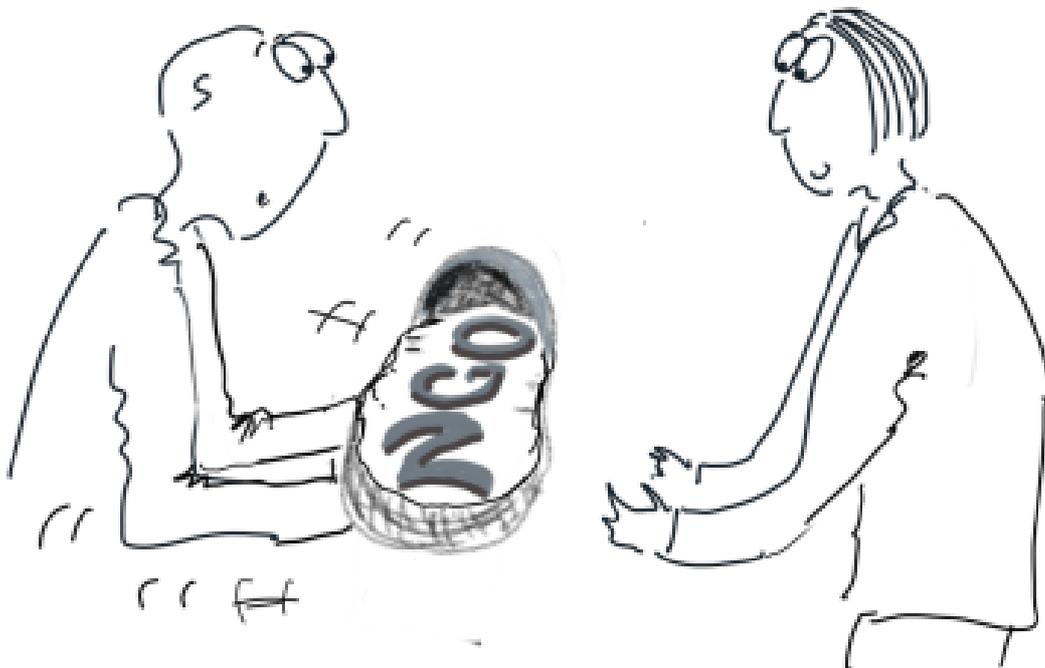




Leadership Transition

Overcoming the threat of Founder's Syndrome



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CONTENTS

About the author.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	2
In search of happier endings.....	4
Founder syndrome	5
The challenge of founder transition.....	5
An opportunity for growth.....	6
Getting ready for transition	7
What leaders can do	7
Letting go.....	8
Looking ahead positively.....	9
Preparing the staff.....	10
Putting succession on the board’s agenda.....	10
What boards can do	11
Put succession on the leader’s agenda	11
Address board performance issues.....	11
Mandate a transition team	12
The transition process	12
Create a roadmap.....	12
Clarify any future role of outgoing founder	13
Identify the appropriate successor	14
Manage the actual handover	15
Mark the endings	15
Passing on the external relationships	15
Embedding the transition	15
Expect unsettling culture change.....	15
Support the successors with regular check-ups.....	16
Successors listen to earn trust	16
Conclusion.....	17
Annex 1 Am I still the leader this agency needs?.....	18
References and useful resources	19
INTRAC blog series	19
Bibliography	19
Useful websites	19

IN SEARCH OF HAPPIER ENDINGS...

'Simon' is now almost 70. He has been Chief Executive of a global NGO for almost 30 years. I've done a few consultancies for them over the years. I've seen all their senior managers come and go. It's like a revolving door. More than 80% of staff have left in the last five years. Simon's been reported to the board on numerous occasions for shouting at staff and losing control in meetings. While staff describe the culture as toxic, Simon talks about disloyalty. But when they resign, he has to fill the gaps, driving himself with even longer hours. He regularly falls asleep in meetings and is not at all well, surviving on a cocktail of medication. He recently had a major stroke flying back from an international conference... And yet he refuses to retire, saying he cannot let go when the NGO is in such a state. And his friends on the board want him to stay because income is still surprisingly healthy. It is a sad, but not unusual story. It may not have a happy ending.



But even this is not as extreme as a case I heard about, where the followers of an ousted founder of a Kenyan civil society organisation (CSO), set alight the houses of the supporters of the new leader - killing four people. This terrible story shows how passions can be inflamed in leadership transition.

Leadership transition does not have to be like this. And it should not be like this. Every single organisation that matures will go through a change of leadership. It is a difficult and critical time – particularly when the leader also founded the organisation. But the change could also herald the start of a new dynamic chapter or the beginning of the end. Despite its massive significance, most CSOs do not manage leadership transition well – especially not with founders. It is usually rocky, painful, risky and sometimes even fatal.

Why does a normal part of any organisation's maturing becoming a debilitating syndrome? How do we avoid the syndrome becoming a potentially fatal disease? And what can we do to ensure as smooth a transition as possible?

Clearly a lot depends on the context. Succession in a community group in a remote Indonesian island will not be the same as in a global INGO based in Geneva or Delhi. It is obviously impossible to guarantee success in such a fundamental change process. But it can help to learn from others' experiences in order to manage the difficult process as carefully and proactively as possible. This gives more likelihood that the organisation and the departing leader can mature to their next stage of life.

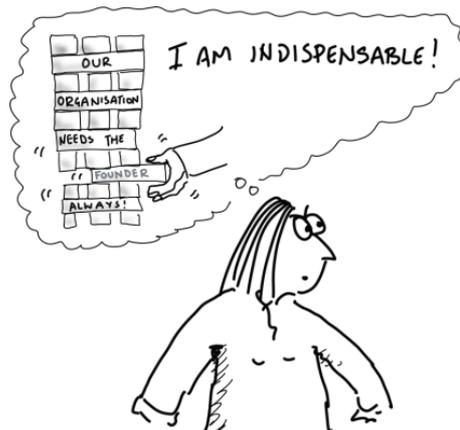
A special [INTRAC blog series](#), drawn from CSO experiences across the world, highlighted learning at three key stages in a healthy leadership transplant:

1. Getting ready – 'pre-op' preparation
 - What leaders can do
 - What boards can do
2. The transition process – the operation itself
 - Clarifying any future role for the ex-leader
 - Recruiting the successor
 - Managing the handover
3. Embedding the transition – post operative care

This paper explores each of these stages in turn building on the original blogs and bringing in new insights from my work on leadership over recent years. It offers reflections and advice for founders, leaders, board members and senior management teams as they face change at the top

FOUNDER SYNDROME

Founder's Syndrome happens when a founder stays on too long in leadership so that it creates debilitating organisational dysfunction. This is not a new phenomenon. I remember first hearing the phrase almost 30 years ago. Since then, far from finding a cure, the 'disease' seems to have flourished. INTRAC has even had a touch of it ourselves, with a difficult transition after the founder left. INTRAC does not pretend to have easy answers.



Founder's syndrome presents in different ways. In some cases the CSO has outgrown the pioneer leader, requiring a different style of management or shift in strategic direction. Many successful founders find it hard to change what has worked well for them so far - and so become more fixed in their ways. They feel attacked and may focus more on loyalty than performance. This leads to staff frustration and often escalating staff turnover. If untreated, the culture can become toxic.

And it doesn't only affect founders. All leaders are at risk after a few years in charge – Simon's NGO mentioned earlier started more than 100 years ago.

Box 1: Seven signs of founder's syndrome

1. Inability to delegate
2. Anger when not included in every decision
3. Paranoia derived from a sense that the venture is "slipping out of their control"
4. Ignoring input from subject-matter experts
5. Expressing prescient knowledge, even when lacking subject-matter expertise
6. Lack of respect for formalized planning
7. Subterfuge of efforts to institute procedures, processes and controls which would decentralize decision making

Source: Greathouse (2014)

THE CHALLENGE OF FOUNDER TRANSITION

Founder transition is particularly serious for CSOs because, as Rajesh Tandon points out in his blog ['Founder's Retirement – are you serious?'](#):

- Founders shape the organisation's vision and culture. Their personal commitments and dreams are the building blocks of a new enterprise.

- The material, intellectual and emotional investment of the founders to their 'enterprises' can't be expected from those who follow them, irrespective of their professional competencies.
- The founder's external networks and relationships are distinctive to the personality of the founder. Hence, these can't be readily handed over to the successor.
- Founders took the risks and paid the price to launch a new initiative. Successors may never be able to fully appreciate the emotional start-up costs.
- Unless their health gets in the way, founders continue to be passionate about the success of their initiative.
- The Governing Boards often are made up of friends and peers, who have usually been brought together by the founders.

Finally, a change of leadership at any time is a huge adjustment. With founders the degree of difficulty is multiplied. It poses a massive organisational risk. It can jeopardise the organisation's very existence. It is probably the biggest responsibility a board will face.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

Founder transition is also a great opportunity. There comes a time when the energy and ideas of any founder (or long-term leader) fall short of what is needed. The external environment may have changed; the conditions for success may require a different way of working; funding streams may have altered; or the founder may simply be getting older, becoming jaded and tired.

As Michael Hammer points out in [Identity and Gender in Founder Transitions](#), founder transitions may be the first opportunity to think about change, not only in terms of a different person, but also in terms of gender and diversity. There is potential to shift the culture and identity of the organisation, to promote new role models, by appointing a successor of a different gender or ethnic background.

Founder transition is a normal and inevitable part of any healthy organisation's development. Every founder, every leader, will move on at some stage. We talk about Founder's Syndrome as if it were a disease. Yet it's only when we fail to deal with it in a forward-looking, considered and open way that it becomes a pathology.

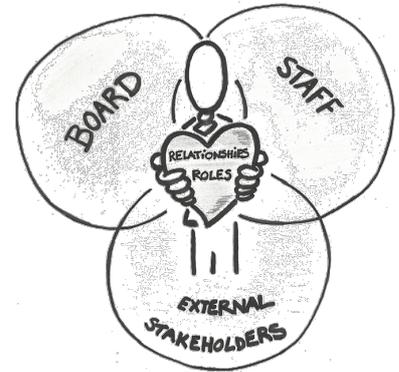
So the real challenge is not about founders leaving (or not), it's more about the timing and the way in which it is done. But whenever it takes place, however it takes place, founder transition is always risky and painful. Emotions are high, people are stressed and there is a real potential for major disaster. It's like a heart transplant – and such transplants can go wrong. We have seen many NGOs collapse and fail soon after leadership transition. The longer you leave it, the harder it gets. Like any heart transplant, we need to take it extremely seriously with pre-operation work, meticulous surgery and considerable post-op care.



GETTING READY FOR TRANSITION

Before any major operation, careful 'pre-op' tests, studies and preparation take place. It is the same for any leadership transition, especially with founders. Dealing effectively with leadership transition requires an organisation-wide response. Successful succession is not about a single individual. It requires the leader, the staff, the board, and the successor to all play their part.

In dealing with cases of founder's syndrome, it is too easy and simplistic to just point fingers at the founder. Even just by calling it 'Founder's Syndrome' we imply that it is an individual's problem. If a syndrome has developed, it may be just as much about board complicity or follower dependence¹. After all, no founder sets out to damage their organisation by staying on too long. They have simply lost their way and the harder they try to fix it themselves, the worse it seems to get. A founder needs a responsible board and trusted staff to encourage and enable them to let go.



WHAT LEADERS CAN DO

Healthy transition requires leaders to let go. This is a very personal and challenging process for many, touching on highly sensitive and sometimes sub-conscious issues of self-identity and ego. Rajesh Tandon ([2016](#)) quotes an 80 year old founder of a successful Indian organisation, who, when asked about retirement, responded: "What? Are you serious? I would rather move on to the other world first."



To help a leader think through transition, particularly when in the midst of a busy CEO role, often requires outside help. They need challenge, encouragement and support along the way. Board members may help leaders see their blind spots. Many founders have found outside coaches to be a real support in helping them to focus on what's next. Good coaches can create a safe space to ask the right questions (see Annex 1)². They help leaders work out what is holding them back and what are the incentives to move on.

Leaders can help prepare for smoother succession by:

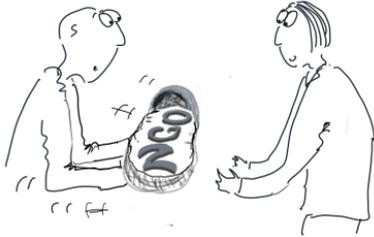
1. Letting go
2. Looking ahead positively
3. Preparing the staff
4. Putting succession on the board's agenda

¹ <https://www.intrac.org/followership-overlooked-ingredient-successful-organisations/>

² See Annex 1 from Tim Wolfred: 'Am I still the leader this agency needs?'

LETTING GO

Leaving an organisation is painful, especially if you have created it. It is as if they are being told 'You are no longer good enough'. Even the smoothest transitions can be tough. They all involve a degree of anxiety, fear, grief, anger, and frustration. Emotions are intensified during times of uncertainty and change. Leadership transition is too significant to be anything but bumpy, especially with founders.



Some founders liken moving on to giving your baby up for adoption. This is far worse than your child growing up and leaving home. Few parents would trust anyone else to look after their child with the same love and commitment that they have. So it is not surprising that founders find it hard to trust handing their organisation on.

Four factors often tie leaders down:

1. Role identity
2. Insidious pride
3. Financial risk
4. Follower dependence



Role identity

Leadership is not just simply what some people do, it is who they are. A board member telephoned me recently to ask about how to help her NGO's Director – an elderly, but still fierce Irish Nun who was reaching her 80s, but showed no signs of letting go. Transition touches highly sensitive and sometimes sub-conscious issues of self-identity. A leader's sense of who they are may have become inseparable from their work. For many founders, their leadership has become inextricably intertwined with their identity. They may be unable to distinguish between what is for the organisation's benefit and what is for their own. They cannot see who they are anymore without reference to their job. So they find it hard to countenance a meaningful life without their position.



Such identity issues should not be a surprise. Founders invest huge amounts of time and emotional energy in making their dream a reality. It has probably consumed their lives. Their outside interests may have narrowed. Some have become 'distant' from their families, friends and loved ones.

So just when they should be letting go, they are clinging tighter to their job for their sense of meaning and purpose. Their commitment to 'the cause' is unwavering, though their ability to lead effectively may be declining. As Rajesh Tandon asks: "*When founders move on, what do they do about their commitments? How do they continue to advance the causes they believed in all their lives now?*"

It can be confused and messy. I remember working with one founder leader, who could accept stepping down from his formal management role and responsibilities as Director of a faith-based organisation. But he still felt he needed to retain his spiritual leadership and remain the 'leader of the movement'.

Insidious pride

We all tend to overestimate our own importance. Founders in particular often feel, or are made to feel, indispensable. Loyal staff and supporters may have frequently told them this over the years. It is easy to get used to the trappings of the role, the respect, the status in society it brings.

We all like to feel we make an important contribution. Moving on as a leader might undermine this.

Financial risk

A commercial entrepreneur can sell their successful business and walk off into a comfortable retirement with the big payoff. It's the reverse for NGO founders. Such social entrepreneurs have no financial incentive to let go. It can be a financial abyss. They have probably worked hand-to-mouth for many years at below market salary. They probably have not built up personal savings. At their age, they may not be able to easily walk into another job. Leaving employment may have serious financial consequences as they have built up on-going financial commitments (mortgages, education fees). One founder admitted to me: *"I can't afford to step down until my children have finished university"*. For many the need for on-going income makes a founder delay or resist succession. One funder INTRAC works with has provided some innovative incentives to help the founder step down – they gave one leader a 'golden handshake' payment (as they had no pension) and to another a grant for them to leave and write their memoirs.



Follower dependence

And it may not be just a leader's own stuff that holds them back. The staff and board may want to keep leaders in their position. They may have been recruited by the leader and may have become



comfortable with and indeed dependent upon the leader. I remember Simon's board Chair telling me that she hoped he would continue for many years to come and the Vice-Chair saying *"There is nothing that Simon could ever do to make me lose my trust in him"*. Sometimes leaders are trapped by their followers who refuse to let them go. I've even heard an extreme story from India where a founder literally had to escape from the office and run away!

It is important to fully appreciate the ties that bind a leader to their position. There are very powerful incentives for them to stay and not leave. It is especially important for the leader themselves to become self-aware of these ties. Awareness precedes action.

LOOKING AHEAD POSITIVELY

As well as loosening the ties, it is also important to reinforce and encourage the positive incentives to move on. These will obviously be different for each person but can include:

The power of legacy

Every leader wants to have made a contribution - and preferably a contribution that continues after they have left. They want to leave a sustainable legacy. But for sustainability you need succession. So healthy leadership transition is a core part of ensuring a sustainable NGO.

Creating some legacy symbols can help some leaders let go. These may also address the issues from loss of status and role. A number of NGOs give their outgoing leaders an honorific title such as 'President' with more of an ambassadorial, figurehead role. Others have created memorial buildings, libraries, scholarships, side-projects to honour the contribution of their



founders. Seeing a visible and tangible contribution gives some founders an important sense of leaving an on-going legacy. They are still part of the scenery, but not interfering too much. An assurance of legacy helps founders move on.

Plan the next chapter

When founders have nowhere else to go, they usually stay on too long. Most social entrepreneurs have no great wish to walk off into the sunset and a safe retirement. They have the same passion to change the world as before, even if their energy is less. They may well have unmet dreams.



It may be valuable to help a founder focus on the next chapter of their lives. The longer they stay on, the shorter the next chapter will be and the more limited the options. The next chapter needs quality time, what is it to be?

Matthew is one of the NGO leaders I most admire. He was Chief Executive of a successful and growing UK NGO. The organisation was doing creative and innovative work. He was well-respected externally and loved by the staff. But after 10 years in post, he decided that at 50 years old, it was time to move on. He felt he had made his contribution and wanted to explore a number of other options for the next chapter of his working life in order to fulfil his calling.

PREPARING THE STAFF

Leaders can help ready the organisation for succession by creating an empowered culture with second-line leadership. Healthy leadership succession emerges from a culture where leadership is already distributed throughout the organisation. It's about building a genuine team culture – a way of working that discourages dependence on an individual at the top. One that promotes delegation, feedback, learning, and transition of roles. An effective senior management team, a second-line leadership that shares responsibilities, is absolutely key.

Whether and how leaders delegate is of paramount importance in preparing staff for succession. No leader can do everything well. Leaders should know and play to their strengths and find people to cover weak points. Delegation - sharing responsibility - encourages others to grow and reach their potential. Good delegation means leaders do not get stuck with ever increasing burdens.



PUTTING SUCCESSION ON THE BOARD'S AGENDA

As we shall see, healthy succession requires strong board engagement. Leaders can assist this by taking the initiative and put their succession onto the board's agenda. Leaders are in the best position to break the taboo and normalise the discussion about succession.

I have been working with an amazing, young leader of a programme with indigenous groups in the Arctic. She felt that after four years in a major funding role, she did not want to become stuck. She informed her board that in nine months' time she would be stepping down (despite not having anything to go to). But she felt she had to give the board time to plan and implement a smooth transition. We are working on how to make that happen, so that the valuable contribution continues and develops.

It helps if leaders are open with the board about their evolving thinking about succession, rather than waiting until everything is decided. Healthy transition does not happen by accident or luck. It needs considered planning as we shall see. The board are the ones responsible for identifying a suitable successor. It helps if they have fair warning to give them adequate time to undertake this onerous task. The earlier and the more open the discussion about succession, the less of an issue it becomes.



WHAT BOARDS CAN DO

While the leader has a critical role in enabling transition, ultimately succession is the board's responsibility. The leader, even if they did found the organisation, is first and foremost an employee, not an owner of the NGO. The board are ultimately responsible for hiring and firing the leadership. They are the ones in charge of any leadership transition process. Board readiness for transition is therefore key. They 'wield the surgeon's knife'.

Times of leadership transition require the board to engage more intensively than usual. They cannot afford to be hands-off, but have to step into greater responsibility. This requires extra time and effort, particularly from the board chair. Continuity of the board chair is critical during transition. Few board members relish being around at times of leadership transition. Many never expected that by agreeing to serve, it would involve much more than a few quarterly meetings. The board cannot opt for an easy life and put off the inevitable. As John Adair says: "Better to take change by the hand and lead it where you want it to go, than wait until it grabs you by the throat and drags you off in any direction." (Adair, J, 2002)



There are a number of ways the board needs to step up for transition:

1. Put succession on leader's agenda
2. Address board performance issues
3. Mandate a transition team

PUT SUCCESSION ON THE LEADER'S AGENDA

Ideally leaders put succession onto the board's agenda. In reality, however, few founders have the courage, vision, clear sense of identity, and humility to do this without encouragement from the board. As they are ultimately responsible, it is often the board who has to initiate the uncomfortable conversations.

Succession is an acutely sensitive subject, but it shouldn't be avoided. Boards can make the question of succession a normal part of board discussions with leaders. Succession should also be a normal agenda item of board-only discussions. Boards are in a position to ask the difficult questions and create space for meaningful discussion, particularly with founders.

ADDRESS BOARD PERFORMANCE ISSUES

The quality and performance of the board will greatly affect the ease or pain of leadership transition. Healthy transition requires a healthy, well performing board. At times of change the board must be more active in decision-making than usual. A rubber stamp is no help in times of transition. They need to have the independence and strength to hold to account both the

departing and the incoming leader. Furthermore, during transition, it is particularly important that the board has a clear view of the finances of the organisation. An active, competent and engaged Finance and Fundraising sub-committee of the board can greatly assist.

Taking stock of board performance, such as undertaking a board performance audit, can be an essential step in preparing for leadership transition. If the board is not performing at its best during transition, the process will be rockier than it needs to be. Board performance reviews can help think through issues of membership, profile, engagement and direction. They will need to plan ahead for stability and continuity on the board, during and after a founder transition.

MANDATE A TRANSITION TEAM

The third core element of a board's contribution in preparing for healthy transition is to mandate a small team to oversee and manage the leadership transition. The whole board may be too big and unwieldy for this task, so it is about selecting appropriate members. It may be that the board would like to co-opt someone from outside or even a staff member into the team. Clearly boards need to choose these members with care. After all, they are the ones who will identify the most appropriate successor – possibly the most important single decision that will affect the NGO's future.

This transition team becomes responsible for overseeing and managing the next stage, the transition process itself.

THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Healthy leadership transition from a founder is never easy and it does not happen by accident or luck. It requires careful and proactive management. It benefits from:

1. Create a roadmap for the process
2. Clarify any future role for the outgoing leader
3. Identify the appropriate successor
4. Actively managing the handover process

CREATE A ROADMAP

The first step for most transition teams is to create a roadmap for the process with timeframes, milestones and named responsibilities assigned. It is also obviously important to budget for the costs involved and identify how it will be funded. A clear initial plan will make it easier to track progress, regularly reviewing and adjusting in the light of reality. With one NGO I am working with there are three key parts to their transition plan (see box 2):

Box 2: Transition plan

Communications

Internally to staff and externally to stakeholders. Why are they leaving? When? What is the process from here?

Recruitment

Job description – clarify leadership and management functions

Person specification and selection criteria and compensation

Announcement, advertise, where, who, how?

Selection – shortlisting, interviewing

Handover

Off-boarding – celebrating endings

On-boarding – key handovers of relationships and knowledge

Post-hire support

Mutual expectations, priorities, performance measures, coaching + board support

CLARIFY ANY FUTURE ROLE OF OUTGOING FOUNDER

Many founders wish to stay on in some capacity; but it is the board, not the out-going founder, who has to make difficult decisions about the founder's future role.

The prevailing wisdom from management experience and literature is that a graceful exit with 'little or no on-going relationship' is the best option. They advocate a genuine step away for six to 12 months minimum. This avoids confusing lines of authority, however informal. The new leader needs the space to lead.

But while a clean break is usually the best option, there are exceptions to the general rule. Provided the board do not feel coerced and provided the benefits clearly outweigh the risks, then according to Mark Leach (2009) there may be value in limited on-going involvement (see [Table for Two](#) 2009).

There may be some small, intermediate steps which will make transition more palatable for the founder. For example, in INTRAC it was appropriate to offer the founder the opportunity to step down and sideways into leading a special project. He also had the opportunity to do consultancy work for us. In this way he was able to mitigate some of the financial risks. Some have found it appropriate to give the outgoing leader a sabbatical with a proportion of their salary covered for a time; in other CSOs the outgoing founder gets a consultancy retainer.

Whatever option is chosen, there need to be clear boundaries (see box 3). The bottom-line is that the successor must have the power to terminate or change this relationship.

Box 3: Boundaries for on-going founder roles

Can do:

- Funder cultivation
- Speaking (when asked by new CEO, needs discipline to review position beforehand)
- Programme work in technical area
- New activities: Special project work, managing growth, writing, coaching

Should not:

- Be heavily involved in strategy setting (at least for the first year). Advice and ideas only given through the successor.
- Be part of board meetings
- Get involved in staff-management-board relationship issues
- Comment publicly on staff management issues

IDENTIFY THE APPROPRIATE SUCCESSOR

Finding the right successor is obviously vital. The transition team will need to carefully consider what they are looking for in the next phase of the NGO's life - the competencies, character and commitment. While it may be good to solicit the input of the out-going founder, experience shows that it is rarely good to have them as part of the recruitment team.

These people will need to put the time and energy into developing an updated person specification and identifying appropriate characteristics. As well as asking what they will lose by the departure of the founder, it is also important to define what sort of leadership role is needed into the future. Sometimes boards try and replace a charismatic founder with another visionary, when what may be needed is someone who is stronger on the management and systems side.

Boards may also need to think through the personality required to be a successful successor. It may be that a successor will need the emotional intelligence and excellent inter-personal skills to deal with the natural friction and resistance to change from staff.

Most NGO boards do the recruitment themselves as they do not have the money to invest in recruitment. But the leadership role is so critical that it may be appropriate to budget and pay for professional help from recruitment specialists if available. To find the right leader requires time, insight, skill and a wide network of connections. It is much more than putting an advert in a newspaper.

Some literature points to the value of hiring an interim director for the first two or so years post-founder (Box 4).

Box 4: An Interim Director?

The track record of leaders taking over from founders is not great. Many leave within a short period of time. Partly it is because the organisation has been created in the image of the founder and old attachments need time and space to dissolve. The successor takes over 'on the rebound'. It is a thankless task to take over from a charismatic leader. Tim Wolfred says that: "The failure to provide for an interim breathing period is one primary reason that so many ED's who succeed founders survive less than two years" (Wolfred, 2008).

Given that the founder successor in INTRAC lasted less than two years, an interim might have been more appropriate.

MANAGE THE ACTUAL HANDOVER

There are a number of key elements in the actual handover that need active management.

MARK THE ENDINGS

It is really important for healthy transition to publicly appreciate the departing leader. At INTRAC we hosted a special event for all past and present staff to recognise the contribution of our founder. Symbolic occasions can be deeply meaningful and can assist closure.

PASSING ON THE EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

The success or otherwise of the leadership transition will be influenced by the wider network of relationships (the NGO's eco-system). For example donors or government officials have often built up considerable personal trust in the founder. In some cases the donors continue contacting the founder about organisational issues, bypassing the successor.

The transition team will need to work hard on communicating the change to external stakeholders so that key relationships are maintained. It is important to try to pass on the network of formal and informal relationships that the previous leader established. At INTRAC the departing founder and the new leader went on visits together to a number of key clients across Europe. They invested six months in the overlap, although by the end this felt excessive. In the end relationships are personal and however much time you invest, personal trust cannot be not automatically transferred to any successor.

EMBEDDING THE TRANSITION

Transition is not over when the new leader is in post. It may take months or even years to embed. After any transplant, post-op care is essential. There is a risk that the rest of the body will reject the new organ. Sometimes founder transition is as much about followers adapting than the incoming leader.

As INTRAC's former chair says: ***"The key challenge of founder succession is paradoxically not the founder and their departure but the followers and how they are able to be open to change, celebrate the past but take on their responsibilities as 'new adults' in a world without the founder."***

EXPECT UNSETTLING CULTURE CHANGE

The first thing to expect is that any successor is unlikely to fit neatly in the existing organisational culture. Any founder will have had a huge influence on the prevailing culture. Any newcomer will disturb this. It is normal for it to feel like a square peg in a round hole. Even if someone is promoted from within they may behave differently to what is expected. They may be more of a 'second-line manager' type shifting the emphasis from a visionary culture to a more management-oriented one. Furthermore, if it is an internal appointment, there is a risk that staff will not rate them as highly as someone new from outside.

A 'storming' stage is completely normal after a change of leader. Staff are probably tired and stressed after all the dislocation and extra work over the last few months. They may react more strongly than usual to minor issues. What is important is to keep a close watch on how relationships with the new leader are developing. Putting too high expectations on deliverables in the first months of a new leader is unrealistic and may be counter-productive.

SUPPORT THE SUCCESSORS WITH REGULAR CHECK-UPS

Once the new person is in place, the board cannot step back and relax. The board need to be in regular touch with the new Director and also with the staff during the adjustment phase to actively monitor how things are going and step in when things are not going as hoped.

There is bound to be some fall-out. Founder transitions will usually involve more than just the leader changing. The wider leadership and staff need to be ready for this. Understanding impacts, managing potentially fractured relationships and possible competitive threats from other players may all come into play.

The board will need to provide the incoming director with support, to give the maximum opportunity for transition to be successful. But they also need to take the probation and appraisal period seriously. The deliverables in this period may well need to be more about earning trust and building relationships (internally and externally) than focusing on more long term income or output targets.



SUCCESSORS LISTEN TO EARN TRUST

For the incoming leader, it is all about building trust with the team. Any successor to the founder will have to earn this trust. Trust in a leader comes from demonstrating that you are 'on their side', not ego-driven; that you are competent and full of integrity.

The most important way to establish trust is simply by listening. It is almost impossible to over-estimate the importance of listening to staff - deeply. Most effective leaders will make a point of interviewing all staff, either individually or in structured focus groups in their first few weeks in office. Some NGO leaders have also asked staff to write them a letter articulating what they hope for from them.

New leaders have to connect particularly well with the existing senior staff (some of whom may even have applied and been rejected from the leadership role). The senior leadership quickly need to get on the same page and ensure they share a common vision and strategy.

CONCLUSION

This Praxis Note has focused on the challenging, but normal process of leadership transition, particularly with founder leaders. As leaders, board members, funders, and staff, we must take it incredibly seriously. It helps to:

- Start to deal with it early - before it becomes a major issue.
- Speak about it openly, to normalise a meaningful conversation about succession.
- Take an organisation-wide approach and not 'demonise' any individual for a normal organisational issue.
- Assist the founder let go and move on.
- Ensure the board is really stepping up into their critical responsibility at a pivotal moment in the NGO's history. Healthy succession needs more board time than usual. Any leadership transition is likely to be the most important moment in their tenure.

Leadership transition, particularly from founders, does pose a massive organisational risk. But if well-managed, it should not be fatal. With adequate attention, thought, consideration and effort, there is every hope that the organisation and the departing leader can mature to their next stage of life.

ANNEX 1 AM I STILL THE LEADER THIS AGENCY NEEDS?

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 responsibilities have they taken on in the past two years?
- 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 job?
- Am I financially constrained? Do I not yet have enough set aside to retire or to work fewer hours?
- Are the professional identity and status I have 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?

Organisational 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 donors whose support I assume is dependent on my presence?
- Are there key relationships held by me alone?

Source: Tim Wolfred, 2008, **Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Non-Profits**, Annie Casey Foundation p 15

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www.TransitionWorks.com

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