PLANNING FOR LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION:

Are You Ready?

HERE ARE RULES EVERY CEO SHOULD KEEP IN MIND.

BY JOSEPH C. SANTORA

Surveys show that less than 50% of nonprofits plan for leadership succession. These organizations are taking a big risk, especially during times of economic uncertainty and turbulence.

It's up to the CEO and board to work together to create a succession plan. Every organization needs one. The following five guidelines will help:

– 1 –
Choose a Successor at an Early Stage.

It's never too early for the CEO, in consultation with the board, to identify a successor. This person will lead the organization if the CEO retires, resigns, is forced from office by the board, becomes incapacitated, or dies. The successor should have the following characteristics:

- **Embody** the same organizational philosophy as the incumbent.
- **Be devoted** to the organization's mission.
- **Possess** leadership traits, such as loyalty, tenacity, and perseverance.
- **Be willing to wait** in the CEO's shadow as heir apparent, ensuring that the CEO and board can sustain the organization's policies and practices after the incumbent leaves.

– 2 –
Name the Successor.

Once the CEO and board have settled on a successor, they should communicate their selection to the entire organization so that a smooth and seamless transition can take place.

– 3 –
Give the Successor Leadership Experience.

The best way an understudy can learn to lead is by leading. The successor should be given leadership opportunities on a gradual basis. Job rotation, working in key administrative areas, will give the understudy a holistic view of the organization. The reigning CEO should serve as role model, mentor, and coach.

– 4 –
Share Vital Information.

The CEO, board, and successor should understand the need to communicate and share vital information. Communication and information-sharing reduce interpersonal and organizational barriers which can lead to poor personal and organizational performance.

– 5 –
Exit & Don't Look Back.

Unless unplanned activities such as death or incapacity occur, the CEO should set a realistic deadline for departure. Often CEOs remain as consultants after they have been succeeded. Such action may cause mixed loyalties and be more harmful than beneficial to the organization. By now the new CEO should be sufficiently mentored to lead the organization, and the departing CEO should realize that retiring doesn't signal a death knell. ■

Resources

Burnham, Katie, "What Skills Will Nonprofit Leaders Need in the Future?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 3.

Temkin, Terrie, "Nonprofit Leadership: New Skills Are Needed," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Muehrcke, Jill, "Are You a Collaborative Leader?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 2.

Vanden Berk, Kathryn Collins, "Is Your Organization an Opportunist?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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