
On the brink:

Leading your organization through an executive transition

It's a familiar pattern: a coalition's Executive Director resigns, the board of directors appoints an interim director, and shortly thereafter they release a job announcement. At a basic level, these steps are all important in an agency's transition process. When an organization takes time to think through each of these steps in detail and plan for the agency's specific needs during the transition phase, the board and staff will reap many benefits for the long-term health and stability of the organization.

A change in agency leadership is a big event in any organization's life. This time should be celebrated and acknowledged in a way that honors the leader (be it an executive director, long-time board member, or other key leader) and recognizes his or her contributions to the agency. As this leader moves on, an opportunity to evaluate the position of the agency presents itself: the board and staff can recognize what the organization has accomplished under that leader's tenure, where the organization is headed, and how the board and staff would like to shape its future. From these conversations, key elements that are necessary in the next leader may come to light.

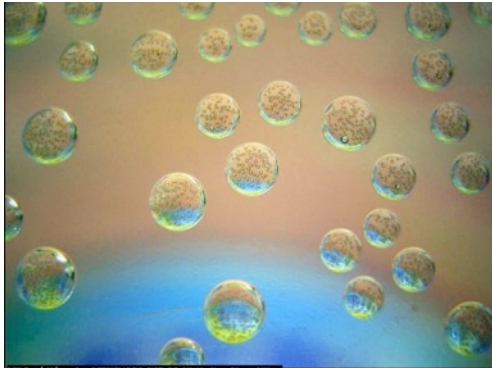
If the organization does not take the opportunity to complete this inventory, the board (and staff) may be tempted to try to replace the outgoing leader with his or her identical twin, without determining whether or not that person has the skills useful for the organization's future. Conversely, the board may react against what they perceived the weaknesses of the former leader to be, and may swing the proverbial pendulum in the exact opposite direction and hire someone completely different, again without reflecting about whether or not that person can make meaningful contributions to the organization's future.

The following article presents a recommended series of evaluative steps to be used by organizations preparing for significant leadership transitions which will help guide them into their futures successfully. For the purposes of this discussion, the significant leadership transition highlighted is an Executive Director transition. When organizational leadership is referred to, it is intended to capture part of the board of directors, such as the executive committee, and may include staff leadership, depending on the organization.

The Challenge

There are two fundamental points of analysis for an organization going through a leadership transition. Many organizations focus on one of these points but not both. Each of these two points of analysis complements the other; together they can help provide a clear picture of what the organization needs from its next leader.

The two points of analysis are assessment and selection. Assessment is the process of analyzing the current state of the coalition, where it is headed to determine its needs. Selection is the process of prioritizing the specific, realistic needs of the coalition as it moves forward and involves making decisions about what will and won't be able to be accomplished in a specific time frame.



Consider this familiar scenario:

A coalition's executive director leaves after a series of administrative struggles, including grant management issues. The board is determined never to let these mistakes happen again and immediately dedicates itself to searching for a director with a strong background in nonprofit administration and is willing to eliminate the minimum requirement that he or she must have sexual assault service experience.

The organization's leadership, in this case the board of directors, has **selected** the priority skill areas they'll look for in the next Executive Director. And they have a good reason to look for these skills: they've experienced challenges in the past and they want to correct for those. However, they have not yet taken a step back to assess where the agency is in space and time – they do not necessarily have a picture of what the organization is currently doing and what the strengths of the current administration have been. They have not looked at their strategic plan or goals to clarify where they are trying to grow the agency in the coming years. Without both of these pieces of information, which comprise the **organizational assessment**, the board lacks a picture of what they are asking the new leader to do in the future – and they may miss an opportunity to bring in a leader with skills they badly need that they have not yet identified.



The following scenario describes an organization that has both assessed the organization and selected priorities for the new leader:

A coalition has a long-time executive director who has an extensive background in rape crisis center work. She is well-recognized as an advocate for victims and has developed a solid programming base that serves the coalition's rape crisis center membership well. The board holds a retreat after the director announces her resignation and determines that, while they are very happy with the work the director has done, they want to prioritize the coalition doing more work in the public policy arena and would like to find a director with a fundraising background as well as public speaking dynamism.

Types of Transitions

Selected



Not Assessed

Planned

The process is carefully thought out, the hiring group has selected priorities, they have a good sense of where the organization is going, and what skills are needed in the next leader.

Indicator: The process is time consuming and the group has a sense of the organization's priorities and the qualities desired in a new director.

Unclear

The process may seem clear, but the organization's leadership is looking for too many things in this transition. There may be a general sentiment that the hiring committee will know whom to hire when they meet him or her.

Indicator: It is hard to make a decision among candidates at the end of the process because "they all seem good."

Reactionary

The hiring group is clear that they want a leader who is not at all like their outgoing leader. The group may be quite certain that they know what they want: a manager, someone with sexual assault advocacy experience, or a lobbyist, but they haven't assessed what they honestly need to move forward.

Indicator: The process is quick and there is a tone of excitement as the organization moves away from its past, however, deeper questions about the organization's future have not been brought up.

Status Quo

The hiring group wants to replicate former leadership and will look for a new hire similar in strengths to the outgoing Executive. The group may be confident in moving forward, though they have not assessed what the agency may need in this hire.

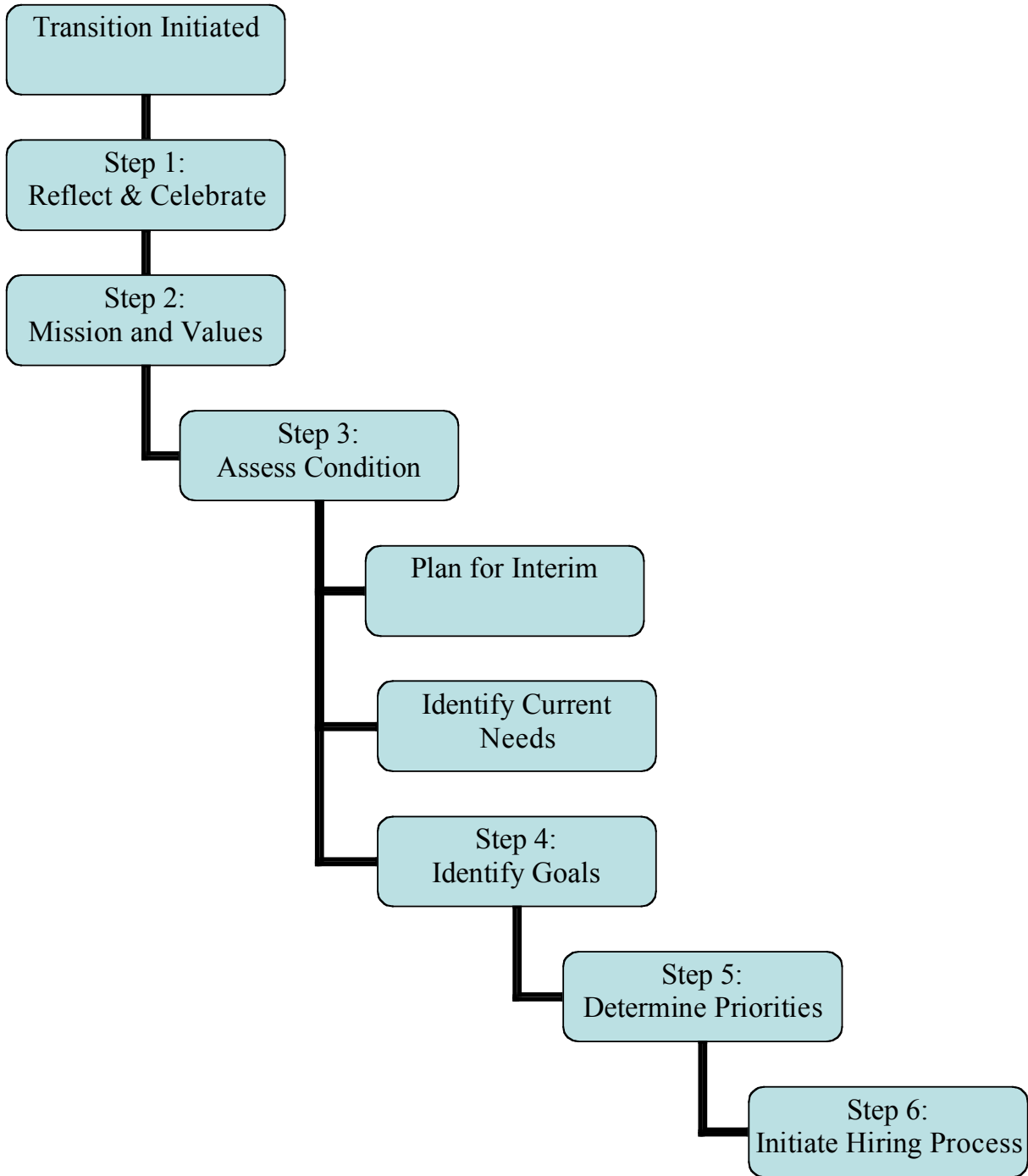
Indicator: The group is decisive and confident as they move forward but have made no plans regarding how the agency might address internal or external changes, challenges, or opportunities in the future.

Assessed

Making a sound decision about what an organization needs in a time of transition requires active participation from the organization's leadership on both angles of analysis. The diagram below describes four different processes, each pursuing a different route of decision making along the "assessing" and "selecting" quadrant sides. The diagram explains the pitfalls inherent in anything but a comprehensive decision making process.

The sections that follow explain a step-by-step process for managing an executive transition, and include steps to ensure that the organization both **assesses** its needs and **selects** its priorities for moving into the future, thus making an informed and researched decision about what qualities its next executive must possess.

The Path



The Path in Detail

Step 1: Reflect & celebrate

When staff leaves, it's tempting to zoom forward and plug the immediate holes in the organization, especially when the Executive Director is moving on. The coalition's workload continues to apply pressure to the organization and it may seem that continuing to meet expectations without being fully staffed is impossible. However, taking a moment to reflect on and celebrate the accomplishments of the organization is a critical step before moving forward.

A significant organizational transition can be intimidating and may bring up feelings of fear, uncertainty, and negativity among staff, board members, and constituents. These feelings are normal reactions to change and should be discussed directly as they come up. At the same time, an organizational change provides a tremendous opportunity. The coalition's leadership can make affirmative decisions during this time to propel the agency's development, strengthen its assets, and ensure that its growth and change is relevant to its constituency and survivors

Framing the transition positively is an important step, and it goes hand in hand with establishing a respectful, concrete, and well-articulated communication system across the organization. When reasonably feasible, representatives from the board of directors can take the opportunity to meet with the staff to discuss the transition and how it will be managed. It is important to talk openly with staff at this juncture to show that communication between the board and staff will be clear, direct, and through an open channel of communication. Establishing trust between the board and staff is critical in order to move forward cohesively. At the same time, it is important to carve out distinct communication channels, so the entire staff is not contacting the board as a whole. A staff designee, or a pair of designees, can be selected to be in communication with the board executive committee or board chair during this transition time.

Once clear communication is established, it is important for the board to announce the transition to the coalition's membership and constituents with an update about how the organization will continue services and proceed with developing next steps. In this communication, the board can set a celebratory tone about what the coalition's recent accomplishments have been and how the organization is positioned to move forward.

Maintaining or developing a solid communication network is integral to managing a transition well. It's important that relevant information be shared throughout all levels of the agency impacted by the information – meaning that it's important for those affected by the change be kept up to speed about the decision making process and plans for the future.

Sharing information is different from sharing decision-making authority. While it's incredibly important to share information, it's just as important to be transparent about who is in charge of making decisions – as well as who is able to give input into those processes and how that input will be solicited and honored.

Other tone-setting opportunities:

- when appropriate, have a farewell celebration for the Executive Director;
- through frequent communication with staff (via phone, email, in person contact); and
- during frequent communication with the coalition's membership and constituents.

It can take a lot of energy to set a positive tone during a transition time, especially when transitions can feel uncertain and sometimes painful. It's critical that people in leadership, namely the Board Chair and executive committee, recognize the strengths of the organization and the opportunities available to keep people moving forward.

If there are truly more concerns about the transition than opportunities or celebrations, please see the article "*When your organization is in crisis.*"

Step 2: Revisit your ethics, principles, and mission

After celebrating, setting up channels of communication, and establishing a positive tone for moving forward, it's time for the organization's leadership (likely the Board of Directors with staff participation) to take stock of the coalition's mission and key values.

Most coalitions exist to increase services to survivors across the state, eliminate sexual violence in all forms, and serve member programs in their efforts to do the same. This multi-fold mission (or any derivative thereof) challenges an organization to operate on many fronts at the same time; coalitions operate within the challenging statewide policy arena, advocating for survivors and for their programs, while balancing the needs of a diverse membership. Focusing on all facets of this type of mission is complicated and requires staff and board members to be proficient in a number of activities.

Similarly, coalitions focus on improving social conditions across their states and nationally, which drives individual coalitions to adopt a series of values that support their day-to-day work in those efforts. For example, a coalition might ask itself a series of framing questions when making an important decision in order to make sure that they are moving forward in a way that feels ethical to their mission and

cause. These framing or values questions might include:

- How will this decision impact survivors across the state?
- Will this decision help survivors access services?
- Will this increase access to services for underserved communities?
- Does this decision contribute to eliminating oppression, not reinforcing it?
- Is this decision humane to employees? To our volunteers? To our membership?
- Will this decision support member programs?
- Does this decision focus on statewide impact (as opposed to local impact)?

This point of transition provides a good opportunity for a coalition to revisit its mission and values. Even if no changes are necessary, it's wise to ensure that the mission, values, ethics, and principles of the coalition are shared throughout the organization. The section below poses a few critical questions that the leadership of the coalition can use for reflection.

Step 3: Evaluate current condition

One you've established a set of common values across the organization, the next step of your internal evaluation process is to take an honest look about what is currently going on for the coalition. If the organization is in crisis, now is a good time to triage plan (see succession planning triage section) and make quick changes to ensure short term accountability and success. If the organization is not in crisis, or once the crisis has been managed, the organization can move forward to identify what the current state of affairs is for the whole. Getting this accurate picture of the current landscape can both provide organizational leadership with a sense of who they need to come in and manage the tasks at hand and it can also provide an opportunity to determine what some growth opportunities might be.

Taking the opportunity to reflect can help the board and staff see opportunities or potential threats to the organization that might not be apparent immediately. A step back will provide a fresh view of the organization –a necessity before moving forward. After all, the organization, because it is a dynamic and ever changing place, is a different place than it was before the leader came on. Reflecting on the changes and getting an adequate sense of where the organization is in space and time will help the board establish a frame of reference for deciding what to do next.

Organizations going through changes must have an accurate sense of their current condition, which includes many factors. The questions below are a suggestion of areas the leadership group might cover in their internal and external assessment. These questions are also on the chart on page 11.

Internal – quick assessment (sample questions):

Finances

- Is the agency budget on track for the year?
- Are there any fiscal challenges for this year or next?
- Are there any staffing challenges in this area as a result of the transition?
- Is the board informed about the agency's financial structure?
- Are there sufficient internal controls?

Programs/Projects/Products

- Are the agency programs/projects/products meeting expectations?
- What support do the programs/projects/products need to move forward during the transition?
- Are there any gaps in programs/projects/products as a result of the transition?

Grant management/reports

- Are grant management systems and reports up to date?
- Will there be any gaps in this area as a result of the transition?
- Are the agency's funding sources informed about the transition plan?

Staff/HR management

- Is staff informed about the transition?
- Who is supporting the staff?
- How is staff morale?
- Are there any outstanding HR issues?
- What gaps might this transition period create for staff management?

External – quick assessment (sample questions):

Public policy commitments/goals

- What has the organization's public representation been?
- What has the organization's legislative agenda or public policy action been?
- Has the organization made commitments about future policy work?

Constituents' needs

What does the membership look toward the organization to represent publicly?

What do the allied organizations of the coalition need?

What agreements has the coalition made with its constituents? Any promises they need to keep?

Meeting representation

What meetings is the coalition attending?

Where is coalition representation critical?

What are the meetings the coalition should be attending but has not?

After assessing the current activities of the coalition, leadership can evaluate whether or not these activities continue to be priority areas. Key questions to ask at this time include:

- Do these activities support our mission?
- Do these activities support the coalition in being successful?
- Do these activities support our values/ethics, and principles?
- Do these activities support our anti-oppression work?

Step 4: Imagine your future

If your organization has a strategic plan in place, now is a good time to take a look and review the goals established for the next 3-5 years. What kind of leader is needed to help implement the plan?

If you don't have a strategic plan, this transition period provides you with an opportunity to develop a set of goals or a vision about where to lead the agency next. What trends would you like to continue? Where would you like to see the agency grow? What ingredients do you need to make it happen?

At the same time, a period of organizational transition is not the ideal time to embark on a full-fledged planning process. Instead, if no plan exists, it's a good idea to select some strategic priorities for the next 2-3 years and set an overall vision for where the organization is headed.

If there isn't a plan in place, the board and staff can set some strategic priorities based on the current assessment of the organization. Is there is an internal or external area that's been in need of attention or for which the organization has specific goals, indicate it as a priority area in the planning tool.

Step 5: Determine needs

This step is the most critical in any transition process: what do you really need to find in your next hire? Often organizations look for someone who's committed to the mission and a good personality fit for the agency, which are both important factors, but fall short of meeting the goal to find the individual who possesses the right combination of skills and experience to fulfill the goals of the next phase of the organization's life.

To make sure your candidate has the right combination of skills and experience, leadership must first know what it's looking for.

Both assessing and determining the key qualities needed in your next ED are important – and separate – steps. Steps 3 & 4 of this process help you assess what you need, but this step will help you prioritize the qualities you must have.



Step 6: Launch hiring process

Now you're prepared. You've buoyed up the staff and constituents of the organization to proceed through the transition phase in a positive frame of mind; you've assessed where your organization is in its current environment and life cycle; you've set some goals for the future; plus you've assessed and determined what you need in a new leader. You're ready to launch a search process!



Being sure you know where your organization is headed and understanding the skills your next leader should possess is critical to ensuring your organization's long-term success. However, once those factors are understood, it's similarly important to outline and manage a solid hiring process. Be sure to look at some of the resources below to help guide you through your hiring transition.

Hiring Resources Online

Hiring an Executive Director for a Nonprofit Agency: A Step by Step Guide: <http://shopping.netsuite.com/s.nl/c.433425/it.l/id.32/f> Free download

Management Help for Nonprofits:
http://www.managementhelp.org/hr_mgmnt/hr_mgmnt.htm

Fast Company:
<http://www.fastcompany.com/guides/hire.html>

Idealist.org: http://www.idealists.org/tools/hr_resources.html

Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania:
<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/category.cfm?cid=10>

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Appendix Resources

Assess Current Environment: Internal Operations

Assessment Questions	Status/Needs	Action Plan and Timeline
Finances		
Is the agency budget on track for the year?		
Are there any fiscal challenges for this year or next?		
Are there any staffing challenges in this area as a result of the transition?		
Is the board informed about the agency's financial structure?		
Are there sufficient internal controls?		
Programs/Projects/Products		
Are the agency programs/projects/products meeting expectations?		
What support do the programs/projects/products need to move forward during the transition?		
Are there any gaps in programs/projects/products as a result of the transition?		
Grant management/reports		
Are grant management systems and reports up to date?		
Will there be any gaps in this area as a result of this transition?		
Are the agency's funding sources informed about the transition?		
Staff/HR management		
Is staff informed about the transition?		
Who is supporting the staff?		
What gaps might this transition create for staff management & HR?		
How is staff morale?		
Are there any outstanding HR issues?		

Assess Current Environment: External Commitments

Assessment Questions	Status/Needs	Action Plan and Timeline
Public policy commitments/goals		
What has the organization's public representation been?		
What has the organization's legislative agenda or public policy action been?		
Has the organization made commitments about future policy work?		
Constituent Needs		
What does the membership look toward the organization to represent publicly?		
What do the allied organizations of the coalition need?		
What agreements has the coalition made with its constituents? Any promises they need to keep?		
Meeting Representation		
What meetings is the coalition attending?		
Where is coalition representation critical?		
What are the meetings the coalition should be attending but is not?		
Membership Relationships		
What is the coalition's membership?		
Who is communicating with the membership during the transition?		
How is the coalition addressing the needs of the membership at this time?		

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