



CLIENT CASE STUDY SERIES, No. 3

# Ferst Readers

*Over the course of seven months, Blaze supported the board and staff of Ferst Readers through a leadership transition and a shift in mindset from survival and scarcity to abundance and growth.*

## *Client Snapshot*

**LENGTH OF ENGAGEMENT:**

November 2019 through May 2020, with the new President onboarded June 1, 2020.

**LOCATION:** Madison, GA

**SERVICE AREA:** over 90 counties in Georgia, in addition to Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Montana, South Carolina and Texas.

**FOUNDED:** 1999

**FOCUS:** Early Childhood Literacy

**MISSION:** Strengthening communities by providing quality books and literacy resources for children and their families to use at home during the earliest stages of development.

**SIZE:** 10 staff, with a budget of approximately \$2M

### **Blaze provided the following services:**

- Interim Executive Leadership
- Executive Search
- Strategic Staff Alignment

### **Highlights:**

- Working with the board, Blaze developed and executed an interim strategy to help the organization prepare for the transition to new executive leadership after a long-standing president's retirement.
- Led executive search process from job description revisions through final Zoom interviews as COVID-19 restrictions were put into place. Worked with the search committee to ensure board buy-in and transparency at every step of the process.
- Evaluated and reorganized internal processes, structures, and staff allocation to better align an already hardworking staff with positions and responsibilities that suited their skill sets and interests. Consulted with and coached staff throughout these changes.
- Provided onboarding and recommendations to ensure a smooth transition for the incoming President. Outlined major strategic considerations for the new President and Executive Committee.

## By mid-2019, Ferst Readers in Madison, Georgia was singularly focused on one goal—finding the organization’s next president.

For almost seven years, the operation had been helmed by a leader who held both irreplaceable intellectual capital and established community recognition. She had stepped down from the board at the start of 2013 to run the organization at a critical time, and the recent announcement of her retirement marked another critical point in Ferst’s history

Her legacy was one of hub-and-spoke management with a lean (if not nonexistent) hierarchy and no immediate successor. In the shadow of her departure remained a very timid team and a brand that revolved more around her strong work ethic than the organization’s actual work.

A few members of the board, including board chair Erikka Moore and board secretary/search committee chair Lauri Strauss, began the due diligence and hard work of understanding the whats and hows of a transition, and knew that a knowledgeable third party could help recruit and secure the next president, as well as cover the gap period of the absence in leadership. Blaze Leadership was on the short list.

Elyse Klova, half of the Blaze team, stepped in as interim president and executive recruiter while empowering the staff to lead in their respective lanes. As Moore remembers, “Elyse established a tremendous relationship with the staff right away. She was powerful in her observation of nuance and dynamics within the team structure. It was reassuring to have that level of transparen-

cy now happening with the board.”

When asked to name the central challenge of the transition process with Blaze, Moore offers one strong theme: People Management.

“The hardest part within change is always people. Once the president retired, the board came to a decision about how to best make this transition. But there was still quite a process of getting the board to a place of comfort. Taking into account existing relationships, the uncertainty in the minds of the board, the uncertainty of beginning a new process, accounting for the impact of the previous presidency, getting the staff to embrace an interim, and ultimately embrace a new leader -- all of these things are dependent on relationships, people, and managing expectations.”

“It’s just so vital to have the right person leading the organization,” adds Strauss.

The organization could have easily and justifiably abandoned the engagement with Blaze at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and instead quickly filled the role of a new president when the executive search was interrupted by closures and chaos.

But it didn’t; the board pressed on.

This is something that Davida Morgan Washington, the new president of Ferst Readers, appreciates. “Something like [a leadership transition] could be so overwhelming in its own right. But knowing that during the pandemic, when staff workloads doubled or tripled, the board could have easily just put a body in the seat to fill this role. But they were very deliberate and

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*-Errika Moore, Board Chair*

deeply engaged in the work of childhood literacy, and stayed the course. And I'm here today because of that commitment.

Moore adds, "As challenging as the process was, it was a process that needed to happen. Every organization needs to have a catalyst scenario that really allows them to morph and change and evolve, or they'll remain stagnant. This was ours."

Strauss had the early responsibility of contributing to the selection of a search firm, beginning the relationship with Blaze Consulting. Today, she can make a bold statement:

"Before the relationship with Blaze began, the board was so very divided. Some members said, 'You talk about finding a new president like it's not a big deal; it's much easier said than done.' But in hindsight, it wasn't nearly as hard as we thought it would be, because we had the right organization helping us. We had the right person that came in as an interim.

If I could go back to the board before this process began, and when so many of our board members didn't believe that this was possible or accessible, I would have said 'No, we're going to have an awesome company partnering with us, it's going to be a smooth transition,

and we're going to end up with a great new president.'"

Today, the organization's outlook is so strong that board members confess awe. The board is together again, back on the same page. Organizations can effectively achieve their mission when everything behind the scenes runs as it should.

Washington, further reflecting on her appointment through this engagement, is a champion for the strategic interim model.

"Elyse was an interim president, and I'm very fortunate for that. Her tenure gave an opportunity for the board and staff to settle down after the exit of the prior president, healing deep wounds in employee morale and clarifying the board's assumptions on the impact of outdated leadership.

She didn't misrepresent the organization during my interviewing process; she was informative, and very sympathetic about the organization's challenges, and helped me to establish confidence in taking on this job by telling me the good, true things that she saw as well.

Having her at the helm of the transition gave me a healthier organization to come in and lead."



*Is your organization facing a leadership transition? Let Blaze support you.*

With almost 40 years' combined experience in the social sector, Blaze Leadership Development offers wraparound leadership transition services to provide mission-driven organizations with the love and support they need at a critical time. We work with board and staff to evaluate and fill interim needs, conduct a strategic and transparent executive search, and provide leadership coaching to ensure a smooth onboarding experience. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you think we can be of service.

You can email Val and Elyse anytime at [hello@blazeleadership.co](mailto:hello@blazeleadership.co).