

# The Succession Planning Lens: Looking to the Future of Domestic Violence Organizations

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Family Violence  
Law Center

La Piana  
CONSULTING

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Dear Colleague,

Today, California's domestic violence organizations are facing a field-wide challenge common across the nonprofit sector: executive transitions. Many domestic violence organizations have leaders that started shelters out of their homes or cars more than 30 years ago, and who are now considering retirement or other transitions – raising the question of how organizations will prepare for the changes in store.

During these leadership transitions, domestic violence organizations will need to sustain the knowledge, passion, and commitment of their founding leaders while continuing to provide relevant services to their community and while navigating complex funding and policy environments. In order to adapt and thrive, these agencies will need meaningful tools to engage in succession planning. The Family Violence Law Center and La Piana Consulting have developed this succession planning guide to share real lessons and offer sample tools and templates for agencies facing executive transitions.

We hope this guide offers support to the next generation of domestic violence leaders and sparks important dialogue on the field's leadership evolution. At Blue Shield of California Foundation, we believe that executive transition tools with a domestic violence-specific lens – such as this – will help organizations changing leadership emerge even stronger.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bess Bendet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Bess Bendet

Director, Blue Shield Against Violence

Blue Shield of California Foundation

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## About This Publication

Made possible by support from Blue Shield of California Foundation's Blue Shield Against Violence program, *The Succession Planning Lens: Looking to the Future of Domestic Violence Organizations* draws on the field-based knowledge of the Family Violence Law Center and nonprofit management expertise of La Piana Consulting. It is informed by interviews with leaders in the domestic violence field and written contributions from executives sharing their own experiences with transition.

We hope this publication will prepare, empower, and inspire domestic violence organizations – their executives, boards, and staff – to initiate conversations about succession planning and to discover how looking through this lens can help them grow more sustainable organizations and support the dedicated individuals who lead them.

### **Family Violence Law Center**

Family Violence Law Center (FVLC) is a nonprofit organization serving domestic violence victims and their children throughout Alameda County, California. Founded in 1978, FVLC provides legal, support, and crisis intervention services to over 7,000 survivors and their families annually. For more information, visit [www.fvlc.org](http://www.fvlc.org) or call 510-208-0220.

### **About La Piana Consulting**

La Piana Consulting is a national firm dedicated to strengthening nonprofits and foundations by enhancing their organizational strategy, collaboration, and leadership. Founded in 1998, its mission is to improve management practices throughout the nonprofit sector for greater social impact. For more information, visit [www.lapiana.org](http://www.lapiana.org) or call 510-601-9056.

## What is the Succession Planning Lens?

Today, unprecedented demographic shifts and other social, economic, and technological developments are converging to change the face of nonprofit leadership – not only *who* leads, but what competencies they must have and how they approach leading their organizations. Succession planning surfaces important questions about how organizations will evolve to meet new and ever-changing realities, and what they will need from leadership to succeed.

Nowhere is this transformative potential more relevant than among domestic violence organizations. The domestic violence movement is moving into a transitional phase. In the last several decades, the field has been sustained by the energy, passion, and vision of key leaders. These leaders are now preparing to pass the torch – a process through which the field will continue to evolve, mature, and find its next iteration. Yet we have heard from leaders of these agencies that succession planning often feels like “one more thing to do” on a list that is already too long. This is why we are so excited to offer domestic violence organizations a different perspective on succession planning.

We feel that succession planning is a kind of strategic thinking that should not be limited to a formal or one-time planning process. Instead, we urge organizations to develop the capacity to view themselves through a succession planning “lens” – an ongoing process of assessing where they are now, where they want to be in the future, and how they will develop the leadership to get from here to there.

*Shifting to a succession “lens” might be helpful for bringing this perspective into the day-to-day workings of the organization and making it part of what we do and how we operate, not just some document we look at and dust off every few years.*

As economic realities and changing attitudes about career longevity deferred the departure of many late-career leaders from their current positions, new discoveries have been made about what drives emerging leaders and the kinds of challenges and opportunities their organizations are likely to face in the future. Fortunately, this has prompted many groups to expand their understanding of succession planning and to think not about how to “replace” retiring executives, but about how to update, revise, or even transform the definition of nonprofit leadership itself.

The domestic violence field is well positioned to take on this challenge. Not only does it share many of the same challenges and opportunities as other subsectors of nonprofits in trying to prepare its organizations and their leaders for the future, but it also faces a unique set of questions that are ripe for exploration through a succession planning lens.

People who work in domestic violence organizations know how transformative dialogue can be – every day they have conversations with their clients that transform their lives. Focusing on this power of dialogue – and what we call “crucial conversations” – we will train our lens on succession planning as a *process* rather than a *product*.” Using this approach, domestic

violence organizations can more easily balance succession planning with their other day-to-day demands, making it a vital part of how they build capacity, develop strategy, and sustain the important work that they do.

## Succession Planning and Leadership Transition

When the nonprofit sector was first warned of the “leadership deficit” it would encounter with the expected retirement of Boomers from executive positions, succession planning and leadership transition processes were called upon to help organizations plan for “what to do when the executive director leaves.” But this oversimplification not only conflated succession planning and leadership transition, it also robbed succession planning of much of its power. While they are closely related, we see a clear distinction between succession planning and leadership transition.

- **Succession Planning** is the ongoing process of defining the roles and capacities needed for successful leadership and then identifying and preparing people to fill those roles.
- **Leadership Transition** is the occasional process of recruitment, selection, and hiring to fill key leadership positions.

The two processes are closely related, but there are key differences. Leadership transition focuses on a specific leadership position and the time-limited process to effectively fill it. Dealing with this transition, its focus is on the practical. Succession planning is a process that anticipates both planned and unplanned leadership changes. Its focus is on the possible. Succession planning is an ongoing process throughout an organization’s life cycle, and it continues, before, during, and after a leadership transition process.

### Three “Plans”

Often when nonprofits do “succession planning,” they are really already engaged in leadership transition work, resulting in one of two types of plans: **the emergency plan** or – more commonly – **the departure defined plan**. Both of these respond to an immediate or imminent need, are usually completed in a limited time frame, and can be easily captured in a written document – but are typically only designed to respond to a specific leadership vacancy.

We use the metaphor of the succession planning lens to describe the more comprehensive scope of a different kind of plan: **the long-term plan**. Taking this broader view of succession planning means looking at how to continually develop leadership and strengthen capacity in an

Leadership transition focuses on a specific position and the time-limited process to fill it.

Its focus is on the *practical*.

Succession planning anticipates both planned and unplanned change.

Its focus is on the *possible*.

organization. Because leadership needs will change as the organization evolves, the long-term plan is best viewed as an ongoing process – or a way of seeing the organization – rather than as a traditional plan. More than a written document, the long-term plan is reflected in the organization’s policies and practices, informs the way it understands and response to the external environment, and permeates its very culture.

Below is a shorthand look at the three types of plans:

	What it is	When it happens	The result
<b>Emergency Plan</b>	A focused plan for how to meet an immediate and unanticipated need	In preparation to quickly respond to a specific and immediate vacancy	A set of short-term interventions to ensure that critical business is attended to while longer-term solutions are developed
<b>Departure Defined Plan</b>	A process to respond to an imminent vacancy	In preparation for a known future departure (e.g., 1-3 years)	A plan that thoughtfully addresses the vacancy as well as related leadership needs, while maintaining a sense of immediacy
<b>Long-term Plan</b>	An ongoing awareness and commitment to leadership development within the context of the organization’s overall strategic direction	In anticipation of future leadership needs – initiated well before a leadership shift makes it necessary	A thorough analysis of leadership needs and assets, and steps for securing the leadership the organization needs to thrive

These three plans are not mutually exclusive, so we do not present this as a “menu” from which to select. In fact, they are mutually *inclusive*. The long-term plan, arrived at by looking through the succession planning lens, provides a solid foundation from which the other two shorter-term plans can be effectively developed as circumstance and need demands. Another way of saying this is that succession planning is what makes good leadership transitions possible.

In many cases a pending leadership transition has been the catalyst for organizations and individuals to begin speaking about succession planning. While there are clearly linkages, we should not confuse the two. The domestic violence field in particular, facing the turnover of many founders, is primed for a deeper conversation on this topic. This presents an opportunity for these organizations to capture their knowledge and learn from each other. As the following story illustrates, this is about more than simply maneuvering through a transition – it is a way to create more intentional, sustainable, and powerful organizations.

## The Story of One Founding Executive Director Transition

Many domestic violence organizations are just now – or will soon be – transitioning from founder leadership. This presents unique challenges, as this founder shares below.

*My proudest life achievement has been my role as founding executive director of 21 years, during which time I had a tremendous opportunity to grow with the organization, to make a difference in the lives of women and other survivors of gender-based violence, and to work with some of the most inspiring, dedicated co-workers and colleagues one could ever wish for.*

*A couple years ago, I had the opportunity to work with an executive coach. She asked me a question that served as a turning point for me: “Are you going to continue to work at this organization until you retire?” I had not really thought about it in those terms, but had a vague idea that maybe when I was 55 or 60 I would make a transition. My coach advised me to “start to make the transition now,” while I still had the time and energy to make a well-planned transition for the organization and while I still had several working years left to start on my own new career path.*

*She gave me various exercises and tools to help me clarify my personal decision, and I worked with her for about nine months before announcing it to my board and staff. During this time, I assessed the organization and whether it was in a good position for me to make my transition out. I brought more attention to building the leadership of others in the organization and attending to areas that I felt needed strengthening. Finally, I was ready to announce my intention of transitioning, first to the board and then to the staff.*

*Once I made the announcement, we – the board, staff, and myself – worked with my coach in an open planning process to prepare for the transition. She facilitated sessions for the board and staff on the transition process and managing change while continuing to coach me as I guided the transition, from developing concrete timelines and plans, to attending to the emotions and feelings of staff and board.*

*We came up with a three-streamed approach: we felt that for the executive transition to succeed, we also needed to do an organizational transition and a fundraising campaign to support this shift. The goal of the executive transition was to make a successful transition from a founding executive to a new leader for a new era of the organization. The goal of the organizational transition was to strengthen the staff, the board, and the infrastructure of the organization in preparation for new executive leadership. The goal of the fund development campaign was to raise \$250,000 to support the organization through the transition and into to the new “post-founding ED” era.*

*(Continued on next page)*



### **The Story of One Founding Executive Director Transition (continued)**

*We were able to achieve all our goals by the planned timeline, and I even had a three-month overlap with the new executive director. We had a public farewell party to celebrate the achievement of our fundraising campaign goal, and I had a wonderful send-off party with staff and board.*

*I have since made the successful transition to a new position with a national organization that leverages my years of experience as an executive director and in the grassroots frontlines to provide peer support and policy advocacy for other grassroots organizations.*

*Now is the time to honor and build upon the legacy of the recognized founders of the movement while fostering broader diversity and a new era of shared leadership, shared power, and collaboration that will contribute to a larger, broader vision of ending violence against women and girls in the U.S.*

*After one year, the new executive director, board, and staff of my old organization mutually agreed that it was not working out and my successor transitioned out of the organization. Her short tenure served as an “interim ED” period that highlighted a lot of issues for the organization to consider. At the time I felt that we were crazy to take on three transition streams all at once: executive, organizational, and fundraising campaign. But given the unforeseen fact that the executive transition did not go as planned, it is clear now why it was so important to have worked on the organizational transition and fundraising campaign: this enabled the organization to weather the prolonged transition period.*

*An existing staff member has stepped up to serve as interim executive, and the organization has spent the past year preparing and working toward a more viable model of executive leadership for implementation in the coming year.*

*This is not just a story of one ED, or one organization’s transition. I share this to help others along this path and also to urge us all to be more thoughtful and intentional about intergenerational leadership. One of the most compelling reasons for my decision was that as the years went by I felt that no matter how much I shared power and leadership, the trajectory of my continued presence was starting to overshadow new growth and leadership for others and the organization. Every leader and every organization is different, but I encourage you to think about leadership in your organization, and how best to continue to build shared and sustainable leadership for the greater good of our organizations and their work.*

## Why is it so Hard to Plan?

Succession planning requires the fortitude and discipline to make explicit those things that we would rather not face – as individuals and as organizations.

### **It acknowledges the reality of one's limits, even of one's own mortality.**

It asks the uncomfortable “what if?” What if the executive became seriously ill or encountered a personal crisis that forced him/her to leave the job? What if s/he determined that a new opportunity at a different organization would be more fulfilling? What if s/he is no longer the right person to take the organization into its next phase of development? Questions like these can call up difficult feelings about admitting weakness, being “replaceable,” giving up – or even betrayal. They need to be addressed with the best interests of the organization in mind and with great sensitivity to the people involved.

### **It requires making statements and having conversations that might otherwise be postponed or avoided.**

During succession planning, issues of roles, authority, responsibility, and accountability are surfaced and examined. This can put everyone involved in a vulnerable position, especially if these kinds of conversations are usually off the table or happen only behind closed doors. The succession planning lens can help shed new light on these issues by encouraging more open dialogue, in a safe and respectful context, so that these conversations are purposeful, healthy, and constructive.

### **It challenges organizations to think strategically about their future.**

It demands intentionality from organizations that have most often grown organically. Many nonprofits were constructed around the vision of a single individual, perhaps with no formal plans for the future, and tend to focus more on the urgency of short-term needs rather than the importance of long-term strategy. It can be difficult for boards and staff to look up from the immediacy of day-to-day operations and consider how to best prepare for challenges and opportunities ten years, or even two years, from now.

### **It pushes leaders and followers out of their comfort zones.**

If an organization decides to take succession planning seriously, mentoring and talent development must become a high priority. The skills of articulating best practices, delegation, empowering others, and providing avenues for staff engagement become an integrated part of the management culture. Leaders may be challenged to relinquish some control, while other staff are asked to take on greater responsibility. (For more on talent development and mentoring, see sidebar on page 9.)

### **It requires time and effort, both of which come at a cost.**

For most nonprofits, staff capacity and other resources are already stretched thin. Even in good times, it is hard to make talent development a priority, especially for small nonprofits. While larger organizations may have greater capacity to invest in activities like long-term planning,

small organizations with limited resources have less margin for error and need to be even more rigorous in their thinking about the future, including planning for leadership needs.

These are just some of the dynamics making succession planning a complex, but essential, undertaking.

## Considerations for Domestic Violence Organizations

Some of these challenges and opportunities affect domestic violence organizations in unique ways, as further described below.

### **Crisis Response Orientation**

One challenge specific to domestic violence organizations as providers of critical direct services is that they are accustomed to respond to urgent need. This is beneficial to clients, but it can lead to a “crisis response” culture that makes it difficult to devote attention to or to invest in longer-term organizational issues like succession planning. At the same time, it is precisely because of the critical, life-saving nature of domestic violence work that domestic violence organizations must be prepared to face major transition through the development of plans that enable them to navigate change while still continuing to deliver effective and uninterrupted services to their clients and communities.

### **Sustainability**

The urgent nature of the work also has a direct impact on the individual well-being of those working in the field and their ability to lead in a healthy and sustainable way. The growing awareness of the effects of trauma exposure offers the domestic violence field an opportunity to re-examine its current leadership models – and opens the question of reinventing them as necessary. As one emerging leader we spoke with noted, approaching the work in a more sustainable way is essential to growing strong leadership within organizations: “This is a very exhausting fight to fight...it’s hard to find someone who stays in the field long enough to know how to lead.” Another executive added a systemic perspective, and a caution, saying: “I think without a better understanding of how we can truly sustain ourselves in this work, we risk unintentionally perpetuating and becoming a part of the cycle of violence rather than ending it.”

### **Generational Differences**

We are in the midst of a generational change in nonprofit leadership, and this shift is especially salient for domestic violence organizations. Founding leaders who essentially created the field are nearing traditional retirement age, but do not yet see themselves as leaving the organizations in which they have invested so much. At the same time, emerging leaders are challenging assumptions about what the executive role must look like, eager to define their own terms and walk their own path. Succession planning is a way to help both Boomers and younger generations understand – and trust – that differences in their experiences, and in their leadership styles, can be a strength rather than a hindrance.

As different generations of domestic violence leaders work together to define the future of their organizations, they have a unique opportunity to explore new forms of shared leadership. As one interviewee remarked, “I think there should be an opportunity for more shared leadership in the domestic violence field, as that is more in line with our mission, but I don’t think that is the case for most domestic violence organizations. For the most part, we have adopted the standard hierarchical model where one leader has the primary access to and control of information and resources, which puts us as much at risk as other types of nonprofits.” By remaining open to new models of leadership, domestic violence leaders can create a more sustainable future for themselves and for their organizations.

### **Organizational Identity**

One of the emerging leaders we interviewed acknowledged an existential question that is facing the domestic violence field: “Some organizations are moving to a more professional model, while others are resisting – I think the look of the movement is going to change significantly, depending on how that plays out.” The growing professionalization of the entire nonprofit sector has led some to posit that aspiring leaders lead more from their heads than their hearts, or that they do not know how to lead movements. This is a potent argument in the domestic violence field. However, such views are based on the assumption that there is one “right” way to lead and do little to question whether the dynamics of movement-building are themselves changing. Again, succession planning can help organizations finding their way forward by working through these tensions and defining a new vision for the future.



## Tools for Starting the Conversation

Succession planning depends on the ability to have *crucial conversations* – conversations that challenge the status quo, push individuals out of their comfort zones, elicit emotional responses, and may initiate a course of action with unexpected or undesirable consequences.

These are the kinds of conversations domestic violence advocates engage in every day – with clients. Domestic violence organizations are made up of expert listeners, individuals trained in how to deal with crisis situations while remaining both empathetic and professional. But it is seldom that these skills are put to use in service of the organization itself through dialogues on strategy or succession planning.

It requires a certain amount of foresight, courage, and willingness to enter into honest dialogue about the future. These conversations require intention, thoughtfulness, and patience. We believe that domestic violence organizations are well equipped to have these conversations – if they make it a priority to do so.

Succession planning has implications for individuals, organizations, and the field at large. In the pages that follow, we suggest different opportunities to use dialogue as a tool for looking at succession planning from each of these three perspectives, and offer tips to help get the conversations started.

## For Individuals



### Self-Reflection

This exercise is well suited for paid staff, but may also be adapted for board members. For both, taking the time to gain clarity about your work with the organization will prepare you to engage in conversations about long-term succession planning.

**Start with what you know.** Take some time to think about your career and ask yourself a few questions about what you are doing now and what you want to be doing in the future – questions like:

*What about my current work gives me the most satisfaction?*

*What about my current work leaves me feeling least fulfilled?*

*What have I learned in the last few years about myself and my work?*

*How long do I want to do this work?*

*Where do I see myself going with my career?*

**Write down your answers.** Nobody else needs to see them, but writing will help you take time with these questions and really think them through. Approach this as a “conversation” with yourself.

**Make it an annual ritual.** Schedule time to do this kind of reflection on an annual basis – or more frequently, if that is what is right for you.



## Facilitated Reflection

The following example illustrates how organizations can support individuals in reflection similar to that described above, but set within a more structured process of facilitated performance management.

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Karen composed the email to her Executive Director thoughtfully:

*Thanks again for the conversation this morning that was part performance review, part goal-setting for the future. I appreciate your honest feedback and hard questions. As always, I come away from these meetings both challenged and inspired.*

*Your closing question about where I see my career going and what I want to be doing three years from now really has me thinking about my future and what I want. I love being a program director, and I have no immediate plans to move anywhere, so that question is not one that I have yet given myself permission to ask. But I appreciate your encouraging me to ask it now. While the day to day challenges in this job are more than sufficient, at some point I know I am going to seek something different, and I find that this really pushes me out of my own comfort zone.*

*Right now, I do not know where I want to be that far in the future, but it does seem to me that we need to keep asking that question, not only for my sake, but for the good of the agency. It is also a question that I am going to ask my direct reports.*

*Thank you for being an inspiration to me, and a mentor.*

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This kind of facilitated reflection is not only for staff. Board members can use an annual self-assessment to gauge their individual performance, using questions about their governance roles and responsibilities.

**Following are some questions to use in these conversations.** Some are general in nature and appropriate for any level of staff, while others may be more useful for those already in a position of leadership.

*Where am I most competent? Where am I least competent?*

*How can I continue to contribute at my best?*

*What do I need to do to keep growing professionally?*

*What opportunities are present to grow professionally in this organization?*

*What are the indicators that it might be time to make a move? To stay?*

*How is my leadership viewed?*

*How am I preparing the staff and the board for my future plans?*

Whether they are built into an organization's performance review and professional development process, or part of one-on-one support provided by a mentor or coach, individuals can gain a lot from thinking through these questions with someone else. Organizations, in turn, can benefit from greater insight into the professional interests and aspirations of its staff.

These kinds of conversations are the centerpiece of a long-term approach to succession planning.





## Artifact Exercise

Everyone comes to the work with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives – each of which are important. The following exercise can be used in large or small groups to promote understanding of one another as individuals, give us an opportunity to both “see” and “be seen,” and bring greater meaning to our work together.

This exercise can be done with staff and/or board members, and is well suited to a retreat setting where there is sufficient time, respectful space, and an appropriate environment for individuals to share a little about their personal connection to the work.

### **Ask each participant to bring an item to the retreat that is a personal “artifact.”**

It can be almost anything: a picture, a piece of sculpture, a toy, something that they have created, an image, or a stone from a special place. It has to be something that is important to them, or that says something about who they are and what they value. It should also help them speak to why they are attracted to this work. Questions to help prompt their thinking are: *What is the attraction, motivation, fire that feeds you? or What is your area of greatest contribution?* Advise each person to be prepared to share the story behind the item they chose.

### **Share your artifacts and stories.**



Invite participants to volunteer in their own time, or go around the room and ask each person to share why they brought the artifact that they did. Allow enough time for each participant to feel heard, but it is helpful to set a limit so that each has equal time and to move the exercise along.

Collectively and individually consider and respond to two questions:

- Think about how you want to work together. What does it mean for you to be a truly effective and cohesive staff/board? What do you need to learn and to do to be a better staff/board?
- Reflect on the challenges at hand. What do you identify as the key challenges/concerns that face you as a staff/board member?

This activity invites individuals to explore their connection to the work by reflecting on the journey that brought them this far and to prepare themselves for more directed conversations about succession planning and the journey that lies ahead. The insights gained through this process can also be used to directly inform staff training and development priorities, board education activities, and capacity building to strengthen leadership at all levels of the organization.

## When to Engage In These Activities

 <b>Self-Reflection</b>	
<p><b>Annually:</b> On the anniversary date of your hire, in conjunction with your annual performance review, or perhaps at the end or beginning of the calendar year.</p> <p><b>As needed:</b> When you are considering a transition or when another major transition is imminent.</p>	<p>Choose a time when you are able to carve out space for quiet writing and reflection.</p>
 <b>Facilitated Reflection</b>	
<p><b>Annually:</b> As part of a performance review or other professional development planning process.</p> <p><b>As needed:</b> When you are considering a transition or when another major transition is imminent and have already engaged in some self-reflection.</p>	<p>Ensure that there is a clear process and high level of mutual trust so that this a supportive experience.</p>
 <b>Artifact Exercise</b>	
<p><b>Occasionally:</b> As part of a board or staff retreat or similar setting. May be particularly useful in integrating multiple new staff or board members, or at times of major organizational challenges or opportunities.</p>	<p>Allow enough time for everyone to share their stories and for the group to make shared meaning.</p>

## Making Space for Mentoring



Looking at your organization through a succession planning lens can help you see new ways to create opportunities for professional growth and development across all staff. This may include mentoring.

Domestic violence organizations often have a hard time developing mentoring opportunities because they are necessarily focused on the immediate needs of clients in crisis and how this shapes the priorities of organizational leaders. As one interviewee observed: “The founding executive directors I know tend to be ‘heads down, trudge through the muck and get it done’ sort of people – but that doesn’t always encourage the space that mentoring requires.”

Below are a few tips for organizations interested in making more space available for mentoring.

For organizational leaders, particularly prospective mentors:

- Articulate and promote the competencies that are important for organizational success
- Identify learning goals and pathways for everyone in the organization
- Assess your own readiness to create the space for learning to occur by delegating more – this will mean letting go of some control

For all staff, particularly prospective mentees:

- Identify the individuals who can teach you something
- Try “feed forward” instead of feedback – decide what you want to get better at and be proactive in asking others how they do it
- Understand where you are trying to grow and what you need to get there

Mentors and mentees should also be prepared for two-way learning – a mentoring relationship can be as valuable to the mentor as to the mentee!

## For Organizations



### Honor the Past

The domestic violence movement has deep roots. Not only does the work that has been done deserve to be acknowledged, but it offers a rich history to learn from. Storytelling can be a powerful method for transferring this knowledge.

Think about the “formative stories” of your organization.

*Who was there?*

*How might their stories about past successes and challenges help the organization understand its present and prepare for its future?*

*Who are the “foremothers” of your organization?*

If you haven’t taken the opportunity to do so before, consider inviting them to share their stories at a future staff meeting, board meeting, or retreat, in the context of better understanding (and celebrating) your shared organizational history.

Not everyone is a born storyteller, so you may want to provide a structure for this conversation.

**One way is to use a “fishbowl” or observed interview format, where a facilitator/ interviewer asks questions to guide the reflections of an individual or small group of individuals, while the rest of the group quietly observes.** At the end, the session can be opened up to questions and more of an interactive dialogue.

**Another approach is to do a timeline exercise.** This is particularly well suited to board and/or staff retreats. You might ask participants to physically line up around the room in the order in which they joined the staff or board, and each say something about what the organization looked like or was engaged in at that time. You could also use a butcher-paper timeline with sticky notes to elicit a similar sharing of when individuals joined the organization and what they recollect about the major achievements, challenges, or other major benchmarks it has gone through over the years.

Questions to be thinking about for these kinds of conversations include:

*How was the organization “born”? Who was there?*

*What were its major successes and challenges? Its defining moments?*

*What were some of its original goals? Which have been achieved? Which have changed?*

*What lessons and advice would past/current leaders share with tomorrow’s leaders?*

The most successful transitions will be the ones that respect the past, but do not attempt to simply replicate it. There are two major mistakes that domestic violence organizations could make at this time. One would be to dismiss the unique challenges, opportunities that organizations face today and the new talent and capacities that exist to meet them. The other would be to ignore the values, history, lessons, and accomplishments of the past.



## Envision the Future

Looking through a succession planning lens is a strategic approach to leadership development and capacity building. Conversations about succession planning should be informed by your broader organizational strategies, but can also help shape how you develop and execute these strategies.

**For this reason, many of the same kinds of questions that would be addressed in a strategy development process are also helpful for informing succession planning – questions like:**

*What are the significant challenges facing the organization right now?*

*What skills and competencies do we need to address them?*

*Which of these do we have? Which do we need to develop?*

*What does leadership need to look like to succeed as we continue to evolve?*

*How would it be the same as current leadership? How might it look different?*

All of these questions challenge organizations and leadership to shift out of the urgency of crisis response mode and take time to think longer term about the needs and opportunities to come. This can be a real challenge for domestic violence organizations, but creating the right venues and formats for these kinds of questions to be asked and answered can help.

### Tips for Taking the Time



Rather than placing a new burden on the organization and its leadership, the most realistic opportunity to engage in these conversations would seem to be in the context of existing structures and processes. This may include board meetings, staff retreats, management team meetings, one-on-one supervisory conversations, or any number of other formats and groupings. All of these can be opportunities to move out of the immediacy and pressing demands of “the now,” and into the possibilities of, and preparation for, the future.



## Invest in Talent Development

Building facilitated reflection into individual performance reviews as described earlier is just one half of the talent development equation. Organizations also need to consider questions about the structures, culture, and systems that support leadership development, such as:

*Do all staff feel valued and essential in the roles they currently play?*

*Do they have opportunities to grow? How is this supported?*

*How is experience and knowledge transferred within the organization?*

*Does this transfer only flow in particular directions (laterally, top-down, etc.), or are there opportunities for sharing experience and knowledge throughout the “hierarchy” and across generations?*

These questions should be asked at each phase of the staff management process. When a new staff member is hired, these conversations should inform how they are oriented to the mission and vision of the organization as well as throughout the process of creating mentoring and training opportunities, professional development plans, etc.

Sustainability is enhanced when organizations articulate the value, and invest in the growth and development, of their staff. Again, this demands a shift in perspective from the urgency of meeting an immediate need to the long-term task of attending to the development of talent and the possibilities for the future.



## Prioritize Wellbeing

The crisis response nature of domestic violence work can place a real strain on organizations and take a tremendous emotional toll on the individuals in them. Organizational sustainability for domestic violence organizations must include the issue of how to sustain the wellbeing of its people so that they can continue to do their good work in a healthy way.

This is a critical issue for leadership development and succession planning. As one interviewee observed: “Succession often happens by default, based on whoever’s around when a leader leaves. *Is there a logical person who’s next in line? Great! That person will take over!* That model often puts the wrong person in the chair – someone who is already doing more than they are supposed to, taking on extra responsibilities – they are rewarded (or is it punished?) by moving up into the top seat.”

To avoid this vicious cycle of burnout, organizations can be proactive in opening up this conversation with questions like:

*How do we recognize, manage, and help others manage the emotional toll this kind of work exacts?*

*How can we develop a culture that supports this and is demonstrated at the top of the organization?*

The importance of asking these questions before they impose themselves cannot be overstated. This is not about simply avoiding burn-out, but proactively creating a healthy and sustainable environment for leaders, staff, and boards. It means understanding the limits of time and energy, making intentional choices, and finding the space for recovery, balance, and work/life alignment. Every day, staff in domestic violence organizations support their clients in moving from crisis to sustainable, healthy lives – those same skills can be used to create more sustainable and healthy work lives within these organizations.

*“We cannot continue this work without finding a way to make it sustainable, and by that I mean sustaining the people.”*

*Funding will come and go, and programs will come and go, but we need to figure out how we can keep people healthy and well in this field to truly move the work forward.”*



## When to Engage In These Activities

 <b>Honor the Past</b>	
<p><b>As needed:</b> When a major transition is imminent or has just occurred. May be particularly useful in integrating multiple new staff or board members, or at times of major organizational challenges or opportunities.</p>	<p>This exercise is most potent when organizations are experiencing benchmark moments. It complements the visioning process below.</p>
 <b>Envision the Future</b>	
<p><b>Annually:</b> As part of an organizational strategy review or strategy development process. Even if not engaged in a formal planning process, an annual “taking stock” is an important practice for organizational health.</p> <p><b>As needed:</b> When a major transition is imminent or has just occurred.</p>	<p>This can be a powerful process. Obtaining external facilitation is worthwhile and allows internal stakeholders to participate on an equal footing.</p>
 <b>Invest in Talent Development</b>	
<p><b>Annually:</b> As part of a supportive annual performance review and professional development process for all staff.</p> <p><b>As needed:</b> With every new hire, promotion, and/or staff departure/transition.</p>	<p>Be realistic about what is doable, but hold yourself and the organization accountable for attracting and supporting talent.</p>
 <b>Prioritize Wellbeing</b>	
<p><b>Ongoing:</b> Develop this as a cultural value that is expressed and upheld by formal policies and informal daily practices. Small, incremental changes can lead to lasting, long-term benefits.</p>	<p>Start today. You, your staff, board, and volunteers are your most valuable assets.</p>

## For the Field



### Articulate a Vision of Future Leadership

Just as organizations can inform their succession planning efforts by honoring the past and envisioning the future, the domestic violence field can engage in dialogue to acknowledge its roots while opening up a fresh vision of what leadership will look like in the future.

Questions to consider include:

*What were some of the original goals of the movement? Which of these have been achieved? Which remain? Which need to be reconsidered?*

*What are the contributions of this generation? What are the new challenges to be faced by the next? How does the former transfer what it has learned to the latter?*

*What are going to be the biggest challenges facing the field in the future?*

*What competencies and skills will the next generation of leadership need to address them? How might leadership look different in the future?*

*How will leaders of the future need to engage differently to keep the work of domestic violence organizations vital, relevant, and distinctive (or not)?*

*How can we develop supports and structures that better sustain people working in this field?*

These questions might be explored in the context of field-wide conferences or other convenings, online discussions, journals, etc. The important part is to engage in the dialogue.

*“It’s a field full of founders about to turn over...most of the new leadership will either be from other fields or first-time EDs from within the DV field, either of which could present unique challenges and opportunities.”*



### Collaborate for Leadership Development

For many domestic violence organizations, leadership development opportunities for staff may be limited by virtue of their small size. This is all the more reason for organizations to think beyond their own walls. By applying the succession planning lens to the field as a whole and taking on shared responsibility for leadership development, organizations can be even more effective in supporting the next generation of domestic violence leadership.

One way to support these kinds of conversations would be to create more opportunities for executive directors to meet: “Find a way to give space for directors to connect with each other...and to support them to think bigger. Their job is already to think big, but there isn’t time and space to consider the larger questions, like how to be a domestic violence executive director and to groom future directors.”

### When to Engage In These Activities

 <b>Articulate a Vision of Future Leadership</b>	
<p><b>Occasionally:</b> When conferences or other forums allow for collective consideration, learning, and planning for the future of organizations and the field.</p> <p><b>Ongoing:</b> Make this a priority in continuing dialogue among organizations and with funders.</p>	<p>Consider what might be learned from and shared with allied organizations not directly engaged in domestic violence work.</p>
 <b>Collaborate for Leadership Development</b>	
<p><b>Ongoing:</b> Consider this as a potential collaborative strategy that can help strengthen your organization and the field, and an opportunity to maximize limited resources by working together.</p> <p><b>As needed:</b> When a major transition is imminent or has just occurred.</p>	<p>Begin by taking stock of your own organization’s leadership development needs and assets, then seek shared opportunities.</p>



## Preparing for Crucial Conversations

Conversations about succession planning are essential for long-term organizational health, but they can be difficult and disruptive. Below are a few tips to help the process go smoothly.

**Have these conversations before you need to.** Crucial conversations related to succession planning should not be initiated under duress. You will not be able to marshal your best thinking in the middle of a crisis. This means you need to make the time, temporarily pulling attention away from day-to-day demands and dedicating energy and bandwidth to deal with significant issues that may not seem as urgent – but are no less important.

**Set the context.** Be ready to explain “what this is about and why we are doing it.” It is not about the short-term, but the longer-term interests of the organization, its mission, and its clients. Taking the time to set this context respects the participants and provides more depth of meaning to the ensuing conversation.

**Know where you want the conversation to go, but be open to new information.** This is a dialogue – not a monologue. As one who is initiating and/or participating in these conversations, you should have some idea of where you would like them to go, what you want others to understand, and what you want to ask of them. You can come in with an idea about the framing of issues and the outcomes you would like, but there is always more than one way for things to turn out. Remain open.

**Pay attention to your own intentions and emotions.** Be aware of the issues, thoughts, and emotions that surface for you during these crucial conversations. There is an old saying in psychotherapy: “You only know when you disclose.” Once you give voice to the thinking you have around these issues, they may become more real to you. Be prepared.

**Listen and be receptive to the reactions of others in the conversation.** Many in the domestic violence field are professional listeners – a skill that can sometimes be lost in the emotional pull of these kinds of conversations. Deep, thoughtful listening is just as important as – if not more important than – the clear articulation and framing skills noted above.

**Try to “add light and not heat.”** Conversations that ask individuals to think about change and the possibilities that change can bring may become emotionally intense. Try to add insight, reflection, and acknowledgement during the process. Own your emotions, but do not let them overwhelm the entire conversation.

**Close every conversation with next steps.** Where do you go from here? What are you asking of others? Who else is impacted by this conversation and when will they enter the dialogue? Is there a larger communications plan that needs to be developed? Being clear about what happens next will help maintain momentum – as well as the trust of those participating in the process.

## So Where Is The Plan?

In this document we have framed succession planning as an organization's commitment to engaging in crucial conversations about leadership development. It is ultimately less important that you have a well-written plan sitting on the shelf than that you use these conversations to develop practices that build leadership throughout your organization.

That said, having a plan on paper can help support your succession planning process. Not only does it document the decisions and actions that have emerged from your conversations, it gives you a touchstone to go back to as you periodically revisit those decisions and refresh and revise them as necessary. Just as keeping a succession planning lens trained on your organization is an ongoing process, your plan can – and should – be a living document.

*“The idea of an actual ‘plan’ is a little overwhelming, just putting the pen to paper – it goes in the pile with all those other things we ‘should’ do but don’t have capacity for.”*

We have included resources in Appendix A, B, and C that describe in more detail each of the three types of plans you may find useful: the long-term plan, the departure defined plan, and the emergency plan.

The emergency plan is the simplest of the three, essentially describing the actions that will be set into motion should such a contingency occur.

A departure defined plan is more about creating an intentional process for preparing for a specific leadership transition, which will be different for every organization and situation. The process itself will entail the development of materials such as job descriptions, interview questions, and messaging to internal and external stakeholders (to name a few). The plan lays out how this all will occur.

Long-term succession plans are less easily contained. These ongoing conversations and their resulting decisions and actions may be captured in and supported by an array of organizational documentation. This may include personnel policies, employee professional development plans, strategic plans, and any number of other living documents that shape the practices and culture of the organization, tell where it is going and how it will get there, and address how human resources – the most valuable of any organization's assets – will be deployed in creating that future.

## Closing Comments

Domestic violence organizations are in the midst of change, and shifts in the environment are putting new demands on leadership. The skills and competencies required for organizational effectiveness are evolving, and will continue to do so. Those organizations that succeed tomorrow will need to navigate challenges and opportunities that are very different from those of today. This marks a dynamic time of opportunity for cross-generational teaching and learning.

Succession planning surfaces important questions about how domestic violence organizations will evolve to meet new and changing realities, and what kind of leadership they will need. The succession planning lens is a useful tool, not only for viewing the way forward through shifts in organizational leadership, but for taking a fresh look at leadership itself, expanding its definition, and building greater organizational capacity and sustainability. Appendix D through G offer supplemental questions and resources.

These are the kinds of short- and long-term strategic questions that can either take your organization by surprise or never even get asked because it is easier to avoid them. Succession planning can seem both overwhelming and yet “not urgent,” making it easy to put off or avoid, and leadership transition can be an especially sensitive subject to broach. But by looking through a succession planning lens, engaging in open and honest conversations, and making these conversations part of an ongoing dialogue about how to best achieve its mission, an organization can gain needed clarity and welcome the future with both renewed confidence and greater peace of mind.

## Appendix A: The Emergency Plan

The Emergency Plan is just as it sounds: a clearly defined process that will be put into place when an executive or another key staff person, either for a temporary absence or longer term period of time, is unable to continue in the role due to unanticipated factors. This is a short-term and possibly temporary leadership transition, as the individual may or may not plan to return. The purpose of this plan is to ensure organizational stability and continuity during an uncertain time.

### Crucial Conversations

What are the kinds of conversations that would support the development of an Emergency Plan? These include some of the classic “what if” questions and test the organization’s preparedness for change:

- What if I had to take a sudden leave of absence for medical or other personal reasons?
- What if I was offered my “dream job” with another employer and had to start right away?
- Do I have a clear, accurate, and up-to-date job description detailing my job responsibilities?
- Are the systems I use to do my work well documented and understood by others?
- What skills, competencies, and capacities would my replacement need to be successful?
- Are there obvious candidates to fill my position in my absence?
- What messages would need to be conveyed to internal and external stakeholders?

Every executive should discuss these questions with her/his board chair and senior management team in the context of organizational stability. Other leadership staff should also have similar conversations about how their own responsibilities would be fulfilled in an emergency.

### Putting Together the Plan

The process for developing an Emergency Plan would typically take no more than two to four weeks, depending on the complexity of the organization. Its content would include:

- The purpose of the plan and the circumstances under which it would be put into action
- Who will fill the specified vacancy (e.g., acting executive director) in case of emergency, and who will serve as a backup to that individual if necessary
- What is the authority of that individual temporarily filling the vacated position, including the role of the board or others in their oversight and supervision
- How this may impact other roles (board, staff, etc.) during the interim period

- How communication will occur with stakeholders (both internal and external)

Because the Emergency Plan does not address the leadership needs of an organization beyond covering the gap left by a sudden vacancy, one can be put in place without having engaged in deeper succession planning. However, organizations that invest in taking a longer look through the succession planning lens will have developed leaders who can step in to fulfill the needs of an emergency assignment with greater confidence and continuity.



## Appendix B: The Departure Defined Plan

The departure defined plan is what many nonprofits think of or experience as succession planning, but it is really more akin to leadership transition. This plan is a product of necessity. It is typically reactive, not proactive, and tends to focus narrowly on a single leadership position rather than looking holistically at the future leadership needs of the organization.

### Crucial Conversations

What are the kinds of conversations that would support the development of a departure defined plan? These include deep reflection on the part of the departing leader as well as strategic questions discussed with and among the board and senior management:

- What is the role (expectations and competencies) of this leadership position?
- What are the significant challenges facing the organization now?
- What skills, competencies, and capacities will the organization need to develop into the future?
- In addition to the above, what qualities are needed to ensure the new candidate is a good fit?
- What is unique about the organization that will “make or break” a successful transition?
- What will be the roles and responsibilities of the executive, board, and staff in this transition?
- What needs to be communicated, when, and to whom?

These questions are best addressed as part of an intentional and structured planning process. The hard part is getting the conversation started – that is, acknowledging the need for a transition plan. This can be made easier if organizations take the proactive approach of examining their leadership needs through a succession planning lens, so that future leadership is something that is thought about and discussed on a regular and ongoing basis.

### Putting Together the Plan

The process for developing a departure defined plan might take no more than a few weeks, but its implementation could extend over a period of several months, depending on the incumbent leader’s anticipated departure date, the position to be filled, and the complexity of the organization.

Because these plans are frequently centered on a departing executive director, the process of developing one is similar to that of an executive transition process, which entails three phases, or components:

1. **Organizational Analysis** – focusing on understanding the organization's context and leadership requirements, articulating the search criteria and process, and identifying who will be involved
2. **Executive Search** – consisting of the mechanics of a robust and participatory process for identifying, screening, interviewing, and selecting a candidate
3. **Transition Management** – ensuring that the new hire is fully integrated into the organization by managing differences, aligning expectations, and developing relationships

## Appendix C: The Long-Term Succession Plan

Unlike the emergency plan and the departure defined plan, the long-term plan is not defined by contained or linear process. Instead, it is ongoing and draws together several areas of inquiry and dialogue that together form the basis of a commitment to talent development that is uniquely suited to a specific organization and its needs. It is integrally tied to the vision for the organization's future.

Long-term plans look beyond how to fill one or two key positions and examine how leadership is built and strengthened across the organization. Every staff person can be engaged as a participant in better understanding where the organization is going, the skills and capacities it will need in its leaders, and how they as individuals can continue to play a role moving forward.

Because longer term succession planning is both informed by the organization's current situation and driven by its desired future state, it can also be useful to link it to related organizational development processes, such as organizational assessments, strategic planning, and board development. Succession planning, particularly when combined with a larger strategy process, creates a context for understanding and addressing these needs, and for building out the right leadership for today and tomorrow.

### Crucial Conversations

The most powerful questions related to succession planning will be found in the intersection between individual needs and organizational demands. Finding the opportunity for these questions to be asked and answered means creating the time, energy, and space to explore the strategic issues of individual and organizational direction and identity.

The process of strategic planning raises questions that can be very useful when translated to succession planning. These questions hold the same potency for individuals as for the organization they are a part of.

- How do we understand and advance our mission?
- What impact do we seek to have?
- Who do we serve?
- How do we serve?
- What is our competitive advantage?
- How are we sustainable?

Asking these questions, and finding alignment between the individual and the institution, will lead to more profound and stable connections.

## Appendix D: For Executive Directors and Other Leaders

Take some time to reflect on your career. Give yourself permission to ask:

- How long do I want to do this, and what does my future look like?
- What are the indicators that it might be time to make a move? To stay?
- What are the challenges I want to take on in my professional life?
- How is my leadership viewed? How can I continue to contribute at my best?
- How am I preparing the staff and the board for my future plans?
- Where is this organization headed, and where does it need to go next? Am I the right leader to take it there?
- How can I increase the opportunities for mentoring and professional development in this organization?

Your answers to these questions should help you frame up a conversation with your board chair and senior staff about your own eventual leadership transition and related planning needs. If you feel that you could use additional support, you may also find it helpful to work through these questions with an executive coach.

To more broadly leverage the power of looking through a succession planning lens, you might encourage other leaders in your organization to ask themselves a similar set of questions. You can also involve them in exploring how this exercise could be adapted across the organization to encourage all staff to think about their professional development goals and how they align with the organization's evolving needs.

## Appendix E: Questions for Staff

While the organization owns your job, you own your career. Periodically ask yourself questions like these as you think about your professional future:

- What have I learned in the last few years about myself and my work?
- What do I need to continue to learn?
- Where am I most competent? Where am I least competent?
- Where do I see myself going with my career?
- What opportunities are present to grow professionally in this organization?
- What do I need to do to keep growing professionally?

Your answers to these questions may help you frame up a conversation with your supervisor about your professional development interests and ways in which you could enhance your contributions to the organization. If there is already a performance assessment process in place, it would be the perfect opportunity for this type of conversation to occur. If there is not, you might suggest this as a way to support talent development and organizational sustainability.

The most effective staff members are the ones who have learned the art and skill of upward influence. Most leaders have multiple levels of responsibility and are trying to practice both leadership and management. The most successful staff members will be those who can identify challenges or opportunities and propose workable solutions that meet multiple needs.

Look to expand your own skills and development opportunities by seeing and articulating the alignment between how organizational demands, challenges, and opportunities can be met by you getting better at taking on more. Describe the problem or opportunity and identify your solution or approach. This will move everyone forward.

## Appendix F: Questions for Boards of Directors

The board's role is always important, but never more so than in the context of leadership transition or succession planning. Board responsibilities include:

- Monitoring the organization's functioning
- Engaging the executive director in a healthy, engaged partnership
- Board members holding one another accountable
- Co-creating a vision and plan for the future
- Identifying markers of success

Each of these responsibilities becomes heightened during times of organizational change, and the board's capacity to have candid and constructive conversations will be tested. As one emerging leader we spoke with observed: "It can be an opportunity for the board to realize their responsibilities – they may have to do more during a transition." Boards may find it useful to do some work as a board to prepare themselves to play an active role in a succession planning effort, as described on the previous page. Here, the board chair has a key role to play, both as a partner to the executive director and as the leader of the board.

Questions the board should ask itself include:

- How prepared are we to weather an emergency succession event in this organization?
- What would we do in such a situation?
- What is our plan for the future?
- How are we doing our own succession planning as a board?

Hopefully you are already conducting an annual performance review and goal setting with your executive director. If not, today is the day to start. Work together to design a process that is clear in its purpose and that provides both accountability and support. As part of these conversations with your executive, you should engage them in thinking about their plans for the future as well as the future direction they see for the organization.

Ask the following questions of the chief executive:

- What are some of the learning goals you continue to have as a leader in this organization?
- How will we know if you are losing your passion for the job?
- When will you let us know that you are planning on making a change?
- What are you doing to create a culture of learning and mentoring in the organization?

## Appendix G: Sample Retreat Agenda

A board retreat can be an excellent venue for engaging in crucial conversations about succession planning. This sample agenda is designed to offer ideas and suggestions on how to frame the topic, structure the discussion, and work together through some of these important questions.

### Agenda

#### Objectives

- Develop a deeper appreciation of each participant's story and commitment to the organization
- Gain clarity on the model of governance and the role of the board
- Surface key challenges and opportunities with respect to succession/transition planning
- Identify planning needs, elements, roles, and timeline
- Agree on next steps

Time	Activity	Process	Owner
8:30	Coffee and Gather		
9:00	Convene and Welcome		ED/Board Chair
9:15	Overview of Agenda / Objectives	Review / Clarify	Facilitator
9:30	Artifact Exercise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Share your story</li> <li>▪ Why are you involved?</li> </ul>	Group Process	All
10:45	Break		
11:00	Role of the Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is good governance?</li> <li>▪ How to create more engagement?</li> </ul>	Presentation / Group Process	Facilitator/All
12:00	Lunch		
12:45	Challenges at Hand <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do we...?</li> </ul>	Articulation	Facilitator
1:00	Succession / Transition Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Arc and elements of the plan</li> </ul>	Identification	ED/Board Chair
2:00	Break		
2:10	Commitments and Agreements	Surfacing / Agreements	Facilitator
2:45	Evaluation and Summary	Clarify / Agree	Facilitator
3:00	Close		

## Preparation Notes

### Artifact Exercise

Ask each participant to bring an item to the retreat that is a personal “artifact.” This can be almost anything: a picture, a piece of sculpture, a toy, something that they have created, an image, a pair of ballet shoes, a stone from a special place. It has to be something that is important to them, something that says something about who they are, what they value, and something that represents them. It should also say something about why they are attracted to this work: *What is the attraction, motivation, fire that feeds you? What is your area of contribution?* Advise each participant to be ready and willing to share the story behind their artifact.

After sharing these stories, the group will be asked to consider and respond to two questions:

1. Think about how you want to work together. What does it mean for you to be a truly effective and cohesive board? What do you need to learn and to do to be a better board?
2. Reflect on the challenges at hand. What do you identify as the key challenges/concerns that face you as a board member?

### Role of the Board

The focus of this segment is to explore the common understanding of roles and responsibilities of the board. The facilitator should present some information and resources on essentials of good governance, models of governance, and lead a discussion on how the board will function. This might include pre-reading in advance of the retreat. Group discussion will focus on clarifying how to become an engaged and high functioning board.

### Challenges at Hand

This conversation will focus on identifying some the key challenges and opportunities that are facing the organization. This can be a simple of exercise of asking the “*How do we....*” questions. The focus is on surfacing what are the biggest issues facing the organization, and what are the potential steps to start to deal with those issues? What are the top goals and priorities in the next six to 12 months?

### Succession /Transition Planning

The board chair and the chief executive should co-present this segment. This is the opportunity to explore with the board the organization’s needs around succession planning, the roles of board members and other key stakeholders, and plans for moving forward. This is the time to build common understandings of the longer-term and shorter-term strategies of succession planning, and can be informed by conversation about several of the thought questions featured throughout *The Succession Planning Lens*.

### Commitments and Agreements

Moving the planning forward requires clear assignments and agreements on the next steps. The closing of the retreat should be a capture and restatement of understanding of who will do what, and by when.



## Resources

The issues and resources related to succession planning are gaining traction with organizations, funders, and capacity builders. Below are some of the most valuable resources that were reviewed as part of the research in creating this document:

***Chief Executive Succession Planning Essential Guidance for Boards and CEO's*** by Nancy Axelrod (BoardSource 2010). This is a general resource that provides some framing of the steps and key issues of succession planning, directed mainly at board audiences. (Available for purchase at [www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org).)

***The Executive Transitions Monograph Series***, a series of monographs on executive transitions and executive transition management. Funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Fr. Fund, these publications feature some of the best thinking in the field on the topic of nonprofit succession planning and executive transition. These are available at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Some of the most significant resources in the series include:

- *Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Nonprofits*
- *Capturing the Power of Leadership Change: Using Executive Transition Management to Strengthen Organizational Capacity*
- *Founder Transitions: Creating Good Endings and New Beginnings*
- *Up Next: Generational Change and Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations*
- *Interim Executive Directors: The Power in the Middle*
- *Staying Engaged, Stepping Up: Succession Planning and Executive Transition Management for Nonprofit Boards of Directors*
- *Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis*

***The Nonprofit Executive Succession-Planning Toolkit***, published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, frames the issues in depth and provides some very useful definitions, tools, and resources. It can be found online at:

<http://www.frbkc.org/publicat/community/Nonprofit-Executive-Succession-Planning-Toolkit.pdf>

***Emergency Succession Plan Template*** by the Center for Nonprofit Advancement. This downloadable resource provides a model for crafting an emergency succession plan ([www.nonprofitadvancement.org](http://www.nonprofitadvancement.org)).