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INTRODUCTION

A transition in the leadership of an organization can unleash a perfect storm, just as the confluence of weather conditions in Sebastian Junger’s novel *The Perfect Storm* conspired to sink the *Andrea Gail*. Like Captain Billy Tyne, some managers and boards might court disaster. Are you seeking thrills that come with a leadership crisis?

- **Engaging in denial**
  
  He/she will never leave. Health and family crises happen to other people.

- **Relying on untested assumptions**
  
  He/she is surrounded by strong capable staff who can take over in an emergency or in an interim. Everything we need to proceed with executive selection is in place and up-to-date.

- **Believing that not getting it right is not the end of the world.**
  
  Executive recruitment and selection is so much fun that we can do it over and over again until we get it right. And it’s not all that costly.

- **Believing that standing still is not, in fact, going backwards,**
  
  We’re doing good work, so the community will cut us some slack. Turnover isn’t all that disruptive - after all people change jobs all the time. Another grant opportunity if just around the corner, if we miss this one.

An article from *The Non-Profit Times* provides a prescription to ensure your own perfect storm:

- Avoid any opportunity to assess leadership performance
- Eliminate all succession planning talk from your strategic discussions
- Ignore administrative support, infrastructure or operational systems needs that would ensure you have the appropriate, skilled hands on deck
- Invite board members or unprepared staff to fill your leadership vacuum
- Rely on board members to conduct your [CEO] search or undertake other assignments [without professional support]
- Broadcast your vacancy widely, then accept the first hungry prospects
- Keep everyone in the dark, as guessing is much more entertaining

...Leadership planning is boring - and no match for the excitement that comes from crisis management and an uncertain future - all the conditions you need to create your own perfect storm management. ¹

If all of that excitement is not for you, please join us for a thoughtful, logical, and intentional look at ensuring the future of your organization. By engaging in a process of succession planning and tying it to the strategic directions of the organization, your staff and Board of Directors can chart the organization’s course for the future and have skilled and committed people at its helm.

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Succession Planning: What and Why?

**Succession Planning** - a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and encourage individual advancement.

**Purposes of Succession Planning**

- Match the organization’s available (present) talent to its needed (future) talent
- Help the organization meet strategic and operational challenges by having the right people in the right places at the right times to do the right things
- Provide a fundamental tool for organizational learning
- Ensure the continued survival of the organization
- Identify promising candidates early and actively cultivate their development
- Avoid a “bureaucratic kinship system”
- Communicate career paths for individuals
- Marry organizational goals and individual needs by:
  - Establishing development and training plans
  - Establishing career paths and individual job moves
  - Communicating upward and laterally about organizational management
- Create a more comprehensive Human Resources planning system
- Create a profile of skills needed for the future
- Improve the retention of talented people with potential

**Outcomes of Succession Planning**

- Develop and retain the most capable employees
- Preserve the organization’s institutional memory
- Ensure that the organization continues to meet all legal obligations

As Paula Jorde Bloom notes in *Thinking About Your Successor*, developing a comprehensive leadership succession plan involves thinking about two things: systems and people.

- Are systems in place to support smooth transitions?
- Are people in place to support smooth transitions? 

This workbook provides information to guide your thinking about succession in key positions of your organization by examining both organizational and individual elements of the succession process.
CHAPTER 1:
ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

- How does the organization conduct recruitment, selection, and placement?
- How does the organization conduct training, education and development?
- How much attention does the organization pay to long-term cultivation of talent versus immediate requirements?
- How well do existing compensation practices support placement, transfers, promotions? Are there disincentives? Is your retirement plan a tool to help retain employees and allow them to leave in an orderly fashion?
- How do labor relations agreements affect the organization’s promotion, transfer and other employment practices?
- Are systems clearly defined, adequately flexible to adapt to change, but adequately structured to ensure their integrity, and are they effectively implemented organization wide?

Let’s take a look at several organizational systems and how they relate to succession planning.

Planning

- Focus on the organizational vision
- Base succession plans on community and organizational needs and trends
- Develop a succession strategy based on strategic and long-range goals
- Concentrate on business objectives
- Build on the organization’s strengths and growth potential
- Ensure continuity of services to clients and community
- Plan for change and some turnover
- Ask the departing executive to capture a brief history of the organization under his/her leadership
- Plan for the un-plannable
  - What if disaster strikes?

Succession success goes beyond people to strong systems and structures.
Communication

- Seek support from the CEO, top management and Board
- Obtain input and understanding from line management and support staff
- Communicate information about the transition organization wide; prepare employees; acknowledge that there will be changes
- Create a communication plan for the first 60-90 days (should address media, format, locations, participants, etc.)
- Develop briefing books or papers
  - Identify format and content and edit rigorously to keep these uniform and readable
  - Include sections related to the organization’s growth, finances, organizational structure, array of services; capabilities, core strategies; long and short range goals, priorities and projects; and potential threats; biographies of key team members; names and contact information for key contacts in funding agencies, board and staff, and community partners
- Announce and schedule transition activities
- Keep the process open and transparent

Human Resources

- Structure performance and developmental activities that marry organizational and individual needs
- Create a profile of knowledge, abilities, skills and personal characteristics (KASPCs) needed to fulfill the organization’s mission
  - What are the experiences and skill sets of those still present?
  - What are those of the leader(s) who is/are leaving?
- Identify key competencies required to pursue future strategic directions
- Integrate Human Resources (HR) with other systems
- Match current and future talent with future needs
- Evaluate and update job descriptions for key positions
  - What did the previous person bring to the job?
  - What does the job now require?
- Design orientation strategies
- Identify mentors and implement mentoring activities
- Consider treatment of the outgoing executive; words and behaviors during this time can easily become instant organizational legends - positive or negative