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- ▶ Event Calendar
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Alliance for Nonprofit Management > Members Only > Enhance > Enhance June 2006 > John Corwin

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ALLIANCE FOR NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

June 09, 2006

**MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: John Corwin**

**The Unique Role of an Interim Executive Director  
John Corwin, Corwin Consulting, LLC**

My father used to ask me: “Are you helping with the solution, or are you part of the problem?”

I was born in Mt. Vernon, New York, and grew up on Long Island. I lived in Cambridge during my undergraduate years, and then, after marrying my wife, we lived for two years in Cincinnati, where I was stationed with the United States Public Health Service as a commissioned officer. We then moved back to the Boston area to attend law school together. After graduating in 1973 we moved to Brooklyn, New York, and in 1979 moved to Greenwich Village in Manhattan, where we still live.

In different ways, for 11 years, I have been involved in capacity building for nonprofits. This work follows 22 years practicing as an attorney in the nonprofit and public interest sector.

For almost six years, I was the first full-time Executive Director of The Glaucoma Foundation, a nonprofit which had a staff of three, a budget of \$900,000, and very few programs when I arrived in 1995. I was fortunate to have the creative opportunity to work with the board to develop programs and messages that substantially increased the productivity of the organization. When I left in 2000, the budget was almost \$2 million and the staff of 11 were managing a half-dozen new programs. The donor list had grown from 1,100 to almost 20,000. More recently, my work has become more explicitly directed to capacity building in my role as interim Executive Director for nonprofits undergoing executive transition.

In 2002, I began my current consulting practice serving as an interim Executive Director for nonprofits undergoing leadership transition. In this capacity, I help nonprofits in two basic ways: by providing professional interim leadership, and by advising the Board of Directors on how best to meet the challenge of turnover by taking advantage of the uniquely powerful opportunity it presents to strengthen the organization. See [www.corwinconsulting.com](http://www.corwinconsulting.com).

More specifically, interim management entails a range of responsibilities, all of which need attending to immediately, including: protecting fundraising income and opportunities and preserving key donor relationships; supporting staff morale to forestall costly staff turnover; ensuring continuation of key fiscal and managerial functions; preserving visibility and reputation; and supporting the search process for the new chief executive.

The key goal of interim management is to build and maintain confidence among Board members, donors, staff, and other stakeholders about the stability, reputation, continuity, strength, and future of the organization.

With this foundation, the Board is able to step back and take a fresh look at the organization and its mission, and make a thoughtful decision about where it wants the organization to go, what challenges will face the new chief executive, and what qualities that new executive should possess. The organization may be at a new developmental stage; the external environment may have changed dramatically. The ideal CEO at the time the previous CEO was hired may not be the ideal CEO going forward.

My role includes helping the Board to determine what process to follow to address all of these questions. In particular, I assist with the design and implementation of whatever strategic planning process is appropriate for the



organization at that point, and enable the Board to take the time it needs to make the decisions that should precede recruitment and selection of the new CEO. My role also includes helping the Board to determine how to go about recruiting, interviewing, and evaluating candidates, and identifying ways in which strengthening current systems within the organization will be helpful or necessary to enable the organization to grow and thrive. Such changes can include revising how finances are managed; modifying the organization's budget to reflect changes that have occurred since the departing CEO gave notice, or since the beginning of the fiscal year; adopting new personnel practices; and, recommending increased investment in infrastructure in order to be able to meet future challenges of the organization.

It is very exciting to see an organization rise to the challenge of what could be a truly traumatic event and come away from the transition process with greater strength, resources, and energy, and greater clarity, focus, and optimism about its mission and its programs. It is exciting to see an organization decide to become more intentional and skillful in its decision-making, and to see the people involved genuinely enjoying their participation in the enterprise.

Most challenging: There is no three-month learning curve! I am expected to catch on immediately to what's happening and what are the most pressing priorities. The first month is incredibly intense, because within that period it is essential to get sufficiently on top of the situation to gain the trust of the Board (especially the chair), the staff, and the major donors concerning the ongoing management and stability of the organization.

It is also important to maintain neutrality, which can be difficult when people with conscientious but very different points of view seek decisions in accord with their views. My role is not to chart the organization's substantive future direction, and being able to engage constructively with everyone is not always easy.

Since I learned of and joined the Alliance in 2003, I have found it to be a terrific source of new ideas and tools to promote the more effective functioning of nonprofit organization. Through its annual conferences, email resources, and nationwide network, the Alliance has made it possible for me personally to have access to the people and the information that can help me to better advise my clients and meet their needs. This type of sharing of expertise on a national scope is an incredible asset to the nonprofit sector.

At the 2006 meeting in Los Angeles, I will be joining representatives of the Support Center for Nonprofit Management in New York to present a session entitled "Interim Executive Directors: A Call to Arms."

The reasons I participate are, first, I think we all benefit from one another's knowledge and perspectives, and, second, it is really great to associate with other people who are genuinely excited about how much can be done to increase the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations through strategic interventions that empower them to work smarter. It is also wonderful to get referrals, most recently for my current interim executive position.

What would I like to see happen in the Alliance? Greater visibility of the organization and its message; there is such a huge educational challenge trying to provide nonprofits with the information and resources they need to achieve their own goals in the best possible way.

In the same vein, for the field I would like to see best practices for leadership—both governance and management—become more widely known, understood and followed. I think that quality and effectiveness of leadership is the single most powerful leverage point for getting the job done better and at less cost.

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*John Corwin has worked for his entire 33-year career in the nonprofit and public interest sector. Through Corwin Consulting, LLC, founded in 2002, he serves as interim CEO for nonprofits undergoing leadership transition. He is currently interim CEO of Learning Leaders, Inc., a nonprofit which recruits, screens, trains and supports over 14,000 school volunteers who provide instructional support and other enrichment services to students in more than 900 New York City public school schools. He has also been Interim CEO at The Valley, a youth services agency in Harlem; the Community Health Care Association of New York State (CHCANYS); the US Committee for the UN Population Fund (now called Americans for UNFPA); and the African Medical & Research Foundation (USA).*

*Prior to his executive directorship at The Glaucoma Foundation, Mr. Corwin practiced public interest law at The Legal Aid Society, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the New York Attorney General's office—as Chief of the Consumer Frauds and Protection Bureau. John served on the board of Greater New York Association of Fundraising Professionals, and is a member of the Public Service Network Committee of the NYC Bar Association, BoardSource, Governance Matters, and the New York Technical Assistance Providers Network. He is a graduate of M.I.T. and Harvard Law School.*