

## Agency for Change Podcast: Ingrid Kirst, Nonprofit Leadership Transition Consultant, Ingrid Kirst Consulting

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**Ingrid Kirst:** 0:01

Change brings both opportunities and challenges. Use the power of transition to transform your organization.

**Announcer:** 0:10

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

**Lyn Wineman:** 0:34

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, President and Chief Strategist at KidGlov. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. All right, this is going to seem like the understatement of the year, but we all know that change is hard, and today I'm going to talk to somebody who facilitates smooth leadership changes for nonprofit organizations. Our guest is Ingrid Kirst of Ingrid Kirst Consulting, and what she does is she helps nonprofits through executive search services, through succession planning and sometimes even by stepping in as an interim director to take advantage of times of transition, to make changes in the organization that will have long-term benefits, and to do so in an orderly fashion, without chaos. So I think you're going to like this one, especially if you are a nonprofit leader or if you serve on a nonprofit board. Ingrid, welcome to the podcast.

**Ingrid Kirst:** 1:39

It's great to be here. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

**Lyn Wineman:** 1:42

Me too, Ingrid. I always love talking with people who are really into the world of nonprofits, and you've got a really interesting niche in this space, Ingrid. Can you tell us more about the work that you do as a nonprofit leadership transition consultant?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 2:03

Yeah, I just I really like helping nonprofits go through transitions in a more calm and relaxed way, and so I've kind of settled on three areas. So I help them with executive search services to find new executive directors, and then I'm there to help them every step of the way, so not doing it on their own.

Sometimes I'm also coming in as an interim executive director and then I'm really helping the board assess what's going on at the organization. What do they need to do, what do they need to change before they hire somebody. And then I also love working with organizations on succession plans so that they are learning how to plan for transitions long in advance of them.

**Lyn Wineman: 2:47**

That is such a great idea. Change is hard for any of us, any kind of organization, but I think it is particularly complicated for nonprofits. I'm going to share Ingrid. I like to be on nonprofit boards because I love nonprofits and I am on a board this year where the executive director resigned somewhat unexpectedly but gave us a really long runway as a board nine months, which almost unbelievable nine months to find someone, get them trained, let the transition happen. I know not every board has that, but as a board member and I wasn't even the president that is the most terrifying thing for me to be on a board and to go through this type of transition. So you've seen it before and you're an expert in this area, but why are times of leadership transition so critical for nonprofits?

**Ingrid Kirst: 3:49**

Yeah, it's just like you said they're big, but they're also opportunities. So it's a chance for an organization to take that step back and honestly look at everything. Not just replacing that, that leader, but who do we have in other roles? Are they the right people in the right roles? Based on those people, what kind of leader do we need? But even to look at you know, are we still fulfilling our mission? Should we continue this work? It's a time to just take that pause and say, all right, what, what are we doing? And should it continue? And usually, of course, the answer is yes, we're doing great work and we want to continue, but maybe we want to go in this direction, so we should look for this skill set. So I look at them as opportunities, even though, as you said, they can be scary.

**Lyn Wineman: 4:41**

Yeah, yeah, I mean a lot of times change. I think that is the way to really look at change, like how can we use this to take us to the next step? But I think you're right. One thing I've noticed about nonprofits is their mission tends to have some scope creep right. Sometimes it's just like a little adjustment here or there, or sometimes for some nonprofits they're very opportunistic and they're opportunistic in helping people, which is the best way to be opportunistic. But maybe a new funding source appears or a new partner appears and all of a sudden you have a new program that maybe is aligned or adjacent, or maybe it's not. But over time, if you've collected a lot of these adjacent programs, you kind of have to ask yourself does that mission still fit? And I bet you see yourself going through those conversations a lot.

**Ingrid Kirst: 5:43**

Yeah, yeah. It's particularly when I come in as an interim and I'm really embedded in the organization and everything. It's like okay, somebody tell me what's the history of this thing that we're doing, because it doesn't match with you know, in one particular example it was like oh well, nobody else was doing it, then they needed somebody to do it.

**Lyn Wineman: 6:04**

Right, and I love nonprofits. I love especially human service nonprofits because they see a need and they want to fulfill it. But it doesn't always make sense. Or maybe it made sense at one time, but it doesn't make sense now. Right, how do you counsel a nonprofit through that?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 6:26

Sometimes I have time, sometimes I don't, but it's really taking that step back and thinking about big picture. So you know, maybe it's part of a strategic planning process or maybe it's, everybody said, you know, once I'm the one that says, hey, this doesn't make sense. Everybody, you find out, everybody else was thinking that.

**Lyn Wineman:** 6:47

And they just didn't want to say it. They didn't know how to say it.

**Ingrid Kirst:** 6:50

Yeah, and so sometimes it's just take somebody saying, ok, I think we should talk about this, and then you can go and, ok, you know, we maybe think this isn't the best fit. Who are the other partners? Who are the other folks in the community doing this and who could do it better, and really talking that through. So I think there's a lot of opportunity there, but it does require being open and upfront about those conversations.

**Lyn Wineman:** 7:15

Yeah, that is a really neat difference, I think, between nonprofits and for-profits is I do feel like nonprofits do have those conversations about partnerships and hey, we don't have to take over the whole world here. If there is somebody who's already doing this, well, maybe we can adjust our resources and our focus in a different area. So that's a cool thing, and you don't often see that on the for-profit side of the world in the same way. So, Ingrid, I'm really curious how did you get into this line of work? Like I often think when I talk to people on the podcast, was Ingrid on the playground as a fourth grader saying when I grow up, I want to be a nonprofit transition specialist?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 8:10

No, I found something recently that I'd written back then and I wanted to be a teacher, so there's some overlap there. Yeah, I, after all my experience working in organizations running an organization about seven years ago to start consulting and just quickly saw a lot of organizations really struggling with these transitions Boards that you know their executive director would say, okay, I'm going to retire and give notice, and the board spent a bunch of the time just going. I don't know what to do.

**Lyn Wineman:** 8:46

I know that it was pure panic on the board I was on and I can't believe I've gotten to this stage of my board volunteer work where this was the first one, but it was. It was seriously like what do we do? What do we do?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 9:01

Yeah, and then you know, and then, because the board's panicking, then suddenly they'd rush through a process to hire somebody and they didn't always know what they needed, and so I was just seeing this over and over and so just decided to step in and explore this as an opportunity, because it wasn't really anybody else doing it locally and I found that I really enjoy, you know, I like the teaching aspect of it, especially when I can work with organizations on the succession planning. But also I get to really dive into the behind the scenes of organizations and help them really figure out what's core to their mission, what's core to the role, based on the other roles that they have in the organization, so that they don't stray too far afield on somebody's idea of oh, we need this or we need this, it helps, let's focus it.

**Lyn Wineman:** 9:52

Yeah, fantastic. So, you have recently worked with two of my favorite nonprofits that are based here in Lincoln, Nebraska, where Kid Gloves headquarters is. But can you just share some insights or examples from that recent work with either Lincoln Bike Kitchen, which I think is one of the coolest names for a nonprofit, also Hope Spoke, an organization that KidGlov helped rebrand a few years ago, but anything you can share from those two particular assignments?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 10:26

Yeah, they were both great organizations to work with. I had so much fun. Lincoln Bike Kitchen they have been around for 14 years and had never had staff. So all volunteers fixing up bikes, giving them out to the community. They were doing great but they kept getting bigger and the volunteers wanted to fix up bikes. They didn't want to do the behind the scenes administrative stuff.

So decided to hire staff. So they brought me on as their first executive director. So I was in an interim role but as the first AD, so I could help them set up some of the systems they needed to do fundraising, to do their finances and just kind of what is it like to have a staff person and not have the board do everything? And then, as we got further along the process and we felt ready, then I helped them go through the whole search process to hire a really great executive director. It's still, I think they're still adapting now. It's still okay. Well, now there's this executive director and she wants to do things. So there's still some tension but they're really moving in a great direction and it's let them really grow as an organization in ways that I don't think they even imagined.

**Lyn Wineman:** 11:41

Ingrid, somebody told me once and I have to remember this because I think there's a lot of tension that happens in life and sometimes we think, oh, wouldn't it be great if we could just eliminate all tension. But my friend, Jen Landis, told me that it's tension that makes a tension bridge strong, right, and I think sometimes that tension is an important and necessary part of growth and development. But, you know, managed and minimized, I think there's a big difference between tension and chaos, right, and tension is probably more on the positive side, growing pains. Chaos is a little bit more on the negative side, unless you're an adrenaline junkie and you love the chaos, then that could be okay too, right? Well, tell me a little bit about your work with HopeSpoke, because great child-serving, family-serving organization been around for a long time, kind of on the different end of the spectrum.

**Ingrid Kirst: 12:46**

Yes, HopeSpoke has a lot of history here in Lincoln, so I worked with them as they were looking for a new executive director and really helped them to again figure out what is it they really needed and you know they do great work serving kids in the community. But what does the executive director need? And does that person need to have that experience in mental health therapy or not? Lots of discussions around that and it really I think it resulted in a really strong candidate pool. We had some really amazing candidates come forward.

**Lyn Wineman: 13:23**

That is such a great problem to have, isn't it? Such a great problem. And I think that speaks to the fact that the organization is so well respected in the community that people would step forward as well.

**Ingrid Kirst: 13:49**

Yes. So yeah, we really just went through a whole process, did the interviews and made that selection and I was really excited when Wendy was selected and I know she's doing great job already.

**Lyn Wineman: 14:01**

That's fantastic. So you know we've talked a little bit about, hey, what happens when somebody decides to leave or there's an opening and you've got to fill that opening. Can you talk to me a little bit more about succession planning? So let's say you're at a nonprofit or you're on a board and it seems like things are just humming along and the staff is stable. How do you prepare for this kind of transition when it doesn't even look like you're going to need it?

**Ingrid Kirst: 14:24**

Yeah. So I spend a lot of time talking about that and I feel like at I'm at least here in Lincoln, people are getting the message, but it's been many years. What I really say is you know? First off, we all know we're going to leave our positions.

**Lyn Wineman: 14:38**

Yeah, eventually we're not going to be here forever, right? No matter what.

**Ingrid Kirst: 14:43**

And also, you know, it's not just the executive director that's going to leave. That's going to cause challenges. It could be a program officer, it could be our finance manager, it could be the board chair having to leave unexpectedly, and so really, you know what we do with succession planning is looking at organizations and figuring out one, what's your emergency plan? So the executive director goes on an extended vacation and gets stuck on a tropical island. What are you going to do? I know the board this happened to me.

The board chair came to a board meeting one day and said I'm sorry, I've changed jobs at work and I no longer have time.

**Lyn Wineman:** 15:27

That's a big one yeah.

**Ingrid Kirst:** 15:28

Right, and this was long ago, I was still learning and we looked around everybody else sitting at the board meeting and finally somebody said, well, I'll do it, and he was my worst board chair ever. So talking about that and figuring out, okay, you know we've got this new board member and you know they seem to have some real leadership potential. Let's see if they could get on this committee and eventually run that committee. Or you know, we've got a staff person who's really stepped up to help staff learn this new technology we have. We're really seeing leadership potential in her. How can we help develop her skills? So thinking about some of those things is really important. Thinking about the emergencies, as I said, what you know, what would happen if. How do we talk those things through? Do we have things documented?

**Lyn Wineman:** 16:22

Yeah, big one yes.

**Ingrid Kirst:** 16:24

And then obviously just having the conversation about. It's always good and making sure that there's a conversation, but then you know if an executive director is really thinking about yeah, maybe it's time, maybe you know, or maybe in a few years. I'd like to move on to something else. One thing I really talk with them about is work on your board. Make sure you have the board in place. Who would be ready to hire somebody?

So, make sure you have committed board members, make sure you have a board that works together as a team, Because often when you have a really strong executive director, you have a board that defers to that executive director. They come to meetings but they don't really work together and so helping them to develop that team cohesion so that when they do need to hire somebody, they're ready to work together. So I think there's a lot. I mean, I could go on and on. There's lots of different ways. It's that intentional time of thinking about well, what would we do, and having a conversation.

**Lyn Wineman:** 17:29

Yeah, it sounds like a great topic for like a retreat or an annual planning meeting or maybe even something you could break up, like you don't have to tackle everything all at once, I imagine, but you could maybe space it out between some board meetings as well, just to be having that conversation. That makes a lot of sense to me, Ingrid. So I've got to ask you this. I mean, a lot of our listeners I know are either nonprofit leaders or they're community minded people who serve on nonprofit boards. What advice do you have for these leaders or these board members to help navigate leadership changes?

We've already talked a bit about succession planning and maybe that's like the big advice, but what advice would you like to give people?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 18:23

Yeah, definitely doing some succession planning is key and in whatever way feels comfortable to get it started. Sometimes just talking about the emergency situation feels more comfortable to people. That's a good way to bring up the topic. I also really encourage people, whether they're an executive director or a program manager or even like a board chair, to think about how they can bring in new leaders by sharing the work.

People don't always want to use the word delegate, but the idea is you know you don't have to do it all. You don't have to be the person who does everything. That often winds up being the bottleneck for getting done. Find those new leaders. Give them opportunities to grow their skills because they want that and they're going to be more engaged in the work. So really take that opportunity. Start bringing in new people. Figure out maybe there's some things that it's time to let go of. Like we were talking about earlier. It could be a program. It could be a way you do things. Start thinking about that and I know sometimes that's hard to do when you're in the midst of doing the work of a nonprofit. It can be crazy, but find those quiet times to sit down and really think about the work and doing it better.

**Lyn Wineman:** 19:48

I think too as a business leader myself, I think even one thing I've had to learn is, in some cases you're not going to find those quiet times and you need to make them. You know you need to prioritize this type of planning and block out time that you can do it. And I think too, for a board member, you know if you're on a board that's not talking about this, you can bring it up. And I often I find on boards sometimes it's not just a matter of raising your hand once and saying, hey, I think we should do this. Sometimes you might have to bring up the topic several times before it kind of gets fully adopted or it's the right time. But being an advocate, I think, for this type of planning and succession planning could be really helpful to a board in many ways.

**Lyn Wineman:** 20:45

So, Ingrid, what's on the horizon for you? You've been doing some great work. You've evolved into this role. What's next for you and your mission?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 20:56

I just want to keep working with organizations on searches and serving as an interim. I've been doing a lot around succession planning, both locally and then nationally. I've been working with a national organization to train other consultants on doing succession planning. We need more people doing that because organizations need it. So that's a big focus of mine right now.

**Lyn Wineman:** 21:23

I love that our time during the pandemic which I don't love very much about the pandemic, but I love that it taught us all how to work remotely and virtually. So now we can have these national connections

in a more simplified and accessible way than we once did. So that's great to see you are making a difference, not just locally, but nationally as well. So that's fantastic. Ingrid, for listeners who are hearing about this line of work, who may be interested in having you come in for consulting as an interim for succession planning, how can they find more information and get in touch with you?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 22:10

It's pretty easy to find online. I've got a website that's just [IngridKirst.com](http://IngridKirst.com) and Kirst is K-I-R-S-T, and I'm also pretty active on LinkedIn, so you can find me there.

**Lyn Wineman:** 22:22

Fantastic. We'll get those links in the show notes on the KidGlov website as well for anybody who wants to look them up. Ingrid also did give me a good clue before we jumped on today. She said it's cursed like first, so just spell it with a K. So there you go. So, Ingrid, I'm going to ask you my favorite question next and listeners of the podcast know that I love motivational quotes and I would love an Ingrid Kirst original quote to share with our listeners.

**Ingrid Kirst:** 22:56

Wrapping up, some of the themes we've talked about. I would say change brings both opportunities and challenges. Use the power of transition to transform your organization.

**Lyn Wineman:** 23:06

Ooh, I love that. I love that second part. Use the power of transition to transform your organization. I hope I got that close to right, but that was really good and I appreciate those thoughts. So, Ingrid, as we wrap up our time together today in this great conversation, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

**Ingrid Kirst:** 23:33

Most important thing is just to know that you don't have to go through these transitions alone. There are people out there who can really help you and it's going to make it easier. And, trust me, you're not the first person to have these challenges and these concerns. I can, I can go through it with you and make it easier.

**Lyn Wineman:** 23:52

That's fantastic. I love that, just in general, you don't have to do this alone. Ingrid, I really have loved this conversation and learning more about this line of work that you're in. I fully believe the world needs more people like you helping out nonprofits in times of transition, so thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

**Announcer:** 24:20



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