

Successful Succession Planning at Indian Creek Nature Center

In 2010, in anticipation of the retirement of long-time executive director Rich Patterson, the Indian Creek Nature Center employed an ANCA Peer Consult, and as a result, developed and then implemented a Succession Plan to lead the organization through the transition.

For close to forty years, Indian Creek Nature Center on the edge of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, headquartered out of an old renovated barn. With an annual attendance of over 40,000 people per year, the barn no longer met the needs of this vibrant, growing center. The Nature Center needed to expand and update its facilities to stay viable. But before beginning a major project like this, they wanted to take a serious look at their operations and the plans for expansion.

The most critical issue the center faced was the then executive director, Rich Patterson, would be departing in the not too distant future. The question was how would the loss of this highly respected, very visible, longtime director affect the operations and fundraising efforts for the expansion. The center decided to contact ANCA to set up a Peer Consult to help assess these concerns before moving forward with any new plans and fundraising efforts.

“The Peer Consult Team of seasoned nature center professionals came to Indian Creek to interview staff, meet with board members and other stakeholders, and tour the facilities and grounds. From that information, the team made recommendations. That advice helped propel the center towards a promising future,” Rich explained. “Having nature center professionals as consultants who have gone through many of the issues we were facing offered us very insightful advice. It is definitely one of the strengths of an ANCA consult.”

One of the most important recommendations was that the center work to develop a leadership succession plan. Rich had been at the helm of Indian Creek Nature Center for thirty-four years. It could make it challenging for a new executive director to step up to lead the organization. But with a good working succession plan in place, the transition went smoothly. “The plan helped John Myers, the new executive director, blaze his own path, kept the fundraising for expansion on track, and I could bow out gracefully,” Rich explained. “It was good for all concerned.”

John goes on to say, “The Peer Consult helped steer the center to develop a good succession framework, but it gave us so much more. I have used the recommendations of that consult over the past five or six years as one of the guiding documents to move the center forward. One of the more successful outcomes came to fruition this past year when we opened the Amazing Space, a new building and campus layout that addressed many of our limitations.”

Rich went on to highly recommend that nature centers go through a formal evaluation process, like an ANCA Consult, at least once a decade even if they are not looking at major expansion or leadership change. “This type of consult is extremely valuable for obvious and not so obvious reasons. It keeps the organization relevant and credible and can even help with legal matters that may occur. It is just one of those best practice items all centers should have in their arsenal.”

