Change is Coming — Is Your Program Prepared for It?

We all know that change is inevitable. As workforce development professionals, we closely monitor changes in the job market to better prepare our participants for newly emerging job opportunities and the evolving needs of employers. But how many of us are monitoring our own organizations in preparation for the leadership changes that will inevitably take place? While succession planning is an important task for any organization, it is easy to neglect because the outcomes associated with it are generally long-term. You may not, after all, know the effectiveness of your plan until a leadership change takes place. If, however, we view this task as succession “development,” it’s easier to see how it can benefit your organization both today and in the future. This bulletin will provide you with practical guidance on how you can help your staff prepare for leadership opportunities and ensure that your organization is not adversely impacted when staff turnover occurs. The practices we describe are intended to help your organization meet its current obligations as a grantee and meet its future leadership needs as they arise in the years to come.

In This Bulletin...

Although succession planning is critical for an agency’s long-term stability and sustainability, it is often overlooked by leaders of workforce development organizations. This bulletin is intended to help you reduce risk of an unsuccessful leadership transition by expanding your pool of capable and skilled leaders. Specifically, we will explore the use of shared leadership, a proven strategy that can maximize the potential of your staff and help your organization meet its obligations as a grantee.

Shared Leadership

Shared Leadership is an emerging practice that can be used to prepare employees for advancement. It also is a way to improve team performance and increase staff retention. Simply put, shared leadership is a strategy for maximizing the potential of your staff by giving individuals the opportunity to lead each other. It is a practice that allows for the cultivation of future leaders who can uphold an organization’s mission, vision, and values.

Leaders of workforce development agencies often find it difficult to share leadership roles with subordinates. They may feel insecure about doing this or they may believe that sharing leadership compromises their authority. It’s important to overcome these insecurities and concerns because the research tells us that there is a positive
relationship between shared leadership and team effectiveness and performance.¹

There are several ways to cope with these concerns. First, the decision to appoint a staff person to a leadership role within a team should be based on his/her competencies. It makes no sense to give authority to a person who does not have the basic skills needed to accomplish the task. This may require you to identify gaps in each employee’s skill set and build his/her capacity through training. Cross-training is an excellent way to build this capacity and provide your agency with the “bench” it needs to meet unexpected staff departures. If you fail to cross-train, you put your agency at significant risk whenever you lose an individual who has specialized skills or knowledge needed to meet your project’s objectives.

Second, it’s important to set some decision-making limits upon the team’s leader while simultaneously giving him/her the authority to take the initiative for reaching the team’s goals. This is a balancing act that requires a great deal of forethought. Third, you need to provide the team and its leader with the resources needed to get the job done. Sending a team up the river without paddles is never a good idea. Fourth, you want to track their progress against agreed upon milestones. What gets measured gets done.

## Using Shared Leadership to Meet Your Project’s Objectives

Your grant offers many opportunities to provide staff members with leadership opportunities. Every proposal made in response to a Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) includes many tasks, some of which must be accomplished within a relatively short time frame. Each of these tasks has the potential to be a leadership learning opportunity. These tasks include, but are not limited to:

- implementation planning;
- developing policies and procedures;
- finalizing project goals and objectives;
- creating communication strategies;
- conducting participant recruitment; and
- establishing benchmarks.

In addition to providing learning opportunities, these tasks also offer the opportunity to achieve buy-in from staff. People support what they help to create. If they are given leadership opportunities involving the development of the project, they are more likely to support the work that has to be done.

Having the team develop a detailed policies and procedures manual is particularly important. This should be a living document that is updated as changes are made. The manual will be invaluable to staff who are called on to assume new roles in the organization.

Prior to engaging any employees in these tasks, it is critical that they understand the requirements of the SGA as well as documents referenced within the SGA, like the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). They also need to be familiar with the project plan described in your proposal. All too often, the proposals made in response to a SGA are written by grant writers who had minimal contact with frontline staff. Staff must be provided with this information at the earliest possible time and be held accountable for understanding their project’s obligations to the Department of Labor and their participants.

How to Promote Shared Leadership

Shared leadership can be facilitated by a team environment that includes a shared purpose, social support and voice. A shared purpose requires that team members understand and have an equal stake in the team’s objectives. Team members must understand the purpose and requirements of the grant, the strategies and allowable activities, and the performance goals. This knowledge will provide them with a common understanding of what needs to be accomplished and allow them to proceed with a shared purpose.

The motivation to participate in a shared purpose comes largely from the support and recognition given to team members. This recognition should be both internal and external to the team. Everyone likes to be affirmed and affirmation is the most effective way to promote a shared purpose.

Finally, shared leadership is most effective when every team member has input into the team’s decisions and everyone feels heard. This can be accomplished by providing the teams with “ground rules” that establish norms for team activities. It is also useful to have a “gatekeeper” for each team - a person who ensures that every voice is heard.

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Resources

- Building Leaderful Organizations: Successful Planning for Nonprofits
  http://www.aecf.org/~/media/Pubs/Other/B/BuildingLeaderful OrganizationsSuccessionPlanning/Building%20Leaderful%20Organizations.pdf

- Succession Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Resource List
  http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/topical/succession.html

- Nonprofit Executive Succession-Planning Toolkit

- Leadership Development and Succession
  http://www.councilofnonprofits.org/resources/leadership-development-and-succession

- Shared Leadership: Is it Time for a Change?