

“Our sector’s challenge is to move beyond episodic and scattered attention to leader transitions and leader development to a consistent and thoughtful ongoing strategy.”

TOM ADAMS, President and Founder, *TransitionGuides*

Executive Transition Management (ETM)

CompassPoint, TransitionGuides and the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations developed the ETM concept to decrease the risks and take advantage of the opportunities associated with an executive transition. **It is a comprehensive approach to manage the whole transition process from the current executive’s departure to the successful launch of the new executive. This unique model includes practices that can be adapted to a variety of situations and constitutes a best practice for all transitions, planned and unplanned, rural or urban, if it is implemented with fidelity.**

In his book *Managing Executive Transitions*, Wolfred articulates his belief that seven factors are crucial to a successful transition:

1. board leadership and engagement;
2. healthy closure with the departing executive director;
3. strategic review and candidate profile;
4. staff engagement;
5. attraction of qualified candidates;
6. thorough candidate screening; and
7. attention to the new executive’s launch (Wolfred, *Managing*, p. 27).

All are an integral part of the ETM process. My recommendation is that Communities In Schools affiliates and state offices implement the succession basics and utilize the following steps of the ETM model in the case of transitions.

(Please note that the attached ETM chart involves three phases. For purposes of the toolkit, these phases are separated into the following four steps.)

1. Addressing Leadership Needs During a Transition.

When a transition occurs, the first step is to address leadership needs. If an executive’s departure is abrupt, some type of interim or acting director option is usually implemented. It may be a temporary promotion from existing senior staff or it may be a board member, depending on the state of the organization and how quickly a search can be conducted.

In the case of a founder, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of the transition: the director’s importance to the organization, the challenges of the transition, the director’s emotional attachment, his or her relationships with stakeholders, the director’s personal considerations, his or her approach to getting ready to let go, the timing of the departure and the director’s potential successors. Closure involves a variety of activities: creating a legacy, celebrating, determining the director’s future role with the organization and his or her role during the transition.

2. Organizational Assessment and Strengthening.

Assessment activities include creating the transition committee, compiling a communications plan, conducting an organizational self-assessment and a board self-assessment, surveying staff and stakeholders and updating the strategic plan. These activities will lead to developing strategic priorities for the new executive.

Organizational strengthening activities involve the board, the staff and administrative infrastructure. Are the systems in place, the data available and accessible, the finances stable, the management team strong, the job descriptions and duties in writing, the staff supported? Is there an inventory of where everything is located?

3. The Search. In addition to the usual resume review, interviews and reference checks, the key tasks of the search committee (which may be the same as the transition committee) include: defining the competencies agreed upon by the board and based on the organizational assessment and implementing an aggressive networking outreach effort to attract a diverse pool of candidates. Resources for the search may range from hiring a firm to conduct the ETM process to the board assuming full responsibility. The interim director option may also provide a temporary solution and provide the board with the time to do a thorough search.

4. THE TRANSITION. Once the search is completed, the very important transition phase occurs. Too often, the board members, relieved that the search is over, do not provide enough guidance for the new executive.

Several orientation components are recommended: a staff meeting convened by the board president to introduce the new executive; a 90-day plan to detail how the new executive will be oriented to the organization and to the community; a leadership agenda developed by the executive and the board with an agreed upon set of priorities for the initial 12 to 18 months; and a social contract to help the board and executive clarify their roles and expectations. Suggestions for building relationships with staff are also included.

Although ETM consulting services are not widespread, studies illustrate the effectiveness of the approach. Transitions can also be done without this support if the board can commit its volunteer resources.

Transition Management on Your Own

This toolkit will enable a Communities In Schools affiliate to execute its own transition. The five components of a successful transition include:

1. A clear vision in relationship to organizational direction and goals as well as the financial and human resources to achieve results.
2. A written plan and timeline addressing the search, key transition issues and a positive new beginning.
3. Regular communication throughout the transition process with board, staff and key stakeholders with opportunities for input.
4. A search process that results in a finalist pool that meets the present and future needs of the organization and a compensation plan that is competitive with the local market.
5. A welcome and orientation for the new executive and the development of a positive partnership between the board and new executive (Adams, *Staying Engaged*, p. 10).

Resources for the Transition

A thorough search process is very time consuming. Most boards manage a transition with internal resources: a search committee and a staff person for input and administrative support. However, a board may wish to hire an ETM firm to assist with the process. Two possibilities exist for making ETM services available to small and mid-size nonprofits with smaller budgets:

1. A funder agrees to provide a grant that can be used to hire a management support organization that can provide ETM services.
2. A funder agrees to support all or a portion of ETM services for a group of grantees (Adams, *Capturing the Power*, p. 14).

Money can be a barrier; however, ETM providers cite numerous examples of grants to organizations from funders who are interested and have a stake in successful transitions (Adams, *Staying Engaged*, p. 5).

Communities In Schools Experience. Most Communities In Schools staff interviewed during the development of this toolkit noted that the board or a committee of the board conducted the search. In the case of Communities In Schools of Wichita/Sedgwick County, Inc., a consultant (and former board president) was hired to facilitate a strategic planning session and a few administrative staff sessions. Once the new executive was on board, his role was to work with her during the transition in a coaching role. Another former board president was hired to staff the search process. It proved to be advantageous to use people who knew the organization.

An Executive Transition Management Overview is attached. This chart provides an overview to help the board and staff understand the basic ETM process and shows the activities in each of the three phases. It is important to note that a number of activities occur simultaneously.

SEE SECTION 7: Additional Resources, Sources and Websites for supplemental tools and information.