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## Lessons Learned from Serving as Interim

When I was a child and saw wet cement either for a sidewalk or the foundation of a building, I was always tempted to put my foot or my hand in the cement so that I could make an imprint that would last forever. Most of the time I had the discipline to resist that temptation! Maybe that discipline I learned as a child helped me during my tenure as Interim President and CEO of the Rockford Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Throughout the seven month I served as Interim President, I worked very hard to resist the temptation to put my foot in the wet cement and make a final impression on the face of the Chamber. Throughout that tenure I worked hard not to make that final impression because I knew and kept reminding myself that final impressions are not for interims!

In August, 2004, the Executive Committee of the Rockford Regional Chamber of Commerce asked me to serve as Interim President. After I accepted the responsibility, I realized I didn't know how to be an interim! I spent a significant amount of time giving serious thought to the role of an interim president and how that role differs from the role of the president. My years of study of governance issues told me there was a huge difference and now I was challenged to put that concept into practice. I wanted to share with you some of the lessons I learned.

In my job interview with the Executive Committee, I expressed my belief that no matter who was selected as the Interim President, the role of interim president was different from that of president. The relationship with the Executive Committee should be different for an interim president than for a president. During an interim presidency, some decisions normally made by the president should be made by the Executive Committee. The worse thing that could happen is for an interim president to take the organization off in a direction that was off course from the current, established focus. Therefore, I expressed my belief that any changes in staff, or deviation from the budget, action plan or strategic plan should be reviewed in advance with the Executive Committee. During the interim period, the Executive Committee was ultimately responsible to the Board of Directors for making sure the organization remained on stable ground.

While the hiring, disciplining, and firing of staff is typically the responsibility of the president, I believe that it is different with an interim president. An interim president isn't selected to change the course of the direction of the organization but to keep the organization healthy until the new president is in place. My goal as interim president was to keep the Chamber stable and to get things positioned so that the new president could "hit the ground running" instead of spending his first few months spinning his wheels.

Let me share some examples to demonstrate how I approached decisions differently as an interim. Soon after taking the helm, it was obvious that I

needed a new computer. The one at my desk was the oldest in the building and I depend very heavily on my computer. The operations manager suggested that instead of a desktop computer, I purchase a portable computer with a docking station so that the computer was very versatile, but unfortunately also very expensive. Instead, I purchased a desktop computer with the idea in mind that when the new president came on board he could decide the qualities of the computer that he found desirable. If a laptop with a docking station was needed, he could give my new desktop computer to another staff member who needed the upgrade and then purchase the laptop. A minor thing, but not so minor if you are the new president and wanted to work from a laptop!

During my tenure as Interim President there were some staff changes. Instead of replacing the staff members who left, I decided that the new president should be the one to do that. In three cases, I asked very capable staff members to take on responsibilities on an interim basis, instead of hiring new staff. Because of the longevity of the interim job, I authorized the staff to hire part time assistance so that they would not be overwhelmed. Having staff serve in interim positions gave those talented staff members a chance to shine! They got the opportunity to try the new responsibility and decide if they wanted to apply for that position or go back to what they were doing.

This approach also gave total flexibility to the new president. The new president can now choose if he wants to hire new staff in the vacated positions, if he wants to promote the interim people into their positions or if he wants to reorganize any or all of the organization. He can make that decision to restructure the organization without having to worry about releasing anyone of their current job.

And now that the new president is selected, I am very comfortable turning the presidency over to him. It is my hope that while serving as interim, I have positioned him to be even more successful.

It is hard not to put your foot in wet cement! But if you keep your focus on what is best for the organization, it is much easier to practice the discipline needed.