

Astor Services's Jim McGuirk talks with Doug Eadie about Chief Executive Leadership

Doug Eadie
Doug Eadie & Company

Dr. Jim McGuirk's 25-year career at Astor Services for Children & Families culminated with his appointment as Executive Director/CEO in July 2002. In addition to heading Astor Services, Jim McGuirk serves on a number of national and statewide bodies, including the Children and Youth Advisory Council for the Joint Commission and the Executive Committee of the New York State Coalition of Children's Mental Health Services. Astor Services for Children & Families provides a comprehensive range of mental health and early childhood programs in New York's Hudson Valley and the Bronx, serving 6000 children annually in over 20 locations. Known for its innovative practices, Astor Services was one of the first community-based children's organizations to be accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals (now the Joint Commission).

Doug Eadie is President and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company, a firm specializing in nonprofit board and CEO leadership development. Doug has worked with over 500 nonprofit and public organizations over the past 25 years. The author of 18 books and over 100 articles on nonprofit leadership, Doug is a member of JNEL's Editorial Board. He and Jim McGuirk worked together –as consultant and CEO– in updating the Astor Services Board's governing role, structure, and processes.

Recently, Doug interviewed Jim about his leadership role as Executive Director/CEO of a major nonprofit corporation with over 800 employees and an annual operating budget of \$50 million.

Now that you've sat in the CEO's chair at Astor Services for almost a decade, you're a seasoned chief executive. How would you describe your leadership role at Astor in a nutshell?

Two things struck me early in my tenure as Astor's CEO, Doug. First, CEO-ship is an incredibly complex, multi-faceted function that requires wearing a number of "hats." Second, my allocation of my CEO's time to certain facets of leadership –the hats, if you will– changes constantly; it'll always need to shift in reaction to specific circumstances. For example, as CEO

of Astor Services, one of the most critical hats I wear is “Communicator-in-Chief,” both internally and externally. In light of the current economic crisis and related uncertainty in New York State Government, this facet of my role is claiming more time now than ever before. Internally, with current levels of anxiety about the economy and our financial stability at all time highs, one of my most critical communication challenges is to convey a sense of calm, transparency and optimism in the midst of the storm, reassuring my staff that we’ll make it through these difficulties and possibly come out even stronger in the end. Wearing my Communicator-in-Chief hat, I also calm the internal waters by raising everyone’s sights, regularly calling their attention to the core values that bind us and give our work meaning. And this isn’t just a matter of words; As CEO I’m expected to model those values day after day through my behavior. As you know, Doug, violating values in practice is a real credibility and morale killer. I’m always aware of the need to practice what I preach.

Doug, being a CEO is so complex, describing the job in a nutshell is probably impossible, but in addition to my communication role, there are a few other really critical hats I wear that I think are at the heart of CEO-ship. I’d like to mention three: Innovator-in-Chief, Chief Board Developer, and Chief Accountability Officer. Of course, wearing the Innovator-in-Chief’s hat doesn’t mean I am the only innovator, but I am responsible for making sure Astor systematically updates its strategies for the future and continues to diversify and grow. This means ensuring that we have a modern strategic planning process in place that involves both the staff and our Board in appropriate ways. I’m sure we’ll be talking about governance in more detail, knowing your work with boards, Doug, so let me say here that I place a really high priority on helping my Board of Directors continuously get better at carrying out its governing mission. And accountability –to my Board of Directors and the public-at-large– is also critical; what I’m saying is that the performance buck really does stop at my desk. One of my most important jobs is making sure that Astor is on-target at any given time, in terms of achieving our programmatic goals, generating revenues, and spending our dollars appropriately. This means I’ve got to make sure, to paraphrase Jim Collins, that the right staff are on the bus, that they’ve got the tools they need to do the job, and that we’re collecting solid performance data. Furthermore, I can’t just stand above the fray; I’ve got to have a firm grasp of internal operations, so I can spot developing problems before they get out of control.

Thinking back on your almost ten years in the top spot at Astor Services, Jim, what would you identify as the attributes and knowledge that have been most critical to your success as CEO?

I’d put attitude way up at the top of the list, Doug, especially in these unsettling times. I’m basically an optimistic guy who really does see the glass as half-full. Also, I’m calm and deliberate in my leadership style. These traits definitely help me succeed as Astor’s Communicator-in-Chief. People need reassurance that, no matter how threatening the times might be, things will work out well in the end, and my style has, I think, helped both staff and Board members keep things in perspective. I think psychological self-awareness is another attribute that has served me well. I’m not saying I’m a paragon, emotionally speaking, but I do make a really serious effort to be in touch with my feelings, and not leave them unexamined so they can sabotage me as a leader. I’m a normal guy who now and then feels really anxious about one thing or another, but I’m always on guard against letting the anxiety turn into angry actions, like hectoring staff in meetings. I guess you’d call this managing my emotions.

On the knowledge front, I’m well aware that when you reach the CEO’s seat, you’ve joined a new profession that rises above the technical expertise that helped you reach the top spot, but I’m certain that my training in counseling and psychology and my long experience in

various roles at Astor Services before becoming Executive Director/CEO in 2002 have been important factors in my success. To be sure, you've got to rise above the detail to lead, but you've got to understand the work people do if you're going to be effective at overseeing performance and making decisions. Also, I think my being able to see the various facets of complex issues and to be flexible in my leadership –adjusting priorities as circumstances change rather than stubbornly staying the course– have served me well as Astor's CEO.

You said earlier that one of the important CEO hats you wear is Astor's Innovator-in-Chief. Talk more about this role, Jim.

First and foremost, I passionately believe that a full-fledged CEO in today's rapidly changing, extremely challenging and at times threatening world has no choice but to be a change leader. To my mind, every nonprofit organization in the world has only one choice: either you take command of your own change, or you become the victim of change –being changed by the events swirling all around you. In a nutshell: Change or be changed! That said, I see the fabric of my Innovator-in-Chief role as woven from three main strands: my design and facilitation of process, my substantive knowledge, and my leadership of implementation.

On the process design front, you and I have talked a lot over the years about strategic planning, and we both agree that old-time, comprehensive planning for an arbitrary period like five years is not adequate in a rapidly changing world. The challenge is to put in place an innovation-focused planning process that generates change initiatives or "change chunks" aimed at capitalizing on opportunities and grappling with threats. This is very different from the parallel process of updating your annual operating plan and budget. As CEO, I've worked closely with the Planning Committee of our Board of Directors to put in place a dynamic process that involves our Board and executive team early in the planning cycle –in a retreat setting– in updating our vision, identifying strategic issues, and exploring possible change initiatives. At Astor Services, in addition to our annual operating plan and budget, we have what you might call a "change portfolio" of innovation projects that we're managing.

Of course, planning process alone isn't enough; you've got to bring substantive knowledge into the strategic decision-making process. That's why I, as Innovator-in-Chief at Astor Services, spend a large amount of my time keeping abreast of the changing world around us –for example, the legislative trends in Washington and Albany and the technical advances in the fields of mental health and early childhood education– so I can play a substantive role in the strategic planning process. In my view, the CEO has to be an active –indeed the leading– participant in identifying the highest-stakes issues and exploring innovation possibilities. Finally, innovations don't implement themselves, and the barriers standing in the way can be pretty formidable –like, for example, scarce time and money and that age-old bugaboo: resistance to changing. One of my most important CEO responsibilities in the area of culture change leadership is to, first, make sure that implementation processes are well designed so that change can actually be managed, and, second, to pace change and identify priorities so that it's not overwhelming to the staff. Just directing and pushing people to change is a dead-end strategy, so I make sure we implement change at a realistic pace that doesn't over-extend and overwhelm staff. Occasionally, I must admit, over the years I've had to play the bad-guy role, directly commanding someone who's digging in her or his heels to begin reading from the same book as the rest of us, but fortunately that's been rare.

You and I worked closely together in updating the Astor Board's governing role and structure some five years ago. Explain more fully for the reader your role as Board Developer-in-Chief, Jim.

When I became Astor's CEO almost a decade ago, I definitely wasn't what you'd call a really "board-savvy" executive. Like most CEOs I know, I came to the top job never having had solid graduate training or work experience related to working with a governing board. When I think about how important boards are to a CEO's success and how much real power they have, including hiring and firing the CEO, it's very ironic that many if not most CEOs have to learn about governance on the job. But, thank heaven, I realized early on in my CEO-ship that I had to pay really close attention to the governance function generally and especially to building a close partnership with my new board. I also knew intuitively that the Astor Board couldn't be a strong, reliable partner with me as the new CEO unless we were all clear about the board's governing role and responsibilities and unless we had a structure in place for carrying out this role. Furthermore, it was not realistic to assume that the board could take on its own development. It didn't take me long to conclude that I had to be the real driver of the Board's development at Astor, though I can't honestly say I knew what that meant in detail at the onset. It's also relevant that I came to my new CEO role with a very positive attitude toward the Astor Board. Unlike many nonprofit CEOs I've met over the years, I really did see my Board as an asset that should be put to work on behalf of Astor.

When the Board and I decided to fine tune its functioning, we made a critical decision together: to find an experienced consultant who could help us with developing the Astor Board's governing capacity and building a solid partnership that could withstand what I knew would be inevitable stresses and strains. We put in place a two-phase development strategy. The first phase centered on a daylong governance retreat involving all Board members and the whole executive team, at which we became familiar with developments in the field of nonprofit governance and pinpointed governance issues needing attention at Astor. The second phase involved a follow-up governance task force, consisting of several Board members and the CEO, which under the Board Chair's leadership came up with a recommended "Board Governing Mission" and a new structure of Board committees, corresponding to the Board's broad governing functions: planning, performance monitoring, and external relations/resource development.

I'd say the Astor Board's new governing architecture –its standing committees– has been the single most important key to my close working relationship with the Board. The committees not only guarantee thorough preparation for full Board meetings, they also give me, as the CEO, a place to interact intensively with Board members, including mapping how the Board will be involved in planning, monitoring, and external resources. We rotate the chairs and members of committees, which over the years has widened ownership of the governing role and exposed all Board members to the full range of governing functions. We can honestly tell prospective new Board members that when they serve on the Astor Board, they are guaranteed to become experts in every facet of governing. Finally, having the committee members take responsibility for bringing recommendations to Board meetings –rather than my directly asking the Board to do this or that– has certainly helped increase Board members' ownership in the organization and also helped me to preserve my CEO line of credit with the Board.

I really appreciate your taking the time to discuss your role as Astor Services Executive Director/CEO with me, Jim, and I hope we'll have other opportunities to explore the multi-faceted nature of nonprofit CEO-ship. Many readers will probably find especially interesting your description of the "Innovator-in-Chief" and "Board Developer-in-Chief" hats that you

wear as Astor Services CEO, and I'm sure they'll have some very practical questions they'd like to ask both of us. Therefore, I'll bring this to a close by inviting readers to contact you at JMcGuirk@AstorServices.org and me at Doug@DougEadie.com.