

Preparing for the Inevitable: A Succession Readiness Checklist

When the following conditions are in place, an agency can expect a relatively smooth transition to new leadership whenever it might occur. An agency might determine which elements below are lacking in its current operations and then create a “succession plan” or “capacity building plan” that prescribes activities and timelines for filling the gaps. The agency is then ready for leadership transitions, foreseen or unforeseen.

- A strategic plan is in place with goals and objectives for the near term (up to three years), including objectives for leadership talent development.
- The board evaluates the executive director annually on general performance and achievement of strategic goals.
- The board, based on its annual self-evaluation, is satisfactorily performing its major governance jobs—financial oversight, executive support and oversight, policy development and strategic planning.
- The executive’s direct reports, based on annual evaluations, are judged as solidly skilled for their positions.
- The top management cohort, as a high performing team:
 - Has a solid team culture in place in which members support one another and can reach decisions as a group efficiently and harmoniously;
 - Shares leadership of the organization with the executive in having significant input to all major agency decisions;
 - Can lead the organization in the absence of the executive; and
 - Has authority to make and carry out decisions within their respective areas of responsibility.
- Another staff person or board member shares important external relationships (major donors, funders, community leaders) maintained by the executive.
- A financial reserve is in place with a minimum of three months’ operating capital.
- Financial systems meet industry standards. Financial reports are up to date and provide the data needed by the board and senior managers responsible for the agency’s financial strength and viability.
- Operational manuals exist for key administrative systems and are easily accessible and up to date.
- Top program staff have documented their key activities in writing and have identified another staff person who can carry their duties in an emergency.

SABBATICALS:

A CHECKLIST FOR PREPARING, MANAGING, AND RE-ENTERING

PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATIONS (at least 6 months out)

Executive Director

- Establish a Temporary Leadership Plan with Executive Committee of Board.
- Identify primary executive functions to be covered during the sabbatical.
- Identify all projects to be managed during the sabbatical period (this may include fundraising events, board meetings, newsletter oversight, etc.).
- Work with Board to designate which manager(s) will cover each function and project.
- Work with Board to designate one manager to serve as Acting Executive Director.
- Devises and execute an orientation and training program for the designee(s) for the functions they will carry. Preparations could include:
 - workshops & classes
 - mentoring
 - pre-departure delegation and feedback
 - relationship building with key stake holders.
- Identify external peers or consultants to be on call as problem solving resources for Acting Executive Director.
- Identify important external stakeholders to be informed of Acting Executive's status at point of executive's departure.
- Present pre-departure plan to Board of Directors for ratification.
- Develop Plan to manage all documents, internal communications, and external communications requiring the executive's response.
- Prepare plans for a smooth transition upon return.
 - Keep the schedule light.
 - Schedule a meeting with Acting Executive Director to share learning's and express appreciation for the additional work the Acting ED took on.(A dinner or some other more formal appreciation is recommended).

Board of Directors

- Prepare Executive Committee to provide support to Acting Executive during the sabbatical.
- Clarify the limits of executive authority for the Acting Executive Director.
- Develop communication plan for key external stakeholders to be informed of Acting Executive's status at the point of executive's departure.
- Establish compensation to be provided for Acting Executive and possibly other staff who take on additional responsibilities during the temporary ED departure.

MANAGING DURING THE SABBATICAL

Executive Director

- Remain detached from the organization for the duration of the sabbatical to allow the management team and others to take on complete responsibility.

Board of Directors

- Executive Committee establishes regular check-in conversation with Acting Executive.

Acting Executive Director

- Check in with support resources as needed.
- Keep track of issues and business to be discussed in a post-sabbatical debriefing with the Executive Director.

RE-ENTRY AND DEBRIEFING LESSONS LEARNED

- In preparing to re-enter, the Executive Director considers 4 questions:
 - What are my expectations and hopes going forward in my job?
 - What am I going to focus on in my first two months back?
 - What am I going to bring back from my sabbatical?
 - What pre-sabbatical habits and behaviors am I leaving behind?
- Similarly, the managers, just prior to the return of the executive director, debrief on:
 - What was refreshing and different in the way the agency was managed during the ED's absence?
 - What other insights on managing the agency were gained during the sabbatical?
 - What new ways of managing do we want to ask the ED to consider on his/her return?
 - What gifts and talents of the ED did we especially miss during his/her absence?
 - Are there any outstanding issues or disputes that need resolution with the help of the ED on his/her return?
- The executive director and managers meet to discuss their reflections and insights. *(At any one of these debriefing steps, it may be helpful to have third party facilitation in order to maximize the insights to be gained and provide a neutral guide and mediator).*
 - The executive director offers his/her resolutions for how he/she expects to practice better self-care habits and to perform differently on the job.
 - The managers offer their insights and requests for how they would like to the agency managed differently going forward.
 - The executive director and managers resolve differences in their expectations and make explicit their agreements on changes expected of one another going forward.
 - The executive director sees to the resolution of any issues or disputes that arose during the sabbatical.
- Executive "eases" back into full duties and schedule over 3 to 4 weeks, e.g., no major writing deadline in first month.
- Executive meets individually with Acting Executive Director and with managers and debriefs with them on their experiences during the Executive's absence and issues needing attention:
 - What was refreshing and different in the management style of the Acting Executive?
 - Are there any outstanding issues or disputes that need resolution?
- Board and Executive formally acknowledge and thank Acting Executive Director.
- Executive conducts performance evaluation on tenure of Acting Executive Director to provide learning for the Acting Executive.

BOARD SELF-ASSESS

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU THAT THE BOARD:

1. Understands the mission & purpose of the organization Rating: _____
2. Ensures legal compliance with federal, state & local regulations? Rating: _____
3. Ensures that government contract obligations are fulfilled? Rating: _____
4. Has a strategic vision for the organization? Rating: _____
5. Is knowledgeable about the organization's programs & services? Rating: _____
6. Monitors the E.D.'s performance on a regular basis? Rating: _____
7. Provides financial oversight, including adopting a good budget? Rating: _____
8. Monitors financial performance & projections regularly? Rating: _____
9. Has adopted a fundraising strategy to ensure adequate resources? Rating: _____
10. Has clear policy on fundraising responsibilities of board members? Rating: _____
11. Acts as ambassadors to the community for the organization and its clients? Rating: _____
12. Understands the role volunteers play at the organization & the organization's philosophy of volunteer management? Rating: _____
13. Understands the respective roles of the board and staff? Rating: _____
14. Currently contains an appropriate range of expertise and diversity to make it an effective governing body? Rating: _____
15. Effectively involves all members in board activities & responsibilities? Rating: _____
16. Regularly assesses its own work? Rating: _____

Rating:
NS –Not Satisfied
SS –Somewhat Satisfied
S – Satisfied
VS – Very Satisfied

17. During the Board discussion of _____'s succession planning at the _____ 20XX meeting, "board development" was identified as an agency need. Do you have specific suggestions as to what kind of development is needed?

18. Other comments?

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SUSTAINABILITY AUDIT: ANONYMOUS STAFF SURVEY

In *Quidoo's* experience, one of the most powerful tools for identifying both high priority organizational challenges and the skills needed in the next executive has been the staff questionnaire presented here. The survey and follow-up interviews let staff know that the board values staff viewpoints. They also reduce the anxiety staff experience when a leadership change is underway by engaging them in the process.

How it's used by *Quidoo*:

1. A draft of the survey is approved by the board's Succession Planning Committee.
2. A member of the Committee and/or a consultant working with the Committee attends an all-staff meeting
 - To describe the Committee's overall work plan and timeline,
 - To let the staff know how they'll have input to the transition and search process, and
 - To tell them about the anonymous survey and encourage them to fill it out.
3. The survey is set up using [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) or a similar tool. An email is sent to all staff with a link to the survey.
4. A Committee member, or a consultant working with the Committee, tabulates the survey and identifies the major staff themes.
5. The Committee member or consultant then meets with groups of staff to present the key outcomes and get more information on the leadership skills and capacity building needs identified.
6. The results of the staff survey and staff group interviews are combined with data gathered from other stakeholder groups—board members, foundation funders, peer agencies—to arrive at both the operational and programmatic issues that need to be addressed by agency management and the skills needed by the next executive director

E-mail message to staff

Dear Staff,

The Succession Planning Committee, which is conducting an organizational assessment before starting the search for our next executive director, seeks your help in deciding what skills we should look for in the next executive director. Your responses to this survey will be used for:

- *setting future directions and capacity building priorities to be addressed with the new executive, and*
- *drafting the profile of skills and attributes the Board will use in recruiting candidates for executive director.*

To complete the survey, please go to: (link to web-based survey)

Thank you for your help!

Survey questions

A. What do you perceive as three of our Executive Director's greatest achievements during her tenure as our agency leader?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B. What elements of her leadership style as executive director do you most appreciate and would like to see carried forward by her successor?

C. What are *your* top three on-the-job achievements over the past 12 months? (*Transition planning involves assessing capabilities throughout the organization, so we're interested in having individual staff members' views on their own recent successes.*)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

D. What three changes at the agency would most help you to be more effective *in your specific job*? (*Your responses are important to identifying agency improvements that would help us be more effective in serving our clients.*)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

E. What three changes the agency would help the agency to be more effective in pursuing its mission?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

F. What three skills or capabilities do you bring to your job that especially contribute to our meeting our goals?

- 1.

2.

3.

G. What are the top three skills that the next Executive Director will need to have in order to be successful?

1.

2.

3.

H. Additional comments:

Thank you for your help!

Am I still the leader this agency needs? { *questions for self-reflection* }

1 - My On-Going Effectiveness

In what ways will this agency be changing over the next five years? What skills will it take to lead those changes? Do I have them?

Are there new things I suspect this agency should be doing for its constituents that I just don't have the energy or interest in taking on?

What level of excitement do I feel most mornings on my way to the office?

What new skills or better ways of doing my job have I developed over the past couple of years? Am I eager to learn and improve my skills?

Do I continue to be effective in building the leadership and management skills of my direct reports? What new duties or responsibilities have they taken on in the past two years?

2 - Personal Barriers to Leaving: If it became clear to me that I should consider leaving my job, what personal barriers would I encounter?

Can I conceive of a career move that would potentially excite and re-energize me? Or do I assume I'll be bored and without meaning in my life?

Do I fear I could not get another job because of my age? Do I have the skills for a different kind of job?

Am I financially constrained? Do I not yet have enough set aside to retire or to work fewer hours and at a lower salary?

Are the professional identity and status I have in this job so critically important to me that I don't want to give them up?

Am I concerned about leaving some things undone in the agency?

Do I believe there is no one out there who can do this job as well as I can or could do it even adequately? Would the agency go into decline without my leadership?

3 - Organizational Barriers to Leaving

Would staff and board resist my decision to leave? Might they even feel angry or abandoned?

Would I be leaving the agency in less than good shape?

Are some key managers under-skilled and dependent on my close guidance?

Is the management team unable to run the agency for a significant period of time without me?

Is the board up to managing a leadership transition?

Are there funders and major donors whose support I assume is dependent on my presence?

Are there key relationships held by me alone?

Name _____

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR LEGACY STATEMENT

PART I

An important step in executive transition planning includes having the Executive Director reflect upon his/her role in achieving key organizational accomplishments or milestones.

Reflecting on your tenure as Executive Director, list the three accomplishments you are most proud of and explain why:

Write Them Down

-
-
-
-
-

How would you like to be remembered by organizational members and the community you serve?

Example:

- ❑ A visionary leader, a coalition builder, a consensus builder, an innovator, someone who could effectively and genuinely engage everyone from politicians to low-income immigrant workers.

PART II

The legacy statement represents your personal vision and aspiration for what you wish to accomplish **organizationally and personally** before your final exit as the leader of your organization. The legacy statement speaks to the “results” you desire to achieve.

The idea is to “begin with the end in mind.” Imagine that you have made the decision to resign as leader. You are at your farewell party. Staff, friends, family, colleagues, are all present for your “send off.” The Board Chair of your organization comes up to the podium and says, “I’d like to commend our leader for the outstanding results she/he has achieved during as our Executive Director. He/she has achieved the following and leaves this legacy behind..... Take a moment to reflect on the legacy of outstanding results you hope to leave as your move on.

List Them

-
-
-
-

PART III

Legacy – Statement

Once you have shaped and finalized your legacy, take a few moments to think on legacy actions/priorities. What can be done within the next _____ months to move you closer to achieving your legacy? For each legacy area, write three action steps that will move you closer to its realization.

1. Legacy area (results desired) _____
 - A) Legacy actions in next ____-months to work toward achieving results.
 - B)
 - C)
2. _____
 - A)
 - B)
 - C)
3. _____
 - A)
 - B)
 - C)



Note: Quidoo Consulting considers it a best practice for nonprofit agencies to have in place an emergency succession plan to cover the sudden and unexpected absences of their executive directors. Provided here is a sample plan modeled on one actually adopted by an agency on the west coast of the United States. In this model, special emphasis is given to identifying the key leadership functions carried by the executive, identifying the agency managers best qualified to step into the executive role in an emergency, and prescribing the cross-training necessary to prepare the back-up managers to cover the leadership functions. One major side benefit to implementing this plan is a management team with enhanced leadership skills.

Quidoo Consulting works with many clients to implement short and long term succession plans ensuring the ongoing success of our clients. If your organization would like help preparing for an executive departure please contact us at john@quidooconsulting.com or call (718) 964-8669.

EMERGENCY SUCCESSION PLAN **(Agency Name)**

Procedure for the Appointment of an Acting Executive Director in the Event of an Unplanned Absence of the Executive Director

1. Rationale

In order to ensure the continuous coverage of executive duties critical to the ongoing operations of **(Agency Name)** and its services to clients, the Board of Directors is adopting policies and procedures for the temporary appointment of an Acting Executive Director in the event of an *unplanned and extended absence* of the Executive Director.

While the Board acknowledges that such an absence is highly improbable and certainly undesirable, it also believes that due diligence in exercising its governance functions requires that it have an emergency executive succession plan in place. It is expected that this plan will ensure continuity in external relationships and in staff functioning.

2. Priority functions of the Executive Director position at **(Agency Name)**

The full Executive Director position description is attached.

Among the duties listed in the position description, the following are the key functions of the Executive Director to be covered by an acting director:

- a. Serve as the organization's principal leader, representative, and spokesperson to the greater community
- b. Support the Board of Directors

- ensure integrity and strength of Board leadership and address issues around clarity of role, governance, bylaws/policies, corporate structure, and membership
- assist with recruitment and orientation of new Board members
- prepare Executive reports to Board of Directors and Executive Committee and attend various Committee meetings

c. Convene and lead the Management Team

d. Participate in recruitment, interview, selection and evaluation process for directly supervised staff and other key executive level positions

e. Strategize organizations' short-range and long-range program and project goals, particularly in Organizing and Planning:

- identify overall resource development goals and fund raising plan
- establish, maintain and cultivate relations with donors, foundations and other resources to support organizational programs and activities
- maintain accountability for current year operating budget and for financial performance of portfolio

3. Succession plan in event of a **temporary, unplanned absence -- SHORT-TERM**

a. Definitions

- A temporary absence is one in which it is expected that the Executive Director will return to his position once the events precipitating the absence are resolved.
- An unplanned absence is one that arises unexpectedly, in contrast to a planned leave, such as a vacation or a sabbatical.
- A short-term absence is 3 months or less.

b. Who may appoint the Acting Executive Director

- The Board of Directors authorizes the Executive Committee to implement the terms of this emergency plan in the event of the unplanned absence of the Executive Director.
- In the event of an unplanned absence of the Executive Director, the Deputy Director shall immediately inform the Chair of the Executive Committee of the absence.
- As soon as is feasible, the Chair shall convene a meeting of the Executive Committee to affirm the procedures prescribed in this plan or to make modifications the Committee deems appropriate.

c. Standing appointee to the position of Acting Executive Director

The position description of the Deputy Director specifies that she shall serve as Acting Executive Director in the absence of the Executive Director.

d. First and second back-ups for the position of Acting Executive Director

Should the Deputy Director be unable to as Acting Executive Director, the first back-up appointee will be the Program Director. The second back-up appointee will be Chief Financial Officer.

In the event the standing appointee, the Deputy Director, is new to the deputy position and fairly inexperienced with (*Agency Name*), the Executive Committee may decide to appoint one of the back-up appointees to the acting executive

position. The Executive Committee may also consider the option of splitting executive duties among the designated appointees.

e. Cross-training plan for appointees

The Executive Director, with assistance from the Deputy Director, shall develop a plan for training the three potential appointees in each the priority functions of the Executive Director which are listed above (section 2). The training plan will be attached to this document when the plan is completed. The director of human resources shall have the responsibility of handling the logistics of the plan's implementation.

f. Authority and restrictions of the appointee

The person appointed as Acting Executive Director shall have the full authority for decision making and independent action as the regular Executive Director .

g. Compensation

The Acting Executive Director shall receive a temporary salary increase to the entry level salary of the executive director position or to 5% above his/her current salary, whichever is greater.

h. Board committee responsible for oversight and support to the Acting Executive Director

As with an Executive Director, the Executive Committee of the Board will have responsibility for monitoring the work of the Acting Executive Director. The Executive Committee will also be alert to the special support needs that of the executive in this temporary leadership role.

i. Communications plan

As soon as possible after the Acting Executive Director has begun covering an unplanned absence, Board members and the Acting ED shall communicate the temporary leadership structure to the following key supporters external to (*Agency Name*):

- Government contract officers
- Foundation program officers
- Civic leaders
- Major donors

4. Succession plan in event of a **temporary, unplanned absence -- LONG-TERM.**

a. Definition

- A long term absence is one that is expected to last more than 3 months

b. Procedures

- The procedures and conditions to be followed shall be the same as for a short-term absence with one addition:

> The Executive Committee will give immediate consideration, in consultation with the Acting Executive Director, to temporarily back-filling the management position left vacant by the Acting Executive Director. This is in recognition of the fact that, for a term of more than 3 months, it may not be reasonable to expect the Acting Executive Director to carry the duties of both positions. The position description of a temporary manager would focus on covering the priority areas in which the Acting Executive Director needs assistance.

5. Succession plan in event of a **PERMANENT unplanned absence**.

a. Definition

- A permanent absence is one in which it is firmly determined that the Executive Director will not be returning to the position.

b. Procedures

- The procedures and conditions shall be the same as for a long-term temporary absence with one addition:

>The Board of Directors shall appoint a Transition and Search Committee to plan and carry out a transition to a new permanent executive director.

6. Approvals and maintenance of record

a. Succession plan approval

- This succession plan will be approved by the Executive Committee and forwarded to the full Board of Directors for its vote and approval.

b. Signatories

- This plan shall be signed by the Board President, the Executive Director, the human resources administrator, and the appointees designated in this plan.

c. Maintenance of record

- Copies of this plan shall be maintained by the Board President, the Executive Director, the Deputy Director, the two back-up appointees, the human resources department, and the (*Agency Name*) corporate attorney.

*Revised by (Agency Name) Executive Committee
date*