

Success in Succession Part 1

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Succession occurs in every organization and in every leader's life; it is inevitable. It should be anticipated and managed well. Over the next few months, I'll lay out some of the key parts in the process of succession. I believe it will help you when the time comes. This transition in the life of a leader is one of the most important but for some, it is the most difficult. How do you pass on a leadership role when you have given your life to it? The sacrifices, the effort, the years of day in, day out service to your dream. One day you have all the authority, energy, vision, and hope, and the next day you pass everything over to someone else's leadership.

So how do we effectively let go?

Succession can unfold in many ways – it can either tragically present itself or serve as a strategic opportunity for the organization. To strategize and consider plans for the organization's future should be a process of guided change management. Understand this: Unless you end up killing the organization that you gave your heart and soul to build up, all leaders are succeeded by someone. We've all seen poor examples of leadership transition but how many of us have seen truly effective ones? Yet the greatest impact on your organization's future is in preparing for succession.

Succession is not for the faint of heart!

Over the last three years, I have been living through the processes that I am addressing here. At times it feels easy and even exciting to think about letting go of all of the authority and not being responsible for people, budgets, and strategy. At other times it feels difficult to even think about letting go of the dream I have spent the greatest years of my life building. The process can be a bit messy but it doesn't have to be. From

personal experience, I will tell you that there are real emotions that surface along the way. You will have both good days and bad days in your succession journey.

One of the best ways for me to truly describe the process of succession is through the analogy of a relay race and the passing of the baton.

I enjoy watching the Olympics and especially like to watch the 4 x 100-meter relay races. I like these because it's not only about how well each part of the race is run, it's also about successfully handing off the baton to the next runner. No matter the speed or pace set, dropping the baton during the handoff will cause the runner to lose the ground gained while picking it back up or even be disqualified.

Despite accomplishments during your own race, career, or ministry, the failure to pass the baton well and in a timely manner with a complete hand-off will result in a loss. As a Christian leader, you must recognize that God's plan and vision for the ministry you steward are much bigger than the span of your life and your accomplishments. Our leg of the race simply falls between the generation before us and the generation after us.

Within a relay race, there is what is called the "exchange zone." The exchange zone is 20 meters long and is preceded by a 10-meter acceleration zone. The person receiving the baton begins running in the acceleration zone but the baton can only be passed within the exchange zone.

In this exchange zone there is:

- Intentional focus in looking ahead not behind,
- Precise timing, (and)
- Transition occurrence at the peak speed of both runners.

Did you catch that? The exchange is made with both runners going at full speed.

In the 2020 Olympics, we saw missed handoffs and even dropped batons. As a result, the mishaps cost each of these teams medals. It was heartbreaking, an obvious disappointment with tears flowing and intense internal emotions as they thought about the years of practice and flawless practice runs. Yet in the main event, mistakes were made that cost the reward.

This poses several questions to consider:

- Have we been willing to communicate the succession process with both the board and staff?
- Have we taken the necessary steps to raise up those who will run in the exchange zone?
- Will they be up-to-speed by the time we hand them the baton or are they already exhausted?
- Will they understand the culture, values, and goals of the organization?
- Have we mentored and developed within them the critical gift sets that will assure a successful transition?

Five important key factors in succession:

1. Identification – Seek the Lord and identify the one who will succeed.
2. Sequence – Mentor and ensure that the successor has the appropriate skills and experience to lead the organization into the future.
3. Timing – Ensure that the leadership baton is effectively passed from incumbent to successor at peak speed.
4. Baton-passing technique – Determine the details by which the succession will be achieved but stay focused ahead.
5. Communication- Provide for respectful and clear communication between incumbent and successor to other leaders within the organization and those the organization serves.

It is critical in a relay race that all of these are implemented effectively for the successful passing of the baton.

There are many opportunities for succession to fail.

Setting expectations and clear communication with one another will lead to success. Failure to execute will cause the process and the organization to fail.

Here's a few examples of what I have seen over the years:

- I've seen leaders stay too long and undo everything they have spent their life building. This is true in churches, businesses, and Teen Challenge.
- Sometimes, a leader retires but never mentors the successor or shares relational equity: no names, no introductions, etc. Some leaders have even taken the donor database with them as if they were their personal property and not the ministry's property.
- Some retire but continue to communicate with the major donors and staff. In those cases, they have undermined the new leader in the process.
- Insecurity is something I have seen all too often in leadership. Insecurity presents itself in many ways. It can result in harsh leadership practices, impulsive decisions, or outbursts of anger and moodiness. I believe all leaders will feel the temptation to be a bit insecure when it comes time to let go.
- Sometimes a leader promises a future leadership role to an associate but then never relinquishes authority. Out of frustration, the associate leaves and when the leader finally decides it is time, no one is equipped to carry out the work or plan of the organization.
- Others simply never commit to train up their team or take the initiative to recruit workers into the organization with the intention of mentoring them for the role. In this case, the burden of succession is then left to the board of directors.
- Procrastination in naming a successor, especially for those in the role of president, can be detrimental to the organization. Many good leaders move on to other organizations where there is an opportunity for upward mobility in leadership responsibilities.

Lesson One in the Process of Succession

1. Identification

“Then Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle on him (Elisha)” (1 Kings 19:19 NKJV parenthesis mine). Have you sought God about who He has to receive your mantle? Has the Lord helped you identify someone to succeed you in whom you have the confidence?

“Then invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; you shall anoint for Me the one I name to you. (David)” (1 Samuel 16:3, NKJV parenthesis mine). When choosing your successor, the most important step is seeking God’s input when it comes time to throw your mantle or pass the baton. Others may make suggestions or you may have someone in mind, but you need the Lord’s confirmation in making your choice. When you have the confidence that you have heard from the Lord on who your successor will be, you can move forward. You will still want to develop a process for transitioning out of your role. Seek God’s input first and let others confirm who He shows you.

In 4 x 100 relays, there are many key rules and processes that the athletes must learn in order to compete. Here are a few that relate to the identification of a successor:

In relay races there are so many things to consider:

- Which athlete is the fastest
- Which athlete is the best starter
- Which athlete can remain calm under pressure
- Which athlete run best around the bend
- Which athlete do best running the final leg of the relay
- Which athlete maintain top speed the longest
- Which athlete handles the baton best at full speed
- Which athlete can judge distance best as an incoming athlete and an outgoing athlete
- Which athletes are willing to work and train together

When you read this list and take a moment to think about them in the context of leadership transition/succession, there are remarkable similarities. Which leader is the fastest to adapt to change? Who is the best to manage change and embrace the vision? Which leader can remain faithful under the pressures over time? Which leader has the ability to finish projects? Which ones are closers, getting things done with little supervision? Who works well with others and helps everyone feel included in the team effort?

There are many attitudes, skillsets, and abilities necessary to assure a good transition in the exchange of authority but it’s unrealistic to expect that any one person will already have all the skills and qualifications needed for a President/CEO role. Be careful not to create a job description or set up unrealistic expectations for a successor. I have read several job descriptions over the years that are just too unrealistic for any candidate to

consider. I read one just recently where the only skillset not included was the ability to walk on water.

There are also things to consider about the season of the organization:

- Is there a current large building project or are locations in different states being added?
- How healthy is the culture of the organization?
- Is the transition due to retirement, a death, or a moral failure?
- What is the current financial status of the organization, is it healthy with plenty of savings or is it operating month-to-month?

All of these situations impact which skillsets will best serve the organization. Take a good look at the organization and spend time in prayer as you consider your decision and process for recruiting and training a successor. For best results, you also want the buy-in from the board of directors.

After 40 years of service in the ministry of Teen Challenge, I've learned a few things about selecting leaders for various roles in the organization. I believe there are some critical character issues that are worth mentioning when considering someone for a key leadership role.

The Essential Qualities of Leadership

A Passion for God

Does this person have the right heart? When you listen to them tell their story and leadership journey, do you hear them speak of their calling, their encounter with Christ, and their passion for the things of God? The Bible tells us that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. What are you hearing from the heart of the one you are considering that lets you know that they genuinely have a heart for God? This is essential for leading a Teen Challenge ministry and for leading a team.

You also want to know if the individual spiritually leads others. The ability to spiritually lead an organization is different from your own personal life. You must hear from God on your knees and be able to put what is heard into operation. Therefore, every leader must have a disciplined prayer and study life. *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).*

The vision, values, and culture of an organization are dependent on the leader. The secular culture around us presses in on our values and, as leaders, we must stay true to the biblical principles that this ministry was built on, without allowing culture to define our values as an organization.

A Passion for Others

Does the person being considered as a successor have a passion for the lost? With a vision like *putting hope within reach of every addict*, there needs to be a burden to see lives transformed. Do you hear a heart for the Great Commission? What about a passion for family – a critical part of being an effective leader? What is the history of

working with others on a team? Does the person get along with others as well as have the capacity to inspire and lead them? Is there an understanding of the importance of managing the culture within the organization? These are critical to accomplishing strategies and goals.

Another key essential is the ability to communicate with the business community and key donors of the organization. What fundraising experience is there? What level of comfort is demonstrated in talking to major donors and winning them over to the vision? Is there experience with foundations or in writing grants? Is the person comfortable with working with a development team to accomplish fundraising goals? Has there been involvement with major capacity campaigns? If so, what was the project, and how much money was needed to complete the project? Was he/she successful?

A Person of Vision

A leader must be a person of vision with an ability to look down the road and see the organization through the eyes of faith as well as envision the projects that are to be presented to donors for support. Vision involves having foresight as well as insight. I love working with leaders who can see down the road and, with the help of God and others, are willing to risk what it takes to achieve the desired future.

I get that not everyone is a visionary leader but for the key role of the organization, it is an essential characteristic. To be visionary doesn't always mean being charismatic. Some visionary leaders are quiet, not excitable about what they want to accomplish, but instead, just keep moving forward with vision and strategy and accomplishing their goals.

Even-tempered and Secure

Over the years I can tell you that I look for people who are secure and possess the ability to be secure in who they are in Christ as well in their role and authority. I love people who are sensible and don't overreact to the chaos that comes with working with people who have life-controlling problems. We work with complex people with complex problems and at times, we have highly emotional people with strong and loud opinions who we must manage. The leaders I love working with can stay even-tempered when dealing with unreasonable and intense personality people.

Emotional stability is an essential leadership quality. This determines how the leader can handle conflicts, responsibility, and criticism. The leader should be a steady example and not be discouraged when the circumstances are bad. The Word offers help in the area of emotional stability. *"It will be healing to your body, and refreshment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:8). "My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and health to all their whole body" (Proverbs 4:20-22). "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Who is the man who desires life, and loves length of days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it" (Psalm 34:11-14).*

A Strong Sense of Purpose and Work Ethic

I love people who know their purpose, are self-starters, and are self-motivated. They solve problems on their own and work through whatever issues come their way. They bring solutions to the table along with the issues. Bill Turner said, "You never know how effective a leader will be until you see them under stress or until you see them manage a problem."

How well leaders manage pain is critical to how they lead. Can they lead through hard times, challenging situations, and challenging economic times? I always want to know about someone's painful past and ask them to describe how they worked through those times.

Leaders need a general sense of purpose, understanding why they are in their position and what their results should be along with a set of specific goals. Identify a leader with an expectation of high levels of performance and don't tolerate mediocrity.

Strong Leadership Skills

Creativity and a good imagination are wonderful for work environments that change rapidly. A leader who can adapt and develop creative approaches to growth and problem-solving is an asset.

Decisiveness, the ability to make a decision and stick with it, is another essential leadership trait. A person who equivocates and vacillates, unable to stick to a decision, is not an effective leader. Vacillating in decision-making does nothing but confuse people.

A leader must be dependable. Dependability is the greatest character trait. Leaders must prove themselves to be trustworthy. *"In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (1 Cor. 4:2).* Jesus praised those who were faithful even over a few things. *"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master'" (Matt. 25:21).*

Persistence is another valuable trait in leadership. There must be a power of will and a strong purpose evident in the leader's life. The tenacity to stick it out when challenges and hard times come against a vision or dream is what brings the dream into reality.

A leader must know how to delegate tasks and responsibilities. He/she must train others so that the range of leadership can expand and develop. Moses is a good example of this principle.

A leader must be objective and operate within a broad spectrum of input. There needs to be freedom from subjectivity, emotion, and tradition so that the current situation can be objectified.

You may or may not find all of the above skillsets in the person you are recruiting, but they can be learned and become part of the training process.

In the lessons that follow, I will talk about the sequencing of the runners, timing, the actual process of passing the baton, and communication. All of these topics are critical to successful succession.

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