Managing A Leadership Transition

A CHECK LIST OF KEY INTERVENTIONS FOR TRANSITION CONSULTANTS AND INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS
Introduction

This checklist is meant as a guide for the strategies of Interim Executive Directors and Transition Consultants who are working with clients of the Executive Transitions program at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. It was developed by a committee of veteran executives and consultants who had worked with Executive Transitions clients over the first two years of the program.

A major strategic concept underpins the interventions listed:

1. The chances for a successful tenure by an agency’s new CEO are optimized if careful attention is given both to “change” techniques (candidate recruitment and proper departure rituals for the resigning ED, for example) and to techniques for helping all stakeholders through the psychological “transition” that lags behind all objective change events. Skipping over key change steps or transition steps can lead to serious difficulties for the agency’s enterprises and its newly hired executive director.

2. Using the language of William Bridges, there are three major phases to an executive transition: ending, neutral zone, and beginning. There are interventions specific to managing each phase.

The suggested interventions are organized with these concepts in mind. They are split out by transition phase, and within each phase there are interventions related to change activities and to transition needs.

It should be noted that the phases are overlapping as a change unfolds; the three phases do not have discrete endings. For instance, transition activities relating to the departure of the former executive can be still be occurring after the beginning of the new executive.
Prologue

**ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

___Formation by the Board of the Transition Committee
to oversee all change and transition work
___Designation of staff transition roles that ensure full staff
input and involvement in the change and transition process
___Recruitment of Interim ED, if needed, from
among current managers or from among external candidates
___Clarification of division of roles between Interim ED and Transition
Consultant
Phase I

A GOOD ENDING WITH THE DEPARTING ED

CHANGE ACTIVITIES

Events, outcome focused, relatively quick

___ Setting a departure date for the executive director (ED)
___ Defining ED’s role in the transition activities, e.g., Transition Committee membership
___ Establishing the ED’s transition plan, e.g., securing a grant for next fiscal year
___ Conducting goodbye ceremonies
___ Defining the post-departure role of the ED vis a vis the agency and its Board

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Psychological, process-based, gradual. Attending to the inner reorientation process that individuals and teams go through when some change requires them to stop doing things the way they used to and start doing them differently

___ Establishing regular communications between consultant and the ED
___ Helping the departing ED focus on new beginnings in his or her career
___ Attending to any barriers to ED’s letting go
___ Acknowledging the legacy & achievements of the departing ED
___ Identifying the skills appreciated in the departing ED; acknowledging the losses
Phase II

THE NEUTRAL ZONE

CHANGE ACTIVITIES

___Perform organizational audit to identify:
   - Strengths & weaknesses
   - Opportunities & threats
   - Priority challenges & opportunities
   - Adequacy of Board oversight & governance
   - Agency work culture
   - Agency life cycle
   - Change goals for interim ED

___Create Board development plan (implementation may be delayed until after new ED starts)

___Attend to interim organizational upgrades

___Prepare for ED recruitment
   - Update the agency vision statement
   - Identify the major strategic questions for the agency
   - Draft profile of desired chief executive

___Conduct search for next ED

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

___Acknowledge the instability & chaos inherent in transitions; create temporary structures and solutions (Bridges)

___Engage the Board and the staff management group in developing the Transition Management Plan (Bridges)

___Closely engage the staff management group in setting interim procedures & rules, e.g. decision making

___Communicate profusely with all key stakeholders– staff, funders, volunteers, clients (2 C’s, 4 P’s – Bridges)
___Tap into the creative side of the neutral zone (*Bridges*)
   Step back, take stock, challenge accepted answers
   Search situation for clues and messages
   Solicit new ideas from everyone
   Encourage experiments
   If the future doesn’t exist, create it

___Facilitate movement to the new beginning
   Permit & facilitate grieving the losses
   Deal with any guilt, resentment, or anxiety that emerge as a result of the changes
   Focus on agency mission & future vision
Phase III

THE NEW BEGINNING WITH THE NEW ED

CHANGE ACTIVITIES

___Conduct orientation & welcoming ceremonies
___Establish Board support & feedback
___Negotiate initial performance goals
___Agree on a performance evaluation protocol
___Create ongoing Board/ED communication patterns
___Plan for ED skill development, especially for first-time ED
   Set professional development goals
   Connect with professional support mechanisms
   Peer group/Coach/mentor
___Celebrate the successful transition; acknowledge accomplishments of all parties
___Facilitate the new beginning (Bridges): Develop the strategies for implementing changes necessary for achieving the updated vision & goals
___Become the facilitative leader of the staff management team
___Address challenges identified in organizational audit
___Understand agency work culture and be strategic in making any needed changes
___Connect with stakeholders
___Engage the previous ED and the interim ED as appropriate
___Work with Board to recruit fresh board members

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

___Facilitate Board discussion of how it wants to productively team up with the new ED
___Communicate profusely – 2 C’s & 4 P’s (Bridges)
___Seek input & feedback on changes as they are planned & implemented
___Negotiate on new rules, procedures, boundaries
___Acknowledge ongoing changes & the time and process needed for the concomitant transitions

___Make the organization more transition worthy (Bridges)