

9 Must-Ask Interview Questions for Executive Directors & Other Nonprofit Leadership Roles

1. What's your management philosophy?

First things first, you'll want to discover how this candidate deals with people. How does he or she give direction, inspire employees, and lead and motivate a team? Whether your nonprofit is large and widely-known or small and scrappy, you undoubtedly want to find that special person who will mesh with the culture that's already established, while also inspiring your team to be the very best they can be. This essential interview question for executive directors will instantly clue you in on how you can anticipate the applicant will interact.

2. What's your experience with strategic planning? What plans have you developed and implemented in the past?

Strategic planning is a key duty of any executive director role. It's important for setting overall objectives for the organization, determining strengths and weaknesses, and identifying changes that need to be made.

Ideally, you want to find someone with a track record of success—or, at the very least, some experience. Asking for specific examples will take the question past the speculative stage and require applicants to provide real-world stories of how their strategic plans have panned out.

3. Do you have any experience budgeting?

As you know, budgeting is another key component of an executive director role. So, it's another area of experience you'll need to directly address during the interview stages. How competent is this candidate when it comes to assessing the financial health of a business? Finding someone who's experienced in managing the finances will be important for the bottom line and overall well-being of the nonprofit.

4. Can you tell me about your hands-on experience with fundraising?

When fundraising plays such a big role in your nonprofit's livelihood, you'll need someone who's comfortable taking the reins and leading the charge.

Fundraising doesn't sound complicated in theory, but you know better. You'll need to look for someone who has some true, valuable know-how in that arena, and doesn't just talk his or her way around a lack of true experience.

5. What qualities do you think are required in a successful leader?

Effective leadership is crucial for any higher-up position, but particularly for your executive director. Asking this question will help you to see what traits the candidate thinks are most important for someone in a leadership role. Do they think a leader should have high expectations and firm instructions? Does a leader value a more collaborative atmosphere and an open-door policy? This interview question for executive directors may seem simple in nature, but it can really reveal a lot.

6. How would you handle criticisms or questions from the media?

Your executive director will also be interacting with the media quite a bit. Anyone who's done that before knows that it can involve some delicate decision-making. So, understandably, you'll want someone who has some expertise.

In a way, your executive director really becomes the public face of your entire nonprofit. Needless to say, you'll want to ensure you make a solid choice.

7. Can you tell me about a time when you solved a complex problem?

This is one of those age-old interview questions for good reason—it serves to uncover a great deal about a particular candidate. So, while it might feel like an old, tired cliché, go ahead and use this question in your interviews to find out how applicants cope when unexpected issues crop up. I'm willing to bet you'll be glad you asked it!

8. How well do you work with a board? Do you have any experience doing so?

Working with a board isn't always easy, but it's something that any executive director is going to be required to do. After all, the director isn't really the boss of your nonprofit—the board is. You'll want to find someone who not only understands that balance, but thrives in it. That way, your team, your new director, and your board will all be happy.

9. What's one thing you would do differently for this organization?

Here it is—the question that all candidates dread, yet all interviewers love. And, you can bet it's an effective one to ask of any prospective directors. In this role, the executive director will be tasked with generating ideas and improvements for the nonprofit. So, he or she might as well get started right in the interview. Not only will this help you narrow down the best fits for the job, but you also might be rewarded with some great new suggestions!