Sidestepping political pink slips

By Roma Ihnatowycz

It starts with a nagging feeling that something is just not right. You find you are regularly being sidelined by board members and senior volunteers, and that key decisions are being made without your input. Eventually, you're called into a meeting and given the dreaded news. Your employment at the association is being terminated.

Sound familiar? For an unlucky few association Chief Staff Officers (CSOs), this has been a very real scenario. To add insult to injury, the termination sometimes has little to do with work performance and everything to do with backroom politicking.

"One of the board members who let me go actually got my job," says Emily Jacobs*, a former long-time CEO with a large not-for-profit group. "It became obvious when he got the job that this was his objective in the first place. So it was not a termination for cause; it was simply a 'go away because we want to make our own choices' situation."

According to Jim Pealow, Managing Partner of Association Management, Consulting & Evaluation Services, reasons for terminations normally fall into one of four 'P' camps: performance, political, personality or promotion. Political terminations, he says, are not quite as common as people believe. In an effort to save face, there are those executives who cite 'political' reasons when their dismissal was in fact performance-based.

But political sackings in the not-for-profit sector are still a very real occurrence, and an intensely traumatic one for those on the receiving end. You are hit with a deep sense of betrayal by board members with whom you have worked closely, as well as a sense of dread at the loss of your job and income. You also feel uncertainty for the future.

"I was let go a day after an important meeting," says Anne Harris*, CAE, another association executive. "Board members knew of the impending termination, yet did not share that decision with me for the two weeks prior to the official notice." For Harris, the manner in which the termination was handled left her in a "real grieving process for a month." After more than half a decade with the association, and excellent evaluations throughout, the only reason given for her dismissal was that the group wanted to move in a new direction. No details were provided.

Harris says that in retrospect there were subtle signs in the months leading up to the termination that all was not well. The lesson she learned is that association executives would do well to always have their antennae up for any indications that their position is entering dangerous waters, and to discuss their concerns directly with the chair or other board members.

These signs may vary from more in-camera meetings, to decisions being made without your involvement, or learning that board members have information they are not sharing with you. Also indicative of trouble is when you often have differing opinions on how things should be done, or when salary increases stall.

Preemptive approach

To avert disaster, executives ideally need to take steps long before things reach a critical stage. While there is no magic bullet to fully protect yourself from a politically motivated ‘pink slip,’ putting safeguards in place before a problem arises gives you at least some defence.

You can start at the beginning, by negotiating a contract with a well-thought-out termination clause. “It’s not a guarantee that it won’t happen, but at least it will make people think that if they’re going to do it then there will be consequences,” says John Metcalfe*, another association executive who after almost a decade of employment found himself abruptly dismissed. “It’s one way you can protect yourself.”

Also remember to document all work and correspondence during your tenure at the association. The extra documentation will come to your rescue if you one day find yourself on the receiving end of unfair accusations. “If the executive director is putting forward information or knowledge to support decision-making, and it’s well documented, then they have left a solid trail,” explains Pealow. “Sometimes when it comes down to the wire, when someone tries to say that this person didn’t do what we told them to do, they can go back and look at the documentation and say, yes they have.”

Pealow also strongly advises holding regular performance evaluations – which surprisingly are still not routinely conducted at many not-for-profit groups. Only with a formalized system of evaluation can a CEO fully understand where and how they need to improve in the eyes of board members.

Once this is determined, executives need to act on areas of weakness by engaging in continuous learning. CEOs cannot become complacent and indulge in the mistaken notion that there is little left for them to learn – the learning process should be ongoing. Association executives need to let their boards see that they are taking steps to become the consummate not-for-profit professional the board wants to have running their organization.

A functioning board

This is not to say that CEOs are the only ones who should be getting their performance evaluated: so too should the board itself. Having a good governance model and a well-functioning board, i.e., one where all members understand and properly fulfill their roles and responsibilities, is critical. These evaluations can help ease some of the politicking that can grow out of dysfunctional boards, as well as any misplaced finger-pointing in proportioning blame. “When (board members) evaluate themselves, they may find that need to focus on themselves first before focusing on (the executive director),” notes Pealow.

Jacobs agrees that good governance is an important preventative tool when it comes to hanging on to the top executive position at a not-for-profit group. “The job of the Chief Staff Officer needs to be clearly defined and the job of board members needs to be clearly defined so that everyone is clear on what their piece is and everyone can be held fairly and objectively accountable for the outcomes,” she says. “Without those pieces, you are being set up for decisions being made on the whim. But if there is a good governance model and accountability process, then you are clear from the outset what the board’s expectations are. And you either meet those expectations or you don’t.”

Once this is established, CSOs need to develop good relations with all board members – with an emphasis on the “all.” John Metcalfe strongly warns against aligning yourself with only certain players. As much as it often happens – it is, after all, human nature to warm up to those who have similar views and personalities – it is a dangerous tendency and one to be avoided. “You need to stay in touch and nurture relationships with all your key constituents, all the stakeholders,” stresses Metcalfe. “The worst thing you can do is to cater to just one group or one individual. It will come back to haunt you.”

Metcalfe does, however, simultaneously warn against getting too cosy with the board, or developing an erroneous view that these are your friends who will have your back. Board members are your supervisors, not friends, he stresses, and they will always place their own interests ahead of any personal relationship they may have with you. “When people are in an executive position for a long time, they start to think of board members as their friends, but they are not,” states Metcalfe. “They may make decisions that are not necessarily in line with yours.”

A fine balance

The relationship between a board and a CSO is critical on many levels, and it is also one based on a very fine balance. While association executives usually have extensive expertise in association management, they are de facto taking their instruction and reporting to a group of volunteers who know far less than they do in this area. Yet, as Jacobs points out, when board members stumble, it is very difficult for the CEO, as an employee, to tell their boss, i.e., the board members, that they’re not doing their job.

This strange imbalance can lead to an unwelcome power struggle, and more than one association executive has found him or herself on the receiving end of the proverbial ‘pink slip’ when trying to win it with a hard-handed approach. It is far better, says Jacobs, to try to educate board members through the establishment of a good governance model or by sharing literature outlining roles and responsibilities with those members actively interested in their volunteer role.

All this points to some observers saying that the power wielded by a long-time and deeply entrenched CSO can be a destabilizing factor for board members. There is talk of a “seven-year itch” – the point at which the CSO may be perceived as having too much power in the organization he or she has been hired to run. Whether through the force of their personality, or simply the outcome of the years of accumulated expertise, insecure board members may start to feel a loss of control over their top staff member, and opt to replace him or her with a new one.

Jacobs feels she learned this the hard way, and advises association executives outright to limit their time at an organization to no more than seven years. “There is always a risk of staying too long,” she says. “This is based on the fact that you cannot be perceived as being ‘the association’ in the eyes of the members. They are threatened by that.”

Pealow disputes this view, pointing to many successful association executives with twenty or more years with one group. He does, however, agree that executives must remain cognizant of their subordinate role to the board within the organization. They need to remember who it is they report to and who, in the end, calls the shots.

Metcalfe concurs: “You always need to behave in a way with a bit of deference to an association, in a way that’s going to make them understand that you realize you work for them. That is critical. You need to be their voice, but you need to do it in a way that’s not arrogant. You really need to find that balance.”

**Names have been changed to protect the identity of interview subjects.*