



Vannin – Bringing the Chief of Staff Role to Startups and Nonprofits



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"The more complex a CEO's role becomes, the more valuable it is to have the support of a Chief of Staff." Keziah Wonstolen

CEOCFO: Ms. Wonstolen, what was the vision when you founded Vannin Chief of Staff? What is your focus right now?

Ms. Wonstolen: I grew up as a management consultant, with one of the big global management consulting firms. As a traditional management consultant, I focused on high tech sales transformations for most of my career. About 6 years ago I moved into the Chief of Staff role at this Fortune 100 global consulting firm. I remember thinking that people are not talking about this role enough, because the leverage you are able to give the big leaders was valuable and the ROI is clear.

Vannin was formed in 2020, and the idea behind it was that I could bring the value of the Chief of Staff role to startups and nonprofits. We are hyper focused on the Chief of Staff role, and we do three things: we provide fractional placements of talent. These are your senior chiefs of staff and former COOs, that will come in for six to nine months. We recruit from a network of over 2000 people for full-time placements. The third thing we offer is training and advisory work. Historically, in the Chief of Staff role, as it has grown from government to business, it has not been as clear as other C suite, VP level roles, in terms of what your scope and deliverable should be, and our point of view is that it is clear, and we go into these training and advisory's a framework and a methodology to how you should deliver in the role.

CEOCFO: *How do you help a CEO understand what the role is of Chief of Staff, and/or what he or she should be looking for, looking at, understanding so that they can have a Chief of Staff that is really effective for them?*

Ms. Wonstolen: One thing that they must understand is that they need to be focused on three areas: Strategy, Operations and Communications. The way that I explain it to CEOs is that this person is going to sit next to you as your right hand. They are responsible for taking the vision out of their head, documenting it and running the rhythm of business to ensure the strategy is being executed according to plan. They are responsible for supporting the communication of the vision to various stakeholders (board, executive team and staff). Whether or not you are a solopreneur or a Fortune 100 CEO. I would still recommend that your Chief of Staff is focused on those 3 areas.

CEOCFO: *You talked about startups. How do you help someone who is starting a business let go of some decisions?*

Ms. Wonstolen: One of the things that we do when we first meet with CEOs is that we do a "CEO task list" transition. That sounds kind of transactional, but we have them "sticky note" all of the things that are on their mind, so on each color they lay out everything that is on their plate. Then the first thing we do is grab things and say, "Here is what you should be focused on, here is the job description of a CEO," and that is something that not many people think about, what is your role as a CEO. We first share that with them, and then we look at all of the things that are on their plate, and we categorize everything else that is left over.

There is typically two areas of projects leftover, one is strategic projects that they just have not had the capacity to get to. Then, there is administrative level work effort, which is their calendar, you need someone to respond to your emails, you need help setting up travel; all of that. The Chief of Staff will take responsibility for the strategic projects and the EA will take the transactional activities.

In terms of letting go, what I have found helpful, especially for a Chief of Staff, and anyone really supporting a COO, CEO, is more, how do you build a relationship and how do you take things off that are low risk/high reward first, and do those really well, and build the trust to then take on the bigger projects. I think you have to get to the real "what do they want" out of the business. Do you really want it to grow? When we first talk about this task list transition, we talk about, "Do you really want this business to grow, because if you do, you have to let go of things." We work with them to understand the work and figure out who should own the work.

CEOCFO: *What are the differences in working with a nonprofit, compared to a startup business?*

Ms. Wonstolen: They are both quite similar. One of the differences in a nonprofit sometimes is their funding mechanism. We will usually have a Chief of Staff that is familiar with the financial implications of running a nonprofit, because those funding mechanisms differ in terms of the way that they are running the overall vision and operationalizing it.

I typically try to have a Chief of Staff that has got that background. However, many of the things are the same. We are still documenting the vision. We are outlining the one/three/ten-year plan, we are putting together a rhythm of business we are making sure that they are anchored back to keep results and outcomes. Therefore, much of it is very similar.

CEOCFO: *What do you look for when you are hiring, or when you are talking with people about becoming a Chief of Staff, whether it is on a temporary basis or more permanent? How do you know when someone is right for that role?*

Ms. Wonstolen: I look to see if you have had a consulting background, because I want to know that you are comfortable being thrown into ambiguous situations. There are many roles that will prepare you for that, but I have found that, most consistently, consulting is one of those where you are able to jump in, and typically, no matter the size of the company, you are going to be joining a CEO that has many ambiguous problems that they need to solve. A good Chief of Staff can scope challenges, understand the context to the challenge, outline options to solve and then execute against that proposal. I also look for someone who has functional background in people, marketing, or operations.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us a little bit about some of your new people in Vannin? How are you growing, how are you expanding, how are you reaching out, how are you finding people for your staff?*

Ms. Wonstolen: It is mainly through our network that we find people. Right now, what we are looking for and what we have continuously been hiring, are people with consulting, nonprofit or startup experience. That is what I am looking for right now, and that is what you will see, that we have brought on the last couple of hires, that they are really focused on our target market.

CEOCFO: *Why is this the time to focus on startups and nonprofits?*

Ms. Wonstolen: The Chief of Staff role is decades old, but it has primarily been historically in the government. It rose to popularity in enterprise corporations through the early 2000s, we are seeing it now in the startup landscape more and more due to the complexity of the CEO role increasing. The role has become more valuable.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us a little bit about the interim and fractional roles? Do you have people on call? Are you able to handle all the business that comes your way?*

Ms. Wonstolen: Yes. We operate as a consulting firm in that capacity. Our placements are typically around six to nine months. Many of our clients are attracted to the fractional model, because it is lower cost, but access to better talent.

CEOCFO: *Where world events come into play, whether it is an election, or the bank challenges, or Ukraine? There is just so much going on these days. How does that affect what you look for, and perhaps the role of a Vannin Chief of Staff?*

Ms. Wonstolen: If you think of all the things that are happening, there are demands on a CEO, no matter the size of the business. They have to

be aware of that. Again, going back to the more complex a CEO's role becomes, the more valuable it is to have the support of a Chief of Staff. Having that right hand to navigate that and going back to those three areas that they focus on, how does it impact the strategy, making sure that the things that you are doing to address the macro challenges are brought into your operational execution, and then, how are you communicating out about them.

One of the biggest benefits that a Chief of Staff can do is managing the communications from the executive office. Especially with things like the macro-economic environment right now, that is something that they can help manage and how they communicate their responses to the board, to their public, to the employees of the company, all of that is very important and critical to get right. I will also say, we have found an uptick in our fractional staffing, because people do not want to hire W2s right now given the uncertainty, so bringing in a contractor is lower risk and more flexible.

CEOCFO: *Are people typically working on premise, or is there remote possibilities in this role?*

Ms. Wonstolen: We do travel as needed but many of our clients are in tech and professional services, which have been remote even before Covid.

CEOCFO: *What does the next year or two look like for Vannin Chief of Staff?*

Ms. Wonstolen: The next year or two is really focused on scaling what we have built. For the last two years, we have built up these three pillars of business, and how we serve CEOs with this Chief of Staff capability. Now we are really focused on how do we scale it, not just in North America, but globally, and refining those functions. We are really dedicated to bringing clarity around the Chief of Staff role. That is something that is very important to us. Therefore, scaling it globally is something that we are very excited about.

CEOCFO: *What surprised you as Vannin has grown and evolved to where you are today?*

Ms. Wonstolen: I would love to say that I had planned the trajectory of Vannin Chief of Staff. We have taken advantage of the growing popularity of the Chief of Staff role as well as the uptick in the trend of leveraging a more liquid work force. I'm surprised by the pace at which we have grown.

CEOCFO: *For someone looking at Vannin Chief of Staff, either a CEO or a potential Chief of Staff, what might they miss about Vannin that they really need to understand?*

Ms. Wonstolen: What I want people to understand is that the Chief of Staff role cannot be a catch-all for everything you do not want to do. You must have a clear framework around the role in order for it to be effective and to be valuable. I always think about the ROI of any leadership role that you are going to bring on. You can clearly calculate the ROIs just by calculating the capacity of the CEO and how much their time is worth. Therefore, by bring on the Chief of Staff, if you can connect their time, obviously the ROI is very clear, but only if you bring

them on with a clear framework and path of what they are going to do and what they are going to achieve in the role.

