Stewardship, Executive Succession, and Legacy

Alexis Davis-Hazell



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The strength of professional service associations lies in the dynamic partnership between volunteer leaders and professional staff. In this column, NATS president Alexis Davis-Hazell reflects on the upcoming leadership transition at NATS, highlighting the governance responsibilities of the board of directors, the operational role of the executive director, and the legacy of Allen Henderson, who will conclude eighteen years of transformative service at the end of this year. Special attention is given to Henderson's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and his receipt of the inaugural NATS IMPACT Award, underscoring his lasting impact on the voice profession.

Professional service associations such as the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) rely on a dynamic partnership between volunteer leaders and professional staff. This collaborative model is essential for fulfilling the mission of an association of our size and representative needs across the profession. Together, the NATS board of directors, NATS staff, region, district, and chapter leaders work to support members and navigate the complex challenges of our field, which overlap with healthcare, academic, entertainment industry, and nonprofit arts and culture sectors. As NATS approaches its eighty-second year, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment: the retirement of long-serving executive director Allen Henderson and a leadership transition process that will shape our future.

The NATS board of directors' role is not only governance and stewardship of association programs, events, systems, and practices. Our fiduciary, strategic, and generative-thinking responsibilities include ensuring legal and ethical integrity, approving budgets, setting long-term goals, and safeguarding the mission of the association.[1] Board members have been elected to represent membership through collective action and are not empowered to act independently of group consensus and published governing documents. The board also oversees fiscal health and compliance with our tax-exempt purpose, and is responsible for selecting, evaluating, and replacing the executive director when necessary—a key responsibility that underscores the board's accountability at the highest level of leadership.[2]

GOVERNANCE AND EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

While participating in an executive succession process as members, it is beneficial to reflect on the roles, responsibilities, and relationships that will be necessary to keep our association running effectively and see us reach a

Journal of Singing, November/December 2025
Volume 82, No. 2, pp. 129–132
https://doi.org/10.53830/sing.00162
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centennial celebration. Effective governance in nonprofit organizations hinges on a clear understanding of the distinct yet interdependent roles of the board of directors and the executive director. While the board sets strategic direction and monitors organizational performance, the executive director is responsible for day-to-day management and operational execution of strategic goals. Executive directors serve as the primary liaison to the board, providing timely and relevant information to support governance decisions. They provide quarterly financial reports, prepare meeting materials, frame agenda items within strategic contexts, and facilitate discussions that emphasize long-term impact. The executive director functions as the chief executive officer, implementing board policies, supervising staff, managing resources, and ensuring that programs align with the strategic plan. At the end of this quarter, NATS sees the end of an era. At the end of this calendar year, after eighteen years of dedicated service, our esteemed colleague Allen Henderson will retire from the executive director role. His commitment, vision, and tireless efforts have laid a durable foundation for our future.

HENDERSON'S LEGACY: STRATEGIC GROWTH AND PROGRAM INNOVATION

Appointed as interim executive director in 2007—and then awarded the role permanently in 2008—Allen Henderson has guided NATS through a period of remarkable growth and innovation. The first NATS Strategic Plan: *Framing Our Future*, was launched five years ago under NATS President Karen Brunssen's (2018–20) and Allen Henderson's charge. As an association, we have learned a great deal as Henderson worked alongside us to translate our goals into actionable plans. That plan, concluding this year, has shaped the association's trajectory and expanded its national and international reach. The next plan will be formulated by engaging a task force of representative stakeholders across our association, in partnership with the next executive director, board of directors, and the Strategic Plan Steering Committee.

Among the many initiatives brought to fruition during Henderson's tenure are the National Student Auditions (NSA), National Musical Theatre Competition (NMTC), Art Song Composition Award (ASCA), NATS Mentoring Program for Composers, Hall Johnson Spirituals Competition, and the Joan Frey Boytim Awards for Independent Teachers. Henderson also conceived and coordinated the "So You Want to Sing" book series in partnership with Rowman & Littlefield. Now a twenty-volume collection, the series paved the way for the NATS Books program, launched in 2022 and now housed under Bloomsbury Academic.[3] These enterprises have not only enhanced member benefits but also positioned NATS as a leader in professional development for voice educators. His strategic foresight extends to fundraising and legacy planning. Henderson secured seed funding for many of the aforementioned programs and more, ensuring their sustainability and enhancing member benefits for years to come.

LEADING THROUGH CRISIS: COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOGNITION

During the last five years of seismic shift defined by a global pandemic, Henderson has played a pivotal role in our navigation of uncertain times. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the performing arts and voice teaching communities. Henderson emerged as a unifying and visionary leader during this time. He facilitated a coalition of medical experts, performers, educators, and researchers to develop safety protocols for voice instruction, demonstrating adaptive leadership in a time of crisis. These alliances produced guidance that shaped our teaching procedures before vaccines and treatments were widely available. He coordinated virtual town halls, disseminated scientific findings, and ensured that NATS remained a trusted source of information and support. His leadership helped voice professionals adapt to remote instruction, navigate safety protocols, and maintain continuity in their work.[4] His efforts exemplify the importance of executive agility and collaborative problem-solving in nonprofit governance. In recognition of his extraordinary contributions during this period, Henderson was honored with the inaugural NATS IMPACT Award at the 57th Biennial National Conference in Chicago. The IMPACT award celebrates individuals whose work has had a profound and lasting impact on the voice profession.[5]

SUCCESSION AND STRATEGIC CONTINUITY

Leadership transitions, particularly the retirement of a long-serving executive director, represent a pivotal moment in a nonprofit organization's lifecycle. NATS policy outlines the process for replacing a resigning or retiring executive director, which requires the president to nominate and seek board approval for a search committee of not less than three and not more than nine current and former board members. The board is also charged with considering the need for any changes to the management structure before and during the search for a new executive director. To that end, the NATS board and executive director search committee have partnered with a nonprofit executive search firm specializing in mission-driven member associations in order to ensure smooth and strategic succession and secure the best candidate to build on Henderson's accomplishments. Organizational discovery is nearly complete, as key stakeholders continue to provide valued feedback. Henderson is collaborating with the board and search firm to document essential institutional knowledge, administrative calendars, program metrics, and operational systems. This documentation will serve as a vital onboarding resource for the incoming executive director. It will be important for NATS leaders to emulate what we have learned through the past several months of executive succession planning in every unit of our association, from chapters up through districts and regions to the national level, as a continuing improvement pillar of our next strategic plan.

CULTIVATING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Despite concrete delineations, the boundary between governance and management can easily become blurred. Boards must be careful not to overstep management functions. Clear boundaries and role definitions help prevent micromanagement and promote accountability.[6] NATS's organizational challenges frequently involve both strategic and operational dimensions, requiring joint deliberation and shared responsibility. A collaborative mindset, supported by structured processes and open communication, will enable us to navigate the ambiguity together and maintain focus on our mission: *To advance excellence in singing through teaching, performance, scholarship, and research.*

The relationship between the board and executive director continues to be considered and cultivated with intentionality, clarity, and mutual respect. As a personal note, it has been a pleasure to get to know Allen Henderson through our near-daily interactions in our respective roles, and similar close collaboration with our next executive is eagerly anticipated. Regular check-ins between the board chair and executive director, a commitment to transparency, and thoughtful performance evaluations will continue as vital practices that foster a productive working relationship.

Henderson exemplifies an executive who engages board members meaningfully, leveraging their expertise and recognizing their contributions, and fostering a shared sense of purpose. We have prioritized those same qualities in a new director. The NATS board is committed to focusing on their core responsibilities and on generative thinking to create an environment in which the new executive director can lead with confidence and clarity. As all embrace their roles and collaborate effectively, we will refine a resilient, adaptive, and mission-driven governance structure.

CONCLUSION

As NATS prepares for its next chapter, the lessons of the past eighteen years offer guidance for sustainable leadership. As we evolve during this leadership transition, we are reminded of the importance of shared purpose, vision, and collaborative practice in leadership. The partnership between volunteer leaders and professional staff, grounded in trust and strategic alignment, will be essential to the NATS's continued success. With a solid foundation and sharp vision, the association will be well-positioned to thrive into its second century. Allen Henderson's legacy is one of innovation, integrity, and unwavering dedication. His accomplishments will serve as springboards for the future permanence of professional development in our field. With gratitude for his service and optimism for what lies ahead, we step forward—together—into the next chapter of NATS history.

NOTES

1. Richard Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (J. Wiley & Sons, 2004), 4–7.
2. "Common Nonprofit Board Responsibilities," BoardSource, accessed May 20, 2025, https://boardsource.org/fundamental-topics-of-nonprofit-board-service/nonprofit-board-responsibilities/.
3. "Allen Henderson to Retire as NATS Executive Director | National Association of Teachers of Singing," National Association of Teachers of Singing, June 17, 2025, https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/Allen_Henderson_to_retire_as_NATS_executive_director
4. "NATS COVID-19 Resources," National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.nats.org/covid_resources.html.
5. "NATS Honors Executive Director Allen Henderson with First-Ever IMPACT Award," National Association of Teachers of Singing, July 5, 2022, https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/NATS_honors_Executive_Director_Allen_Henderson_with_first-ever_IMPACT_Award.
6. Chait et al., *Governance as Leadership*, 13–15.

Alexis Davis-Hazell is a singing actor of opera, concert, and musical theatre repertoire. Her performance highlights include operatic and symphonic works with regional organizations in the United States and Mexico, over 130 performances of *Porgy and Bess* at international venues, and contributing to the GRAMMY™-winning album *Grechaninov: Passion Week* with the Phoenix Bach Choir and Kansas City Chorale. Davis-Hazell has over twenty years of teaching experience in adjunct college, tenure-track university, and private studio owner roles, and a variety of higher education administration experience. As an interdisciplinary collaborator and session presenter at conferences and arts research alliances, her research interests include African American folk and art music, Russian art song literature, and lyric diction pedagogy. She served in chapter leadership roles immediately upon joining NATS in 2010. She was a NATS Emerging Leader Award recipient in 2014, and accepted regional appointments in the Cal-Western and Southeastern Regions, as well as national committee appointments. Prior to a focus on NATS' strategic goals as president-elect, Davis-Hazell was instrumental in the development of a comprehensive membership retention and recruitment guide for district NATS leaders. Davis-Hazell is assistant professor of voice and assistant director of undergraduate studies at the University of Alabama School of Music. https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9558-1092

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