

Succession Planning For Coalitions

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The Issue

Planning for and managing executive leadership transitions are challenging tasks for any organization. The tenure of Executive Directors varies widely across the country, both in terms of length and tone of their leadership, but the challenges of moving from one ED to another are more similar than different.

Coalitions have been very lucky in the movement to end sexual violence. In many states, coalitions have enjoyed the long tenure of powerful women in leadership positions who have shepherded our coalitions and our movement as we've grown. In other states, there have been coalitions who have not enjoyed this kind of stable leadership. Instead, those organizations grapple with the challenges that changes in leadership bring. In either case, as well as those in between, every coalition will at some point be faced with the need to manage a successful transition from one Executive Director to the next. This article is intended to give coalition boards and staff ideas of how to plan for and engineer a successful transition, both in the face of an imminent departure or well in advance of any potential change.

The Challenge

Two things are happening when an organization manages a significant change in leadership. First, the inner workings of the organization need to be continued in a way that sustains the organization in the interim (stability). Second, there needs to be a concerted effort to replace the outgoing leader (the search). Having both goals, stability and the search, in the forefront of the organization is an important balance to strike. Because planning for an executive search is a critical and time consuming task, it serves an organization well to plan for how to maintain stability before a search is necessary. Succession planning is an ongoing process that must be discussed at all levels of the organization on a continuous basis. In fact, the very idea that change will happen and the organization will be ready for it can become an important piece of the coalition's culture.

Emergency succession planning (last minute planning) can certainly be done, but the coalition will benefit from having conversations about planning and priorities without having a leadership crisis imminently hanging overhead. Advance succession planning can help ensure that there are many potential leaders inside the organization who can help craft or maintain stability during a time of change.

For Coalitions

Coalitions have distinct challenges in addressing executive transitions. In the anti-sexual violence field broadly, we talk about the crisis nature of our work being a profound barrier

to organizational planning. In many ways, this is quite true: our rape crisis centers and coalitions are often understaffed, which overburdens existing staff and creates an environment in which they spend most of their time and energy fielding the day-to-day crises of survivor calls, systems demands, and funding fluxes. However, in this setting, it is even more important that we make time to plan strategically for both the development of the organization and inevitable leadership changes, as we have fewer resources at our fingertips on a day-to-day basis and will not necessarily be able to marshal our resources in a true emergency to make a workable plan.

Because coalitions are responsible for both statewide systems advocacy work and local membership support (plus potentially numerous other activities) there are many necessary angles of succession planning. Coalitions manage a statewide membership, a statewide board of directors, and state-level systems and policy work, all of which demand a comprehensive understanding of a variety of issues. With these components affecting the organization deeply, it's imperative that the board of directors and executive leadership plan for change on many levels and grow an organization that's flexible and nimble along the way. Some of the challenges that face coalitions include (but are certainly not limited to):

- supporting complicated systems work (including relationship building and public policy efforts);
- managing a statewide board of directors, often who represent local programs;
- supporting the various needs of statewide member programs; and
- managing a staff with a high turnover rate (potentially).

Another issue that, though not unique to coalitions, should be given some attention is the amount of emotion either discussion or management of a transition can generate. For many staff, board members, and constituents, the personal relationships that develop during the course of one's work in the anti-sexual violence field are incredibly important. Discussing or planning transitions may bring up issues of grief and loss for individuals, and those emotions can be overwhelming. There are many resources that can be helpful to organizations in this arena, not the least of which are Employee Assistance Programs who can usually provide some level of group or individual processing/counseling sessions.

What we can do now: Preparing for your transition

It's very easy to avoid talking about eventual staff transitions, for fear of rocking the boat or starting conversations about one's own departure. However, the easiest time to talk about staff transitions is when they are not currently happening. Therefore, it serves an organization well to create an atmosphere that supports ongoing conversations about these inevitable, eventual changes.

There are many opportunities to discuss succession planning, with the organization's board of directors and staff, including:

- in annual personnel evaluation processes,
- through annual work planning conversations,
- in board strategic planning or visioning discussions,
- at regular board meetings, and
- at regular staff meetings.

The board of directors is responsible for setting the overall vision and goals of the agency. As the board works to fulfill this role, it can help prepare the organization for changes by clearly identifying its priorities. If the organization's leadership is clear about where it wants to be in the future, then those goals (if shared throughout the organization) will help in identifying the skills that would be needed in the any future leader.

The board is also responsible for making sure that the organization is in compliance with relevant laws, accounting procedures, and other accountability measures. In completing this part of its job, a member of the board (likely the secretary or chairperson) should know where the organizations key records are (501(c)3 letter, articles of incorporation, relevant filings with Secretary of State's office, etc) and should have copies of such documents in safe-keeping somewhere off-site.

At regular board meetings, board members should make a habit of asking key questions about how staff is creating systems to support their work in the future, how redundancies are being developed so that current information is not lost, and how staff is being cross-trained and supported so that no one person has information that others don't. The goal is to ensure that the organization develops processes and systems so that work can continue without much interruption if any key staff person leaves. The board of directors can make it known that one of their governance priorities is to build a strong organization that can prepare and plan for change, and therefore set expectations that staff will create their systems accordingly.

Annual evaluation and planning systems are important to have in place for all staff positions. Though it's important to give feedback consistently throughout the year, the annual evaluation and work planning processes can be useful opportunities to take a step back and complete a broader assessment of the past year's successes and challenges, as well as a time to take stock of where each position is heading for the next year or more. In these conversations, staff should discuss:

- how they're documenting their processes for posterity (so future staff don't have to recreate the wheel);
- with whom they have key relationships;
- where the growth areas in the position are (and what qualifications they or their successor will need to accomplish new goals);
- what their annual workflow calendar is and where it is documented;
- how they are developing redundancies in their work systems so if they are suddenly unavailable work can continue; and
- how the job description reflects the job, and how to make changes to the job description when appropriate.

In addition to making sure these key areas are addressed, staff can also attend to details that can help ensure that any unplanned transitions are smooth. These details include:

- who has copies of keys to agency files and where are they kept?
- who maintains a master list of passwords or other system that ensures computer files can be accessed?
- who has the authority to sign checks and approve expenses if the ED is unavailable?
- is there a general agency operations manual? Is one needed?

All of these conversations take time, and it will be time well spent in advance of a leadership crisis. In fact, organizations can ease into talk of succession planning by discussing what they would do in case of emergency and develop a mini-succession plan based on a hypothetical leadership crisis (the journal *Advancing Philanthropy* suggests the scenario of an Executive Director who wins the lottery and runs away to Tahiti, as opposed to a morbid hypothetical). After developing a short “in case of emergency” plan, the board and staff may feel more prepared to dig deeper and develop a multi-layered and broader succession plan.

In case of emergency

Though advance planning for transitions is most useful, organizations don’t always have that opportunity. Entering a transition period without a previously developed plan doesn’t mean that the organization has to forego any benefit planning could have provided. In fact, sometimes under the pressure of an urgent transition, organizations can craft thoughtful triage plans.

When a board of directors is faced with a sudden transition, they have a number of issues to tend to and questions to answer. The list of questions and issues can become overwhelming quickly, so it may be helpful to identify what the absolute priority areas are before moving forward.

- Who will approve expenses and sign checks?
- Who will ensure compliance with contracts and grants?
- Who will ensure the organization is in good financial health? (ensure checks and balances are maintained, oversee audit, etc)
- Who will supervise personnel?
- Is there anything about this transition that will threaten the organization’s funding or future work? How can we address that?
- Who will communicate with our membership and key constituents about this transition? What are our talking points?
- Who is responsible for media contacts or public appearances during the transition?
- Who from the board will supervise the staff leadership during the transition?

A word about the money

No organization wants to face the mystery of where the organization’s money is kept, how many accounts it has, or any question of who has signing authority on those accounts. It is imperative for every organization to identify at the board and executive staff level where every bank account is, what the account numbers are, and who is authorized to access these funds. Similarly, both board and staff leadership should know where the organization’s lines of credit are, how much they are for, and who is authorized to change or access them.

An annual review and assessment of finances is a critical function of the finance committee or other designated board representative. Great care should be taken to ensure that only current employees and board members have access to funds and credit and it should never be a mystery as to where the organization’s money is held.

After these critical areas are addressed, the board and staff of the organization can work together to maintain (or achieve stability) during an abrupt transition and then move forward to discussing how to complete a search process.

Addressing the challenges of statewide work

The statewide systems advocacy or policy work that coalitions participate in can not usually be addressed comprehensively in an emergency situation. Instead, statewide systems work must be cross-staffed and information about current work shared throughout the organization. This is not to say that all staff must attend statewide meetings – in fact, that is likely not a good use of staff time or expertise. But information about the coalition’s agenda, key issues, and areas of concern can be shared in many ways.

First, statewide representation and advocacy work can’t be a one-woman show. Coalitions rely on their memberships for input and feedback and therefore should base their priorities and agendas on what their membership wants to see addressed. There may be additional issues that arise that the coalition staff see need to be managed as well, and the coalition’s membership should be informed (not necessarily polled) when such is the case.

Statewide systems work is incredibly labor intensive and takes the work of many different people to move forward. At the coalition staff level the Executive Director, or perhaps a Public Policy Director, is usually the main representative of the agency. In some coalitions, a support person or maybe another staff member might be available as well. It’s important that, no matter how many or how few people a coalition might have involved, more than one person have relationships with the colleagues with whom the coalition works. More than one person must be trained on how the statewide systems work happens, where the state agencies are housed, who the players are, etc. Statewide systems work can also be discussed with the organization’s full staff via staff meetings or other structured gathering.

Conclusion

Regardless of the coalition’s size, each organization can immediately begin to address the gaps that inevitably will arise during a time of transition. Cross training, complete information reporting, and solid documentation processes can all help alleviate the pain of these times of change. Issues ranging from simple internal office issues (where is the extra set of keys? How do I contact the landlord?) to major statewide policy issues (how did we come up with our position statement on sex offender management?) can render an organization temporarily ineffective if the right information isn’t shared across multiple levels.

All organizations and businesses need to plan for changes in leadership. Statewide sexual assault coalitions face additional challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that advocacy efforts at the state level can continue in times of significant personnel changes. The board of directors and staff can prepare for these changes well in advance and should prioritize having conversations about inevitable changes (even if those changes are years away).

Checklist for executive transition planning (Advance Planning)

Complete?	What?	Who?
	Identify core values, vision, and goals	Board
	Update & maintain job description for ED	Board
	Support development of sustainable internal systems & processes	Board
	Provide support and governance to ensure organizational mission and values are upheld.	Board
	Develop organizational calendar of key activities	ED/Staff
	Cross-staff core organizational functions	Staff
	Share information regarding key files/documents	ED/Board & Staff
	Develop leadership of staff and membership	ED/Staff
	Develop constituent relationships across the organization (not based on individual personalities)	Board & Staff
	Create flexible succession plan (for Executive Director, key staff positions, and key board positions) and share it with staff and board	Board & Staff
	Update & maintain job descriptions for staff	ED/Staff
	Create redundant systems to support key staff work	ED/Staff
	Document internal agency processes/create operations manual(s)	ED/Staff

Checklist for Succession Planning (Triage)

Critical Questions	Answers & Notes
Where is our organizations' money? Do we have lines of credit? Who is authorized on all of these accounts?	
Who will approve expenses and sign checks?	
Who will ensure compliance with contracts and grants?	
Who will ensure the organization is in good financial health? (ensure checks and balances are maintained, oversee audit, etc)	
Who will supervise personnel?	
Is there anything about this transition that will threaten the organization's funding or future work? How can we address that?	
Who will communicate with our membership and key constituents about this transition? What are our talking points?	
Who is responsible for media contacts or public appearances during the transition?	
Who from the board will supervise the staff leadership during the transition?	
If staff have taken on additional responsibilities, how are they being compensated?	

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