THE DINGMAN COMPANY

Successful Leadership Transitions For Non-Profit and Other Organizations

A Dingman Company Strategic Initiatives Resource

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Leadership Transitions - Challenges & Opportunities

Perhaps no other event in an organization's or institution's life cycle is filled with a greater sense of both expectation as well as angst than the transition of senior leadership. The departure of the chief executive officer presents unique opportunities and challenges – opportunities to evaluate and re-engineer the vision and mission of the institution - challenges of ensuring continuity and viability of current operations and future services. There is usually a heightened level of risk and uncertainty about the future when a chief executive officer leaves even under the best and anticipated of circumstances. Perhaps no other event impacts the "going concerns" viability of an organization like the transition of leadership - especially at the executive level.

This particularly is true for institutions that depend heavily on senior leadership for vision, direction, operations, communications and fund raising. For most of these entities, the CEO is the face and identity of the institution's presence as well as the catalyst for fulfilling its mission. Historically such organizations take on the character and style of the senior leader in a way that is more defining than in most other settings. While the well-worn leadership adage that "streams rise no higher than their source" applies to most senior executive roles, in most organizations and non-profit settings in particular, this reality is even more profound given the nature, needs and consequences of the organization's promises to its constituencies and the central role played by the senior executive in fulfilling those promises.

Transition Realities

While securing competent leaders has always been a demanding process, current realities of society and culture, rapidly changing demographics, demands for improved accountability, limited talent pools and the struggling economy make finding and retaining successful leaders even more challenging. Given the demands placed upon those who assume these positions, the average tenure of nonprofit CEOs appears to be shortening making it necessary for Boards to be more frequently engaged in transition planning and management.

Stressors that contribute to these shorter terms include:

- The unprecedented changes brought upon business and culture by the recent health, financial and related crises.

- The unrelenting demands of fund raising and budget management in a new era when competition is on the increase and funding from many sources is on the decline.
- Increasing litigation with many leaders embroiled in lawsuits initiated by employees and clientele requiring a significant investment of time, resources and emotional capital.
- And the threats of government regulations, particularly in areas of “right to hire”, that require regular monitoring and diligent engagement in order to protect and advance the distinctive missions of organizations.

Perhaps one of the most sobering realities contributing to the transition challenges is the impending retirement of the majority of the current senior leadership in the next three to five years. While some of these leaders may stay on beyond the traditional retirement age and be available for continuing assignments due to personal preferences, financial need or good health, many prefer and plan to move on. Most, however, should be encouraged to retire in order to allow the organization to embrace new opportunities, perspectives and make a place for better-equipped and experienced specialists.

This “baby boomer” retirement bubble is placing a significant drain on the pool of eligible and qualified candidates prepared to step into these vacancies. Many organizations have been limited in their ability to groom the next generation of leaders due to budget reductions that have substantially reduced middle management ranks – the place historically from which most senior executives rise. Also, the current generation of leaders often is so consumed with the multiple demands of their assignments that little time and energy is left to invest in developing replacements and mentoring successors.

All of these factors are now converging to create a “perfect storm” – an unprecedented leadership vacuum and demand for qualified leaders both at home and abroad. Many organizations are discovering that some of the most aggressive searches for leaders are coming not necessarily from their US “competition” but from abroad as global opportunities expand exponentially in emerging epicenters such as India, China, Central and South America.

Leadership Transitions – A Unique and Providential Opportunity

However, despite the challenges of increased leadership turnover and competition for successors, intentionally orchestrating the CEO transition can be one of the greatest opportunities to re-energize vision, adapt mission, assess current conditions, re-engineer structures, strategically reallocate resources and deploy the right people for the organization’s next season of effectiveness.

A senior leadership change provides a unique opportunity to fully assess the current effectiveness of the organization’s viability, mission relevance, functions, operations and structures. Effective transitions require even greater attention to the “fit” between the organization’s current needs and future opportunities with the skill sets, experiences and dispositions of its leadership. Transitions also provide an opportunity to examine and strengthen Board governance and the critical relationship between the Board and the CEO – factors emerging as among the most important in successful leadership transitions.

The Central Role of Governing Boards

One of the most significant and frequently overlooked influences on institutional effectiveness and successful leadership transitions is the role and function of the group charged with the legal oversight of the organization – the governing Board. A critical need of successful leadership is a context of accountability. When mission drift, operational dysfunction or other crippling crises occur in organizations it is not unusual to find the root causes to be in the unclear relationships between the governing Board's expectations and its CEO's implementations. For federally recognized, tax-exempt nonprofit entities in the United States, it is the governing Board that is legally, morally and functionally responsible for the supervising of the organization's stated mission, objectives and the personnel and procedures to achieve that mission.

We are living in an era of expanded scrutiny and, as a result, increased responsibilities of governing Boards in general and nonprofit Boards in particular. The failures of industry and related financial systems, and the resulting calls for better oversight make it necessary for governing Boards to be pro-active legally, morally, ethically and operationally. Boards must increase their roles in monitoring, evaluating and guiding the mission of these institutions. While administrative leadership (Presidents/CEOs and their executive teams) carry the primary responsibilities for implementing the mission of the organization, Boards must strengthen commitments to both their explicit duties - as defined by relevant accrediting, certifying, best practices and federal as well as governmental requirements at the State and local levels. Boards also hold in trust the mission and integrity of the organization on behalf of its stakeholders. Guarding and guiding the missional promises of the organization, serving in essence as "stewards of the calling", is the highest responsibility of a faith-based nonprofit governing Board.

Also important to the Board's stewardship of the organization's promise, is its clear definition of *executive leadership expectations, limitations and operating parameters*. In our experience the majority of "going concerns" crises occur as a result of a lack of a clear understanding of policies and practices between the governing Board and its CEO over institutional goals, values, performance expectations and accountability measures.

Interestingly, there is a tendency of some Boards not to closely manage and hold accountable their CEO's. Board members are busy with their own personal and professional obligations and only able to give limited attention and time assuming that, given the competencies of the organization and its personnel, very little scrutiny is required. In some cases, CEO's discourage and/or aggressively resist the in-depth oversight of their Boards in a variety of ways making it difficult for these Boards to govern responsibly and fulfill their moral as well as fiduciary responsibilities as overseers.

In reality, most Boards do not function at high levels of effectiveness and, as a result, do not know their institutions well enough to select and guide the best next leader. The first question Boards need to ask is, *Do we have a clear and viable vision we need a CEO to fulfill or do we need a CEO to help us find a clear and viable vision?* The second is, *Do we fully understand the current conditions and future opportunities we need our new leader to address?* Given the press to find someone who can run the organization so that they can return to their usual practices of review and comment, many Boards prematurely develop search processes that do not answer fully these two critical questions.

Given the more frequent turnover of executive leadership, Boards must assume a greater and much more pro-active role in the operations and directions of their organizations. Rather than merely “reviewing and commenting” and then either “approving or rejecting”, Boards must proactively “guide, govern and monitor” in order to fulfill their fiduciary obligations. Board/CEO relationships make or break successful leadership transitions. It is with these realities in mind, that we offer a seven phase process designed to help the Boards of faith-based nonprofits find the leadership needed to responsibly fulfill their sacred callings as stewards of the institution’s mission and promise.

Seven Stages of Successful Leadership Transitions

As we have noted, the changing needs of and pressures on the next generation of CEO’s require a new breed of leader and a new class of governing boards. A CEO transition, when strategically managed, provides a strategic opportunity to better serve the organization’s vision and mission for a new generation as well as the opportunities and challenges it brings. How the Board manages the departure of current leadership and prepares for the selection, arrival and installation of the successor sets the standards for an organization’s image, position and future effectiveness. Managed well, such transitions equip the organization for a new season of relevance and effectiveness. Handled poorly, it may take a decade or more for the organization to recover its momentum and distinctive contributions to the mission it seeks to achieve.

Based on the current research in succession planning, leadership development, policy board governance and indicators of organizational effectiveness, as well as our practical and applied experiences with multiple faith-based nonprofit clients, we suggest **seven stages of leadership transition management** to help Boards with this most critical responsibility of recruiting and facilitating the success of their next chief executive officer.

While ideally an organization should consider utilizing all seven of these stages, each is designed as a stand-alone resource that can be deployed when and how the institution’s Board views as most beneficial. Also, they can be sequenced and re-packaged with the understanding that every organization has distinctive needs, varying degrees of resources and unique opportunities that require adaptation to fit the institutional peculiarities and realities. We have shaped these steps by asking and answering seven critical questions:

Stage One: Board Readiness & Effectiveness – How Well Are We Leading?

This first stage of transition management assists the governing Board to determine its current levels of operational effectiveness by using best practices insights and self-assessments to achieve the level of functions required to prepare for and manage the leadership transition process. Boards need to pay special attention to those elements of their oversight that speak specifically to mission, organizational core values, fiscal viability, program effectiveness and executive limitations – all of which impact mission, corporate identity and ultimately leadership success.

The best practice for this first stage is to use a policy governance approach to help the Board examine and then develop several *governance essentials* foundational to clarifying, projecting, enhancing and measuring institutional effectiveness. These elements include:

- Clear, compelling statements of *organizational vision* and *mission*
- A description of the *core values* needed to guide the organization in fulfillment of its stated mission and implied promises.
- A clarification of the *moral owners* to whom the organization feels accountable and responsible along with a description of the organization's *beneficiaries.*
- An overview of the *major functions* as well as the *primary strategies* the organization uses to serve its beneficiaries, keep faith with its moral owners and fulfill the promises implied in its declaration of mission.
- A summary of both *short and long-term goals* to achieve its stated objectives along with the *monitoring tools* to measure success and validate results.

Perhaps the most important outcomes of this first stage of the Board's responsibility of leadership transition management is its thoughtful delineation of *executive leadership expectations, limitations and operating parameters*. As was noted earlier, the majority of crises occur as a result of a lack of clarity about expectations and common understanding of agreed upon objectives between the governing Board and its CEO over institutional goals, values, performance expectations and accountability measures.

This first stage provides the resources for:

- An overview/training session for your Board on "Keys to Faith-Based Board Effectiveness"
- An assessment of your Board's performance and potential based on the "Keys to Faith-Based Effectiveness" with recommendations and suggestions for a "Board Development Plan".
- A review, recommendations and assistance as desired with the design of essential policies and practices needed to support the Board's work particularly related to CEO/Board parameters and expectations.

When this first step is completed the Board should have a sense of confidence about its own capacity to successfully manage the leadership transition the organization is facing by answering the question, *How well do we and can we lead?*

<u>Stage Two – Organizational Assessment</u> – What is Our Current Reality?

As noted earlier, one of the most important and sobering realities is that most Boards have only a limited understanding of the actual conditions of their organizations "health and well-being". It is essential for governing Boards to know where the organization is today in terms of fiscal stability, program effectiveness, market position, key performance indicator trends and other "going concerns" matters before they begin the search for the next executive leader. Many a new executive, and often the Board, have been unpleasantly surprised a few months into the new tenure when critical threats to institutional viability unexpectedly surface. Too frequently the desire to paint the best picture of the organization to recruit quality candidates fails to portray an accurate picture of the organization and its leadership needs.

This second stage focuses the governing Board on key performance indicators (KPI's) to accurately assess current strengths and weaknesses in the operational, programmatic and fiscal areas of institutional viability in order to minimize such surprises. This stage provides a comprehensive analysis of the most critical "dashboard indicators" to determine strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and potential opportunities. This analysis includes:

- A comprehensive review of the past three years of audits to identify critical trends
- A summary of most recent accreditation and/or other professional practices benchmarks particularly related to quality, marketability and sustainability.
- An analysis of major trends benchmarked against an individualized "At-Risk Indicator" list (see Appendix 1 for an example of one developed for Higher Education) to help the Board better understand current conditions.

When this step is completed, the Board should have an accurate picture of the current conditions into which a new leader will step. Completion of this stage assists the Board to better understand and thus communicate the health and condition of the organization answering the question, *What is our current reality?*

<u>Stage Three – CEO Profile Development</u> – Who Do We Need to Lead Us?

Anchored to the essentials of effective board governance and informed by the organizational assessment report, the Board is assisted in this third stage to develop a working profile of the leadership needed to meet current challenges and address future opportunities.

Based on the answer to the question, *Do we need someone to fulfill our vision or someone to help clarify and refine our vision?* the Board is assisted in defining the qualities, skill sets, dispositions and passions needed in the next leader. In most cases it is advisable to include other constituencies and stake holders in the profile development. Since broad ownership of the selection process of the new leader is required for his/her success, it is usually helpful to develop ways for these constituents to be a part of commenting and recommending the qualifications they feel are needed to lead the organization into the future.

Our research shows that several key qualities seem to be common to the next generation of leaders of most faith-based nonprofits. Among these universal skill sets, experiences and predispositions are:

- Strategic resource management,
- Openness to accountability,
- Entrepreneurship,
- A commitment to collaboration and team development,
- Change management,
- Effective communications,
- Cross-cultural and globalization awareness,
- Strong Board relationships and
- A deep passion for the core values and stated mission of the organization. (Adapted from "Turnover: Selecting the Next Generation's Presidents", Change Magazine, September-October 2010).

Much of the current leadership search is concluding that *character is a better predictor of executive leaders' success than credentials and interview performance*. Research is showing that strategies focused on developing selection criteria that help determine *a mature capacity to lead* that puts other priorities ahead of personal needs for approval and success – in essence a "servant leader" motivation that seeks the good of the organization and others even at great expense to the self to be among the most effective. Such leaders, studies suggest, are able to discipline themselves to pay attention to their *discomfort zones* recognizing that a significant aspect of effective leadership requires a willingness to work outside of preferred or learned approaches and styles. The conclusion is that the next generation of CEO's must be driven more by the needs of the people and the organizations they serve rather than their own needs.

Using these as a base line, the best practice is for the Board to develop a list of the organizational-specific skill sets, corporate culture distinctives, leadership style and executive experiences required of the next leader. Every organization has a distinctive climate and culture that new leadership must understand and embrace. Whether it is a theological underpinning, operational style, specialized service niche or a myriad of other organizational distinctives, Boards must be able to understand these factors, delineate and then apply them in the development of the "ideal profile" to ensure the best fit.

Refinement of this profile occurs in Stage Four when a decision is made on how to conduct the search. Most external executive searches occur with firms that have additional tools for leadership profile development and candidate skill set assessment worth reviewing before a final profile is established.

The outcome of this phase is agreement on the picture of the leader most likely to move the organization's mission and vision forward. Upon completion of this stage the Board should be better able to answer the question, *Who do we need to lead us?*

Stage Four: Search & Selection Strategies – Where Is Our Next Leader?

Stage Four provides the governing Board with tools to make the important decisions for a productive and timely executive search and selection process. The pros and cons of self-directed searches and the use of an external search firm are examined along with a consideration of the need for and implications of an interim leadership appointment.

With institutional conditions understood and a working leadership profile designed to address those conditions, the Board next makes the important decision of whether to employ a self-directed process or use an external firm to conduct the search and selection of their next CEO. Self-directed searches can cost as much and more than using an outside resource when Board and staff time is fully factored. Self-directed searches can be cost effective if there are Board members willing to volunteer substantial time to the process. However, even with the most efficient of procedures, self-directed searches usually require at least one full time staff person and up to half time for the search committee chair along with substantial institutional resource support. In the final analysis, many nonprofit Boards choose to outsource the search and initial screening process to a reliable and experienced agency.

In this stage, the Board evaluates various options for conducting the search and helped to make the best decision for their organization based upon needs, resources, available budget and time frame. Smaller faith-based organizations can conduct a successful self-directed search by using some basic field-proven templates if the Board is willing to put significant time into the process.

Frequently there are internal candidates interested in becoming the CEO. While promotion from inside is often easier and perhaps perceived as the least risky, we recommend that a full search be implemented as a means to validate credibility should an internal candidate finally be selected. The CEO role is so demanding that the elected candidate needs the affirmation that they are the best qualified among those considered.

Depending on the findings of the Board and organizational assessments in Stages One and Two, it may be advisable to appoint an interim CEO to help resolve outstanding weaknesses and issues. An interim may also be helpful when replacing a long term, beloved and “heroic” leader – particularly a founder. Sometimes a little distance between the “hero” and the next long-term leader allows sufficient time for the organization to grieve and adjust. Interims also can be very helpful when replacing a failed leader – particularly if that failure was ethical or moral in nature.

The interim strategy makes it possible for the Board, working through the appointee, to discover, address and resolve critical matters before actually selecting and installing the next CEO. Some of our clients have used interims as a means to put the organization in a better position to recruit highly qualified candidates. While the usual approach is to appoint an internal person to the interim role, we believe that, depending on the issues to be resolved, the use of an external specialist often is a more effective way to resolve complex problems that an in house appointee may be unable or unwilling to address due to the political and relational limitations. Also, interim internal appointees are put at risk when the new CEO arrives since they can be seen as a threat or perceived as having difficulty surrendering the reigns of leadership. If an internal interim is utilized it must be clear whether or not this individual is a candidate for the CEO position. It is unusual for interims to become candidates. In summary, an external interim often finds it easier to make the tough decisions that can cripple a new CEO’s effectiveness.

“Sudden departures” of CEO’s present a special challenge to governing Boards. Most successful searches require several months to complete. Whether due to untimely resignations, performance failure, debilitating health or death, it usually is advisable to employ an interim CEO rather than rush the process of replacement. We are seeing a significant increase in sudden and unplanned CEO departures for a wide range of reasons. It is a good idea to have a process in place, preferably a set of Board policies, to guide how CEO replacement will be handled. These policies facilitate a proactive rather reactive response to CEO departures no matter when and how they occur.

No matter what approach is used to conduct the CEO search, it is the governing Board's ultimate responsibility to select and install the new CEO. While several search options are available to the Board, the final decision must rest with the duly authorized governing body to determine whom they feel best suited to lead the organization into the future. This stage helps the Board answer the question, *Where and how do we find our next leader?*

Stage Five: The Leader's Farewell – How Do We Say Goodbye?

This stage is used to develop checklists, implement procedures and utilize tools that ensure that the current leader's final period is full, productive and meaningful. These assist the governing Board to capture the wisdom and insights of current leadership as well as help the departing CEO finish well by answering the question, *How do we appropriately recognize service, identify legacy and say farewell?* Ensuring that the current leadership is honored and that an effective transition out of the institution is achieved are the primary goals of this stage.

The first question we often are asked is how much notice should be given regarding the departure of the current CEO? We noted earlier that most successful searches require nine to twelve months to execute effectively. In a planned departure, it is important for the CEO, privately and confidentially, to advise the Board about one year in advance to give sufficient time to implement the transition and search processes. Once those are in place, a public announcement of departure is appropriate about nine months or so in advance of the final day of work. In some settings, ninety days' notice is more appropriate if existing transition policies are in place and a replacement is readily available. Some CEO's are on multiple year contracts, so it is common for the last one to be issued as a terminal agreement with the intent that at the close of the contract period the CEO plans to depart. However, more than a year's public notice creates a "lame duck" hiatus that can seriously interrupt the momentum and progress of the organization.

Once officially apprised of the CEO's intent to leave, the Board, working with the CEO and the senior administration, needs to define the various activities, priorities and other deliverables expected from the departing leadership. The primary tool we find most helpful in this phase is the development of a "Leadership Transition Briefing" handbook that summarizes current conditions, needs, trends, issues and other strategic planning matters to ensure that essential information, relationships and momentum are identified and catalogued. This document provides the Board with a better picture of the current condition of the institution, gives the departing CEO an opportunity to bring his/her tenure to an orderly closure and provides an important quick start briefing resource for the new CEO.

Decisions regarding any continuing relationship between the incumbent and the organization need to be clearly defined and delineated. We are seeing an increase in efforts to retain the former leader in some capacity ostensibly to help the new senior executive with the transition of the organization and particularly its financial supporters. It is our experience that such relationships rarely work as anticipated. Most often the continuing presence of the former CEO creates significant confusion and conflicts that damage institutional performance, limit re-engineering and eventually reduce credibility. Also, most candidates will be hesitant to accept an appointment when the CEO remains in any official capacity sensing the potential for conflict. On very rare occasions, where the former CEO is willing to be under the direct supervision of the new leader, we have seen some limited positive results. We never recommend that the former CEO retain a reporting relationship directly to the governing Board.

It is very important that all contractual matters regarding the separation of the incumbent are clearly delineated early in the process. We have seen some unfortunate confusion and bitterness develop when presumed perks and benefits are not clearly spelled out. Make sure that any promises regarding separation pay and other benefits are fully understood by both the Board and CEO well ahead of the final day in office.

The Board, during this final period, develops a checklist of decisions, activities and other initiatives to celebrate and honor the incumbent's achievements providing opportunities for the constituents and stakeholders to say goodbye – all designed to help the current leader finish with a sense of fulfillment, joy and dignity. How an organization says its "Goodbyes" sends an important message about the true character of its mission and corporate culture.

When this fifth stage is completed, the Board and the departing CEO should feel that the question, *How do we say Goodbye well?* was fully and responsibly answered.

Stage Six – Firm Foundations – How Do We Say Hello?

Stage Six is designed to assist the Board with establishing a culture of continuous quality improvement by identifying the policies, practices and relationships needed for the new leader's successful transition. Through the use of ninety-day checkpoints, benchmarks, dashboard key performance indicators and transition tools, this stage is designed to assist the new CEO and the Board answer the question, *How do we lay the foundations of both short and long term leadership success?*

The relationship between the Board and the new CEO during the first 90 to 180 days is critical to long term success and effectiveness for the leader as well as the organization. In this phase the Board develops policies, practices and procedures to help it and the new CEO work together productively and transparently. We cannot stress strongly enough how important it is in the first ninety days that clear understandings of performance measurements, organizational priorities, accountability mechanisms, reporting strategies and communications expectations be established.

In some cases, executive coaching for both the CEO and Board leadership is helpful to identify the critical procedures and clarify the basic expectations of the Board/CEO relationships. Most situations demand that the new executive "hit the ground running". Given the current environment of change, few CEO's have the luxury of a long "honeymoon" period. The "Leadership Transition Briefing" handbook serves as a tool to help the new leader more quickly grasp the nature and needs of the institution. Without such assistance, new CEO's often require twelve to eighteen months to assess accurately the current conditions and future potential of the organization. This stage is designed around the specific needs of the organization helping to keep the mission moving forward by passing the baton of leadership responsibly.

It is important that the new leader and his/her family be welcomed and installed with careful attention to see that the multiple adjustments in both personal and professional life are addressed. A celebration around a formal installation provides an important opportunity to introduce the new CEO to the various stakeholders and clientele. Ensuring that the new leader is presented to key community leaders, donors and other individuals of influence needs to be accomplished as early as possible in the new tenure.

Starting strong is the ultimate goal of Stage Six with the Board carrying the responsibilities to ensure that the new CEO is welcomed, oriented and fully equipped for success by laying the foundations for leadership success.

Stage Seven – The Inaugural Year – How Do We Keep It on Track?

This capstone stage of the transition process provides the new leader and the governing Board with tools and strategies for both the Board's and CEO's annual evaluation. Here performance is measured against established goals to help answer the question, *How do we keep it all on track?*

It is essential that the Board develop a systematic and meaningful *culture of continuous quality improvement and assessment* if the organization is to model the biblical standards of excellence, effectiveness and good stewardship. While it is usual for the Board to monitor and evaluate the success of their new CEO it also is important that the Board be self-evaluated as well as assessed by the CEO to ensure a mutual understanding of expectations. This final stage offers principles, practices and strategies for monitoring and effecting continuous quality improvement.

This process includes the review and refinement of key performance indicators, Board governance policies and practices, and executive as well as Board assessment. Suggestions as well as recommendations for promoting and supporting innovation and adaptation of strategic plans and initiatives are developed. Goals for the next fiscal year are set and clear understandings of how success will be measured are established.

While adjustments to expectations and evaluation of performance should be happening throughout the first year as a key component of the activities of Stage Six, this final step in the transition process is important to making any remaining course corrections so that the tenure of the CEO and the most effective working relationships with the Board are established. *Getting it and then keeping it on track* is the ultimate indicator that the organization has successfully navigated the leadership transition process.

Governing Boards and their CEO's must develop strategic partnerships to ensure the relevance and success of their organization's mission. We anticipate that a substantial majority of current leaders will leave office in the next few years. Given the accelerated rate of turnover, as well as the limited pool of qualified candidates, success in managing leadership transitions must become the highest priority.

We at the Dingman Company have worked with executive search and transition in the United States and abroad for over four decades. Please go to www.dingman.com to see a list of the various organizations we have assisted to make their leadership transitions successful. If we can be of assistance as you plan your leadership transition, please contact us.

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