii. Provide professional development & support for the Co-Directors to support and manage the Co-Directorship.
- iii. Implement a detailed communications plan among Board, Staff and External Stakeholders to address questions/concerns about the Co-Directorship, including how the power dynamics of a Co-Directorship are not intended to be different from a sole directorship. Anticipate and plan for community/external relations scenarios to identify clear roles/responsibilities and processes.
- iv. Develop an executive succession plan for the case in which the Co-Directorship doesn't work out ideally.

4C. Considerations if Co-Directors are not Selected, Possibly beginning prior to the Onboarding Stage

- Create intentional plan for how to onboard new ED
- Create intentional plan for maintaining the loyalty of, and retaining the internal candidates

Non-Endnote Sources Reviewed

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How a co-CEO model can benefit nonprofits, **Grand Rapids Business Journal**, June 18, 2021: <https://grbj.com/blogs/blog-small-business-startups/how-a-co-ceo-model-can-benefit-nonprofits/>

5 Insights from Directors Sharing Power, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, March 2017: https://www.compasspoint.org/sites/default/files/documents/Five_Insights_Report.pdf

Should we appoint co-executive directors? Don Kramer's Nonprofit issues, September 5, 2017: <https://www.nonprofitissues.com/to-the-point/should-we-appoint-co-executive-directors>

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Leading and Managing Nonprofit Organizations: Mapping the Knowledge Base of Nonprofit Management in the Human Services, Sara L. Schwartz & Michael J. Austin, November 2008.

Fifty-five years of managerial shared leadership research: A review of an empirical field, by Marianne Doos and Lena Wilhelmson, *Leadership* 2021, Vol. 17(6) 715–746.

End Notes

ⁱ **Co-Directing: A Leadership “Pas De Deux,”** by Jim Campbell, December 12, 1995, at: charityvillage.com/co_directing_a_leadership_pas_de_deux/

ⁱⁱ **8 Tips for Making a Co-Directorship Work**, Huffington Post, December 11, 2014: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/8-tips-for-making-a-codir_b_6305354

ⁱⁱⁱ **Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership**, by Meera Chary, of the Bridgespan Group, March 23, 2022: https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/approaches-to-nonprofit-co-leadership?utm_source=leadersmatter&utm_campaign=H1_BLA_2022&utm_medium=email

^{iv} **Not So Lonely at the Top: Lessons from a Co-Executive Director**, published by the Georgia Center for Nonprofits, Fall, 2016: <https://www.gcn.org/articles/Not-So-Lonely-at-the-Top-Lessons-from-a-Co-Executive-Director>

^v **The Disadvantages of Co-Leadership**, by Nelson Reed, in classroom.synonym.com: <https://classroom.synonym.com/disadvantages-coleadership-8792222.html>