Leadership Transition:
How Leaders and Their Organizations Can Survive a Change at the Top

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Business and Management
of
National University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Masters of Science in Organizational Leadership

By

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Abstract

This study explores leadership transition and how the City of Bellflower can address this form of organizational change when the current director retires. The goal is to examine best practices and mistakes during transition, and provide a process, adapted from Appelbaum and Valero’s (2007) study of interviews and surveys allowing the organization’s leadership to assess itself in relation to the transition. The study compares results of this assessment to scholarly literature and then proposes recommendations to assist the organization during the transition. The findings indicated the organization will benefit most by building on the foundation set. In addition, the organization’s leadership feels that prior to making significant changes, it is important to listen, learn, and communicate expectations.
The following project has met the approval of faculty for quality and scholarship as a culminating experience for the fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree in Organizational Leadership:

Type of project

___ Comparative Study
___ Applied Business Research
___ Thesis
X  Case Study

Title: Leadership Transition: How Leaders and Their Organizations Can Survive a Change at the Top

Approved by:

Julia Buchanan, MA
Lead Faculty, MSOL
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date

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date
Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my two wonderful children Peter Jakob and Reagan Danielle. You two are my inspiration.
Acknowledgements

There are many individuals that have been vital in my completing the requirements in the National University Organizational Leadership Masters Program. First, I need to thank my wife for her support and encouragement. She has once again proven to be a wonderful wife, in addition to being a fantastic mother to our two young children.

Secondly, I would like to thank Rich Pierce, whose leadership inspired this study and whose thoughts and insights have contributed tremendously to this paper. I have nothing but respect and admiration for him as a leader, and more importantly I am proud to call him my friend.

Next, I would like to thank Vicki Casañas for her support and encouragement as I pursued my educational goal this past year. Her thoughts and insights also contributed immensely to this study.

I would also like to thank those that have led and mentored me in the Parks and Recreation profession. Kristen Smith, Scott Mowl, Brad Morris, and Chris Chamberlain are wonderful leaders that have inspired me over the years. Their support, encouragement, and most importantly their friendship has been truly valuable.

Finally, I would to thank Donette “Mimi” Mellana, and Dan “The Dude” Underwood. Without them to love, nurture, and guide me as a child, my true potential would not have been realized.
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Chapter 1: Overview

Leaders face many challenges when taking over in the top spot of any organization. If they do not build momentum quickly, they can be sure of an uphill battle (Watkins, 2003). When it comes to leadership transition, a form of organizational change, there are many different factors that will determine whether or not the transition is successful. In order to successfully implement transition strategies, it is essential for leaders to make an impact early, and involve others during the transition process. The need to make an impact early is essential because the actions of new leaders during the first three months will largely determine whether or not they succeed in the long run (Watkins, 2004). The need to involve others is equally vital because one of the biggest mistakes a new leader can make is to become isolated and think they can do it all by themselves (Appelbaum & Valero, 2007).

Research Objectives

The goal of this project is to apply a case study with the following objectives:

1) Analyze the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation as an organization and analyze the impending retirement of the organization’s director. 2) Have the leadership within the organization participate in interviews and questionnaires in order to assess the organization’s readiness for transition as it relates to best practices and common traps identified by experts. Additionally, through the aforementioned methods, have participants rank these best practices and common traps as to their importance or relevance to the organization. 3) Analyze the aforementioned assessment, and then incorporate the findings into a summary with suggestions to assist the organization during the future change.
The framework of this case study relies on literature related to change and leadership transition; the key literature is incorporated throughout the study and is woven into the suggestions for the organization. The analysis and assessment components of this framework draw heavily upon Watkins’ (2003) work in his book *The First 90 Days*, Neff and Citrin’s (2005) work in *You’re In Charge – Now What?*, and Kotter’s (1996) eight *traits of successful change management*. Through this study’s process, it has become overwhelmingly clear that Friedman and Saul (1991) were correct when they stated, “Many scholars of organizations and strategic management agree that new leaders can make a difference; the important issues are when, how, and why they do” (p. 619). This case study attempts to assist the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation in meeting those challenges.

About the Organization

The City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation serves a diverse community in Los Angeles County. The department has a great tradition, is very systematic, and is known for “doing the most with the least.” This reputation has come because the organization serves a fairly large community, but has a very small workforce, and a very modest budget. Including the administrative staff the department has 10 full time employees and approximately 100 part-time employees to serve the recreation needs of a diverse community of over 70,000 residents. The department runs a variety of recreation programs for the community at parks, schools, and neighborhoods, not to mention the numerous community special events the department is in charge of which include, but are not limited to a car show, carnivals, firework shows, parades, movies under the stars, concerts, Easter egg hunts, and Halloween events.
The department has a long-tenured director who has provided strong leadership over the past 30 years (19 in the top spot). This director’s leadership has established positive norms, values and priorities that have become institutionalized over time. In addition, two of the three supervisors in the department have had long tenures within the organization; the successor (current assistant director) has had seven years in the organization. The long tenures of the director and his lead management staff are all excellent attributes that could prove to be helpful to the organization as it addresses the challenges of the upcoming transition.

As mentioned above, the organization has the ability to do “the most with the least” because of two primary reasons: quality control and customer care. These attributes are a direct reflection of the leadership strengths of the current director. Over the past 19 years he has managed and led a very controlled and efficient operation, never allowing “small things” to be overlooked. In addition his emphasis on customer care is seen throughout the organization and is modeled by his own actions when providing customer care to not only the public, but those within the organization. It will be essential for the organization to find a way to build upon these attributes rather than lose sight of them in the transition.

Customer care is deeply ingrained within the organization and it can be assumed that this aspect of the organization will continue without having to make too many changes because this is a strong attribute practiced by all leaders within the organization; however the true challenge will be for the new director to create systems that allow for continued quality control. In the past the current director’s systems allowed him to check all work prior to final approval; therefore he was the sole source for final quality control.
However with growth opportunities, and new technologies on the horizon for the organization, quality control systems may need to be restructured in order to allow others to assist and be held accountable for quality control and allowing the new director to focus on the growth and new changes which are certain to come with the transition.

*The Organization’s Impending Change*

There is no doubt that the current director’s strong leadership has created a wonderful organization which provides optimum service to the community. The leader at the top is dynamic, has steered this organization for 19 years, and creates a culture of belonging for the employees. These traits are a direct reflection of his leadership and he can be very proud of that fact. His tenure, though, is nearing an end as his retirement is imminent. His successor is the current assistant director. Both individuals have a vested interest in a smooth succession. The current director would like nothing more than to retire with no worries, knowing that the foundation he has set for the department will allow it to thrive and continue being a top-notch organization for generations to come. In addition, he would like the employees he has led and developed to be left in place to thrive in their profession. His successor, the current assistant director, faces a difficult task in replacing a strong leader who has built such a strong following within the organization; her interest is to get her tenure off to a strong start and build momentum and backing for a vision, enabling her and the team to build and grow the organization on the foundation set by her predecessor. Ultimately, she feels that it is her calling to lead the organization and its members and to help both to realize their full potential. To her, that would be true success.
Appelbaum and Valero (2007) suggest that the toughest task a manager can face is starting a senior job from the outside of an organization. The learning curve is short lived; new products, services, and day-to-day work processes must be learned at a rapid pace in the context of new political environments and organizational culture. Fortunately the successor in this situation is an insider. She has had an opportunity to learn all the ins and outs of the organization, build supportive relationships, and learn the political climate, all under the direct tutelage of her predecessor.

**Research Design**

The research design appropriate for this study is a qualitative study utilizing multiple methods for data collection. According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (1987), “the intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular event, role, group, or interaction” (as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 198). It is a process in which the researcher attempts to understand a particular social environment through contrasting, comparing, and then classifying the subject (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

This study incorporates open-ended observations, interviews, and questionnaires, in addition to ranking systems for best practices and common traps. Interviews are conducted with the Executive Leadership Group (ELG), which consists of the retiring director and his successor. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the Critical Leadership Group (CLG), which consists of upper and mid-management, administration staff, and lead programming staff within the organization. The conclusions that resulted from the data gathering are summarized, analyzed, compared to the scholarly literature, and finally developed into suggestions for the City of Bellflower and how it can address the upcoming transition.
Significance of Study

The results from this case study have led to an increased understanding of how leaders and the organizations that they lead can best approach a change in leadership. The research explored how best practices can be applied to the specific situation of an organization’s needs and how best to avoid common traps. The research provided a better understanding of how critical listening, learning, and communicating is for a leader prior to making critical changes to an organization.

As the baby boomer generation begins to retire, many more organizations will be experiencing a transition in leadership. This study provided a better understanding of how important a sense of awareness is for leaders. They need to be aware of the organizations culture, situation, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In addition, they need to be aware and understand that building relationships within the organization is essential. All of these items will assist in gaining buy-in prior to making significant change, and that buy-in will be essential for success.
Chapter 2: A Review of Key Literature

It is essential for newly promoted leaders or experienced ones taking on a new top position to establish strong leadership skills that show an ability to influence the group to work toward common goals early on. In addition, a transition strategy needs to be in place to give credibility to the leader (Appelbaum & Valero, 2007). The key literature on this topic provides leaders and organizations with valuable tools to address these challenges.

Today’s foundations of organizational change theory go back 60 years to Kurt Lewin’s (1947) initial phases of influence during organizational change of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Judson (1991) developed a more modern model suggesting a five-phase process for an organization’s leader when attempting to implement change. These phases consist of analyzing and planning for change, communicating the change, gaining acceptance of new behaviors, changing from a desired state, and consolidating and institutionalizing the new state (as cited in Holt, Self, Thal, & Lo, 2003).

Building on Judson’s work, John Kotter (1996) provided a model to help leaders to succeed during times of organizational change. In his work, he described eight reasons why change initiatives succeed, and compared them to reasons why those same initiatives may fail. See Table 1 below that briefly describes these reasons:
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful Change Strategies</th>
<th>Failing Change Strategies</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Demonstrate a sense of urgency</td>
<td>1) Allow too much complacency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Form a strong change coalition</td>
<td>2) Fail to create a strong change coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Envision the future and build strong strategy</td>
<td>3) Underestimate the power of vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Constantly communicate the vision</td>
<td>4) Under communicate the vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Remove barriers and align the organization</td>
<td>5) Permit obstacles to block the vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Build on early successes</td>
<td>6) Fail to create short-term wins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Maintain (or increase) the pace of change</td>
<td>7) Declare victory to soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Put systems in place to reinforce change</td>
<td>8) Neglect to anchor changes in the culture</td>
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</table>


On a level more directly related to leadership transition, Neff and Citrin (2005) developed a framework entitled “The First Hundred Days Pyramid” which provides strategies for leaders to start their tenure on a strong positive note. This pyramid consists of eight key components:

1) Prepare yourself during the countdown (base of the pyramid).
2) Align expectations.
3) Shape your management team.
4) Craft your strategic agenda.
5) Start transforming culture.
6) Manage your board/boss.
7) Communicate.
8) Avoid common pitfalls. (p. 261)

Watkins (2003) went a step further in emphasizing the need for leaders to make an impact early on during a transition. He tells leaders this: “The President of the United
States gets 100 days to prove himself; you get 90” (p. 1). That is a powerful statement, which puts strong emphasis on the need for new leaders to move quickly during the transition. Watkins (2003, 2005) provided a framework of seven common traps and seven success principles for leaders who are transitioning. The traps include failing to build a coalition, setting unrealistic expectations, being captured by the wrong people, attempting too much, being isolated, coming with “The Answer,” and staying too long with the existing team. In contrast the core success principles include securing early wins, building a winning coalition, laying a foundation, leveraging the time before entry, organizing to learn, creating a personal vision, and managing himself (herself) (as cited in Appelbaum & Valero, 2007).

In their research, Appelbaum and Valero (2007) correlated the work of Neff and Citrin (2005) to that of Watkins (2003, 2005). Their work created a survey of executives asking them to rank the seven traps and seven success principles of Watkins’ (2003, 2005) work. The main result from their research survey was the idea that leaders need “to listen and learn about the culture, the organization and the situation before making too quick decisions” (Appelbaum & Valero, 2007, p. 7).

It is important to identify the common themes of Kotter (1996) throughout all of this literature: urgency, coalitions, strategy, communication, alignment, and building on success. Kotter’s last two steps of maintaining the pace of change and putting systems in place to reinforce change are just as important as the common themes identified above, however they are not emphasized in the other literature. One area that seems to be lacking in the literature and research is implementation strategies for smaller businesses and
organizations. The strategy studies seem to all relate to large corporations and large government entities.

This literature will be the foundation for this case study. The focus will incorporate the best practices and common mistakes identified by scholarly literature into strategies directly related to the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation. Because of the lack of research pertaining to smaller organizations, this case study may be able to shed further light on how smaller organizations can successfully manage leadership transition.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to meet the goals of this case study, the following process was carried out to gather and analyze information: First, interviews were developed and conducted with the ELG, which again consisted of the current director and his successor. This step built on the model that Appelbaum and Valero (2007) provided; in their research, they surveyed executives to rank the traps and principles identified in Watkins’ (2003, 2005) work. The interview questions for the ELG followed a similar method; based on the work of Neff and Citrin (2005), Watkins (2003, 2005), and Kotter (1996). Open-ended questions were asked based on leadership, the organization, future transition, and best practices and common mistakes during leadership transition. In addition the subjects were asked to rank lists of best practices and common mistakes by order of importance. Next, the CLG was given questionnaires based on the same aforementioned questioning and ranking system. The purpose behind this aspect of the study was to obtain insights from other critical leadership areas in the organization and to heighten the ELG’s overall awareness of how others in the organization view the upcoming transition. This will allow the organization to assess its status with regard to transition readiness and identify opportunities to improve its readiness.

After data was collected and analyzed, a summary was prepared based on the research findings and on the scholarly research described in the literature, incorporating best practice strategies that may be most pertinent to this organization.

The ultimate goal of the interviews and surveys conducted was to collect data and opinions about the preparedness/readiness of this organization to meet the challenges that will arise when it goes through its upcoming leadership transition. The data collected was
assessed and compared to conclusions that were made in Appelbaum and Valero’s (2007) study.

Instruments

In order to obtain significant findings from this study, it was necessary to develop and administer a variety of different instruments. The first instrument utilized to assess the ELG was an interview (Appendix B), consisting of open-ended questions directly related to the organization, leadership, and leadership transition. This particular instrument was applied to the ELG only, which consists of the current director and his successor. The second instrument to be assessed by the ELG was a ranking system (Appendix B) in which the subjects were asked to rank two (2) different lists; the first relating to success strategies for leaders during times of transition and the second relating to common traps leaders face during those same times. This ranking system was administered as the final part of the aforementioned interview.

In addition to assessing the ELG, information was gathered from the CLG, which consists of key leaders throughout the organization. The instrument used to assess this group was a questionnaire (Appendix C) that included open-ended questions and the same ranking system given to the ELG. The open-ended questions in this instrument were similar in content to those that were given to the ELG.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore best practices to be implemented and common mistakes to be avoided by leaders during times of transition in smaller organizations. Specifically, this case study analyzes traits of the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation’s leadership to assess how prepared the
organization is to meet the challenges of a transition in its top leadership. This study focuses on three questions that examine the organization in relation to best practices in leadership transition. These questions are:

1. What are the similarities and/or differences in the views of the ELG and CLG regarding addressing the upcoming transition?

2. How can the organization utilize the assessment results and scholarly literature findings in order to best prepare for and meet the challenges of its impending transition?

3. How can conducting an assessment of the organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats be beneficial to the organization during the transition?

Participants

It is important to define the groupings used in this study and also to identify those participants in each grouping. The ELG consists of the outgoing director and the current assistant director who will be the successor. The CLG consists of a strong, diverse mix of upper management, mid-management, administration, and lead programming staff in the organization. Of this group, a total of 13 individuals participated in the study.

Data Analysis

During and after data collection through interviews and questionnaires, analysis attempts to identify common themes. As suggested by Creswell (2003), data has been categorized, constantly reviewed, and coding applied. As major themes and ideas became apparent or showed potential of being significant they were documented and incorporated in the findings.
For a qualitative research study such as this relying largely on the interpretation of the researcher, it is essential to identify the researcher in relation to the organization and the study and comprehend how that may shape the results and interpretation (Creswell, 2003). The biggest limitation to this particular study was the fact that the researcher is a member of the organization, in a top leadership position. Though this could have posed a significant problem in this study, many steps were taken to avoid bias.

First, approval and buy-in was received from both members of the ELG prior to starting the project. Additionally their input was sought as to what goals they had for the project and how it should be shaped; ultimately they added the second group, CLG, as a study subject to add to the findings. Next, the scope of the study was submitted to the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is in place in order to protect the rights of human participants. Attached is the approval letter regarding this project (Appendix D). Next, different data sources (ELG and CLG) were utilized to promote triangulation of results. Finally, the topic could possibly be perceived as highly sensitive, especially for the CLG which assessed the leadership and the overall preparedness for the organization to transition. In order to address this concern, all participants were guaranteed that their answers would not be linked with their names. This was done by conducting interviews with individuals at off site locations, as well as having all surveys sealed and delivered individually. This was critical in order for the groups to be candid and open in discussing their perceptions of the organization.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Part 1: Core Success Principles and Common Traps of Leadership Transition

The research methods applied to both the ELG and CLG assess which success principles and which common traps relating to leadership transition are most important to the leaders within the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation. This was done through interviews with the ELG and ranking systems with both the ELG and CLG.

Interviews with the ELG started out by seeking open-ended answers directly related to the top three priorities and the top three mistakes that leaders should be aware of in the first 90 days in a new position. The questions and answers directly relate to the findings in the Appelbaum and Valero (2007) study. Because the ELG had two subjects within the group and the Appelbaum and Valero (2007) study had 66 subjects, it may seem far fetched to attempt to correlate this study’s findings with those of the Appelbaum and Valero (2007) study. However, the results indicate that both the priorities and understanding of the ELG members are consistent with those referred to in the comparative study.

For the open-ended question asking the ELG to identify priorities for leaders during the first 90 days, the ELG answers fell into three different categories. The first category included answers relating to listening and learning about the organization in its entirety. The second category consisted of answers relating to communication of vision, objectives, and expectations. The third category consisted of answers relating to relationship building. See Figure 1 for specifics.

For the open-ended question asking the subjects to identify important mistakes, the ELG’s answers fell into two categories. The first category’s answers were related to
different aspects of change, including changing before learning, changing without buy-in, and failing to learn most essential aspects of the organization during change. The second category’s answers were related to becoming isolated and not getting out and creating relationships. These two categories were also the top two categories from the findings in the Appelbaum and Valero (2007) study, which made up for over 65% of the answers in that category. See Figure 2 for how findings of the present study relate to those of Appelbaum and Valero’s (2007) study.

Figure 1
ELG – Top Three Priorities for Transition

![Bar chart showing ELG's top three priorities in the first 90 days](image)
After the open-ended questions were complete, the ELG subjects were asked to rank common traps and best practices in order of importance for leaders. With regard to traps, Table 2 indicates that both subjects in the ELG ranked coming in with “The Answer” and being isolated in their top three; both of these traps were first and second per the Appelbaum & Valero (2007) study. The results with regard to the ranking system for success principles found nothing significant to report. No patterns emerged; the subjects’ rankings were inconsistent with each other and showed an insignificant relation to the Appelbaum & Valero study (2007). One of the ELG subjects did mention leveraging the time before entry as a priority in their top three, Appelbaum and Valero (2007) had this success principle as the first-ranked priority, organizing to learn as second, and creating a personal vision as third.

The CLG was also asked to rank common traps and core success principles for leaders during transition. This group’s priorities can be seen in Table 3. The group feels
strongly that attempting too much (top three of 77% of subjects) and coming in with “The Answer” (top three of 69% of subjects) are the top two traps that must be avoided. Becoming isolated came in a distant third.

It is important to explain here how a leader might fall prey to these traps. Ciampa and Watkins (1999) suggest that leaders fall prey to attempting too much by trying too many things at once, in an effort to suggest that successful leaders and organizations are active, quick and able to multi-task. However, this trap can lead to confusion and a sense of being overwhelmed throughout the organization. Falling prey to the second trap listed is not advisable either because it may indicate that the new leader is suggesting a quick-fix solution, when in actuality there are no quick-fix solutions and there may be nothing needing to be “fixed.” Therefore, leaders attempting to come in with “The Answer” will indicate to the organization that they are in fact suggesting a quick-fix which will undermine possibilities for building support (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999).

In addition, the CLG feels that the top three success principles to be followed by a new leader are as follows: 1) Managing himself/ herself 2) creating a personal vision 3) laying a foundation. All three of these principles were ranked in the top three of over 60% of the subjects in the CLG. These findings indicate that the CLG expects the new leader to be competent in both their technical and leadership skills and be able to communicate clearly the vision and expectations that come with the change.
Table 2  
**ELG – Ranking Common Traps and Success Principles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELG’s Ranking of Common Traps</th>
<th>Current Director’s Successor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization’s Current Director</td>
<td>Current Director’s Successor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Attempting too much</td>
<td>1) Becoming isolated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Coming in with “The Answer”</td>
<td>2) Failing to build coalitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Becoming isolated</td>
<td>3) Coming in with “The Answer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Failing to build coalitions</td>
<td>4) Attempting too much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Setting unrealistic expectations</td>
<td>5) Setting unrealistic expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Getting captured by the wrong people</td>
<td>6) Staying too long with the existing team</td>
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<tr>
<td>7) Staying too long with the existing team</td>
<td>7) Getting captured by the wrong people</td>
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<td>Organization’s Current Director</td>
<td>Current Director’s Successor</td>
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<tr>
<td>1) Leveraging the time before entry</td>
<td>1) Building a winning coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Securing early wins</td>
<td>2) Laying a foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Building winning coalition</td>
<td>3) Managing himself/herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Managing himself/herself</td>
<td>4) Creating a personal vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Laying a foundation</td>
<td>5) Organizing to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Organizing to learn</td>
<td>6) Securing early wins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Creating a personal vision</td>
<td>7) Leveraging the time before entry</td>
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Table 3  
**CLG – Ranking Common Traps and Success Principles**

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<td>4) Failing to build coalitions</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7) Staying too long with the same team</td>
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<td>4) Organizing to learn</td>
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<td>5) Leveraging the time before entry</td>
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<td>6) Building a winning coalition</td>
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<td>7) Securing early wins</td>
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Part 2: An Assessment of Leadership

Questions were asked of both the ELG and CLG regarding leadership traits. This line of questioning was implemented to create awareness of how leadership may or may not assist in an organization’s success. The ELG subjects were asked to assess their own leadership styles and weaknesses, whereas the CLG was asked only to assess the current director’s leadership attributes that bring success to the organization.

The current director described his essential leadership qualities as being approachable, being able to communicate well, being able to treat all members of the organization as a friend or family member, and being able and willing to do any task (nothing is too small for him). He sees the following weaknesses in his leadership style:
1) Being soft or weak in holding non-productive organization members accountable. He overcompensates for other weaknesses by either taking on more responsibility himself or spreading duties out amongst productive members of the team. 2) Overstepping boundaries of tactfulness at times with his humor with subordinate staff.

The successor described her leadership with the critical leadership traits as leading by example, being passionate, being team focused, and holding high standards for subordinates. In contrast she feels her weaknesses include having difficulty with multi-tasking without dedicated support staff -- in particular with completing multiple projects with the thoroughness and attention that may be required -- and having a lack of patience.

The CLG group was asked to list leadership qualities of the current director that they feel enable success within the organization. Amongst the thirteen subjects in this group, a total of seventy three answers were given. Overall, Figure 3 shows the most important leadership qualities that the CLG feels enable the organization to be successful.
It is important to note that competence (technical and leadership) was the top quality mentioned with an overwhelming 36% of answers having to do with some form of either technical or leadership competence. Leadership competence is defined by Kouzes and Posner (2002) as having “the abilities to challenge, inspire, enable, act as a model, and encourage” (as cited in Kouzes, 2003, p. 257). The category listed as “other” consisted of twenty one qualities mentioned no more than once.

Figure 3  
*Enabling Leadership Qualities*

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**Part 3: Organizational Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats**

A good portion of the methods used to survey both the ELG and CLG consisted of asking the subjects to reflect on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the organization.

Survey results suggest that the ELG feels that the strengths of the organization revolve around a core set of values which include a strong culture of family/teamwork, hard work, commitment/buy-in from top to bottom, creativity, and willingness to adapt.
In addition, a key strength is the overall talent of the productive staff members, including full- and part-time employees, in the organization.

In contrast, the ELG feels the weaknesses of the organization are as follows: 1) a group of non-productive, long-tenured staff members 2) budget constraints 3) a perception of being the “step-child” in terms of resource priority within the overall structure of the municipality, which in effect puts the organization last in line, always behind safety and infrastructure 5) the inability to strategically reposition in order to change this and 4) lack of facility management and programming technology.

Important themes identified by the ELG as opportunities were the addition of technology to facilitate operations within the department more efficiently, additional full-time support staff or turnover in current non-productive staff, and creating more political advocacy through the Parks and Recreation Commission. Threats were seen as too much and too rapid change during the initial phases of transition and deteriorating maintenance standards because that department is being asked to do too much by itself with not enough resources. In addition, political climate change and budget cuts were also seen as important threats to be aware of.

The CLG group provided thirty-seven strengths through the questionnaire. Of those strengths, an overwhelming 49% were directly related to values that were identified through the ELG’s analysis. Those values included a strong core leadership staff, creativity and willingness to adapt, and a strong culture of family/teamwork. This is a strong indication and confirmation that these values are the foundation of the organization as seen through the eyes of the executives as well as the other leadership.
Of the weaknesses the CLG mentioned, 42% were related to personnel issues; specifically lack of support staff, too many non-productive staff, and an inability to retain strong leaders. Directly relating to those issues was the weakness mentioned in the surveys of taking on too much as an organization without having the appropriate staffing levels. Another significant weakness that is mentioned multiple times is fear of change for the organization.

Twenty-one opportunities for the organization were identified by the CLG. Of those identified, 43% of them related to addressing the needs of more productive or qualified personnel, in addition to restructuring the organization to better adjust to the staffing level concerns that are identified. Another significant number of respondents mention the addition of technology as an opportunity.

Of the threats that the CLG identifies, a majority is in direct relation to the weaknesses identified. However, there was a significant revelation in the threats assessment, which was that 18% of the threats mentioned were related to staff not buying in to the change. This is a very strong statement and significant finding by this group. It will benefit the successor and organization as a whole to understand that the group will need to buy-in to the new leadership in order to have a successful transition and avoid an uphill battle.

**Part 4: Transition Preparedness**

Transition preparedness was addressed with both the ELG and CLG groups through different methods. The ELG subjects were asked to identify what has been done to this point to prepare for transition, then they were asked to identify ways to better prepare for the transition. Table 4 shows the results of this questioning.
To assess how the CLG feels about the organization’s preparedness to meet the challenges of transition, the group was asked to rate the organization’s overall preparedness for a transition in leadership, 1 being *completely prepared* and 5 being *completely unprepared*; they were asked to explain the reasoning; and finally they were asked what can be done to better prepare the organization for transition. With 13 respondents the rating averaged 2.65, or slightly above 3, which is *somewhat prepared*. Seven of the respondents (over half or 54%) responded with a 3. This shows that the majority within this CLG feel that there is still work to be done in order to prepare for the transition.

After the CLG subjects were asked to rate the preparedness of the organization for a transition, they were then asked to respond as to why they gave this rating. The common theme revealed through this questioning is that the CLG feels that a firm
foundation has been set, and that there are opportunities to build upon that foundation. However, the group feels that more learning needs to take place throughout the entire organization (with the successor and all leaders) with regard to the essential day-to-day duties and functions of the current director. Therefore the time leading up to the transition must be dedicated to listening and learning in order to understand what is required to make the organization function successfully as it does now.

Both the ELG and CLG were asked whether or not any major organizational changes can be anticipated at this point. Most within both groups anticipate the addition of technology and changes with regard to the organizational structure, reporting lines, and responsibilities once the successor assumes the position.

In assessing the preparedness of this organization for its impending transition, the ELG was asked to discuss how a new leader can meet the challenge of replacing a long-tenured leader that is well respected and whose employees are very loyal. According to the current director, a newly appointed leader in this type of situation must first and foremost listen, learn, and understand why there has been success prior to making any major changes. In addition, it is essential to understand that the loyalty and respect gained for a long-tenured leader does not happen overnight. It is built up through years of team building; therefore it is important to not attempt to make major changes at the start, but rather to build little wins and buy-in gradually. This will enable the new leader to build strong relationship with the organization, earning the same respect and loyalty that was given to the predecessor. Once the leader and the organization have established mutual loyalty and respect, major changes will be more easily accepted by the group. The successor feels that it is important to establish through communication very early that
there are differences between the two leaders. This needs to be done by clearly communicating her vision, objectives, and expectations from the start.

The last aspect in assessing the preparedness of the organization was to seek how the organization can continue its high standards in quality control through the transition. As stated in the introduction, a key strength of the current director and the organization is quality control standards. The current director is a unique leader and has very unique capabilities which can be attributed to his 30 years of service to this organization. One of those unique capabilities is his ability to directly oversee all quality control aspects of the organization. He is able to identify all errors that staff may make, and correct them, literally from top to bottom. He knows every possible aspect of his department. The author firmly believes that this unique talent can be attributed to one of the director’s weaknesses: his being lenient on non-productive employees. Over a 30-year span, he has had to adapt his own style to compensate for errors of others and has developed a routine, and knows what to look for. His weakness has turned into a major strength, enabling him to see everything with regard to quality control.

For someone coming in that does not have those unique capabilities, quality control may seem like an overwhelming task for one person. Therefore the ELG and CLG were asked to provide some suggestions on how to address this during the transition. The list below shows how the ELG suggests addressing this issue:

1) Hold everyone throughout the organization more accountable for their own area’s quality control.

2) Have the successor take the time at first to continue directly overseeing the quality control in order to understand the details and needs of quality control.
After an initial overseeing, responsibility for oversight could be spread throughout organization.

3) Implement programming and facility management technology to assist staff in identifying errors and eliminating many errors that may occur.

4) Streamline quality control management so it is more productive throughout the organization, not having it fall on the director.

The most relevant answers provided by the CLG included creating better checks and balances throughout the organization to limit mistakes getting to the director level, and holding employees more accountable when work does not meet the standards required.
Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusions

Bellflower is facing an incredible challenge in the near future of transitioning to a new leader and a new style of leadership. The organization will not be the first to take on this incredible challenge, nor will it be the last. Fortunately for this organization, it has a strong foundation built on its strong core of leaders, commitment from top to bottom, creativity and adaptability, and a strong culture of teamwork and family. If this foundation is embraced by the new leader it will increase the chances of a smooth transition. In addition, the organization is taking initial and appropriate steps to meet this challenge with success.

This case study builds upon the research findings of Appelbaum and Valero (2007), whose findings state that “to listen and learn about the culture, the organization and the situation before making too quick decisions is probably the most important advice that stand out” (p. 7). Both the ELG and CLG findings for this study are consistent with this. The ELG listed observe, listen, and learn as the top priority for leaders: 50% of their answers fell into this category. The Appelbaum and Valero’s (2007) study had 43% of their findings fall in this category. To further solidify these findings, the CLG listed attempting too much and coming in with the answer as the most important mistakes, indicating that prior to change listening and learning need to take place.

In relation to the findings throughout this study, the following items are being suggested for the organization’s next steps in its particular transition.

First and foremost, the findings from the ranking of success strategies and mistakes suggest that the leadership should continue to learn and understand all aspects of the organization: not even the smallest detail should be left to chance. Therefore,
leverage the time now to begin transitioning to the new leader. Take advantage of having
the successor known, and coming from within the organization. The findings suggest that
the current director and successor begin working more on training with regard to the
current director’s day-to-day duties. The ELG interviews revealed that the current
director needs to be willing to give more to the successor, giving specific training,
clarifying expectations of the tasks given, and giving constructive feedback. The
successor in turn needs to embrace these duties and give high priority to completing them
with top quality and thoroughness. Whether or not the task may be delegated in the
future, it will be essential to complete these tasks now with minimal assistance and
delegation. This will assist the successor in learning every aspect of the organization
including what to look for with regard to quality control. Next, the findings also suggest
that it will be beneficial for those in the organization to visually see transition taking
place prior the current director actual departure. Accordingly, it may be beneficial to
practice the suggestion made by the successor: that shadowing of the current director
should take place during the final quarter before the retirement takes place.

In order to address and combat the difficulty that comes with replacing a well
respected, long-tenured leader, the ELG can take its own advice. When asked how a new
leader can address an issue such as this, the ELG mentioned the following strategies:

1) Generate and secure short term wins to build up momentum, respect, and loyalty
for the successor.

2) Clearly communicate the vision, objectives, and expectations.

One early win, that would have tremendous benefits, would be for the current director to
show approval and backing of the aforementioned vision, objectives, and expectations
through his words and actions to the organization. Of course this must be sincere, but the potential psychological boost for this organization would be greatly beneficial to getting the transition off on the correct path to success. In order for sincere approval, it is important for the new director to fully embrace and learn the organizational tasks required by the current director prior to his departure.

Top priorities and mistakes during transition, leadership traits, and the readiness of the organization for the transition have all been assessed through this study. Additionally, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats have been identified by both the ELG and CLG during this study. This analysis can prove to be a critical tool to utilize during the time of transition. The strengths of the organization have been identified as the culture and values. That culture and value system revolves around strong employees in leadership positions, a strong culture of family/teamwork, hard work, commitment/buy-in from top to bottom, creativity, and willingness to adapt. Knowing that collectively the group embraces this culture and value system, it will be important for the successor to embrace these qualities and build upon them. This should not be a problem because of her belief in those qualities as well.

Not only does the aforementioned analysis define the foundation of the organization, it also provides critical findings that show how the ELG and CLG understand the weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the organization. Therefore, a coalition for change is already in place, especially with regard to the issues that will require change in order to address the organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. These finding suggest that it will be critical to build on this momentum and continue to gain buy-in on these particular change initiatives.
It is critical to be clear that there is no single best approach for a leader to approach leadership transition. The transition will depend on the leader, the situation, and of course the followers or team members. Ciampa & Watkins (1999) state it this way:

While changing one’s leadership style may not be appropriate, new leaders must understand their own styles and their own strengths and weaknesses. Self-understanding allows the new leader to build a personal support system that helps augment the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses. (p. 34)

Taking this into account, an understanding of self, of the organizational situation, and of the followers is essential to understanding the best plan of action to successful transition and change.

In closing, the last recommendation to be made is for the ELG to embrace the findings within this study by leveraging the time now to continue to learn as much as possible about strategies and traps related to transitions. This can be done by learning from the experts, reviewing the literature that the study was based on. Then modifying the specific strategies to the City of Bellflower’s specific situation. Lastly, continuing to seek feedback from the CLG will greatly assist with a successful transition. The input provided by this group has been essential throughout this study and will prove to be valuable in the future.
References


INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMATION ABOUT: Leadership Transition: How Leaders and Their Organizations Can Survive a Change at the Top

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER: P.J. Mellana; contact at (562) 867-9412 (home), (562) 805-8471 (cell), or pj mellana@agol.com

CONSENT:
I have been asked to participate in a research study that investigates leadership transition, the best practices for leaders during this form of organizational change, as well as common mistakes leaders should avoid. The goal of the study is to conduct an assessment of the City of Bellflower Department of Parks and Recreation, which will be experiencing a transition within the next twenty-four months with the imminent retirement of the current director.

In participating in this study I agree to complete a survey consisting of open-ended questions and “ranking system” questions. In addition I agree to participate in a follow-up interview if needed for my survey. I agree to complete this survey by Friday, August 17, 2007 at 5:00 p.m.

I understand that:

a) There are no risks of this procedure.
b) Although there may be no direct benefit to me, the possible benefit of my participation is to the City of Bellflower’s Department of Parks and Recreation. From this study, best practices directly relating to the organization’s current situation may be identified and aide in a successful transition for the organization.
c) I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences.
d) I understand that the investigator may stop the study at any time.
e) I also understand that
   i. Personal anonymity will be guaranteed, directly linking myself with answers given.
   ii. Research list of interviewees may be reviewed by the Director of Parks and Recreation.
   iii. All of my answers and final results of research data will be used for presentation and publications.
iv. As the data is presented, I can choose to be identified as the source of that information for group discussion purposes.

f) If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.

g) I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Provost, National University, 11255 North Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla, CA 92037; Telephone (858) 642-8125.

h) I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form.

i) I understand the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained;

j) I understand whom to contact for answers to questions about the research and research subjects’ rights, or in the event of a research-related injury;

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form.

_________________________________________  _____________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party    Date

__________________________________________ _____________________
Signature of Witness        Date

__________________________________________ _____________________
Signature of Investigator       Date
Appendix B – Executive Leadership Group Interview and Ranking System

Top Tier Leadership Interview and Ranking System

The first step will be to conduct interviews with the retiring Director and his successor. During these interviews the line of questioning will be as follows:

1) What are the top three priorities an executive/leader entering in a new position should focus on during its first 90 days in order to increase its chances to succeed? (as asked in Appelbaum & Valero study, 2007)

2) What are the three most important mistakes you believe an executive/leader entering in a new position can do during its first 90 days in order to jeopardize its chance to succeed? (as asked in Appelbaum & Valero study, 2007)
   a. Answers will then be compared and contrasted with the Appelbaum study

3) Can you describe your own leadership style and how it contributes to the organization?

4) Thus far, what steps have been taken to prepare the organization for the upcoming transition?

5) What are the strengths of the organization?

6) What are the weaknesses of the organization?

7) In the next five years what opportunities do you forecast for the organizations?

8) In the next five years what threats must the organization be aware of?

9) What are your top interests for having the organization have a successful transition? For example in my project proposal I said the following can be assumed: 1) The director would like to retire with no worries, knowing that the foundation he set for the department will allow it to thrive and continue being a top-notch organization for generations to come. 2) The incoming director would like to begin her tenure as director by starting strong, building momentum and backing for a vision, enabling her and the team to build and grow the organization on the foundation set by the predecessor. Can these things be assumed, or are there other interests in mind as well?

10) What suggestions or systematic approaches would you recommend in order to continue the high standards of quality control within the department?

11) As of now, are there any major organizational changes that will come with a change in leadership?

In addition to the above open ended questions, I will also ask these subjects to rank the following lists. This then will be compared to the Appelbaum and Citrin study results.

Through research, the following seven (7) items have been identified as the most common traps for leaders during a transition. Please rank them from 1-7, 1 being the most critical item for leaders to be aware of and 7 being the least critical item for leaders.

- Becoming Isolated
- Coming in with “The Answer”
- Staying Too Long with the Existing Team
• Attempting Too Much
• Getting Captured by the Wrong People
• Setting Unrealistic Expectations
• Failing to Build Coalitions

The subjects will also be asked to comment on each item and how they feel the organization is prepared to avoid these common traps.

Through research, the following seven (7) items have been identified as success strategies for leaders during for transitions. Please rank them from 1-7, 1 being the most critical item for leaders implement and 7 being the least critical item for leaders.

• Leverage the Time Before Entry
• Organize to Learn
• Create a Personal Vision
• Secure Early Wins
• Build Winning Coalition
• Lay a Foundation
• Manage Himself/Herself

Again, the subjects will also be asked to comment on each item and how they feel the organization is prepared to implement these strategies.
Appendix C – Critical Leadership Group Questionnaire and Ranking System

In addition to the Director and Assistant Director, key leadership staff identified by the Directors (retiring/successor) will be sent a questionnaire with the following questions. The number of individuals being sent this survey will be between 7 and 10.

1) What leadership qualities of the current director do you feel enable the organization to be successful?
2) On a scale of 1-5, how prepared is the organization for the retirement of director? 1 being completely prepared, 5 being completely unprepared at this point. Please comment as to why you feel this way.
3) What do you feel can be done to better prepare the organization for a transition in leadership?
4) What are the strengths of the organization?
5) What are the weaknesses of the organization?
6) In the next five years what opportunities do you forecast for the organization?
7) In the next five years what threats must the organization be aware of?

Through research, the following seven (7) items have been identified as the most common traps for leaders during a transition. Please rank them from 1-7, 1 being the most critical item for the new director to be aware of and 7 being the least critical item for the new director to be aware of.

- Becoming Isolated
- Coming in with “The Answer”
- Staying Too Long with the Existing Team
- Attempting Too Much
- Getting Captured by the Wrong People
- Setting Unrealistic Expectations
- Failing to Build Coalitions

Through research, the following seven (7) items have been identified as success strategies for leaders during for transitions. Please rank them from 1-7, 1 being the most critical item for the new director to implement and 7 being the least critical item for the new director to implement.

- Leverage the Time Before Entry
- Organize to Learn
- Create a Personal Vision
- Secure Early Wins
- Build Winning Coalition
- Lay a Foundation
- Manage Himself/Herself
Appendix D – IRB approval letter

(signed copy on file)

August 10, 2007

Mr. Paul Mellana
14502 Cabell Ave.
Bellflower, CA 90706

RE: Request for Human Subject Research IRB Expedited Review

Dear Mr. Mellana:

Title of Project: Leadership Transition: How Leaders and Their Organizations Can Survive a Change at the Top

Based on an expedited review of the project received by the IRB on 8/3/07, and the requested information provided, the National University IRB subcommittee has made the following findings:

This project has been approved.

Thank you for your cooperation in this process. The IRB committee looks forward to your successfully completing your research and providing an electronic abstract of the results of your research to mhazzard@nu.edu for your IRB file.

Sincerely,

Mary E. Hazzard, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
National University 11255 North Torrey Pines Road
La Jolla, Ca. 92037
Phone: 858-642-8361
FAX 858-642-8729
Email: mhazzard@nu.edu

Cc: Dr Daniel Mayer