

## **Nonprofit boards don't just want a unicorn**

### **... they want a *special kind* of unicorn**

By Lorcan Barnes, President of Lester Consulting Group

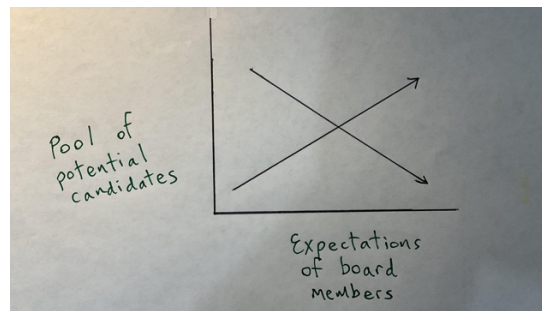
“Searching for a unicorn” refers to a nonprofit board’s desire to hire a chief executive with an unrealistic set of skills and experience. As an executive search consultant for nonprofit organizations, part of my job is to help manage a board’s expectations. A few simple tips can help all parties (board, candidate, and consultant) complete the search process in a strong position to advance the organization’s mission.

Much of my experience has been working with Catholic high school boards, which means we’re hunting for a unicorn in a distinct forest (i.e. the ecosystem of Catholic secondary education.) My work in other nonprofit sectors -- early childhood, corporate philanthropy, social services, community organizations, etc. -- has taught me that each sector only thinks of their distinct ecosystem when searching for chief executives, even though nonprofit leadership skills are largely transferable.

For example, Catholic school boards want a leader who has solid experience wearing three hats of leadership: educational leadership, leadership within a Catholic organization, and business leadership (including fundraising!). Few leaders have worn all three hats. Discouraged by the expectations, some strong leaders may not apply because they feel unqualified.

When I was first hired as a Catholic high school president in 1996, the Board of Trustees expected 10 years’ experience wearing *each* of the three leadership hats! That unicorn didn’t apply for the job, so they hired me, a pony with potential. Boards need to recognize that there may not be any ‘perfect’ candidates. Boards need to adjust their expectations and open their hearts to the ‘least imperfect’ candidate. (Of course, character and integrity are presumed.)

Today, boards have even greater expectations of the unicorn they want to hire. Boards want a unicorn who is *also* known and trusted in the local community, who comes from traditionally marginalized communities, *and* who can connect with polarized stakeholders. Expectations of leaders are going up at the same time the pool of interested candidates is going down. These trend lines aren’t pretty. For a number of reasons, including work-life balance, fewer people want to step into the space of nonprofit leadership. Recent studies have revealed that up to 75% of all nonprofit executives plan to leave their positions during the next five to seven years.



What can boards do about it?

- **Up front** – At the beginning of the search process, the board needs to have the tough conversation about “needs” versus “wants.” Don’t politely say *everything* is important because you don’t want to offend certain stakeholders. An effective candidate profile should make priorities clear to applicants and stakeholders. For example, boards should not say that fundraising experience is a *requirement* late in the process when they are screening semi-finalist applications if the board has invited applications from candidates without fundraising experience.
- **During the search** – Respect the organization’s ecosystem and manage community expectations. For example, if there’s going to be disappointment among teachers if the new president isn’t required to have experience in education, then the board needs to reinforce the role of the president to the faculty and articulate safeguards to ensure educational excellence will continue to be an organizational priority. Helping stakeholders truly understand the complexity of the president’s job will help those stakeholders see beyond their limited organizational perspective. Managing stakeholder expectations is a critical ingredient of a successful search. Boards who prepare a nonprofit community with realistic expectations will position the new leader for success on day-one.
- **Once the new leader is identified** – Establish a thoughtful onboarding process that ensures the new leader engages with a broad set of opinion leaders, not just the loud stakeholder voices that line up outside their door in the first month. Before day-one, the board should identify training opportunities to help the new leader gain skills in those components of the job where they lack experience. The board should provide the time and budget for leadership coaching. It’s a lonely job. In order to maximize effectiveness and longevity, make sure the leader has an objective thought-partner with whom they can be vulnerable.

Unicorn hunting is a growing sport. Adjusting expectations and planning effectively for the executive search can help your organization find the right workhorse who can become a stallion for your organization’s mission.

Lorcan Barnes was a nonprofit president/CEO for 24 years. Today, he serves as a consultant helping nonprofit organizations with executive searches, interim leadership, board governance, and leadership coaching. ([www.lcginc.net](http://www.lcginc.net), [lbarnes@lcginc.net](mailto:lbarnes@lcginc.net))