

Thinking About Your Successor

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Ever wonder what would happen to your center if you were struck by lightning and died? A morbid thought to be

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sure, but one that makes every director I've posed this question to stand up straight and ponder. Does anyone else on your staff know the password to your computer? Does anyone else on your staff know the combination to the center's safe deposit box? Would anyone on your staff have

the range of skills, knowledge, interest, or desire to step into your shoes and fill the leadership void created by your untimely demise?

I posed this hypothetical struck-by-lightning question to 400 directors in a survey about leadership succession. The results were amazing. Only 30 percent of the directors were confident that the operation of their center would continue smoothly and that personnel and systems were in place to ensure an efficient transition. Ten percent of the directors

responded that chaos would reign if they died suddenly and that no one was equipped to step into their position and assume the leadership role. The remaining directors indicated that things would be shaky but still functional; that someone could cover their responsibilities until a formal search to find a replacement was concluded.

Author and organization consultant David Baron once quipped, "The brightest business people recognize that while death is unavoidable, their organization need not follow them to the grave." Sound advice, even for administrators of early care and education programs.

When you board an airplane, one of the first instructions the flight attendant gives is to think about your exit strategy in case of an emergency. A well-crafted risk management plan can help minimize the disastrous consequences to your center should a tragedy befall you. A risk management plan ensures that policies are in place for things like computer passwords and safe deposit box combinations. But a center needs much more than a risk management plan. It also needs a comprehensive leadership succession plan.

What is leadership succession?

The transition of the directorship reverberates throughout a center. It is a significant and pivotal event in the life of an organization. When done right, it can infuse vitality into a program, providing fresh ideas and new perspectives for the future. When done wrong, it can result in earthquake-like tremors throughout a center, creating instability, uncertainty, and havoc. The replacement of leadership is disruptive because it changes lines of communication, affects decision making, and generally disturbs the equilibrium of daily activities.

Leadership succession planning rests on the supposition that transitions work best when they are approached intentionally. A leadership succession plan is a deliberate and systematic effort by your organization to ensure leadership continuity in the directorship and other key leadership roles. It can help your center develop and retain its most capable employees, preserve your program's institutional memory, and ensure that your organization continues to meet all its legal obligations. Developing a comprehensive leadership succession plan involves thinking about two things: systems and people.

Are systems in place to ensure a smooth transition?

Assuming you plan a less dramatic departure from Mother Earth than being hit by a bolt of lightning, thinking about leadership succession involves thinking about the infrastructure of your program. Your infrastructure is all the formal and informal systems you have established to ensure that a new replacement can be socialized into your role with a minimum of disruption.

There is no single formula for managing transitions because each organization is different. If you are an owner of a center and operate a private proprietary program, your needs and interests will be quite different from those of a director of a nonprofit center who is accountable to a governing board or agency executive team. The important point is that regardless of the legal auspice of your program, systems need to be in place to handle both anticipated and unanticipated changes in leadership.

Are people in place to ensure a smooth transition?

In my research, I found that only 27 percent of directors felt they were well prepared to handle the range of tasks required of them when they first assumed their administrative roles. This is not surprising given that most directors are promoted into the administrative ranks from teaching. Their classroom experience simply does not prepare them for leading and managing others.

The orientation and socialization process for many new directors is haphazard and highly stressful. Over one-half of directors reported that the first three months in their new role was overwhelming, that they had to figure out things by themselves. Only one-half of directors who

were hired from outside the organization felt the job description they received and interviewing process they participated in provided a realistic understanding of the special challenges of their new position. Only 14 percent of directors felt their orientation into their new role was systematic and thorough.

This does not need to be the case. When programs develop a culture of professional development whereby leadership is delegated at all levels of the organization, it is possible to create a center that does not experience chaos when the director leaves. When an administrative position opens, staff have been groomed to move into higher levels of leadership responsibility.

In programs like this, directors think deliberately about job descriptions and create a career lattice within their centers where roles reflect expanding spheres of leadership accountability. In these centers leadership is talked about, practiced, and nurtured at all levels of the organization. Assistant teachers, teachers, support staff, and administrative staff are all given opportunities to develop the technical and interpersonal skills essential for leadership. It is possible, for example, to think about accountability as moving from managing oneself to managing a few others, to managing groups, to managing external constituencies.

Moving into higher levels of leadership accountability requires more than just knowledge and skill. It requires a psychological shift in thinking about the scope and impact of one's role. It also requires changing one's perspective about interpersonal relationships and how time is spent.

For example, think of the psychological shift needed to move from the role of *teacher* to that of *head teacher* or *team leader* where supervisory responsibility for managing the work of others may be required. Many first-time head teachers and team

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leaders overpower their direct reports. They feel a need to showcase their expertise and they often finish tasks themselves out of frustration with low-performing staff. Managing the work of others by problem solving together, modeling in supportive ways, providing helpful resources, and giving appropriate feedback requires not only a broader repertoire of knowledge and skills, but also a different mindset than that required of a classroom teacher.

Start thinking of your replacement your first day on the job

Do you define your success in terms of what you have achieved at your center or in the people you have mentored to carry on the work you have done? In other words, are you hiring people who could replace you one day?

Most leaders in organizations have emerged as leaders because they were

identified and mentored by established leaders. Mentors make it safe for fledgling leaders to spread their wings, take on challenging assignments that broaden their knowledge base, and try out new tasks that expand their repertoire of skills. What are you doing at your center to cultivate formal and informal mentoring relationships that help individuals assess their career aspirations and expand their knowledge and skill?

Leadership succession planning is not a one-time task that results in a slick report that gets filed away. It is an ongoing dynamic process that includes:

- thinking about the work requirements for the various leadership positions in your program and the dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to successfully perform each;
- identifying high-potential employees who have both the interest and ability to tackle more complex work assignments;

- developing a professional development plan for each employee that bridges the gap between their present ability and the key activities, responsibilities, and tasks required in the next level of leadership responsibility; and
- structuring formal and informal mentor relationships that move individuals to higher levels of leadership competency.

Take some time to think about what leadership succession means in your center. What are you doing today that will help ensure a smooth transition for your successor, whether you anticipate that transition taking place tomorrow, next year, or ten years from now? A well-crafted leadership succession plan is the best gift you can give your center when you move on to other earthly or heavenly pursuits.

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