

Organizational Stresses

DURING TIMES OF TRANSITION

TRANSITION CAN BE A CRISIS SITUATION

When asked to describe organizations at the time a leadership change took place, former executive directors, board members, and outsiders depicted organizations in crisis. Sometimes the death or sudden resignation of the leader caused the problem, but in many cases, a buildup of difficulties resulted in pressure to find a leader to step in and take over.

“I came in after the previous managing director had been asked to depart, so I was responsible for doing a lot of bridging with the [staff] members and the community who had been hurt by the previous director.” (former executive director)

“We were thrown into search mode unexpectedly, because the previous executive director [had a family situation] that involved leaving Chicago. It was a harried transition because we had been in an ill-advised mode of expansion at the time. We had spent more than we had, and our finances were not looking good.” (board member)

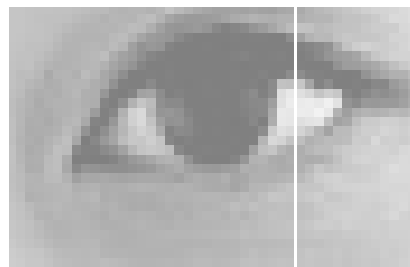
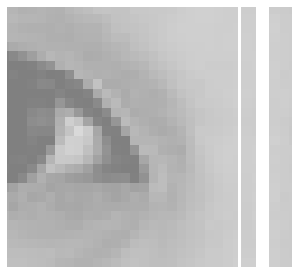
“It can be a very dangerous time for the organization.” (individual interview)

CHANGE CAN CREATE AN OPPORTUNITY

Outsiders were especially vocal about the need for the board to take charge when a vacancy occurs, striving to institutionalize the leadership position and choose a leader who can take the organization forward.

“The best transitions occur when the board is able to look at what the organization’s particular needs are, at that particular time, and find a new leader to meet those needs. You can’t just replace what you have. You have to go out and get what you need.” (individual interview)

“It’s very rare that [a transition] is a wake-up call for the organization. Most of the time, the board does not face whatever the root cause is, and there’s a scramble to fill the position with whoever is available. In a good transition, the board takes a look at what is really needed and makes changes in the job description or organizational structure to adjust.” (individual interview)



CHANGE FORCES THE BOARD TO REASSESS

Board members said the role of the board changes during leadership transition. A big change occurs when an organization goes from having an involved, hands-on board to one that is focused on strategic planning and fund-raising.

“The board has been in kind of a continual process of trying to grow itself up, trying to go from the kind of people who started by licking envelopes and really being hands on to a board that’s more an administrative oversight body.” (board member)

“The complication is going from a grassroots structure to something a little more sophisticated, because for the first time, we’re bringing in board members who can raise money—who have been on other boards and know how boards run—and they want something a little different than there has been. Their coming along has created a tension between the old way of doing things, where there was very little difference between the board and the staff, and this more stratified way of doing business.” (board member)

REASSESSMENT CAN FORCE CHANGE

When a board is doing its job, examination of the organization’s needs sometimes prompts the realization that a leadership change must take place.

“It’s a classic story. [The former executive director] got us through a lot, including moving into a new building, got us to here, but then we just had to have somebody else.” (board member)

“Coming from the corporate side to a grassroots organization, I could see there were a lot of things that needed to be taken care of. My thought was that if we were going to progress, we had to find someone who knew how to be an administrator. We just had to find a way to go out and make that next step.” (board member)

Often, the need to fill the leadership position forces the board to rethink the job.

“We sat down and did a detailed job description. Then we pulled things out that weren’t appropriate for the executive director and added things that were.” (board member)

“There is now a deputy director whose responsibility is to oversee a lot of the day-to-day operations so [that] the executive director can look outward more than I could.” (former executive director)

“I always said I was doing four different jobs, and I wanted whoever replaced me to do only one. So that meant bringing on more people before I could leave.” (former executive director)

TRANSITION TAKES ITS TOLL

Board members talked about how difficult and time consuming the job of hiring a new leader became, placing additional stresses on the board and the organization during an already difficult period.

“I’ve been on the board for a year. It’s been a great pleasure, but it’s also been one of the most onerous, difficult, and demanding things I’ve ever done in my life.” (board member)

“During our search, the development department fell completely apart. The two people who were supposed to be working together weren’t speaking to one another. They were both vying for the executive director job. Both thought they ought to be considered, but neither was qualified.” (board member)

Outsiders were unsympathetic to this problem, saying that when boards are well run and doing a good job of oversight, transitions go smoothly. The trouble is that most boards don’t plan for transition and don’t deal with leadership changes proactively.

“Even if the executive director is young and healthy and isn’t going anywhere, the board needs to ask, ‘Are you happy? How long do you plan to stay?’ If there is a weakness, they have to fortify that person, or replace [him or her]. If the executive director is getting close to retirement, the board should discuss succession annually and make the transition part of its strategic plan.” (individual interview)

“The problem is that board members don’t want to take personal responsibility for the welfare of the organization, and [staff] members don’t understand the implications of planning for the long term. I sometimes think corporate people on boards check all their management knowledge at the door.” (individual interview)

