

get it right on... Succession Planning

As any organisation knows, keeping a good management committee or Board together for a while can be a difficult task. Some organisations choose to limit the term of office for their board members to ensure they are continually refreshed and revitalised, but even the most stable governance structures have to manage the regular turnover of board members.

Board or committee members can leave an organisation for a variety of reasons. Some feel burned out, others move on for personal reasons, some leave the area, others leave because of dissatisfaction or personal friction, and some just think it's time to give someone else a turn.

Whatever the reasons for leaving, every Board or committee will have to deal with a turnover of members over the lifetime of an organisation. Having some form of succession planning in place is vital to ensure the Board or committee do not lose focus.

There are a number of requirements for a smooth transition. But one of the easiest tasks to put in place now is that valuable organisational information is communicated among board members and passed on to newer members. Managing the transition of new board members is a vital ingredient to ensure the ongoing success of an organisation.

Why plan?

Unless you plan, the organisation is likely to falter when someone leaves, whether this is planned or not. If you do operate a fixed term of office, there is no excuse for not planning well ahead. On the other hand, it is also important that you are prepared for that unfortunate time when a board member leaves unexpectedly such as due to overseas work commitments, illness or even death.

Planning for succession is an ongoing responsibility. A last-minute rush is likely to result in a board or committee that lacks the necessary skills, motivation and knowledge to effectively lead the organisation.

How to plan

How your organisation chooses to do this will depend on your structure and the regularity with which your Board changes members. When one member leaves, the remaining members should be prepared and recognise where there will be a void - this information should be taken into consideration when appointing another member or encouraging someone to put their name forward.

To prepare, the rest of the committee should:

- Make sure there is an induction and screening process in place for new members
- Have available a board/committee member information pack detailing the organisation's goals, values, mission and work for incoming members.
- Make prospective new members aware of exactly what the committee role will entail and the level of commitment which will be required.
- Identify the skills and abilities the board needs from new appointments.
- Review the current board – what works, what's missing?

- Identify potential new directors/committee members (but be careful not to be too insular!)
- Invite potential board members to meetings
- Search widely and constantly monitor any changes in the organisation so board members reflect the needs of the group.
- Keep existing board members up to date on what is happening
- Evaluate the performance of board/committee members to make sure they are fulfilling their responsibilities.

Losing out...

One of the biggest problems organisations can face arises when one key board or committee member leaves. The solution is to document as much information as possible.

Where the organisation is small, it's likely that the Board or committee don't just oversee the organisation but also to run it. In that situation, losing a committee member can be a greater cost to the organisation. You don't want that knowledge to leave so ensure that the group:

- Documents information. Minutes, records, proposals, planning documents for events, contact books etc. Anything of interest or significance should be documented as it is the organisation's long-term memory
- Ensures procedure/operating manuals are written up and generally available
- Audits itself each year - run through the list of all the important information integral to the running of your group and make sure it is updated and kept in a safe place
- Promotes open communication between members and ensure the relevant information is passed on
- Makes sure each board member is aware of each other's skills and expertise
- Schedules regular board meetings and make time on the agenda for board members to report on their current projects/events.