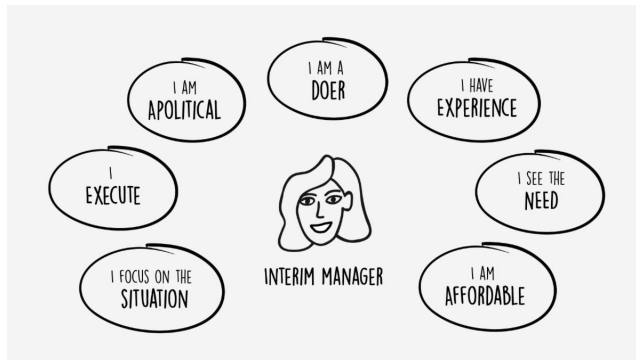




To Interim or Not to Interim



Continuing the previous Manager Series 1 and 2, this opines why a board should *always consider* hiring an Interim Manager.

One of the most important reasons for hiring an Interim speaks directly to Grand Lake's most recent situation where the Mayor stepped up to be Interim. It is quite different to be a Mayor "giving direction but not doing the work" to becoming a Manager researching, meeting with staff, doing the hard work necessary to make recommendations to a board with the information they need. It is also quite

different that said work may be ignored. Mayors can "work both sides" of the table, proposing policy then advocating for it, which betrays the idea of professional managers and, perhaps oddly some might think, also betrays the idea of citizen governance. Managers have leeway to *implement* policy as they wish. Mayors get to decide then go back to their day jobs. When a Mayor "volunteers" to "help" with day-to-day work at Town Hall, that can lead to many awkward issues with staff, applicants and is just generally a bad idea. An Interim preserves the administration - politics boundary. If you don't think that matters, ask Sam Light at [CIRSA](#).

One of the first questions I ask a board is do they want an Interim to preserve the current order or to review systems and policies, and aggressively problem-solve? An astute interim can quickly assess dysfunctions and address them with honest feedback to staff members who might have earned a Hall Pass from the previous manager, and to a board. In one place an interim wrote job descriptions and wrote HR hiring standards which hadn't existed before. In another, an interim may address a sticky personnel issue that is impacting the entire organization. An Interim tends to withhold less from a board because they are not playing the long game. They don't have time. Some are specialists in assessment, being the "bad guy" and making some key changes. Though I don't recommend overtly asking a transitional person to "clean house" (powerful as it sounds) if they focus on a couple key issues, they can often release a logjam without impeding progress, and their very presence can often prevent speculation turning into an exodus of good staff. That extra set of eyes and ears on the organization from an Interim is often the incoming TM's best advisor. A short tenure with an interim moves the organization beyond any of the awkward contexts and feelings from the past TM situation so that the incoming manager can begin addressing forward issues instead of mending those from the past. Even if an Interim Manager appears to primarily seat warm or hold space, being a point person serves vital functions – doing what I call "care and feeding" of board and staff. A competent interim can cohere a staff after a messy exit if that was the

case.

During this transition period, an Interim can do Chiropractic- through preparation and alignment work for a Board. It may sound strange for the larger places to say, but if goals and a strategic plan are out of date, no longer the consensus of the board, or have never been written (which is very common in small places), it is important for a board to convene to align with each other **so that they can signal clearly what defines success for an incoming manager.** An Interim who isn't focused on job preservation can insist that discussions take place, that disagreements and awkward relationships get addressed before they burst into dysfunction. Too many boards glibly pass over this reflective step or fail to discuss it together.

Professional Tip: an Interim will be there long enough to understand the basics of how an organization ticks so they may be able to do something that I believe is crucial to transition—and if so, write a deep-dive transition memo. This is a confidential memo (sometimes just between Managers, sometimes including the Mayor or board) to the incoming manager that lists items in progress internally and externally, who are the up-and-coming staff to mentor, which public will come in and use a bunch of your time, how to handle certain reporters with key facts, points of contact and nuances. An outgoing manager will often have 50 or more external contacts that are speculative inquiries that have not risen to the board's attention yet because so much of the work is years in the making. I had a mental file on every single property and property owner in each of the business districts when I was Manager. Managing a small place can be like planting an orchard – the fruits of labor sometimes are well into the future.

When a manager exits without passing some of that legacy knowledge along, it is not only obvious experience with current files that goes out the door, but many, many other crucial prospects in the works. Of course, some managers like to start and figure it out themselves which works if they become a 7 –10 manager, but these days when managers change every 2-4 years so much is just lost. An engineer can insist on “as-built” drawings, the clerk leaves a public record, but many Directors and Managers have a “carnal” knowledge of place. A Transition Memo can boost the learning curve for an incoming manager to know when a certain person checks in as they do periodically (to not spend too much time with them), who has great ideas, which families are thinking of rezoning or redeveloping which may only happen after an elderly family member passes. Three years after I began as Town Manager in Eagle, I was still checking items of the Transition Memo and had added many new pages myself in a working document. Few TMs who are fired bother to share a Transition Memo. I didn't.

I advise boards that it should be quite clear to Town Manager candidates what “success” looks like to that board for the next couple years. Directional clarity is too often assumed as self-evident. That is where an outside person from DOLA, or an organization like NWCCOG comes in handy. If there isn't an Interim Manager or a search firm to provide structure and facilitate the job announcement and prepare the table. For the Grand Lake example discussed last week, one advantage of the direction they took appointing the Mayor as Interim is the continuity, and the preserved institutional knowledge. Both the town board and candidate certainly know what they are getting. Five years ago, they had two different Interims before hiring John Crone. All involved seemed to understand how necessary that was to hold the tiny organization together. This time, Mayor Kudron serving as Interim turns out to have been a kind of pilot for both parties. Sometimes an interim does so well that they stay – Gary Suitor in Steamboat Springs is an example of that.

Boards sometimes seem to act as if the next manager is behind the curtain, waiting to be introduced. Jumping too quickly from one Manager to the next has risks. For boards who really want to attract a quality Town Manager (TM) there are many considerations that should begin with their current manager *after* they earnestly attempt to put issues on the table and work things out before taking hasty action. There are reasons a therapist asks first in couples therapy, “have either of you contacted a lawyer?” Once the intent to separate, fire, request resignation, or just make life miserable is put on the table by the board as a group, it is no longer a discussion about performance, it is a negotiation about the exit. Though it feels powerful to put the manager in the corner with the dunce cap, it also paints the *board* in that corner with them.

How a board separates with their last TM is, fundamentally, their first interview with the next TM. Impatient boards get this wrong all the time -check out [Frederick](#).

The integrity and respect shown during the exit of the outgoing manager speaks volumes. Managers looking for their next job expect that there was a difficult situation or incompatibility that prompted change. Boards tend to go silent at this point, but any effort to communicate inside and outside the organization as honestly as can be mustered goes a long way. Lawyers advise silence. They are correct that the delicacies of a personnel matter demand that, but transparency about the path forward is crucial. How the board handles this period matters *significantly* to future candidates.

What is going on inside a suddenly decapitated organization?

Speculation. The other reason Interims are vital is that exits are often messy. Rivalries restrained begin anew. As soon as a change is announced, there should be someone tapped to communicate with staff. Larger organizations have guiding documents as well as institutional inertia with a staff leadership team that can stabilize an organization during transitions, not to mention an experienced HR department that frequently handles searches. A town council in many places can look across the room as a manager walks out the door and point to a great Director and say, “we hereby appoint.... To be Acting or Interim

TM.” In smaller towns, the interim phase can get sideways rapidly when there is no obvious internal leader to appoint, or the one appointed doesn’t already have respect and experience. Things can continue to deteriorate for weeks or months when the structures provided by a manager for the staff and for the board disappear. Frankly the board often missteps, sometimes with the best of intentions. Optics are notoriously difficult to see from within. Most of our small towns don’t have a communications person to lean on, or a strong HR office experienced in outside searches. Grand Lake has 12 employees, half of which are public works or water. Some boards have tenuous relationships with the local press who track down rumors, call around, and sometimes critics come out of the woodwork. Not all press write as friendly a story as this one from [Aspen in 2018](#) before they replaced Steve Barwick with Sara Ott, or how Sky-Hi News reporter Emily Gutierrez is reporting on the Grand Lake situation.

What do I mean by optics? For one, how a board behaves and respects each other during board meetings, not to mention with the media and with staff (who are often contacted by colleagues on behalf of candidates). Boards that I work with often think that such situations and their reactions to such situations have no impact on the talent they seek to subsequently attract. That would be wrong. Boards often underestimate the importance of consciously signaling what is happening beyond the town during an interim period. In fact, many potential candidates will do a Google search of news articles (and god forbid embarrassing videos of the board) and move on to the next opening. Potential candidates read the local news, make diligent calls to colleagues, and even watch hours of board meeting recordings and years of minutes before applying and in preparation for interviews. That is precisely the kind of diligence you seek in a manager.

An interim, who has been a Town Manager does not need time for a learning curve.

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What do you think about the need for Interim Managers TM? Email me.

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