APPOINTING A MISSION AGENCY CEO

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Category: Observations

Perhaps the most important thing that a mission agency has to do is to appoint the CEO/Director who will run the organisation on a day to day basis. Because of the importance of this issue, I thought I'd write a few short thoughts on the subject.

One of the first things that a board must do is to take a sober look at their own agency and the situation in which they are operating. The world is changing rapidly and the environment for world mission is vastly different to what it was a decade ago, much when I first started in mission work in the 1980s. Despite this, I still encounter mission board members whose vision of mission is rooted in an understanding of mission being from the Christian West to the needy rest of the world. I'd strongly encourage all board members to watch the video below (sorry for blowing my own trumpet).

https://youtu.be/fPpsDrbD4XI?si=NGZ6_3hy6OstuxK_

I would also suggest that boards should look at my reports on agency finances which would allow them to gain an understanding of how their organisation is faring compared to the rest of the sector. These two papers may be of help 1, 2.

The second part of the process is for the board to have a clear picture of where they see the agency in the next five or ten years. It is the role of the CEO to lead the agency towards the board's vision. It's no good at all to appoint someone to lead if you don't know where you are going. Equally, a board should not appoint a CEO to work out a vision for them; that's getting the horse and the cart thoroughly muddled. Of course, the CEO should be involved in any future vision setting, but it is the board's responsibility to ensure that it happens.

Nothing I've written so far applies specifically to appointing a CEO, this is stuff that the board should be working on all the time; but it does come into focus at hiring time.

The actual recruitment process is essentially similar to appointing any staff member and there are good HR consultancies who can help with the process if that is needed.

However, there is one big question that often arises, should the appointment be internal or external?

Looked at from one angle, the choice seems to be clear. There are many, many more people who are not members of the agency than who are and so it seems far more likely that a good CEO can be

found from outside of the organisation than from the inside.

However, many people who work inside agencies would dispute this. They would argue that the particular agency has its own traditions and ways of doing things, that their organisation is uniquely complex and that only someone who has worked with them could ever understand all of the issues that a CEO has to grasp. This argument says that an internal appointment is essential. I'll admit. that I used to share this opinion, but over the last decade or so I have changed my mind, let me explain why.

Firstly, a good leader can learn to work in a new organisational culture; no one would question a CEO moving from say Marks and Spencer to Dyson, despite them being very different organisations, so why couldn't someone move between two mission agencies?

Secondly, having been a member of one agency for almost forty years and having done research into the agency sector as a whole and done consultancy work for a variety of specific agencies, I'm simply not convinced that agencies are as individual as they think they are. I fully understand why insiders (like me) think their agency - or family - is special, but in truth they have a lot more in common than they think. The sorts of things that people emphasise when talking about their own agency are the complicated membership and support structures, the complexity of being a UK charity that has to relate to an international governing body and so on - but many agencies share these issues. The details may differ, but not the big questions.

The bottom line is that a potential CEO should have the skills and flexibility to work in a new organisation and to learn its culture. This does not necessarily mean that an outsider should be appointed, but the idea should not be ruled out of hand. I would argue that anyone who has worked in the non-profit sector - charity, government, education and so on - could be considered. The transition from profit based organisations to agency work is much harder because the concept of the "bottom line" is much harder to conceptualise.

This brings me to the last point. I said at the start that appointing a CEO may be the most important thing a board does. Actually, I think that there is one thing that is even more important; ensuring that the CEO is successful is more important than appointing them. This means that there should be a thought through and adequately resourced program of orientation for any new CEO. Even if they are an insider, they will have new things to learn and they need to be helped to learn them; an outside will have different needs, but it is the board's responsibility to help them.