

Leadership Succession Outline/Tip Sheet

Please refer to: www.littap.org and click Governance to access the monograph *About Face – A Guide to Founder Transition*, by Debora Ott, and Susan Kenny Steven's essay: *Helping Founders Succeed* as well as other resources.

1. Be prepared for emergencies and sudden departures.

- a. Store important information in an accessible place known to key staff and board officers; keep it current.
 1. Prepare lists with contact information for board members, staff, funders, and program partners;
 2. Develop a calendar with the year's deadlines for grants, reports and special events; plug in upcoming and ongoing programs on a quarterly basis;
 3. Compile a set of important papers such as the organization's 501 (c) (3) IRS designation letter, its state Charities Registration, banking resolutions and Articles of Incorporation, etc.;
 4. Include papers that describe the people of the organization, and especially the dynamics among them;
 5. Describe sensitive issues not covered by mere lists;
 6. Include board-approved statements about the organization's mission, history, artistic philosophy and editorial policy.
- b. Develop internal succession strategies with board and staff for emergencies in which the founder may or may not return to work.

2. Determine if the founder wants the organization to be sustained after s/he leaves.

- a. Does the board agree?
- b. Is there a compelling reason to continue sustaining the organization?

- c. What is the level of community interest and investment in your organization?
 - d. Do you have a strong and sustained history of funding, sales and circulation?
 - e. Is a merger desirable?
 - f. Should your organization seek shelter under another organization, college or university?
 - g. Is there someone inside the organization that can be trained for leadership?
- 3. Allow for a minimum of two years to complete the transition.**
- 4. Adequate planning and resources must be in place.**
- 5. Financial stability is essential.**
- a. Develop a cash reserve. Every transition requires extra available cash in case funders take a wait and see attitude during the transition.
 - b. Salary levels should be in keeping with industry standards to attract a good candidate.
 - c. Financial practices of the organization should be sound.
 - d. Gain and maintain the confidence of funders; ongoing communication with funders and legislators may result in direct support for the transition.
- 6. Develop a written transition plan in concert with board members; have the full board vote on the plan.**
- a. Define roles for board, staff, founder, editor or artistic director.
 - b. Map out expectations.
 - c. Make sure the organization is financially stable.
 - d. Include strategies to diversify your funding base.

- e. Identify ways to promote the community's involvement – people who are invested in your organization can speak out for it at various levels of funding and in the community.

7. Root the founder's legacy and values in the organization before s/he leaves.

- a. Develop a written history, artistic philosophy and/or editorial policy for your organization.
 - 1. WHY does your organization exist? What specific need compelled the founder to start the organization, and how has it remained relevant?
 - a. Include the organization's current mission statement and indicate how it developed over time;
 - b. Describe current programs and their evolution.
 - 2. Be clear about the founder's historic role, and give credit to others whose contributions were significant in your organization's development.
- b. Conduct a formal board vote to approve this record before the founder departs.

8. Make sure your board conducts regular performance evaluations of the founder so it understands how to assess the new leader.

Many boards deeply trust their founders and don't evaluate them. This leaves the board at a disadvantage, since they haven't institutionalized a way to evaluate a successor. If they initially extend the same level of trust to a successor that was accorded to the founder, problems will likely arise.

9. Develop a task-oriented job description for the founder's position to determine if s/he is doing the work of more than one person.

Founders often do whatever is necessary to keep their organizations afloat. Successors can't be expected to do this. The board needs to have a realistic picture of what it takes to fill the founder's shoes, even on an interim basis, and be willing to support that.

- a. Re-evaluate founder's responsibilities and tasks, ensuring that it's only a full-time job. Create additional position(s) if needed. For example, founders sometimes function as executive and artistic directors/editors. Split the positions.

- b. Have staff evaluate their positions as well.

10. Engage an outside consultant to assess skill sets within the organization in relation to its growing needs.

- a. Redefine the founder's role in the organization, and be honest if you want the organization to succeed.
 - 1. Is it time for the founder to step down as chief executive?
 - 2. Is it time for the founder to step aside and let a manager assist with operations while s/he continues as artistic director/editor?
 - 3. Should the founder leave the organization entirely, join the board or become an advisor?
- b. Delineate new staffing responsibilities and authority.
 - 1. Clearly define new founder and staffing responsibilities, authority, reporting requirements and relationship to one another.
 - 2. Conduct weekly meetings with designated trustees to smooth communications and evaluate performance

11. Outside consultants can facilitate issues that are close to the founder and board.

12. Allow time for the founder to learn to let go gradually.

It's important that the founder have a sense of purpose in life that's not related to the organization so s/he doesn't hang on to it for identity. If needed, help the founder know where s/he's going and what s/he will be doing after stepping-down.

13. Do not let the founder handpick his/her successor—it's a board responsibility.

Involved the founder in the selection process at the board's discretion, since s/he knows the requirements of the job.

14. Involve staff in choosing the successor; it's crucial to transition success.

- a. Have staff discuss their fears about the transition and the profile of their ideal candidate.

- b. Use a consultant or board member for this purpose, not the founder, since staff needs to be frank.
- c. Have staff interview final candidates using the same set of prepared questions for each.

15. Include outside stakeholders in the transition and leadership selection process.

16. Introduce the new leader to key stakeholders – funders, artists and writers, and community members and colleagues to build trust and bridges of communication.

17. Include time for the founder and new leader to work together or in which the founder will be available to answer questions or give advice if needed.

Tips for the New Leader:

The first person to succeed a founder often does not succeed. The following may help guide the transition process for successors:

- Clarify the board's expectations for you and your position; make sure you have a job description;
- Embrace shared leadership as a concept. Successful transitions come from a sense of shared ownership and leadership;
- Do not fool yourself into thinking you are taking the organization to a "new level" at the expense of assuming a leadership style that is inclusive;
- Assess your skills as well as your strengths and weaknesses. Get training if needed and ask the board to foot all or part of the cost;
- Have clearly defined relationships to community, founder, and board in place;
- Be able to distinguish between decisions that need to be fulfilled by collective or individual acts;
- Get involved in the community: attend events, join boards, meet people in other organizations;

- You are entitled to “lesser successes” – fail well;
- Review any risks/rewards of new programs with the board and staff, and make sure they fit within the organization’s mission, strategic plan and direction;
- Insist on regular performance evaluations to measure your success, and determine where you need improvement;
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. People love to give advice and they will want to see you succeed if they value the organization.