

The Transition of an Heroic Leader

Developed by
David J. Gyertson, Ph.D.

In this article we look at some styles of leadership and consider their implications for successfully navigating an executive leadership change. We consider in particular those executives who have achieved *heroic stature* for reasons that may include being the founder, having served for an extended period of time or successfully navigated the organization through a major crisis or new opportunity. And we offer some suggestions on how to help the next leader manage relationships with their predecessor.

A helpful book that addresses such leadership transitions is Jeffery Sonnenfeld's *The Heroes Farewell: What Happens When CEOs Retire* (Oxford Press: 1988). Using this theme of *heroic stature*, Sonnenfeld researches a wide-range of senior leadership departures. Based on the findings, he developed a typology categorizing the exit styles of corporate executive officers. Sonnenfeld uncovered the existence of a unique nature among departing CEOs that included a *heroic self-concept... a feeling that one has a unique role to fill and that only the hero is capable of carrying out the responsibilities of the job* (p. 3). He also concluded that this attitude often serves as a *barrier to the hero's exit* (p. 62) and a significant challenge to his or her successor.

The four categories Sonnenfeld uses to describe CEO types and the implications for succession and transition include: monarchs, generals, ambassadors and governors. Sonnenfeld suggests that transitions are influenced by three tensions: internal tensions, tensions between generations, and tension with the organization. Search committees and governing boards can make effective use of his insights to help ensure that momentum and mission of their organization are not lost in managing these tensions during transition. Please note that individual leaders often are a hybrid of Sonnenfeld's categories. Look for the predominant characteristics to best understand how your current leader might transition.

Monarchs are those CEOs who do not leave voluntarily, but either "die in office" or leave under duress. While this predisposition most often is seen in founders, it also is present in those who have re-engineered the organization through a significant crisis or season of change. Monarchs can create a serious identity crisis for themselves and their organizations as they depart. We have seen cases where monarchs, usually unwittingly, do things to disrupt the mission and, as a result diminish the organization's as well as their own reputations. Questioning of the next generation's leadership integrity and or motivations, undermining relationships with significant donors and Board members, and using their influence with primary stakeholders (donors or investors), monarchs can raise doubts about the future by creating an us-against-the-interlopers climate of conflict. In these attempts to preserve their legacy, and protect what they believe to be the non-negotiables of the organization's mission, they can hobble, and in some cases, seriously cripple, the organization they gave their lives to advance.

Managing well the transition of a monarch is critical to the ongoing success of the organization – at least in the short term. Wise successors who understand that they cannot *replace* but can only *follow* monarchs will do all they can to celebrate and honor the legacy of their predecessors. Misunderstandings are best addressed privately between the monarch and successor. Keeping the monarch informed about upcoming changes and providing both the rationale as well as opportunity to comment upon such changes, can minimize public conflict.



We encourage a time of transition where appropriate so that the monarch feels that their work and contributions are valued, appreciated and respected. In the Bible, King David's example in following King Saul provides a rich resource of insight on honor and self-control that can help the successor better manage the inherent conflicts in a monarch's transition and minimize the potential disruptive impact on organizational identity and mission.

Generals, Sonnenfeld suggests, represent those who leave with great reluctance, often plotting ways by which to return. They exhibit similar disruptive behaviors and tactics to the monarch but with their underlying motivation driven by the belief that when the organization comes to its senses, the general will be invited back to salvage the organization. Generals often have a sense that their work was not completed. Frequently they leave because of weariness, health issues or burnout. Out of office for a season they re-calibrate and realize that their lives are empty – that they have not developed an identity and life purpose outside of their previous leadership role.

We recommend working with generals well in advance of retirement when possible to help them prepare financially, emotionally and spiritually for the next chapter in their life's callings. Like monarchs, generals need the assurance that their contributions are valued and legacy honored. Similar strategies of engagement to those noted for monarchs work well with generals. Providing periodic opportunities, when appropriate, for the general to return for ceremonial duties can help with the transition. Since they played such important roles in shaping the direction of the organization, wherever their contributions to institutional identity can be celebrated and emphasized, will help them, their successors and the organization manage the transition positively.

Ambassadors represent those who exit gracefully, retaining amicable relationships with the organizations they leave. Some organizations create emeritus positions for ambassadors providing opportunities for these leaders to assist with the successful transition of the new leader. Helping introduce the new CEO to the various stakeholder constituencies, being available for counsel and particularly helping transition the message and resources can be helpful. This is a pro-active *passing of the mantle of leadership* that can be most beneficial when organizational continuity is preferred and important. This requires unusual grace and significant wisdom on the part of the incoming leader as well as the governing board. Such transitional roles need to be clearly defined, limited in scope and pre-determined in terms of length of tenure.

Some of the best ambassador transitions place when the predecessor is on the staff of taking direction from the new leader. However, this type of relationship is often awkward for employees, governing board members and significant contributors. The ambassador must facilitate the required transition of power and, most significantly, the transfer of loyalties by supporting the new leadership fully. I enjoyed an unusually positive relationship with my predecessor Dr. Jay Kesler during my tenure as President of Taylor University because of his integrity in always respecting my calling as the President for a new season. Another example was the President Emeritus relationship of Dr. Ted Engstrom who served with grace a series of presidential successors at World Vision. I regret to say, however, that these are notable exceptions. In many organizations, the ambassador role is often a mixed blessing frequently creating too long a good-bye unnecessarily delaying transitions to new paradigms required to address emerging challenges and opportunities.



Sonnenfeld suggests that **Governors** are those departing leaders who enter a given organization, stay for a time, and then leave when their tour of duty is completed, maintaining few relationships or other ties. The Navy military model of leadership transition is a helpful illustration. Ship Captains are assigned for a specific tour of duty focused on a particular mission consistent with their experiences and skill sets. When the assignment is completed, they are *piped ashore* and move on to a new position rarely returning to the previous billet. These leaders usually do not stay for long periods of time – often less than five years. They are assignment focused - hired to help the organization through a transition. Usually governors are either crisis management or opportunity management specialists. They are motivated by the need for change and challenge often becoming restless when systems are fixed and running smoothly.

There are increasing numbers of governors present in organizations for a wide variety of reasons. One of the biggest is the increased use of interims to help organizations assess current conditions, understand future leadership needs and provide breathing space after the service of monarchs in particular so that the next generation of leadership can focus energies on new directions. Governors often re-shape mission and identity when there has been a major crisis of integrity but more often they help clarify existing mission and determine current strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats so that a more accurate picture of the organization and its future leadership needs can be identified. My career has been primarily that of the governor stepping in to help start-up new entities or transition existing missions. Governors usually depart suddenly which can be unsettling to stakeholders if the leadership mission was not clear from the beginning or the reasons for transition not well communicated.

Governors, while desiring to have their contributions and legacies valued, most often are satisfied by completing the necessary tasks on their *watch*. They leave with few regrets, anticipating the next duty station and retain limited connections to their previous assignments. Successors are left free to move forward with the next phase of the organization's needs without feeling obligated to consult with or keep the governor informed. We do encourage successors however to touch base with governors early in the transition to gain insight.

While who takes up the leadership mantle next has the greatest impact on the emerging mission and identity of the organization, how the transition occurs and particularly the nature and disposition of previous leadership and how they were handled in the transition also impacts the organization's ability to move forward smoothly. By taking time to accurately assess the style of the departing leader and the implications, searches take on a more informed and potentially proactive process that can help better identify the next leader and contribute to his/her future success. A good search result helps the current leader finish well and the new leader start strong.

At the Dingman Company we work diligently to help our clients understand their unique leadership needs. Our goal is to assist you to identify the type of leadership most needed by your organization at this time. We have the experience and the expertise to find the right mix of leadership motivations to move your organization's vision forward.

© David Gyertson, 2012