

The Five Phases of Leadership Transition in a Nutshell

Finding the next visionary leader for your organization is a formidable task. The Executive Director (ED) is usually a principal leader, spokesperson, and fundraiser for the organization. When organizations fail to plan effectively for a major leadership transition, it can lead to unintended outcomes, such as a mismatch between the organization's needs with the new leaders' abilities and skills. Frustration and dissatisfaction can quickly set in, leading to the voluntary or forced departure of the new leader. This is a scenario that can result in major disruption, reduced efficacy, and lessened stakeholder confidence in the organization. To avoid these problems, you want to prepare a comprehensive transition planning process in order to find the right leader and ensure their success.

We are often asked what a transition planning process looks like. There are five major stages in the transition planning process:

- 1) **Preparing for Change:** During this phase, the ED announces his/her intention to leave the post, and the organization sets up a **Leadership Transition (LT) Committee**. The Leadership Transition Committee leads the transition process, from planning the departure announcement strategy with the ED to designing the best process for recruiting, hiring and supporting the new leader.
- 2) **Taking Stock:** The organizational members review where the organization is situated in the organizational life cycle, taking stock of organizational strengths and weaknesses, as well as environmental trends, in order to better understand the skills and abilities that will be needed in the new leader.
- 3) **The Search:** During this phase, the Leadership Transition Committee develops a profile of the skills, knowledge and attributes needed in the new leader, culminating in a thorough job description. The Leadership Transition Committee also designs and implements a process for advertising the position and recruiting candidates. The process for screening, reference checking, and interviewing candidates also takes place during this stage. A critically important part of the committee's work during this phase is to conduct in-depth interviews with behavioral question sets and test case scenarios. We provide specific examples in this manual.
- 4) **Hiring:** During this phase, the committee should examine the latest data on executive compensation and benefits in order to develop the parameters for an offer of employment. A number of candidates have been interviewed and two or three finalists are now interviewed by the full Board of Directors. If all goes well, an offer of employment is extended, and employment terms are successfully negotiated during this phase.
- 5) **On-boarding:** The Board plans the public announcement and prepares a thorough ED orientation process with the assistance of the senior staff. The Board also develops a written working agreement or memorandum of understanding with the ED, in order to identify first year success benchmarks and optimal processes for ensuring ongoing and effective communication, coordination and clarity on decision-making roles between the ED and the Board.

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