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Facing the future: “It’s always wise to look ahead, but difficult to look further than you can see.” Winston Churchill

By: Jennifer Chandler

“Here’s what we know: Leaders leave.” - I was tempted to use this as my opening salvo when speaking with nonprofit leaders in Indiana last week about continuing and emerging trends. As expected, when I asked those in the room to share what was keeping them up at night related to their nonprofits, about half in the room reported they were worried about their nonprofit’s financial sustainability. But an equal number confessed their concerns about finding new board members to replace those who were retiring, or their apprehension about what would happen if their executive director were to leave. One leader shared how devastating it was for her small nonprofit when a key employee (one of only 3) was out of work for months due to illness.

Transitions are times of great vulnerability for nonprofits. We’ve all seen nonprofits struggle with a funding dip, as donors wait to see how the new leadership will turn out. Transitions may cause collaborations to lose momentum, or strategic thinking to

shrink, as the new leader cleans up a mess or simply needs time to get up to speed addressing day-to-day operations. Yet well before the inevitable transition there is a serious conundrum: whose job is it to bring up the fact that the nonprofit needs a leadership transition plan? Both the board and the staff leader may be reluctant to raise the issue, but planning for the future, including leadership transitions, is one of the most important fiduciary duties for any nonprofit board. Advance planning is a proven risk management strategy to minimize the stress of a transition.

While there are many good resources available encouraging nonprofit boards to focus on succession planning well in advance of leadership transitions, instead we are prone to ignoring the issue. Having to deal with transitions through crisis management instead is unfortunately one of the 'dirty little secrets' that even your nonprofit board may be hiding.

We understand. It's hard to gaze into the future to the day when leaders say 'goodbye.' That's why I was so pleased to find a little book filled with lots of wisdom titled, [*When Leaders Leave*](#). It's particularly well-suited for nonprofits still being led by their founders. We invited the authors to share an excerpt that we think underscores the vital importance of accepting that the future is uncertain. Once you take that initial psychological leap, you are already preparing your nonprofit to be resilient in the face of a transition of leadership.

Read on for concrete suggestions and inspiration from *When Leaders Leave* that can help your nonprofit face for the future with renewed resiliency.

Accepting leadership change as inevitable can be the engine that fuels the resiliency and agility an organization needs to thrive. Because change is the only constant we can count on, we all need to embrace it and figure out how to use it in our favor so that we can help our organizations grow and evolve. Here's what we know.

Leaders leave. Whether it's a founder or leader with beginning thoughts about retirement, a new generation leader just starting her planned five-year run, or a transition in board leadership, organizations are always in flux somewhere on the continuum of leadership transition.

Leadership change is a challenge. Leadership change is not simple. It impacts every employee, board member and stakeholder in the organization. Anticipating that challenge in advance ultimately smoothes out the process and prepares the organization for a successful transition and integration of new leadership.

Leadership change is opportunity. Knowing that change is inevitable opens the doorway to new thinking about how an organization and its leaders can positively impact the mission. When the environment supports a mantra of continual growth, new directions will evolve. With change in mind, management always has an eye toward long-term growth and development for the individual and for the organization.

Change is constant. And a change in leadership is inevitable. That's true even when that leader is the founder who passionately embraced a societal need, brought together bright and promising people to think about solutions, and created the organization. At some time, at some point, that founder/leader will move on.

A change in leadership, which often strikes fear at the very heart of an organization, can throw the board, staff and leadership into turmoil. In fact, people go to great lengths to avoid disrupting the status quo. Sometimes, they even stay in bad relationships because it seems like a more palatable option. If we are overwhelmed by the fear of new leadership and we try to hold onto the status quo, we expend a lot of energy grasping at something that is unachievable. Successful organizations have both the stability and the resiliency to respond to changes in their internal and external environments.

Change in leadership is, indeed, a painful thought. But avoiding it or pretending that it won't happen could put an organization in long-term jeopardy. What is most important is that the facts are faced and parameters put in place to ensure that the organization will continue to thrive and stand on its own without the current leadership. It is critical because this will ensure that the organization's leadership can continue to address its mission in positive ways.

Planning ahead and thinking through that potential change in leadership for the chief executive and, sometimes, for the board chair, is actually a series of three processes that support the organization's overall strength and development: leadership legacy planning, succession planning and transition planning.

Leadership legacy planning assures the organization's ability to survive and thrive. This focus is actually part of an important, ongoing process in which the organization periodically assesses its vision based on the reality of current needs and refines its optimal path for growth. This process also provides a roadmap to ensure that all levels of leadership are aligned with the same focus. With advanced leadership legacy planning, the organization will survive a leadership transition and actually thrive because of the reflection inherent in the process and the diverse thinking and energy brought by a new CEO.

The opportunities abound. Every organization has the potential to go through a leadership change and emerge with strength. The transition provides a unique chance for the organization to manage change by establishing good leadership practices and creating an environment of resiliency.

Priscilla Rosenwald and Lesley Mallow Wendell are the authors of [When Leaders Leave](#), a small but mighty book that is jam-packed with practical wisdom based on the authors' many years of guidance to nonprofits during leadership transitions.