

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Without an Earthquake

by Norman Edwards



One of the more challenging tasks of a ministry is to transition from a highly successful founder or long-term leader to a new leader without major disruptions. When change takes place in the U.S. presidency, we know from recent history that the elaborate work of the transition team includes everything from selecting cabinet-level officers to public ceremonies and what pictures will hang on the walls of the oval office. For most ministries, the planning is not nearly that complicated (nor, thankfully, expensive).

Fortunately, the transition in most ministries goes smoothly and the ministry enjoys uninterrupted leadership. This transition is graced by the Christ-like servant attitude of all parties involved. Unfortunately, we also know of too many situations where the transition has been a disaster, largely because of little or poor planning. The years of fruitful and blessed ministry of a godly leader can be marred at the end merely because the issues were never thought through. The problem is that most of those on the board have seldom or never been responsible for the transition in leadership, but could write the book after the experience.

As an example, six retired men were enjoying a meal together

during a national meeting. The one thing they had in common was having served as CEOs of nationally prominent ministries. The conversation drifted to their personal experiences of transition in leadership at their various organizations. Without exception, all six had had very unpleasant experiences either when moving into leadership or when moving out. Unnecessary—and no doubt unintentional—hurts were caused because of thoughtless actions and comments. Surely this does not honor Christ, whom they all served.

Possibly five groups or individuals share responsibility in the transition process. Here is some counsel for each. Rewrite each paragraph to meet the needs of your own organization.

• **Counsel for the board.** If there are major problems in leadership succession, it is usually because the board itself has done little or poor planning. Adequately care for your departing leader. A board committee or the board chair should prepare a list of all the issues and steps to be taken, such as appropriate honor and public recognition of the outgoing leader; any compensation and benefits he or she may continue to receive; housing arrangements; and future relationship with the board.

Make sure the search process invites public input, including the

insights of the outgoing leader. Plan the public announcement of selection. There must be a written understanding of the dates and conditions of the transition. The board appoints those in charge of a public inauguration or installation. Separate the public honoring of the outgoing leader from the celebration and introduction of the new leader.

• **Counsel for the outgoing CEO.** Accept the fact that you are no longer in charge. It is not your job to name your successor; that is a task legally assigned to the board. You may have an opinion on the matter, but that should be passed on to the search committee or board in private, not by any public announcement. Get out of the way of the selection process and the new leader. If you continue to live in the area of the ministry, plan to be out of town for several months when you step down, in order to give the new leader the freedom to get settled into his or her position.

*“Christ is honored
by smooth leadership
transitions.”*

This will require people to go to their new leader, not to you, with their concerns. For some, leaving the leadership role may mean moving out of the area completely to avoid the possibility of interference.

Give advice when asked. Recognize in advance that some things are going to change and sometimes the change will not be to your liking. Support your successor in public and in private. Be gracious and share the praise that is given to you on your departure. You didn't do it alone.

If you are retiring, you may have to work at it. Retirement is not easy, especially for the person who has carried heavy responsibilities and full work schedules for many years.

• **Counsel for the incoming CEO.** Recognize that many good things have happened in the ministry long before you were named its leader. Honor history. This may be especially important during your installation. Give recognition to those

“New leaders must have the freedom to build their own team.”

who preceded you, and acknowledge that you can see as far as you can because you stand on the shoulders of those who served before you. Unless the place is falling apart, wait for a while to implement changes.

Listen. Many people will want to give you advice. You may want to ask your predecessor to accompany you and introduce you to some of the major donors to help bridge their loyalty from one person to another. This will provide an opportunity to talk about key issues in depth. Get to know the history and people of the ministry soon.

And finally, let each person on your top administrative team know where he or she stands. They are all wondering.

• **Counsel to the administrative team.** You are in a touchy situation. When the U.S. President is elected, he brings in an entirely new team of cabinet-level officers—and a few thousand other employees. For most Christian ministries,

irreparable damage could occur if all the top leadership left at one time. But you must also recognize that the new leader must build his/her own team. It is a common practice for those at the vice presidential level to turn in written resignations, thus giving the new leader the opportunity to bring in his or her own people or to rehire them. One of the privileges of serving at this level in the organization is that you serve “at the will of the president.” You will be in a stronger position for doing this.

• **The supporting constituency.** Recognize that in God’s good graces all leaders are not alike. Celebrate the fact that each leader brings the gifts that are needed for that particular time in the history of the ministry. Very quickly show your love and affection for the leader God has given.

You don’t need to remind the new CEO that his predecessor did it in a different way. Give the new leader time to refocus where the ministry is going. If after a time you have questions or unresolved issues, ask for an appointment to clarify the situation. Avoid comments such as, “But Brother George always did it this way.”

One more way we honor God through the ministries we serve is to honor and support the leadership and plan and pray for those times when it changes. 🌟

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