

SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS IN THE CIVIL SECTOR

When the leading executive leaves an organisation, it creates a space. That space usually feels uncomfortable and dangerous, but it also provides an opportunity for new ideas to flourish. Successful executive transitions work with the natural dynamics of any significant transition, both creating a sense of order and safety and allowing for change and growth.

Leadership transitions happen under a variety of circumstances - some with advance warning, some when the organisation is strong, and some on short notice or because of a mismatch between the skills of the executive and the needs of the organisation. Each type of transition will require a different approach. However, it's always a good idea to include careful preparation and planning, and to factor in the psychological dynamics that are inevitably part of this process.

Many organisations use an outside assistance when the executive director is leaving. Some hire companies to help them recruit appropriate candidates. Others enlist assistance from consultants to navigate the transition period. As well as bringing expertise in planning and change (as well as extra help for a time-intensive project) many find a neutral, unbiased perspective useful when established internal relationships are shifting.

Preparation

Assessment: The first and most important step in an executive transition is assessment. That means more than how the organisation is meeting its goals. The Board can assess its performance, strengths, and weaknesses, and a staff survey will gather important information about their experience of the organisation and its potential future. The outgoing executive director needs to share his or her ideas of where you are and what you need - and don't forget about the people your organisation serves. They have a valuable perspective, as well!

Even if your leadership transition is happening within a short timeframe, you should review key organisational documents and procedures such as budgets and bylaws. You need to know where the gaps and strengths are (e.g. our mission statement is excellent, but our job descriptions are out-of-date) so that you can include them in the job description for the new director. All the information you've gathered in your assessments – compiled and summarized - will be critical to determine what kind of leader you need at this point in your history.

Leadership Planning: If you have at least a year's time or even if no transition is imminent, you have the opportunity to be more proactive. Does your organisation have a leadership plan, including both the staff and Board? That plan might include what to do if a senior leader was suddenly called away for a personal emergency. It also might cover second line staff leadership development. Broad-based leadership plans are a great way to think about the future of leadership in your organisation without focusing specifically on the future of the executive director.

One overworked executive director knew he needed a sabbatical to recharge, but his responsibilities were so great he could not take one without causing massive disruption. His organisation created a leadership plan and over time, developed other staff members to capably manage some of those tasks. He was able to leave, rest, and then return to a job that – even better - no longer depleted his energy.

Transitioning

Leadership transitions require significant time and effort. Many organisations create a special team (usually from the Board, but perhaps using other helpers) to manage the process. The managing team will need to establish goals and timelines, ensure that progress is on track, prepare messages for the public, and communicate with the organisation.

Endings: Generally, leadership transition processes can be broken into three parts - Endings, Between-time, and New Beginnings. The Endings phase is the right time to ask strategic and operational questions (for example, whether current staff have skills to manage day-to-day during the transition). This is also the right time to clarify the role of the outgoing executive both for the process and after their departure. Will s/he have decision-making power in the hiring process? Will that person maintain a powerful role on the Board? Be thoughtful and balanced in these discussions. While the outgoing executive often has invaluable institutional memory and connections, it can be difficult for a new executive to function if there is not clear permission to lead. Some organisations have found that defining a phased-out mentoring process respects both parties. Others outline a plan for a sabbatical, welcoming their previous executive back to the Board after the new leader has found footing and built relationships.

Between-time: This period is marked by the search and identification of a new executive. This, in turn, involves determining where and how to conduct outreach, arranging both in-person interviews and organisational visits for leading candidates, and developing a contract. Sometimes (especially in situations with a short timeline) an interim executive director will allow the organisation to continue functioning while still preparing for a longer-term appointment.

New Beginnings: When hiring is complete, it's time for the new director to have meetings with the Board (both with individual members and with key committees), with funders, and with senior staff. The managing team can set the stage for success by creating positive messages for the public and the staff in general. Your outgoing director should introduce the new director to important stakeholders, demonstrating support for the organisation in its next phase.

While organisational attention naturally shifts to the new director, this is also a new beginning for your outgoing director. Make sure to recognize their legacy, and to provide support as possible as they move into a new role (either in the boundaries of the organisation or outside of it). Some organisations have connected their outgoing directors to coaching that helps them define the next period in their life. If the outgoing director feels comfortable and happy about the future, it will ease the power shift between the old and new directors as well.

If possible, plan on at least a year to complete the transition. This will allow you time to strategize; recruit based on your findings, and adequately prepare your new executive. More time gives you additional options - you could conduct a more thorough assessment, or prepare or update your strategic plan.

Psychological Aspects

Leadership transitions provoke strong emotions. Successful transition planning involves more than just strategic planning and logistics - the team should be prepared for emotions of the executive, the staff, and the Board. Even merely acknowledging that strong emotions are a normal part of the process will create a healthier dynamic.

Leader: Deciding to leave an organisation can be very difficult for a director – after putting in so much time and effort, it is often hard to separate your identity and sense of purpose from the organisation’s identity and goals. It may be equally difficult to contemplate a future where the organisation fails after one’s departure or thrives despite it! As the process continues, it is inevitably difficult to navigate how much control and what kind of influence the outgoing director will have both during the process and over the organisation’s long-term future. It may be useful to commission the director to write a “legacy document” detailing the values and other core aspects they want to make sure are carried on, and to incorporate those elements into the search process. Finally, expect tension between the outgoing director and the new director, normalise it, and plan how to handle it.

Staff and Board: The first symptom of psychological discomfort may be avoiding conversation about an executive’s departure (whether it has been initiated or not). Fear of appearing disloyal may prevent some important decisions – this is one reason broad-based leadership planning is useful. Once the transition is underway, Board members and staff are likely to feel anxious. If the Board has been acting mostly in service of the director, it may now need to take on much more responsibility and power. Members may be overwhelmed and uncertain about their capacity. Staff are typically worried about their own role and how changes will impact them, and may reflect that by becoming defensive or negative. Find ways to collect and reflect their input throughout the process – not only through an initial organisational assessment, but also as the managing team identifies key roles or skill sets for the new director. Finally, it can be helpful to have staff provide the new director with letters that reflect their own hopes and dreams for the organisation.

Communication takes on a particularly critical role in transitions. Outside and inside sources are watching carefully to see if the organisation will be able to survive and maintain its value. Typically, the people more involved with the transition will be much more prepared for each part of the change than the rest of the organisation, and they need to respond respectfully to natural differences in readiness. Many sources advise communicating with the staff more than you think is necessary. Monthly progress updates will help people calibrate their expectations.

There is also a role in this process for ritual – this has always been a way to help people navigate the transition from one place to the next. If endings are marked clearly and positively, it becomes easier to move on. Celebrate or acknowledge the legacy of the outgoing director publicly and allow others the

chance to say goodbye. Similarly, mark the beginning with your staff – not only as the hiring of a director, but as a time to look forward to everyone’s contribution towards the new future.

For more information about or help with leadership planning or an upcoming executive transition, please contact Haritha Sarma at the Human and Institutional Development Forum: haritha@hidforum.org

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