

Managing Organizational Leadership Transition: A Brief Guide

Managing organizational transitions during a time of leadership change can be challenging, and the transition from founder to a successor president presents particular challenges. The Council for Opportunity in Education has undergone such a transition in the last several years, and we offer a description of what we believe to have been an effective process in the hopes that it will be helpful to our member associations and the college access and success community at large.

The literature on leadership transitions suggests that the conventional model for many organizations is one of a “graceful exit” for the leader, with the idea that he or she bow out of all participation in the organization’s activities. More recently, though, an alternative model has been touted, one that allows the new executive to take the leadership reins at the same time the organization retains the departing leader’s expertise, networks, and institutional memory (Leach 2009).

COE has embraced the latter model, out of the recognition that Arnold L. Mitchem, who founded the organization in 1981 to represent the federal TRIO programs and to expand college opportunity for low-income and first-generation Americans, remains a knowledgeable and effective advocate. COE’s first president carefully groomed his executive vice president, Maureen Hoyler, who helped establish the organization’s operation from its very beginnings, as his logical successor.

COE’s leadership transition has been marked by the following characteristics that we feel are essential to a successful transition: 1) clearly demarcated roles for the departing executive and his successor; 2) long-range planning by the board; 3) inclusive involvement and engagement in the planning process by those who govern the organization and those who work for it, as well as external evaluators; and 4) effective communications with the organization’s constituency and other stakeholders.

Clearly Demarcated Roles

In the current leadership transition at COE, Dr. Mitchem serves as president emeritus. He retains an office at COE, though he has relinquished his presidential office. This change of office space signals the change in leadership to staff and to visitors. He will continue to serve on COE’s corporate advisory committee and on occasion will speak on COE’s behalf.

As the new CEO, Ms. Hoyler directs the policies and programs in concert with the COE board. She represents the public face of COE at events such as the recent White House convening of higher education leaders as well as at state and regional association meetings.

Planning Starts Early

When a change in leadership occurs voluntarily, organizations can adopt a long-range and deliberate planning process. At COE, succession planning began in 2010 when the board extended a three-year contract to the organization's founding president, Arnold L. Mitchem, to expire September 30, 2013. The board moved to adopt a three-year strategic plan, which would expire at the end of Dr. Mitchem's tenure. The organization's next strategic plan was developed as an integral part of the succession of Maureen Hoyler to the COE presidency.

Involvement is Inclusive



Dr. Arnold Mitchem

President Emeritus,
Council for Opportunity
in Education

Current and former COE board officers and members, staff, Dr. Mitchem as founder and Maureen Hoyler as successor, and external management consultants were involved in the succession and transition planning at COE.

In 2012, the COE board appointed a search committee, which voted to recommend to the full COE board that in lieu of conducting a search for Dr. Mitchem's successor, Maureen Hoyler be appointed the next president of COE. The COE board adopted this recommendation in December 2012.

In early 2013, COE retained two consulting groups, one to conduct a management study of the organization, and the other to conduct an environmental scan of COE. This was accomplished through small group interviews with COE staff and board officers.

Using these findings, Amy Verlanic, the COE board chair, convened a select committee of current and former board members, including co-chairs of the board's Strategic Planning Committee, to draft COE's strategic plan for 2014-15. The plan was prepared in consultation with Ms. Hoyler in her role as incoming CEO, and was formally adopted by the full COE board in December 2013.

Effective Communications Before, During, and After the Transition Process



Maureen Hoyler

President,
Council for Opportunity
in Education

Dr. Mitchem's retirement as CEO and Ms. Hoyler's appointment as successor was announced initially to the COE Board. The Board is made up of 35 members who represent the leadership of COE's 10 regional associations throughout the U.S. and the territories, and then via state and regional meetings to the wider community.

Ms. Hoyler gave an inaugural address at COE's annual conference in Chicago in September 2013 in which she acknowledged her predecessor and announced both continuing and new priorities for the organization. This communiqué, which was disseminated to the community and posted on COE's website, gave COE's constituency assurance that many of the organization's long-standing commitments would be retained. At the same time, Ms. Hoyler conveyed the new directions COE would be taking in concert with the organization's recently-adopted strategic goals.

COE staff helped pave the way for the leadership transition by making prominent mention of Ms. Hoyler's succession at state and regional meetings in the months before she formally took office.

Some Lessons Learned from the Transition Process

View a change in leadership as an opportunity to review where you've been and where you're going. Where possible, use your organization's strategic planning process to guide the succession process. A strategic review of the organization's mission and direction is necessary to assure that the board and the new executive are in sync with the organization's priorities.

Don't limit your succession planning to a select few. Involve your organization's staff in the succession planning and transition process. Cultivating staff engagement allows them to throw support to the new leadership and be invested in whatever new directions the organization is taking.

A leadership transition involving a founding executive requires special attention to assure your staff and your constituency that the organization will continue and that the contributions of the founder are acknowledged. At the same time, the new executive must have clear and unambiguous authority to administer the organization's policies and programs.

Changes in organizational structure may be necessary when a change in leadership occurs. Don't be afraid to align staff to ensure the right structure for a new leader. And take time to align the organization's structure with your strategic plan.

Useful Resources:

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Axelrod, Nancy R. "Chief Executive Succession Planning: Essential Guidance for Boards and CEO's." Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2009.

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