

Leaving Well

Advice to Boards



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If your organisation is run by the person who set it up, or has enjoyed a long and successful period of leadership, then change can feel challenging – and it is likely to be!

Often Boards in this position have come to depend too heavily on their highly experienced and passionate executive and mention of succession can feel daunting for Trustees.

It can often be a difficult period professionally and personally for the founder or leader, and whilst they are likely to have a keen interest and expect some involvement, it's important they can depend on the Board to assume ultimate responsibility for succession planning.

Indeed, in a charitable company, responsibility for the appointment and line-management of senior staff rests with the Board and therefore preparing for leadership transition is led by the Chair (*for further information see Charity Governance Code section 4, Decision-making, risk and control and section 2, Leadership*).

Taking in turn the key stages on the journey of succession, we have outlined what to expect, the key steps we advise you consider and suggestions about what support might be helpful.

Stage One: Become succession-ready...

What to expect?

A founder may be able to offer plenty of notice of a planned departure or retirement, but it is not unusual for changes in personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities or health issues to mean there is a more sudden gap at the top.

Recruitment of a senior role typically takes at least six months, and whilst your senior leadership team may be able to hold the fort on an interim basis, it is a good idea to be prepared for leadership change at all times. The Board conversation with founders may start several years before a decision is made about the date.

Also, leadership in the cultural sector does not reflect the UK's diversity, particularly in terms of class, disabilities, race and gender. If we want to attract the full range of talent into the leadership roles, we need to ensure our approach is inclusive from the outset which requires additional planning and preparation.

Key actions & considerations

Start conversations early and ensure senior roles are regularly reviewed

Many founders allow their passion to mean they work far in excess of their contracted hours. This is a dangerous situation as when they leave, this role will need to be realistic in scope and scale especially if you are wanting to attract the widest range of talent and avoid discriminating against potential applicants with disabilities or caring responsibilities.

One founder explained how she'd regularly reviewed her job description with her chair to ensure it was up-to-date and realistic to achieve within contracted hours so that when the time came, the organisation would not have allowed itself to become over-dependent on any single individual. If you are aware your founder might be thinking of retirement or moving on in the next five years start the conversation early to ensure there is sufficient time to prepare for what can be a major change.

Ensure the Board understands its role and is performing

Typically Boards of founder-led organisations are over-dependent on their founder and have therefore not fully assumed their legal responsibility as the primary stewards of the charity.

For example, it is not uncommon for founders to have a seat on the Board or to have appointed their Chair and/or Trustees.

This can be a double-edge sword for founders as whilst they value their additional control, it also results in them feeling overwhelmed by responsibility which should be shared by the Board. This means that when the time comes for the Board to lead succession planning some adjustment is required to enable the responsibility to shift to the Board.

This can feel onerous for a Board and unsettling for the Founder.

"If you want the organisation to continue beyond the founders, you need to make sure that it isn't allowed to be over-dependent on them in terms of power, structure, strategy and systems."

Make sure line management support and supervision is in place

For some long-serving leaders, regular supervision and formal performance management is not in place. This is not good governance practice and can lead to problems during a succession.

Don't rely on the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

It's the CEO's responsibility to manage and develop their senior team but as a Board you need to be confident that a strong leadership team is in place and that senior colleagues have opportunities for development.

Ensure the Organisation has a clear vision, set of values and strategies in place

This is a core Board responsibility at any time, but it is even more important in times of change that there is clarity and consensus around the core purpose, priorities and ways of working.

Having these pillars in place will be useful when the Board is articulating what kind of leader you're looking for in your next phase, and enables you to be clear with potential candidates about the core vision you expect them to honour and build on, whilst also welcoming new perspectives as to how this vision might be achieved by a new leader.

Support you might find useful

The Board may benefit from a governance review to ensure all Trustees are confident in their roles and compliant with relevant governance standards, and if a Chair is expecting to be involved in succession planning then they might want to find a mentor with this experience.

Investment in leadership development and support for the transitioning founder and the wider leadership team can be a wise investment, and is essential if the CEO has an authoritative style (as many founders do).

Many founders will find they need external support to shift their ways of working in preparation for succession and will find leadership development via training, coaching or mentoring helpful.

Stage Two: Planning succession & recruitment...

What to expect?

The Chair has a critical role to play during succession, as they support the outgoing leader as their line-manager and lead the recruitment of their successor.

They will also need to act as the main point of contact for internal and external stakeholders who are likely to be keenly interested in progress and need reassurance

Key actions & considerations

Identify and manage the risks

Leadership transition is widely understood to be a difficult period for any organisation and therefore active planning and management of the key risks involved is essential.

We heard of organisations where leadership transition had resulted in significant reputational damage; loss of external stakeholder/ funder support; loss of core staff and specialist skills; significant financial cost to avoid litigation around Constructive Dismissal; and disputes between staff and Board that required external mediation.

There are two common scenarios which need to be avoided, failure to attract diverse and high calibre candidates, and a tendency for those who are appointed to leave after a very short period.

Both of these can happen when a role is over-unrealistically ambitious or there is a perception that the postholder will be expected to follow too closely the approach of the former leader.

There may be other risks too, specific to your organisation.

Chairs who had experience of succession strongly advised any Board embarking on such a transition to create and make use of a risk register.

'A lot can go wrong from loss of confidence in the process to loss of external stakeholder support. Establish, maintain and monitor a risk register.'

Capacity of the Chair

The Chair's role in this process is demanding and they need to be confident they have the expertise and time to lead this process well.

Key tasks include creating a nominations task group from the Board, meeting regularly to support the outgoing leader, and communicating with internal and external stakeholders about the process.

Boards can sometimes forget that highly capable leaders and founders are also employees, and that as their employer there is a duty to provide line-management support.

Given how unsettling most outgoing leaders find transition, regular supervision meetings are important and external support via a coach and or mentor can be a wise investment and relieve some of the pressure on the Chair.

'It will be hard at times for the Chair to know what to do. Find a mentor or pair the Chair with others who have gone through this situation. It was really difficult and messy at times, even though we thought we knew what we were getting into. The Chair and outgoing Director need to work closely together on the transition and be able to have really honest and open conversations.'

The Board's primary responsibility is the long-term future of the organisation

Ideally a founder is involved in co-designing and shaping their departure and the succession plan, with the Board retaining responsibility for decisions and implementation.

This means discussing at the outset with the founder the respective roles and agreeing how decisions will be made, and by whom. It is important not to expect, or allow, the founder to be responsible for the transition or recruitment.

Agree the Founder's leaving date and stick to it

At times the organisation and the outgoing leader may be tempted to extend the leaving date, especially if recruitment takes longer than planned (it often does).

But the clear advice was that both parties may never feel 100% ready, so best to set a date and stick to it as moving the date back is rarely helpful.

It may even be helpful to have a gap.

External interim leadership could be an opportunity to create a break between different leadership styles, for which an incoming leader may be grateful. Or promoting internal staff to interim roles offers valuable developmental opportunities.

Keep Stakeholders informed

Once the leadership transition process has started, every Board meeting needs a 'Board-only' section of the meeting to discuss progress.

This usually works best at the end of a meeting.

Internal stakeholders and funders will need regular updates too, as they will have concerns and it is unfair to expect the outgoing leader to handle these enquiries.

Support you might find useful

You may want to consider appointing an external recruitment agency to provide capacity and expertise around the recruitment and selection process.

It can be useful to create a sub-group from the Board to support succession planning, as well as recruitment.

Mentoring and/or coaching for the Chair can be helpful if they are leading this type of transition for the first time or supporting a founder who is finding this process challenging.

Stage Three: Handover and endings.

What to expect?

This can be an uncomfortable stage for incoming and outgoing leaders, so the Chair's role in facilitating productive dialogue about what handover is needed and how this is progressing is essential.

It might feel safer to have a long handover, and an outgoing leader might expect this, but this is unnecessary and can create confusion and frustration.

Key actions & considerations

Prepare thoroughly for a new Leader, without tying their hands

There's a balance to strike between not over-loading an incoming leader with pressing tasks, and not 'setting things in stone' too far ahead that they have no scope to make changes.

A good balance is to have a 12-month budget and plan in place, with no major decisions needing to be made in their first 3-4 months. But after this period of orientation, an incoming leader needs to be able to review and revise the strategy.

Don't over-do the handover

This is best kept short and focussed. Founders, and their Boards, consistently over-estimate how much handover support incoming leaders will find useful. Most want a maximum of two weeks, ideally less (or none) with some ad hoc access on request after the initial handover period.

A three-way conversation between Chair, incoming leader and outgoing leader can be helpful to agree on an approach, rather than making assumptions about what might be needed.

During any handover period, it is recommended that the Chair meets regularly (i.e. weekly) with both incoming and outgoing leaders, individually and together, to support all parties.

Recognise the Founder's contribution

Public recognition of the founder's contribution is important, although this is a highly personal and individual matter and the preferences of the departing leader should always be discussed with them.

Examples founders had valued include a celebration event and naming of a space / award in their honour, others preferred more private recognition. There is no right or wrong way to mark the end, but many find themselves at odds with what others expect of them at this emotional time.

Discuss future plans with the Founder

Discuss future plans with the Founder – if there is a possibility the founder may be considering future freelance work in the sector or non-executive roles with peer organisations you may want to discuss how to avoid any perception of conflicts of interest or confusion around their new roles.

As some will not have finalised plans before they leave, you may need to agree a channel for them to check-in with the Board around any future plans after they've moved on.

Support you might find useful

Both incoming and outgoing leaders can find this period difficult and benefit from external support, which can alleviate some of the pressure on the Chair.

If an incoming leader already works with a coach, the organisation could offer to meet this cost or, if not, then offer to help them find a leadership coach.

An outgoing leader can also benefit from coaching during this period, and it is good practice for an employer to offer to cover this cost for a short, fixed, period after their employment ends to ease their transition.

Stage Four: Supporting the incoming Leader

What to expect?

Long serving leaders can cast a long shadow, having influence long after they depart, not least if staff feel very loyal to the former ways of doing things. Similarly Board members can feel conflicted about changes in approach, which are to be expected under any new leadership.

Whilst ensuring any new leader is accountable and working within the framework of vision and values agreed with the Board, the Board may also need to actively 'back' new leaders if they encounter resistance.

And a long-standing and successful leader can be tough act to follow, so incoming leaders may benefit from additional internal and external support whilst they settle into their role over their first year.

Key actions & considerations

Discuss future plans with the Founder

A very common challenge is that Boards can want to preserve too much of the previous leader's style.

Expecting too much continuity can result in failure to attract a wide field of talented successors and/or not creating a culture where new leadership can thrive; one of the reasons we see such high turnover after founders and long-serving leaders.

Incoming leaders need to understand what is non-negotiable, and what they have authority to change.

Having a clearly defined vision and mission statement and set of organisational values is a useful tool in this.

"Boards need to be careful to be respectful to the Founder without tying the hands of the new Director and harking back to how things used to be done."

"They need to be clear about the values – the things that can't change, any non-negotiables – but then make sure the incoming leader has authority to change things. The Board needs to say clearly (and mean it) to the new leader "you have permission to change things."

Discuss future plans with the Founder

Establish clear boundaries with the former leader - informal or formal connections with the former leadership can be undermining for the new leader, even though often well-intentioned.

Whilst it can be tempting to maintain a connection with the outgoing leader, this can be particularly threatening to an incoming leader and it is important to establish clear professional boundaries. Ongoing involvement of any former senior staff in a freelance or Board capacity is rarely successful and so best avoided.

The Chair can helpfully and tactfully ensure the former Leader is clear about the importance of making a clean break and respecting the new Leader's authority.

Support you might find helpful

Providing support to the outgoing leader, to develop plans beyond the organisation, via covering training costs or coaching fees can help them to focus beyond their former role, which can benefit them and their successor.

An incoming leader is likely to be on a rapid learning curve and experiencing some resistance around the changes they wish to make.

Offering leadership support (coaching/ mentoring) and development (training) can be a wise investment.

Thank you to all of our esteemed contributors...

Rachel Adams, Tom Andrews, Marcel Baettig,
Hilary Carty OBE, Lindsay Dunbar, Emma Hogg,
Susan Jones, Emmie Kell, Reyahn King, Judith Knight,
Kate Paradine, Matt Peacock OBE, Jeanie Scott,
Nina Simon, Amanda Smethurst, Holly Tebbutt, Jo Verrent,
Helen Wewiora and Sue Wilkinson OBE.

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Sandeep, a Clore Fellow, is based in Birmingham consulting with cultural organisations on enabling strategies that embed Equity, Diversity, Justice and Inclusion. Sandeep consistently works towards improving positive representation; she began her career in Sandwell Outreach Services and Race Equality Libraries. She was Head of Partnerships at The Reading Agency, and also managed youth literature programmes at Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature for five years, focusing on youth empowerment, providing opportunities, encouraging possibility and nurturing potential. She also chaired the UNESCO Cities of Literature Network from 2017-2021. Sandeep sits on the Boards of the Women's Prize Trust, World Book Day and Jaivant Patel Dance.