

Finding the Alpha Dog

How to land a great executive director for your shelter

BY JIM BAKER



Nancy McKenney, who started as the new executive director at Marin Humane Society in March, had the kind of skills the search committee wanted: leadership and management abilities, strategic planning and fundraising experience—and bunny-cuddling skills to boot.

When the McKamey Animal Center in Chattanooga needed an executive director in 2008 for its brand-new facility, its search committee advertised the position nationally on several career search-engine websites and by word-of-mouth, yielding more than 190 résumés.

The committee heard back from lawyers, accountants, store managers, personnel specialists, kennel workers, nail technicians, veterinarians, students, and more. Only about 1 percent of the applicants had any shelter experience. “We even had an exotic dancer apply,” search committee member

and emeritus board member Barby Wilson recalls, laughing. “I think that’s the mentality ... people think, ‘Oh, I love animals—it’s not a problem, I can handle that job.’ And it’s not like that at all.”

The shelter was conducting its search for a new leader after the departure of its previous head, who’d been on the job for less than a year. Wilson says she’d had impressive credentials, but ended up being the wrong fit for the shelter.

The second time the Chattanooga shelter’s search committee members went looking for a new executive director (ED), they

learned from their earlier experience. The mechanics of the search process stayed the same—advertising locally and nationally, gathering résumés, interviewing and culling candidates—but other elements of their approach were different.

During their first search, they’d been focused on their capital campaign. With the new building finished, their conversations with candidates the second time around focused not on getting a building built, but rather on policy and procedures, Wilson says.

The search committee had also learned not to get overly anxious and hurry to

hire someone, and not to search for ways to make a résumé fit the job. The second search committee, according to Wilson, was much more savvy and probing in the interview process.

But what *really* made the process different was that this time, committee members had the advantage of watching one promising candidate on the job, working at the Chattanooga shelter as interim ED. That was Karen Walsh, who had been involved in several fundraising events for the capital campaign. She was a member of the teaching staff in the veterinary technician program at Chattanooga State Community College, and she had worked as an animal control officer years before in Virginia.

And she had business experience, which the search committee really wanted in its new leader. Walsh had run a successful restaurant for five years. The search committee approached her about serving as interim ED while the shelter looked for a permanent replacement. Walsh agreed, and indicated that she'd like to be considered for the top job, too. Even as some members



Being able to communicate a vision for the organization is key, says Steve Jacobson, right, executive director of the Animal Welfare Society in West Kennebunk, Maine.

of the search committee were insisting that the next ED should be a “big-time shelter person from out of town,” Wilson says, Walsh was bringing chaos into order right before their eyes.

The committee ultimately decided it didn't need to search any further. “Karen had a very balanced résumé with a strong business background, sheltering experience, and vet tech experience, balanced with excellent interpersonal skills,” Wilson says. “No other candidate brought that combination of attributes to the table.”

Let the Right One In

Being an executive director is a tough job—just ask anyone who's ever tried her hand at it. There are so many “hats” to wear: leader, manager, fundraiser (also known as “donor schmoozer”), spokesperson, strategic planner, animal advocate ... the list goes on. That's why it's so important to hire someone who—sticking with the hats metaphor—has a head that will fit into all of them. Plus,

you've got to find someone who's a good fit for your community and your shelter's particular philosophy.

Conducting such a hire is no small task, judging from the short tenures of many shelter EDs. Some leave after just a few short, tumultuous years—or are pushed out by boards or advocates that are unhappy with them, whether for reasons of performance, personality, or that amorphous, hard-to-define problem of “unsuitable fit.”

Times have changed in the way shelters go about hiring an ED. It used to be enough to have a passion for animals and a commitment to the field, according to Inga Fricke, director of sheltering and pet care issues for The Humane Society of the United States.

These days, she says, it's not enough to just have shelter operations knowledge, or skills limited to any one field. “You have to have a balance nowadays. A good ED is somebody who is flexible, adaptable, who has a really strong foundation in a variety of areas. Obviously if they *aren't* quite as strong in one area, they really have to have support staff that's very strong under them that they can rely on,” Fricke says.

Finding that perfect leader can be tricky, but with the right kind of preparation, it is possible to come up with just the right candidate.



Karen Walsh's experience as a licensed veterinary technician and as an animal control officer was a strong factor in her getting the job as executive director at the McKamey Animal Center. Here, she helps ACO Jay Nicholson with a German shepherd found running at large.

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The right preparation includes advance planning and conceptualizing; if your organization knows where it wants to go, it's a lot easier to find the right person to drive you there.

Do They Have What it Takes?

Jane Luiso, a former executive director of the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago and past president of the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA), has helped many shelters find candidates for executive director jobs. Luiso now works for the Chicago-based Kittleman & Associates, an executive search firm exclusively serving nonprofit organizations and institutions.

These days, Luiso says, shelters often want their leaders to have strong business skills, and they may also be seeking a head who'll fill certain skill gaps in their management team. That means finding people who know how to work with a board of directors, understand financial statements, and have experience managing staff and a grasp of fundraising.

Candidates who have that combination of talents frequently come from the nonprofit sector, but they also, increasingly, come from

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the business world, equipped with sales and marketing skills and the ability to go out and "sell" their organization to donors and the wider community, according to Luiso.

Wilson thinks this is paramount. "To be successful, and to be able to provide appropriate and compassionate care ... a shelter must first be run as a business. Do hire someone who can grasp all the aspects of running a business, from the financial side to the personnel side," she says.

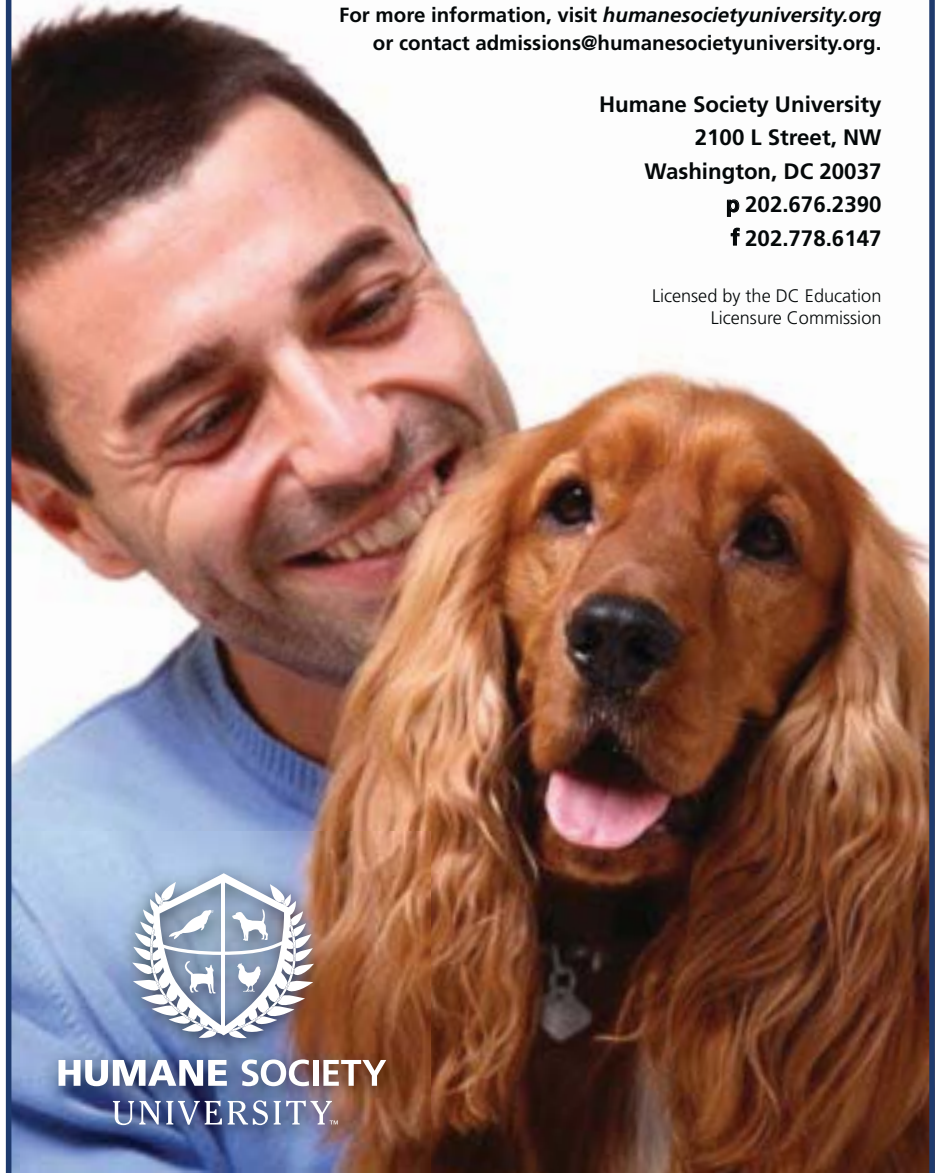
This is not to say that operational knowledge and skills aren't important—they are. But they're not always necessary

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Shelters are increasingly complex organizations to run, and candidates who are seeking the top job must have a firm grounding in how nonprofits operate. Nancy McKenney of Marin Humane, left, confers with vet tech Andrea Reese, as veterinarian Belinda Evans performs surgery.

for a candidate to have in her background. It really depends on the kind of shelter she's being hired for, says Luiso, who notes that operations skills may not be needed for the ED of a very large shelter, where the director of operations would handle much of the hands-on operational work. But it might be different at a small or medium-sized shelter, where, Luiso says, the organization might be light in that kind of expertise and need the ED to have more sheltering knowledge.

Take a Good Look

Then, of course, some job candidates have qualities that boards and search committees should avoid like the parvo. Sources contacted for this story had some definite ideas about this.

For example, avoid zealots, who can't see the shades of gray in many of the ethical dilemmas common to sheltering work. Avoid those with a "my-way-or-the-high-way" approach to managing people. Or a candidate who loves animals, but has less enthusiasm about working with the two-legged variety. Not to mention the folks who look great on paper, with impressive credentials, but lack the practical skills to succeed in a shelter setting.

Also deserving a yellow flag, Fricke says, are ED hopefuls who make sweeping promises to accomplish challenging goals without any evidence that they have the skills and experience to actually do it. "They have the passion, but they don't have the know-how to get there. No track record, and no real practical understanding of what that's going to take."

Hiring people like these can be a recipe for disaster. But how can you spot one before you hire one? By being careful, and doing your homework.

Warren Cox, executive director of SPCA Inc. in Lakeland, Fla., has worked in the sheltering field since 1952. He's served as ED at more shelters than he can remember, and also served as interim ED many times, helping boards find candidates for the top job. In fact, that's how he started out at SPCA Inc.

He's learned a few things about the hiring process along the way, such as: Learn about the candidate's background. That's essential, yet it's often done only cursorily by board members. "They should look at the [person's] résumé with an open mind, and then do their research," Cox says. "A lot of times I've found out recently they're putting things on their résumé that aren't honest; it's probably half true, but it's fudging it."

Wilson advises that it's important to dig deeply into a potential ED's background; there is often more than meets the eye. Don't forget to check references, and utilize Internet resources—Google can be a wonderful thing.

If possible, one way to glimpse the reality is to simply visit the candidate's current shelter. "If I was a board member, and I was going to hire somebody, and I knew that they came from [a certain] place, I'd have somebody stop by, and take a look at that agency, and see what they thought," Cox says.

A common mistake Cox has seen shelters make is to interview a candidate once, and then reach a decision. The process should be more complex than that, designed to reveal more about a potential ED than a single interview can provide.

"Sometimes you can see a person at an interview, and they're just totally dynamic; they overwhelm the board," Cox says. "But they don't have that candidate come back, and really interact and get to know the staff, or have other people interview them, and that person is hired, and it was really kind of like a smokescreen."

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Cox encourages shelters to invite candidates to "come back for a whole day, and meet as many people as they can, even meet with community leaders, because it's very important to see if that person can interact with everyone."

Again, when you're looking for the right person, it helps to know what you want them to do in the job. That means taking your time, and carefully considering what qualities and skills the new ED should have. What is your shelter trying to do over the next five years? The next 10? What professional skills will help an executive director guide the shelter team toward accomplishing those goals?

Say your shelter wants to focus on increasing adoptions and reducing euthanasia, for example. Does your candidate share that vision? How would they go about achieving it? Some of these qualities are harder to quantify, getting at the roots of an individual's philosophical approach to sheltering, as well as animal welfare in general. Wilson argues that it's essential that any prospective ED understand (and share) a shelter's mission and operational philosophy. During the hiring process, the search committee should discuss the candidate's perception of the "big picture," she says, as well as his or her perception of what constitutes the fundamentals of shelter operations.

Often it boils down to "the vision thing," which sounds awfully intangible. But Steve Jacobson, executive director of the Animal Welfare Society in West Kennebunk, Maine, believes it's part of the reason he was hired. Coming from an insurance background, Jacobson's business experience impressed the search committee, but its members also liked that he had an idea of where he'd like to take the shelter in the future.

"I went into my interview ... with a vision. Even the use of the word 'vision' was pretty important," he says. He shared his thoughts about improving the shelter's PR, customer service, and facility. He sketched some ideas on increasing adoptions and growing the donor

base, and for transforming the shelter into more of a regional, rather than strictly local, organization.

"I realize that these items aren't unusual or very exciting," he says, "but verbalizing these as goals during the interview gave the committee reassurance of what I wanted to do."

Yes, Goldilocks, There is a Just Right

All this makes it sound like hiring the right ED is like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack.

But when shelters do things right, they can find the right person. Earlier this year, the Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif., was looking for a new leader. It was a time of rapid—and often rocky—transition for the organization. The shelter's longtime ex-

ecutive director had retired in 2007 after 26 years in the job; she was followed by two more EDS who left in quick succession.

The board engaged a search firm, and created a criteria matrix to help refine the interview and selection process. "We were looking for a proven track record across the board: leadership and management skills, strategic planning experience, fundraising, government and community/media relations, advocacy, board relations—all packaged in a person with a style that would fit well in our community and with our staff," says Laura Goff, chair of the search committee.

Nancy McKenney emerged as the best candidate, and took over as CEO in March. She'd previously spent 19 years as CEO at the Humane Society for Seattle/King County. She has a master's degree in nonprofit leadership, and she's a past president of SAWA, among other accomplishments.

McKenney thinks it was a combination of her sheltering experience, her firm grasp of strategic planning, and an ability to work with the board and staff during a time of transition that led the search committee to choose her as the new ED.

The job of being a shelter ED—you could argue that it's more of a calling, really—is one of the more difficult professions out there. Wilson notes that her shelter's search committee often felt that the job description should have included a line that said, "Must be able to walk on water, while alligators are just below the surface, nipping at your feet."

An amusing image, but it's true. An ED has so many roles to play, in addition to dealing with what sometimes feels like a new crisis every day. Hiring the right person—one who will allow a shelter to grow, innovate, and carry out its mission—is a process that requires care and patience. It's an important decision, so give the hiring process, and the gravity of the position, their due. The community and the animals will be the better for it. **AS**

For more about the skills needed for humane society staff to rise from their current positions to ED, read Jane Luiso's SAWA column, "Rising to the Top," in the September/October 2011 issue of Animal Sheltering.



These days, it isn't enough for a shelter ED candidate to "just love animals"—you've got to be able to understand financial statements, raise funds, and know how to manage people. Jacobsen confers with Animal Welfare Society co-managers Bobbi Allen and Kirstin Minnini.