



Leadership NOTES

Leadership Transitions & Succession Planning

In the education world spring and summer bring, in addition to showers, flowers, and vacations, an annual churn of leadership positions. Many districts and schools will enter the fall season with new superintendents, principals, and other administrators in place. It can be an exciting time of new possibilities and opportunities. All too often, however, the transition of leadership leaves the affected organization in a state of uncertainty and turmoil that negatively affects the work of adults and the outcomes for students. It is sometimes the case that for months prior to, and after a leadership transition, the affected organization is distracted from its core business and pours much energy into posturing, politicking, and predicting- all to the considerable detriment of teaching and learning.

With skillful succession planning and adept transition management, leadership transitions need not result in a period of poor productivity. On the contrary, leadership transitions can offer a semi-regular opportunity for a school or district to be reminded of its enduring values, to recommit to its responsibility to evolve and adapt, and to recognize that the purpose of the organization is infinitely more important than the personality of any individual contributor. Examples of effective transition management can be found in many types of organizations. Exemplary practices can be found in the military, the church, higher education, and some business enterprises. Less exemplary examples also abound and can often be seen in politics, collegiate and professional sports, and, well... K-12 education.



As I interpret it, one of the core principles of servant leadership is that **leaders should adopt a long-term perspective on the leadership needs of their organizations. They should strive to be wise stewards of the organization's health and effectiveness both during and after their tenure as leader.** To this end, here are some practical (and conceptual) principles that can guide education organizations that desire to take the long-term, steward's perspective with respect to changes in leadership.



Three foundational thoughts that support healthy leadership transitions:



1. In consistently and sustainably successful organizations, **leadership is seen as a function, not a person.** Every school's and district's fortunes rise and fall on the function of leadership, not only on the contributions of specific leaders. Just as individual leaders can be developed, the function of leadership can be developed within every organization.



2. **Leadership is a set of learnable skills.** Mostly, leaders are made, not born. Since leadership is a function of a strong life, school, or district, it is instructive to remember that, as a function, leadership is best understood as a set of skills that can be learned and applied by all.



3. The truest test of a leader's service to the organization is found in the performance of the organization **after the leader departs.**



Success principles before a transition (succession planning): The success principles for succession planning speak to the need to build components of the organization that are durable and long-lived, elements that will dependably guide the organization before, during, and after leadership transitions.



A. Build leadership density. Leadership density refers to the number of leaders and the depth of leadership know-how spread throughout the organization. Schools and districts who have high leadership density are better positioned to handle leadership transitions with agility, grace and positivity. Districts with a well-designed leadership pipeline process are making a wise investment toward seamless and productive leadership transitions to the great benefit of all stakeholders.



B. Develop human capital. One of the best ways to ensure an organization's future success is to develop the knowledge, skills, and values of the people who will work in the organization through and beyond a leadership transition. Skills and abilities, once developed, endure and shape the success of the enterprise no matter who occupies current or future leadership positions.



C. Shape a strong, positive culture. Culture remains. It endures. The literature on organizational culture is replete with accounts of how difficult it is to change culture and how resilient and pervasive it is. Schools and districts with weak, disjointed cultures are especially susceptible to large swings in performance during a leadership transition. As the respected management consultant Peter Drucker famously quoted "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."



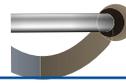
D. Develop and maintain clarity of purpose. Perhaps the first and most important task of a successful education leader is to establish and maintain clarity of purpose. The vocabulary list for this concept is well known...mission statements, vision casting, core values identification, goal setting, coherence of effort, teamwork, and shared commitment to a common future. This work not only sets the stage for present day success, but also for stability, focus, and purposefulness through transitions of leadership.



E. Design effective processes, structures, and routines. Organizations that design and maintain effective management routines, processes, rituals, and practices establish an important set of core business competencies that ensure smooth operation throughout a leadership transition. When the operational aspects of the enterprise are well honed and successful, there exists a sense of efficacy, confidence, and optimism that contributes greatly to successful leadership transitions.



F. Develop communication capacity— before it's needed. Leadership transitions create questions and uncertainty among staff. Lack of information, whether real or imagined, creates "worst case scenario" thinking. Sustainable performance throughout a transition is only possible through stepped-up communication on all channels— written, spoken, large group, small group, and individual.





G. Communicate professionally, knowledgeably, and favorably about the leadership team that will follow the transition. When a transition is pending or in progress, it's on everyone's mind. Leaders do well to acknowledge this and communicate authentically, naturally, and professionally. Express gratitude for the opportunity to serve. Be humble and don't listen too much to expressions like "it will never be the same around here." Express confidence in the organization's ability to continue effectively, perhaps even more effectively. Highlight the skills and abilities of the leader who will replace you. Do this with and for all stakeholder groups. Above all, put the needs of the organization, and particularly its needs during transition, ahead of any or all personal needs for praise, congratulations, compliments, or ego boosts.



Success principles after a transition (transition management). The success principles for transition management speak to the actions taken by new leaders through and after a transition that optimize the transition and the long-term health and effectiveness of the organization.



A. Practice pro-active communication. It is best to overcommunicate during a leadership transition. The various stakeholder groups with which a leader communicates routinely will not have a long history of interpreting communication from the new leader. For this reason, provide as much communication as possible, in all types and groups, to build familiarity and reduce misunderstandings. Focus first on routine communication, not high stakes, or emotionally loaded issues. Toss tennis balls before slippery eggs.



B. Reinforce culture through symbolic actions. Every leadership decision or action has a dual nature. There are technical components to every decision/ action and symbolic components to every decision/ action. During a transition, the symbolic nature of leadership actions is exaggerated. As people search for clues as to the true nature of the new leader, every word, deed, decision, action, or inaction will be assigned a symbolic meaning. This is unfair to new leaders, but it is nonetheless true and predictable. Rather than lament the unfairness of the transition scrutiny, new leaders do well to capitalize on this window of symbolic effect as an opportunity to make the transition even more positive and effective.



C. Recognize the safety and security needs of staff. Maslow's hierarchy reminds us that until our safety and security needs are met, it is difficult for humans to focus on higher level needs including the work at hand. Leadership transitions create uncertainty about each organizational member's formal and informal status and outlook for the future. Insiders may become outsiders, and the unwritten list of "up and comers" may have a few additions and deletions. It is wise, during a transition, to reassure staff as to their basic needs for safety and security. When staff receive little or no communication about these basic needs, it is a human survival response to assume a "worst case scenario" until proven otherwise.



D. Be versatile in your leadership style. One of the benefits of self knowledge (see Leadership Lesson 1: Understanding Self & Others) is the ability to be versatile and flex to a more effective leadership style when needed. Leaders with low levels of self-knowledge find it harder to be versatile, since they are not as knowledgeable about their own and others' preferred style, temperament, or approach. A leader might realize, for example, that her preferred style is to be quietly introspective when considering options. In a leadership transition, however, the leader shows versatility by intentionally reasoning out loud with staff when considering options, knowing that this better meets the staff's needs to become familiar with her thinking and reasoning.



E. Project personal humility and service. Leaders are given opportunities, especially during the first few months of a transition, to articulate their beliefs and values about education and leadership. If a leader embraces the tenets of servant leadership, this is a particularly effective time to project those values and beliefs.



F. Highlight strengths of the organization that should be carried forward. New leaders are wise to remember that time did not begin with their arrival on the scene. Even low-performing schools and districts undoubtedly have strengths and assets that can be built upon and are best not abandoned. Many new leaders in transition make it a practice to interview each staff member individually and ask a version of these three questions: 1. What, in your opinion, are this school's (or district's) most valuable strengths and assets that we should continue and build upon? 2. What, in your opinion, are some practices or programs that are not performing as well for our students— things we might consider scaling back or ending? 3. How can I best support you, personally, to help you continue to grow and develop?



G. Communicate professionally, knowledgeably, and favorably about the leadership team that preceded the transition. (This principle intentionally mirrors principle G under succession planning.) When a transition is in progress, it's on everyone's mind. Leaders do well to acknowledge this and communicate authentically, naturally, and professionally. Express gratitude for the opportunity to serve. Be humble and don't listen too much to expressions like "things are really looking up around here since you arrived." Express confidence in the organization's ability to have a successful and smooth transition and continue to become ever more effective. Highlight the skills and abilities of the leader who preceded you. Do this with and for all stakeholder groups. Above all, put the needs of the organization, and particularly its needs during transition, ahead of any or all personal needs for praise, congratulations, compliments, or ego boosts.