

Executing Emergency Transitions

From Ron Matan's White paper "Succession Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Journey, Not a Destination!" – 2010.

Boards of Directors have a responsibility to be ready for anything, prepared to handle unforeseen situations that threaten their organization's survival. Unplanned, emergency departures happen, sometimes as a result of an accident or critical illness, other times because of an unexpected change in circumstances. Whatever the cause, there should be written documentation regarding critical information so that anyone can step in on an interim basis and manage the nonprofit efficiently. A list of important information includes:

- Names of banks and account numbers
- Contact information for accountant, lawyer and other key advisors
- Names and contact information for all board members
- Passwords for database and other technology functions
- Copies of policies and procedures
- Copies of current budgets, financial statements and audits
- Copies of all board and committee minutes
- Copies of incorporation documents and by-laws
- Staff roster and contact information for all employees
- Contracts
- Process for establishing an interim or acting executive director

Along with this type of critical data, an emergency succession plan checklist might also include:

- An outline of succession procedures, including timelines for steps to be taken – including changing signatures at banks, reviewing contracts for renewals, payroll processing, etc.
- A copy of the most current job description for the executive director
- A calendar of events and anticipated activities for the upcoming 12-18 months including performance reviews, lease negotiations, etc.
- A communications plan that includes who should be notified of the executive director's departure and a press release template for notifying the media
- A description of the executive search process and a charter for the search committee
- A financial plan including the costs regarding severance pay, outplacement services, executive search consultants and perhaps an external interim executive

If the executive director does exit abruptly, having easy access to these and similar items can alleviate some of the initial concern, allowing the board to move forward carefully and thoughtfully as they consider a full time replacement. Following an emergency plan will give them the extra time they need to conduct a thorough search, perhaps over several months or more, as they seek to fill the executive director's role on a more permanent basis without jeopardizing the daily routine of the organization.