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# Founder-Leader Transitions: The Role of Succession Planning in Nonprofit Organizations

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FOUNDER-LEADER TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF SUCCESSION PLANNING IN  
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

JOANNE V. KOSCIOLEK

Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Leadership

AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

2006

MASTER OF ARTS IN LEADERSHIP  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

FOUNDER-LEADER TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF SUCCESSION PLANNING IN  
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

JOANNE V. KOSCIOLEK

JULY 31, 2006

- Thesis
- Leadership Application Project
- Non-Thesis (ML597) Project

There are both opportunities and challenges associated with executive transitions. Succession planning is becoming an increasingly significant topic for many nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities. The retirement of the large generation of baby-boom leaders during the next decade is likely to have a direct impact on the capacity of organizations to sustain their work. This is especially critical for smaller organizations and those with founders or long-term executive directors who leave. These leaders have shaped their organizations throughout their tenure and are seen as synonymous with their organizations. Founders and long-term executives have a strong presence and vision for an organization, but when their time has come to move on, it's critical to be prepared for the transition. Understanding the traits of founders and long-term executives, and knowing how to engage the next generation of leaders can facilitate a positive transition, which creates a sustainable organization. This study examines the factors that are critical for successful leadership transition planning in nonprofit organizations with founders or long-term executives.

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# FOUNDER-LEADER TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF SUCCESSION PLANNING IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

## Introduction

Human capital is an organization's most important asset, but it is often overlooked. In the constant effort to develop a strong, capable workforce, organizations tend to focus more on hiring and training. They neglect succession planning, which is an essential ingredient in building an organization that is capable of sustaining its success and attaining long-term strategic goals. This planning is especially important for smaller nonprofit organizations and in organizations with a founder or a long-term executive director who leaves. Succession planning has become a common topic in Twin Cities' nonprofits due to the impending retirement of many baby-boom generation leaders.

Succession planning is a deliberate process that prepares for the impending departure of a founder or long-term executive director so the organization can continue to be successful as a new leader assumes the responsibilities. It prepares an organization for a leadership transition to ensure the organization will be sustained beyond the tenure of the founder or long-term executive.

Succession planning is more than just an organizational chart depicting who holds what job within an organization. It is a dynamic and continuous process, requiring a focused strategy that aligns organizational goals and human capital. For the purposes of this research, succession planning is a method to ensure that leaders are identified and prepared to replace founders to ensure the continuity and appropriate skill level as the organization evolves. These changes can be routine departures such as retirement, but can also consist of non-routine departures due to sudden or unexpected absences of the executive director.



There are situations where long-term executives and founders become very comfortable in their positions, facing a variety of challenges everyday as the organization experiences a shift. Some of these changes can be difficult to deal with for founders whose charisma and vision have made the organization a success. Change is inevitable and an organization that develops an effective succession plan will survive a founder's or long-term executive's departure.

In this study, I explore the rationale for organizations dealing with a leadership transition to develop a succession plan. I examine what constitutes an ideal leadership transition for nonprofit organizations with a founder or long-term executive so succession planning can happen in a purposeful and non-threatening manner. Lastly, I suggest an ideal leadership transition model that includes a variety of components that can assist any organization experiencing a transition.

### Literature Review

In this review, I discuss the literature related to the stages of organization development, positive and negative traits of founders, executive tenure and experience, expansion of the talent pool, and steps required to embrace change as a leadership transition takes place. The literature chosen in each of these areas helps to establish a rationale for understanding the importance of succession planning for leadership transitions, particularly those organizations with founders and long-term executives.

#### *Stages of Organization Development*

Change is inevitable; transitions are occurring everyday. Understanding organization life cycle changes is important because leaders play a specific role in each stage of development. Leadership changes are necessary to move an organization through its life cycle, especially when

it is a founder-leader or long-term executive transition. Each stage depicts the life journey with many choices, challenges, and obstacles along the way (Simon, 2001). As founders or long-term executives transition out of the organization, it's critical to determine what life stage is best for a leadership change.

All organizations experience different stages of development. In particular, many nonprofit organizations begin with a single, visionary leader who shows the way. According to Staughan (2004), the first stage is when a leader's idea is formed into an organization, using mostly volunteers with a fairly informal structure. The second stage is a time when staff is hired and a systematic, effective process is developed for the board and staff to work with each other. This can be a chaotic phase as board members are recruited and roles become more clearly defined. The third stage is when the board begins to undertake the role of governing the organization to ensure effective systems are in place as the program grows. The executive becomes removed from the direct service component of the work, spending more time managing staff and board, raising money, and performing administrative functions. This can be a difficult time for founders since they begin moving away from the central work and why they founded the organization in the first place. The final stage of an organization's development is when the work becomes institutionalized and responsibilities become clear among staff. The organization has now reached a stage of maturity, achieving influence in the community and benefiting from the synergy it has created.

Organizational stages are not just about growth. Another model described by Simon (2001), has five stages that include similar stages to the three discussed above, as well as two additional ones. Simon's depiction of the final two stages includes a phase for sustaining the momentum of the organization and time to recommit to the mission. The shift to stage four is

likely when a founder begins to struggle with his or her role due to a variety of obstacles that must be overcome. Simon says these obstacles include “lack of control or too much control by organizational leadership, lack of risk-taking, and a conflict between the old and new” (p. 26). Once an organization reaches stage five, there can be a resistance to change, resulting in isolation of the organization. These final stages are difficult to reach with a founder who sees the growth as an obstacle rather than an opportunity to build and sustain the organization. However, this is not a good time for a founder to leave.

Founders spend most of their energies in the first stage focusing on cause and mission (Linnell, 2004). Linnell found this stage to be where founders thrive because the success of the organization and leader is measured by its results. Roles are often loosely defined because the staff is small and communication comes naturally. However, over time, the organization begins to expand and an increase in investment eventually leads to the development of policies and systems to manage the growth. Some founders see moving into this next stage as a waste of their time because it takes them away from the mission work of the organization. At this point, a founder-led organization needs to decide whether it can continue or is limited by the founder’s capabilities. There are challenges at this stage because of the gap between the mission and the development of systems. This is the point at which the characteristics of the founder make a difference in the decision to move the organization forward, with or without the leader.

#### *Founder-Leader Traits: Positive and Negative*

The number of nonprofit organizations has grown tremendously over the past few decades. According to the Minnesota Nonprofit Economy Report (Pratt, 2001), 5,940 new nonprofit organizations registered with the Minnesota Attorney General’s office in the year 2000. Many of the leaders of these nonprofits founded their organizations by taking their

passion and turning it into a mission. They also had the skills to build the people support and basic nonprofit structure to implement their passion (Linnell, 2004).

There are differing ways of looking at founders, some positive and some negative. Founders can be seen as entrepreneurs who possess the skills to develop plans and guidelines, make decisions, and embrace change. They see a cause or injustice and begin to devise ways to address the issue. On the other hand, founders can also be seen as individualistic, controlling, afraid to let go of the past, and skeptical about devising policies and procedures.

According to Stevens (1999), “founders have a calling, a mission, an internal mandate fueled by classic entrepreneurial characteristics: energy, drive, intensity, self-determination, and urgency” (p. 2). In her article, Stevens writes about the many positive attributes of founders in their abilities to challenge conventional methods and systems and to constantly try new things, knowing they are never satisfied because the work will never be done. They have a sense of pride for their organization and its work, especially at the forming stage. Stevens believes that founders do not necessarily disrupt their organization’s growth and development. Her personal experience suggested that “successful founders are those who learn to adapt to their organization’s ever-changing life-cycle needs” (p. 2).

McNamara (1999), in his booklet about *founder’s syndrome*, discusses many of the negative traits of founders and their affect on an organization’s sustainability. He defines the syndrome as something that occurs when “the organization operates primarily according to the personality of the prominent person in the organization” (para. 1). The author clearly states that this syndrome is an organizational problem, not a problem of the person in the prominent position.

McNamara (1999) discusses the founder's characteristics throughout his or her tenure, how to transition to a new executive, and the actions a board and new executive can take once a transition occurs. He says that the time for a founder to depart is when his or her dream has become real; the dream has created an organization that someone else needs to move forward. However, a good leader will acknowledge the importance of creating a transition plan that will ensure the organization's sustainability well into the future. The board also plays a key role in identifying what it needs in a new executive and choosing a successor who can manage the change.

There are positives and negatives to every type of leader and leadership style. Founders have positive traits that are difficult to duplicate. Their entrepreneurial spirit has created a number of nonprofit organizations dealing with a variety of societal issues. Founders can be successful when they learn to adapt to the ever-changing life cycle needs of their organization (Stevens, 1999). The charismatic traits of founders can become negative characteristics because their passion is so intense that developing policies and procedures can get lost. Their passion and personality takes on a life of its own and establishes a unique style of leadership.

#### *Executive Tenure and Experience*

A variety of studies have been conducted to show that current executive directors will soon be transitioning out of their jobs due to the aging of the baby-boom generation. This shift in the labor force is changing nonprofit leadership, causing an impact on capacity. By 2008, there will be three million less available workers between the ages of 25 and 44 (Dohm, 2000).

In order to explore the impact of this shift on community-based organizations, Adams and Associates (2001) sent out a web-based survey to 208 organizations and achieved a response rate of 51% (106 organizations). Their study found that 32% of the executives were founders.

The proportion of founder executives was directly related to the size of the organization: 15% of organizations with budgets over \$1 million are currently lead by founders, while 48% with budgets less than \$500,000 are currently lead by founders. Founders are more likely to be leading smaller nonprofit organizations, which pose additional challenges such as access and the need for resources to support a transition. In addition, smaller nonprofit organizations do not necessarily have the infrastructure to support a leadership transition. It could be more difficult for a founder to decide when and how to move on and for the board to plan a successful transition to new leadership. The prevalence of smaller organizations headed by founders emphasizes the need for a flexible approach to transition planning.

Peters, Wolfred, Allison, Chan, Masaoka, and Llamas (2001) and Wolfred, Allison and Masaoka (1999) examined tenure and the career paths of 1,209 nonprofit executive directors in five regions of the United States. Both studies (Peters et al., 2001; Wolfred et al., 1999) found that 65% of responding executives were first-time directors. In addition to finding a high percentage of first-time executives, both studies found that nearly one-half of the executives were in their positions for less than four years (Peters et al.; Wolfred et al). These findings do not bode well for an area that relies on relationship building as a key skill of the executive director. A shorter tenure does not provide the opportunity to develop, manage and retain important relationships.

The combined findings of the 1,209 nonprofit leaders revealed that less than one-half of the current executive directors plan to choose another executive director position. The reasons for their disinterest are related to high stress, long hours, and concerns about fundraising (Peters et al., 2001). This also relates directly to the loss of talented workers as the baby-boom generation ages and retires. The issue is important because of the potential time lag that can

occur between an executive leaving and his or her replacement being hired. There is a learning curve for anyone taking on a new position, so it's important to understand that the new leader will not be producing at the same level as the previous executive. This costs money because of the decreased efficiencies as a new executive becomes familiar with the position and the organization.

In addition, each study looked at age categories, although the ranges were different. In the larger study of 1,072 executives, 70% of the executives were between 40 and 59 years old (Peters et al., 2001). In the smaller study of 137 nonprofits, 29% of the executives were between the ages of 47 and 51, the leading edge of the baby-boom generation, and another 16% were ages 52 and older (Wolfred et al., 1999). This group of nonprofits has 45% of its leaders who will be transitioning out of their roles in the not too distant future. In yet another study of 208 community-based organizations in Maryland, 65% of the respondents were over the age of 50 (Adams & Associates, 2001). This information reinforces the argument that a major talent loss and generational change is beginning and will continue over the next ten years.

What is the past experience or background of executive directors? The study conducted by Peters et al. (2001) found that, of the 1,072 organizations, only 36% of the executives were promoted from within, while 64% of them were recruited from outside their agencies. Of those who were promoted from within, many of them indicated they were in a program-related or direct-service position in the organization. Of the executives hired from outside the organization, 39% had previous management experience in for-profit, whereas 21% had previous management experience in government (Peters et al.). The study also found that the majority of executives who responded took the job because of the organization's mission and their desire to give back to their community. The executive's interest to find meaning and contributing to a social cause

outweighed even pay and benefits when accepting the position. Therefore, when attracting the next generation of leaders, it is important to emphasize the mission and values, not just the desired skills and job components (Peters et al.). In today's world where work is fluid and organizations are flatter, it's important to identify an entire pool of talented people to choose from for specific leadership positions (Byham, 1999).

### *Expanding the Talent Pool*

Over the past 30 to 40 years, the baby-boom generation has been a dominant force in leadership and social change within nonprofit organizations. As this generation begins to move towards retirement, it is certain that nonprofit organizations must make room for a new generation of leaders who can continue the work. A 2004 survey sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation of 360 nonprofit organizations in the Greater Milwaukee area found that 66% of respondents would experience a leadership transition in five years. It is also worth noting that 56% of respondents have already had a leadership transition in the past 10 years (Teegarden, 2004). It is evident that executive transitions will continue to increase as these leaders retire or pursue different interests.

Teegarden (2004) looked at the stability and potential transitions that will occur in the next 10 years, as well as the demographic make-up of current executives. She found that the average nonprofit executive in the Milwaukee area is a white woman in her 50s, with 26% of them founders of their organizations. The ethnic make-up of these executives depicted a large percentage (84%) as white, with 46% of them serving primarily white communities, while 23% serve mostly African American and 23% serve mixed communities. The concept of trying to recruit leaders of color as this shift occurs is another issue that must be considered.



Teegarden (2004) also examined the career paths of executives and found a similar percentage as Peters et al. (2001), with 60% in their role for the first time. Finally, her study looked at the number of organizations that had already experienced a transition and whether any of them had a succession plan in place. She found that “most organizations appear to approach change in the executive director from a search and hire framework as opposed to a transition management approach” (p. 3). Many of the organizations surveyed had not even thought of developing a succession plan. The fact that leaders haven’t even considered a succession plan is evidence that this is an area requiring attention.

### *Leadership Requirements*

In order to carry out a smooth leadership transition, organizations will need to assess generational values and differences in leadership styles. “Younger people want more space/time out of work for family and friends. Older leaders have often merged personal and professional realms and are now in a life stage in which these issues don’t predominate” (Kunreuther, 2005, p. 8). So what do organizations do to attract the younger generations to leadership positions? Kunreuther recommends a variety of approaches including:

1. invest in younger leaders...
2. identify and nurture more leaders of color...
3. make it viable for directors to leave...
4. broaden sites of intergenerational discussion...
5. examine current organizational structure and expectations...
6. promote a healthier balance between work and personal/family life. (p. 4)

These recommendations are all proactive methods for current leaders to better engage the next generation of leaders. These steps are crucial as the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins to unfold. The

leaders of the baby-boom generation must now look to the next generation of leaders who can influence and guide their important work. A mentor program could be one way to ease the transition process so outgoing founders or executives feel confident to leave the ongoing work of the organization to a competent and passionate leader. It is never too early to begin planning, but it's also critical to recognize the changes in organizational structures. Succession management may be a better way to identify a pool of candidates with high leadership potential, rather than focusing on just one or two individuals.

### Research Purpose and Questions

Leadership transitions of founders or long-term executives of nonprofit organizations are on the rise as the baby-boom generation begins to retire or pursue other interests. This study uses a qualitative approach to deepen an understanding of why founder-led nonprofits, or those with a long-term executive, must engage in succession planning. Transitions of founders or long-term executives do not need to create a crisis. Transitions will occur, so it is best to leverage the shift in a way that helps an organization fulfill its mission. This research also hopes to clarify the ideal tenure of a founder so a leadership transition allows the organization to grow and thrive even after the founder leaves. Lastly, the research should assist other nonprofits that might be dealing with an impending leadership transition to better understand the positive role a founder or long-term executive can play.

This study is intended to answer the following questions:

1. What are the leadership traits of founders/long-term executives?
2. What are the leadership traits of successors?
3. How did organizations manage the transition process?

4. Is there a model transition process to assist other organizations?

By answering these questions, I hope to clarify how to best implement succession planning among nonprofit organizations; especially among those that have a founder or long-term executive transitioning out. The results of this study will clarify the importance of planning and developing sound practices to assist the organization through a leadership transition.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, I interviewed founders or long-term executives and their successors in six nonprofit organizations. This section summarizes the sample, measurement, procedures, and data analysis used.

*Sample*

The sample for this study consists of the founders or long-term executives and their successors from six Twin Cities' nonprofit organizations that have experienced an executive leadership transition within the past seven years. It was critical to get the approval of both leaders (founder/long-term executive and successor) from the same organization to complete the process.

The organizations were chosen after contacting the Center for Nonprofit Management at the University of St. Thomas. The center has been working extensively with organizations around the issue of leadership transition. I met with the director of the program at St. Thomas to create a list of organizations who recently experienced a leadership transition. In addition, I contacted Linda Tacke of Leadership Tactics, who has helped organizations through transitions, to identify additional potential organizations. The initial list consisted of 18 nonprofit organizations and names to contact.

From this list, I began making phone calls to request participation in the study. Key criteria in choosing the organizations were that the transition had occurred within the past seven years and that both the founder/long-term executive and the successor participate in this study. In two cases, the successor was interested in participating, but the founder/long-term executive was not. Of the six leaders chosen, three were founders and three were long-term executives. In addition, I made an effort to include men and women, as well as reflect diversity among the interviewees. There were a total of twelve interviews conducted, representing six different nonprofit organizations.

### *Measurement*

Measurement in this study consisted of the qualitative responses to personal interviews (see Appendix B). The interview involved four questions each to the founder/long-term executive and his or her successor. Each interview was conducted separately and privately. To identify leadership traits, I asked the founders to focus on their role in starting the organization. I listened to their stories about how the organization was founded and the experiences they had throughout their tenure. The long-term executives spent more time discussing their experiences and changes, although their stories about growing the organization were similar to the founders. I also asked them how they knew it was time to leave and what factors made the decision easier or harder. Based on their responses, I was able to see similar leadership traits among the founders and long-term executives.

To clarify the transition process, I asked the founders/long-term executives to evaluate the leadership transition from their perspective. What went well, what could be improved, and what would they have done differently? Their answers provided insight into how they each managed the transition process. In addition, I probed about the overall interview process to select

a successor, their level of involvement, and if they mentored any internal staff; especially if there was an internal person who was being groomed to take on the leadership role. This information was compared to what the successors said to determine consistencies or inconsistencies into each individual's viewpoint on the process. These responses provided a summary of the leadership transition and what worked well and didn't work so well during the process.

The successors each had four questions that focused on their interest in the position and how they felt about following a founder or long-term executive. They each discussed with me the best things about assuming the position and some of the challenges. From their responses, I was able to determine similar leadership traits among these individuals; strengths they brought in assuming the key leadership position.

I also asked the successors to evaluate the leadership transition process from their perspective. When reviewing the data, I looked for similarities to the founder's or long-term executive's description, as well as differing responses. This helped to see the transition process from both perspectives and not just one-sided. These results gave me the information to develop an ideal transition process that can be flexible and unique to nonprofit organizations experiencing a shift.

### *Procedures*

The research involved face-to-face interviews lasting between 60 – 90 minutes. Prior to completing the interview process, I received approval from the Augsburg College Institutional Review Board (IRB); the application is included in Appendix A. I contacted each interviewee by phone or email to ask for their participation in the study by explaining the purpose of the research. Once the individual indicated an interest, I mailed or emailed the specific questions for the interview. Participants were told that the name of their organization and their name would be

kept confidential to reduce the risks involved in the study and to ensure honest responses. A meeting was arranged at a location, date, and time convenient for the interviewee. Before the interview started, the researcher reviewed the consent form (Appendix C) and asked each person to sign in agreement. The interviewees were also told they could withdraw from the study at any point; no one withdrew from the study.

My role in the interview process was to be an observer and listener. It was important that I develop a good rapport with the participants so they would answer the questions as honestly as possible. When conducting the interviews, I took hand-written notes of each participant's response to the four questions for founders/long-term executives and the four different questions for successors. After the interview was completed, I typed up each participant's comments verbatim. The participants were categorized by their organization first, then if they were the founder/long-term executive or the successor.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed using a qualitative research process through a phenomenological study. This form of analysis was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of each individual's perception and perspective of the leadership transition process. In reviewing the data, I looked for common themes among the participants. The documentation was categorized within those themes. Once that was completed, I reviewed the responses regarding their overall tenure in the leadership role. I identified trends, similarities, and differences based on the responses. The commonalities were counted by each occurrence in order to establish similar experiences by each of the participants. These descriptive results identified the common leadership traits of the founders/long-term executives and successors.

The data were also organized by each participant's depiction of the leadership transition process. This information provided a general summary of the transition process as experienced by the six different nonprofit organizations. The individuals interviewed all shared a similar phenomenon, the leadership transition, but each person provided a unique perspective to that experience. From their experiences, a model transition process was developed that could be duplicated and used accordingly by different nonprofit organizations.

## Results

### *Leadership Traits*

The results show some similarities and differences in the six nonprofit organizations that experienced a leadership transition. There are a number of leadership traits that each of these individuals demonstrate. In this section, I describe common leadership traits of the six founders/long-term executives and the six successors interviewed. For the founders and long-term executives, the responses are categorized into four common leadership traits based on the interview questions: visionary, charismatic, self-awareness, and mentor. For the successors, the responses are categorized into three common leadership traits based on the interview questions: visionary, emergent, and transformational. The common trait among both the founders and successors is visionary. This trait will be explained separately for founders and successors.

#### *Founders/Long-Term Executives*

##### *Visionary*

In order to get an idea about what precipitated the beginnings of their organizations, the researcher asked each leader to explain the history of their tenure. The combined number of years these six individuals served in leadership roles within their organizations was 116 years; an

average of 19.3 years each. These individuals are all leaders in their field, driven by the goals of mission, vision, and purpose.

The founders and long-term executives had a vision for the organization they created and developed throughout the term of their leadership. It was clear that they all shared a deep passion for the work of their organization. Three of the organizations began as grassroots' efforts to provide a service to the community that they felt was lacking. These three founders started their organizations informally at first. Their initial planning sessions were held casually, discussing the need that was missing. These discussions took place among friends and others who had an interest in their cause. The founders were not quite sure where it would lead them. These leaders clearly envisioned where the organization was going, but not necessarily how to get there. One founder shared that "within a couple of years, I realized there was a need to do more...a need for more resources to families." Another founder stated, "I was convinced nothing would happen if an organization wasn't formed." The third founder said "things were just happening and something more formalized had to be put in place."

They each have an entrepreneurial spirit that brought them the energy and drive to create a formalized structure to deliver services based on a need. Only one of the founders actually created the internal systems and a stable framework for getting the work done and sustaining the organization over time. The other two founders tried to develop systems, but their passion and energies were absorbed in the direct service work of the organization. The task of management can be difficult for founders because of the passion and personal connection they have for the cause. According to McNamara (1999), founders manage their organization according to their personality, which is "dynamic, driven, and decisive" (para. 6). They convey a clear vision for what the organization can be, and are passionate about the mission (McNamara, 1999). They had



a dream that needed to be turned into reality. The only way they could do that was to inspire others to see that dream and make it theirs.

The three long-term executives who each only followed two previous leaders had different experiences than the founders. Two of the three individuals assumed the executive director position after they were working within the organization in management positions. This was beneficial as they had served in leadership roles and helped to develop the systems and practices. They had the vision to manage change and bring the organization to a higher functioning level. The other long-term executive followed a founder, which required him to develop the systems to maintain the program focus. All three of these leaders have established stable organizations with solid infrastructures to build upon.

All of these executives were clearly called to their work. Their vision was transformed into a mission, which drives their energy and motivation to make a difference. They are true leaders whose ideas and dreams were turned into a reality that continues to serve the greater community.

### *Charismatic*

There is no question that founders and long-term executives have the leadership trait of charismatic. Their charm and personality draws people to them, which is critical in their quest to form organizations providing services. Throughout the interview process, I found myself drawn to these leaders to learn more about their work and vision. All three founders have strong, dynamic personalities that became synonymous with their organizations. They inspired others and created excitement around an issue they saw needed to be met.

Each of these founders saw an opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. They were able to effectively communicate a compelling vision of the future and develop trust among

others to support this vision. I recognized that these founders took personal risks and made sacrifices for others to believe in the achievement of their goals. They led by example, motivating everyone around them to sustain the work. They were relentless in their ability to promote the mission and vision of their organizations with unlimited energy. Their charisma and passion inspired both volunteers and staff to achieve amazing results that continue to grow. One founder stated the board “loves me, and they will do whatever I say.” He has put his heart and soul into fostering the work of the organization; he communicates well. People are drawn to him because of his personality and charisma; a common trait among all founders interviewed.

The three long-term executives interviewed were also charismatic, but in a little different way than the founders. They had strong, dynamic personalities, but were less effusive about their work. They took a more pragmatic approach to managing and leading the organization. This could be due to the fact that they each succeeded two different leaders prior to their tenure. The predecessors had set the direction of the organization, so they used their charisma in a more focused approach. Even though they were moving their organizations through growth and change, I observed less self-promotion. They were charismatic in their abilities to inspire and motivate followers, but it was more focused on managing, administering, and building on a solid vision. In comparison, the founders used their charisma to build organizations based on their vision. Their charisma was needed in all aspects of their leadership.

#### *Self-Awareness*

Self-awareness is an important trait for leaders to have, especially when it's time for a transition. This component is best described by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) in the theory of emotional intelligence, which includes competencies that incorporate managing yourself as well as managing relationships. Personal competence is one of the areas of emotional

intelligence that clarifies how leaders manage themselves. “Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, as well as one’s strengths and limitations and one’s values and motives” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 40). The founders and long-term executives were realistic and honest with themselves in making the decision to leave. In the case with the three founders and the three long-term executives, they had a tendency for self-reflection. They made the time to think things over and determine the best path for them and the organization. This self-awareness provided the opportunity to think things through rather than act impulsively.

Overall, the executives were able to assess their strengths and limitations; they had a strong sense of self-worth and knew their capabilities. One of the founders said he “wanted to get out of the way” because the organization needed to move forward without him. Another founder stated, “I was losing the mission-edge and just wasn’t as intense about the work.” This is best described by Goleman et al. (2002) in the trait of emotional self-awareness. These individuals were aware of their internal signals and recognized how their feelings affected job performance. All the executives also exhibited self-confidence in understanding their abilities and giving themselves permission to see new challenges outside their organization. This leadership trait is essential as they begin to let go of their passion and focus on the next stage of their career. The individuals interviewed were authentic and candid, providing the interviewer with a sense of their convictions toward a mission. They are truly inspirational people!

#### *Mentor*

The founders and long-term executives were definitely mentors throughout their tenure. They identified and mentored people who could assist them in their efforts. They each stated they liked to help people develop new skills, whether that was inside or outside the organization.

Most of the mentoring was informal, but as the founders and long-term executives made their decisions to leave, mentoring became a little more formalized in a few of the organizations.

One of the long-term executives hosted a leadership breakfast after he made the announcement that he was going to leave. It was an opportunity for staff to hear from him about the transition, but also to identify leaders within the organization. He was concerned that very few people would show up, but on the day of the breakfast more than 50 people attended. These results told him about the commitment of the staff and their desire to move ahead. He said, "I kept my eye on potential stars in the organization, no matter their level." In this case, the long-term executive is still mentoring the successor and expects to do so for the next 6-9 months. It is up to the successor to decide when the mentoring should end; the long-term executive has not established any timeframe for this process. The formalized approach is working and they meet twice per month to discuss issues that require his input and advice. It is an excellent opportunity to continue developing the skills of the successor and retaining the knowledge and expertise from the long-term executive. This may not work for everyone, because personality plays a huge role in a mentoring relationship. However, it has been successful for a number of the organizations that were interviewed.

### *Successors*

#### *Visionary*

The successors interviewed are also visionary leaders, but in a different way than the founders or long-term executives. According to Goleman et al. (2002), a visionary leadership style can transform the strength of an organization at a variety of levels. These organizations already had strong foundations, and the successors were all able to articulate their own vision to increase the capacity. The transition period allowed successors to review the long-term goals and

strategies of the organization, giving them the opportunity to develop buy-in from all employees. According to Goleman et al., “visionary leaders help people to see how their work fits into the big picture, lending people a clear sense not just what they do matters, but also why” (p. 57). Based on the interviews, the successors connected with other areas of the organization and have clearly communicated the overall goals during this new era of leadership. One successor explained how he aligned with the staff and took positive steps toward getting to know them and their work. This visible step helped to bridge a gap between board and staff, allowing everyone to clearly see the goals and objectives moving forward.

Another individual who succeeded a founder began working on a strategic plan with the board and staff. This helped to establish solid relationships with board members and staff, demonstrating her leadership skills. This organization needed more strategic positioning in the community with a greater focus. The successor wanted to “make things more ‘hers’”; she was not afraid to get out there and create a new image of the organization that was not synonymous with the founder. Her vision was to boost staff morale, gain a level of confidence, and keep everyone connected to the mission of the organization.

Another successor said the best part of assuming the job was the “ability to finally be in charge.” This individual had worked within the organization prior to being named the executive. She wanted to build on the successes of the organization, and the previous executive supported her vision for how the organization could grow; they had “compatible visions for the organization.” The overall operations of the organization did not change much, but this successor focused the initial vision on staffing needs. This allowed her to connect with staff and clarify where the organization was heading under her leadership. Relationships were already in place,

but as the new leader, this successor was able to solidify these and build a sense of commitment from both staff and board members.

### *Emergent*

The concept of emergent leadership has not received as much attention as other more traditional leadership traits. I saw this as a trait in the successors based on the definition of emergent leadership by Moss & Kent (1996) as a dynamic social process where a specific individual adopts the role as leader. This can be formal or informal, and in the case of the successors, they adopted the role as a leader formally through a selection process. However, they were all emerging leaders in their current area of work. These emergent leaders have many similar personality characteristics that were essential in taking on a new role. All of the successors were skilled at articulating and verbalizing their ideas about moving the organization forward; a critical characteristic of an emerging leader. Another trait includes their ability to pay attention to their own behavior based on information and signals from others. They have the ability to adapt their behavior in a way that best fits the needs of the organization. All of the successors interviewed were completely aware and concerned about the shift in leadership. They were attentive to the staff, board, and the greater community so people understood what was happening with the shift in leadership. One successor sent out monthly correspondence to staff about the transition so everyone had correct and updated information. Another successor talked personally to board members for feedback and so they could see the “new life” she was bringing to the organization.

It is interesting that all six successors were leaders in many other areas of their work prior to taking on the role of executive director. It’s worthy to note in the research that four of the six successors had worked very closely with the founder or long-term executive and emerged as the

most qualified candidate. These individuals redefined and rediscovered themselves to apply their traits and skills to a key leadership position within the organization. They exerted influence with other members of the organization to quell any fears or concerns about the leadership shift. One successor who was promoted from within said, “it was great to finally be in charge.” These individuals accepted different roles and relationships within the organization, emerging as the new leader with vision and focus.

*Transformational*

The successors have been leading their organizations anywhere from 5 months to 5 years. They have become transformational leaders by putting passion and energy into everything they do for the organization. This identified leadership trait encompasses both visionary and emergent leadership. Transformational leadership begins with developing a vision and communicating it to excite and motivate followers. Each of the successors has focused on continuously selling their vision so others can see how they fit into that plan. In a way, they have learned to sell themselves as well as the vision, developing their own integrity and skills as a part of the new path for the organization. They are looking forward and clearly defining a new and focused direction. However, the research shows that each of them understands there may be some curves and/or obstacles in the road, but they are relying on the board and staff to assist in navigating the changes. They have each taken charge and have set the tone by making personal connections to the board and staff. They are keeping their feet firmly on the ground by listening to any concerns or challenges. I observed an unwavering commitment to the work of the organization. They each identified areas where their expertise can help achieve greater results. They are dedicated to the success of the organization and understand the importance of action so others see progress.

One of the successors said “there was a lack of systems because so much was in the founder’s head.” This successor used her skills and expertise to gather information and now has “brought new life” to the organization. When she took the position, the board was shrinking. She has recruited new people to serve under her leadership, developing her own relationships separate from the founder. A different example of transformational is when two of the successors made physical transformations in their office when they took over as the leader. One successor painted the office a brighter color so people noticed a physical change in the office area. Another successor purchased new office furniture that fit her style rather than sitting at the previous executive’s desk. These are physical changes that play into the trait of transformational leadership. The changes are examples of how the organization is making a shift and others may see opportunities to transform themselves at the same time. As the organization continues to move through its life cycle, new responsibilities and positions will be created for staff. One successor stated, “a door opened to new opportunities.” She was able to push through difficult times to move the organization through to a new stage of its development.

#### *Transition Process*

In four of the six organizations, the founder or long-term executive gave at least a one-year notice of their departure. In the other two, less than a 6-month notice was given. However, of the four who gave a one-year notice, they all thought they were going to leave earlier than they did. One of the executives was going to give himself 10 years as the director, and then move on. He thought that was a good amount of time to achieve his goals and then allow for new leadership to move the organization to the next level. Surprisingly, he ended up staying 10 years beyond that original timeframe. One founder said, “it was time to go five years ago” yet he felt he needed to stay to raise money and stabilize the organization. Two executives felt the Board



was veering away from the initial mission and knew they could not stay because of the program shift. One founder tried to leave and ended up coming back as the executive director within a few months. The initial successor had the business skills, but not the passion for the mission. This executive stated, "I'm a steward of the culture I created." He did not feel he could make the transition until he "found a people-person" who had the same dedication to the mission as he did. The organization was his dream and it wasn't that easy to let go. This founder still works in the organization providing direct service to constituents, so he still hasn't been able to totally transition out of the organization.

The transition process was handled a little differently in each of the organizations. However, there were some similarities that included hiring a search firm, establishing a search committee, and no direct involvement in the hiring process by the current executive director. Four of the organizations used outside search firms to update the job description and develop a strong list of potential candidates (both local and national). Obviously, this is an expense that must be considered during a transition process. In addition, five organizations put together a selection committee that consisted of current and past board members. None of the organizations had any staff representation on this committee, but one organization established a representative employee group that reflected the staff to conduct one aspect of the candidate's interview process. One of the smaller organizations involved the entire staff in the interview and selection process. Otherwise, the other four organizations did not involve any staff in the selection process. Only one organization used an interim executive director, which was for 3 months until the permanent successor was hired.

Only one of the six founders or long-term executives was directly involved in the formal interview process for hiring their successor. This organization is still struggling with the

transition because the founder still works in the organization in a different role. In one organization, the executive met informally with the candidates for lunch during the final interview. This provided the candidates access to the executive director, but not in a formal interview.

The founders and long-term executives played various roles in the transition process. Two of the long-term executives and one of the founders stayed on after the successor was chosen for a period of time. Two of them are actually still working in the organization in different capacities. One of the long-term executives is involved in major gift fundraising work and the founder has moved into the program aspect, providing direct services to clients. In the case of the founder, he is struggling with his new role because he says, "I'm present, but absent." People see him everyday and his physical presence keeps him involved in the administrative work of the organization. He states, "I'm trying to make myself scarce and only come in when necessary." He's biding his time and has set a final date when he will permanently leave the organization. This founder stated, "This gift is not mine to keep...it's to pass it on. I'm trying to pass it on." The organization has been his dream and he wants to be sure it continues without him. According to this founder, the board is a little "stuck in the old ways." The current board chair has been around since the organization was founded and is in his 80's. The shift of him moving on could make a difference, but no one is asking him to leave. Therefore, this founder is having a hard time transitioning out of the organization and that is why he continues to work directly in the program area. There is a successor in place, but I have deduced that even though this founder is no longer leading the organization, he still needs to be there to ensure his dream continues. This is a hindrance to moving the organization to the next stage of development

development because his physical presence is so visible. There is little to no opportunity for the successor to emerge as the new leader to provide a new vision and focus for the organization.

Another interesting factor about the leadership transitions is that four of the six organizations transitioned the executive director position to an internal person. In one of the organizations, the person had served as a board member and then worked part-time in a staff position. This successor wasn't really interested in the position when the founder gave notice to leave because "the infrastructure was bad." But, this successor likes change and views it as a "door open to new opportunities." In the other three organizations, the successor held a leadership position within the organization working directly with the executive director. Two of these individuals didn't initially apply for the position. One was hoping the board or previous executive was going to ask her to apply, but they never did. This successor applied at the last minute because she was worried about the future of the organization and its direction. The other successor enjoyed being the number-two person in the organization, but the executive director kept telling her to apply. She finally realized "it was better to be the new executive director than have to work for a new one."

All of the successors admitted there were difficulties in following a founder or long-term executive. The biggest issues were around the lack of systems in the three organizations with founders. Most of the initial time spent as the new executive has been putting systems in place. There was so much information in the founder's heads that one successor said she "didn't even know what questions to ask." It's critical for founders and long-term executives to spend time documenting information to pass onto the next leader. During the timeframe before the executive has left the organization, the leader must develop a system to record as much of the information in his or her head as possible. This did not occur in any of the organizations interviewed;

however, five of the six founders/long-term executives made themselves available for many months after the transition. Two of the successors did not take advantage of this opportunity because they just wanted to move on. The other four successors continue their connections with the previous executive on an as-needed basis. Although, the more time that has passed since the succession took place, the less contact the successor has with the founder/long-term executive. In the two organizations where the executive is still employed in a different role, these individuals are available as much as needed. One wonders if it isn't time for them to move on and find roles in other organizations rather than the one they led. They need to consider "letting go" so the successor can move the organization forward with new leadership.

One founder discussed his role in the succession planning process: "my role is to build leadership and capacity to absorb change, rather than build an organization that cannot go on without me." This individual has a healthy perspective about the transition and what is needed for the organization to move ahead. It is an emotional process for both founders and long-term executives because their job was so much a part of their career and lives. The concept of "letting go" and finding ways to determine a valued role for the founder/long-term executive while supporting the successor is difficult.

In two of the organizations, the researcher felt the long-term executives easily made the transition and were able to move on. One of the long-term executives had a new role defined for himself, one that brought him closer to his original training. Another individual was ready for retirement. He said, "I wanted someone else to run the organization and didn't want to be around so people would ask 'what do you think?'" Two founders interviewed were able to let go because they realized it was time for a new challenge. During the transition process, one of the founders totally removed himself from staff and board so the successor could develop her

personal relationships and organizational goals. It was hard because of the “family atmosphere of the organization.” He established clear boundaries about his role once he left, and everyone adhered to his wishes. The other founder said, “I was burning out and wanted something different.” The organization wasn’t growing enough for her to take on new challenges. This founder received a new opportunity that took her out of the state. The physical departure in leaving town helped her to move onto other things. These individuals were able to cut their ties within a reasonable amount of time to let the organization move forward under new leadership.

One long-term executive and one founder are still struggling with letting go. These individuals are the ones that are still employed within their organizations, but in different roles. The researcher believes they both can move on because they have faith in the successors and their capabilities. Their physical presence keeps them engaged in the work, and they need to identify opportunities to provide their expertise in a way that helps them to move on.

#### Leadership Transition Model

There are so many factors that play a role in a leadership transition process. There is no right way to conduct a leadership transition. Every situation is unique and different depending on the complexity of the organization including the services, its size, the staff, and the role and make-up of board members. Also, every organization has values that contribute to the culture that must be considered during a transition period. Transitions are not about hiring someone that is exactly like the founder or long-term executive. It is hiring someone who can build on the successes of the leader to sustain and grow the overall work.

The stages of organizational development play a key role in determining an appropriate time for a founder or long-term executive transition. An organization’s life cycle does not have a pre-determined ending point or length of time within each stage. It is a journey with important

and crucial events occurring within different stages. Based on Simon's (2001) life stages of nonprofit organizations, founders can typically take an organization through the growth phase. However, once growth has occurred, it requires that systems be put into place. If there is no formalized system, it is difficult for an organization to move to the next phase with a founder. This might be a good time for a founder transition to take place. This was true of two of the organizations interviewed; the succession took place about mid-point in the growth phase. It was still difficult because the successors spent much of their time developing the systems. But, once in place, they could move to the next phase of sustainability and redesign. Some founders can reach the sustainability stage where additional staff leadership is developed to handle the additional responsibilities. This is a perfect stage for a transition to take place once the structure and systems are stabilized. This was true of the long-term executive transitions that took place. These organizations were towards the end of the sustainability stage, moving towards redesign.

Based on the interviews and research conducted, the following is a model that should help organizations experiencing a transition be successful. These are just suggestions and can be altered or enhanced based on the specific needs of an organization.

#### *Succession Planning*

Succession planning is more than just who takes on what roles. It is an ongoing process to identify individuals who could take on a variety of roles within the organization. It's essential to engage in this process for key leadership, but succession planning can be done within all levels of the organization. A key characteristic of a plan is to detail who will take on different roles of the executive's job. The other main aspect is developing staff for leadership roles. It is critical to engage in succession planning with the board and include this in annual executive evaluation discussions. In particular, a formalized process must be established to develop staff

leadership and capacity. This could consist of a mentoring program for all levels in the organization, as well as opportunities for staff to attend classes or workshops for career development. This formalized approach is an excellent incentive for employee retention, which is also critical for sustaining the organization's work.

#### *Notice of Intention to Leave*

The current leader should give a minimum of a 9-month notice about his or her intention to leave. This provides the needed time to understand and deal with the imminent changes for the organization. It is essential for the leadership of the organization to acknowledge that there is going to be change, now and in the future. It is rare that the same leader stays with an organization for the entire length of its existence. If they did, it's probably because they were unable to sustain the organization and it failed under their leadership. Therefore, another reason to begin succession planning is that change is unavoidable. It's easier to understand and deal with change when everyone is aware it's going to happen. A key factor during a leadership transition is to publicize the work of the organization more, instead of focusing on the founder or long-term executive. Developing a communications and public relations campaign can create greater visibility of an organization to the broader public.

#### *Organizational Audit*

The third action to take for a successful leadership transition is to audit organizational job descriptions and update them as needed. This is especially crucial for the executive director's job description, which may not have been updated since the individual was first hired into the organization. Major responsibilities probably haven't changed much, but refining overall responsibilities is helpful in order to move forward. This process also helps to clarify all the roles in the organization and how they will fit within the new leadership. One founder stated that his

job description changed dramatically compared to when he first started because other management staff now handled much of his initial responsibilities. The organization had grown tremendously since he first started, and the updated job description became much more concise and focused.

Leadership characteristics influence where an organization is at in its life cycle (Simon, 2001). The leadership traits identified of the founders and long-term executives depict qualities that can take an organization through a specific development stage. In particular, their visionary skills and charismatic personalities provide them opportunities to create, but not necessarily manage processes. It is important to recognize the key leadership traits of a successor that can move an organization to a different level within its life stage. Conducting a life stage assessment (Simon) is a way to help an organization plan for the future so leadership traits are matched with organizational needs.

#### *Hire Outside Search Firm*

The fourth point is to hire an outside search firm to assist in the selection process. The organizations that used an outside firm had more clarity about the selection process. The search firm also provided a more diverse pool of candidates and elevated the importance of the replacement position. Hiring a search firm demonstrates fairness in making all candidates, internal and external, go through the same process. It also provides an outsider's perspective about the culture of the organization that could be helpful to candidates. In conjunction with a search firm, organizing a search committee made up of current and past board members is another step in the transition model. These individuals know where the organization has been and where it's going in order to ascertain the right person for the position.



### *Staff Involvement*

Staff involvement is another critical piece to the transition process, and is the fifth point to an ideal transition. I interviewed a few organizations where staff did not have any role in the hiring process. This can create some difficulty for the successor when staff has no opportunity for buy-in to the process or the selection. A few key staff members should be chosen to participate in the interview process of the final candidates to provide the staff perspective. In addition, this enhances the succession planning process since other staff are able to participate in one component of the transition. It's also an opportunity to develop relationships with staff once the actual transition takes place.

### *Interview Process*

The sixth point is that the founder/executive director should not be a part of the formal interview process. This is especially true with founders, because they are just so personally invested in the organization, and it's difficult for them to be completely objective in choosing their replacement. For both the founders and long-term executives, they struggled personally because running their organization has always been what they did. One founder said "who am I if I'm not wearing this hat?" They can be nervous about what's going to happen to their dream. That leads back to the importance of auditing job descriptions so the responsibilities and requirements for the position are clearly articulated.

Planning for at least a two-month overlap between the current executive and the successor is another important point. Three of the organizations had some overlap, which provided greater cohesion to the transition. This is an opportunity for the successor to have access to the knowledge of the founder or long-term executive. One of the successors said "there was so much information in the founder's head; I didn't really know what questions to ask." The

opportunity for the previous executive to be accessible and physically present can truly make a difference for a successful transition. However, it's important to put a time limit on it and be sure there is a clean break. Otherwise, as is the case in two organizations interviewed, the executive finds other responsibilities or roles, and has not left the organization.

*Communicate, Communicate, Communicate*

Lastly, and the most important point of a successful transition, is to communicate continuously to staff and board about the process. It's essential that everyone has information about the transition timeline and process. This eliminates doubt and uncertainty about what is happening and how it affects them. One organization sent out monthly electronic updates to staff throughout all phases of the transition process. Once the successor was chosen, a recap of the entire process was communicated to the board and staff. Communication contributes to the overall succession planning process so all levels of the organization understand the level and degree of commitment to hire the most qualified candidate.

Conclusion

The topic of leadership transitions continues to be at the forefront of many nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities. The Center for Nonprofit Management at the University of St. Thomas has been holding succession planning workshops for the past three years. My research has shown that leadership transitions are happening all over the Twin Cities area. They are going to continue as the baby boom generation begins to retire and the labor market tightens. As identified by Bell, Moyers, Wolfred, and D'Silva (2006), this is especially true in smaller nonprofit organizations that lack the staffing depth to develop leaders inside the organization. Many organizations are more familiar with executive search rather than the concept of transition management. Of the organizations interviewed for this study, only two had an actual succession

plan in place. The reasons the other organizations didn't have one were similar to other studies done on leadership transitions (Teegarden, 2004); the majority hadn't really thought about it or were too busy to get it done. Due to the impending increase of retirements as the baby boomers age, as well as a decrease in the talent pool for qualified replacements, the issue of transition management and succession planning continues to pervade the nonprofit sector.

Though this study was limited to six nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities where both the founder/long-term executive and successor were interviewed, the findings identified key leadership traits consistent with the literature. In addition, the study verified significant factors and common themes as they related to transitions. This helped to develop an ideal model for a leadership transition that could be further researched.

Additional studies that could expand upon this research of leadership transitions are to investigate organizations that hired an interim director. Reviewing the role of an interim director and how that could improve the transition process could add to the leadership transition model articulated. Depending on the organizational development stage, an interim director could serve a unique role during a transition. In addition, linking specific leadership traits with an organization's life stage could prove beneficial. It's clear from the literature that characteristics of leaders affect an organization's life cycle. Connecting these two factors more formally could provide a greater understanding in choosing a successor.

Other research could be conducted on organizations that have formalized a staff development or mentoring program and how that contributed to a greater number of qualified internal candidates for leadership positions. It could also look at whether a staff development program made a difference in retaining employees. It is evident that there continues to be the issue of a declining pool of qualified leaders. Organizations are going to have to engage in staff

development in order to identify the right person for the job. Finally, a study of founders only from all areas of nonprofits around the country would be an interesting research project to get a greater understanding of how they view transitions. Since this was a small sample, a larger study of nonprofit organizations from different geographies could show different results.

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Appendix A – Institutional Review Board Approval Form

**Augsburg College Institutional Review Board**

**REQUEST FOR APPROVAL FOR THE USE OF  
HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

**1. Project Title:**

Founder-Leader Transitions: The Role of Succession Planning in Nonprofit Organizations

**2. Principal Investigator** Joanne Vnak Kosciolek  
(first middle last)

Telephone number (area code) 612-408-3819  
College department name Masters of Arts in Leadership  
Investigator's address 2508 Quentin Court  
St. Louis Park, MN 55416

(Signature) \_\_\_\_\_

(For IRB Use Only) Approval # _____ IRB Chair: _____
------------------------------------------------------------

Campus Box \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: jokoss@usfamily.net

**3. Check one:**

- Faculty / staff research
- Fellow / post doctoral
- Student Research
- Undergraduate
- Graduate

**4. If principal investigator is a student:**

Advisor's Name: Dan Hanson  
Address: Music 25A  
Department: Communications  
Telephone: 612-330-1540

**5. Applications for approval to use human subjects in research require the following assurances and signatures to certify:**

- The information provided in this application form is correct.
- The Principal Investigator (PI) will seek and obtain prior written approval from the IRB for any substantive modification in the proposal, including, but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators, agencies as well as changes in procedures.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study will be promptly reported.
- Any significant new findings which develop during the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the IRB and to the subjects.
- The research may not be initiated until final written IRB approval is granted.
- Data collection may begin only after IRB approval is given.

This research, once approved, is subject to continuing review and approval by the IRB. The PI will maintain records of this research according to IRB guidelines.

If these conditions are not met, approval of this research could be suspended.

Signature of Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Research:** As academic advisor to the student investigator, I assume responsibility for insuring that the student complies with College and federal regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research:

Signature of Academic/Thesis Advisor \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Note:** If the faculty member supervising student research is not a full-time Augsburg employee, the proposal must be signed by the Department Chair, who, together with the part-time employee, assumes responsibility for compliance.

Signature of the Department Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Faculty/Staff Research:** As department chair, or designee, I acknowledge that this research is in keeping with the standards set by our department and assure that the principal investigator has met all departmental requirements for review and approval of this research.

Signature of Department Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



**6. Checklist for Investigators**

(application will be returned if not complete)

- \_\_\_ (1) This application includes a lay abstract stating the purpose of the study.
- \_\_\_ (2) The application describes the study population, inclusion/exclusion criteria, process of identifying subjects, etc.
- \_\_\_ (3) The abstract includes a description of tasks the subjects will be asked to complete.
- \_\_\_ (4) The application includes a full description of anticipated risks and benefits of study participation.
- \_\_\_ (5) Provisions have been made to minimize risks and those procedures are outlined on the form.
- \_\_\_ (6) Provisions have been made and documented to care for subjects in case of accident or injury.
- \_\_\_ (7) Procedures to maintain confidentiality have been fully described.
- \_\_\_ (8) Provisions have been made to obtain informed consent from all individuals related to the study. (e.g., parents, subjects, cooperating institutions, etc.)
- \_\_\_ (9) All questions on the form have been completed.
- \_\_\_ (10) All supporting documents have been attached, including protocol, survey instruments, interview schedules, solicitation letters, advertisements, consent forms, etc. **Supporting documents must be in final form as you intend to distribute them. Your application will be returned if these documents are in outline or first draft form.**
- \_\_\_ (11) If this study requires approval of another committee or cooperating agency, documentation of approval or notice of application has been attached.
- \_\_\_ (12) Appropriate departmental signatures and signature of academic advisor for student research have been obtained on Pg 1.
- \_\_\_ (13) A copy of this application has been made for the investigator's records.
- \_\_\_ (14) I request blind review. I have omitted all identifiers from copies submitted. (Original copy contains all names for IRB file.)
- \_\_\_ (15) The application is in the same page format as shown in this electronic word processing file. The location of questions and pagination is the same as in the original.
- \_\_\_ (16) Any unanticipated problem involving risk to subjects or noncompliance with regulations regarding subjects must be reported immediately to the IRB.
- \_\_\_ (17) If the research period is longer than 11 months, the IRB must review the research project again.
- \_\_\_ (18) Some projects that are either complicated procedurally or are of a long duration may require verification that no material changes have occurred since the IRB review.
- \_\_\_ (19) Any changes in approved research protocols must be reported promptly to the IRB and may not be initiated until IRB approval except when necessary to address immediate hazards to subjects.
- \_\_\_ (20) I attach 10 copies for full review applications **or** three copies for expedited applications **or** two copies for exempt applications, including any attached instruments and materials.

**You must make a preliminary judgment about the level of review required for your application. The chair will then determine the level of review after submission and contact you if additional copies are required.**

Completed, *typewritten* forms should be returned to:

Augsburg College Institutional Review Board  
c/o Norma Noonan, Ph.D., chair  
2211 Riverside Avenue, Campus Box 107  
Minneapolis MN 55454-1351

Telephone: 612-330-1198

7. **Project title** Founder-Leader Transitions: The Role of Succession Planning in Nonprofit Organizations

**Inclusive dates of project:** November 15, 2005 to May 1, 2006

8. **Project** (please circle): **has been / will be submitted to the following funding agency:**

N/A

**Funding decision** (please circle): **is pending / has been awarded.**

Agency-assigned grant number (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

If this study is part of a program or center grant, provide the title and principal investigator:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. **Is this research subject to review by another internal committee of the College?**

No  Yes: If yes, attach documentation of approval.

Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

10. **Is this research conducted at another location or with a cooperating organization, e.g., schools, clinics, community agencies, etc.?**

No  Yes: If yes, provide written documentation of approval from that institution.

Specify: Interviews may be conducted at founder's or successor's nonprofit organization. See consent form for documentation of approval.

**CHECK REVIEW CATEGORY BELOW:**

11.  This research requires **full review** by the Institutional Review Board.

12.  **Expedited Review** (see Application Information on page ii): This research fits the precise requirements of category \_\_\_\_\_ of the expedited review provision of 45 CFR 46.110." The research could be considered of "minimal risk" to participants based on those guidelines.

13.  **Exemption category:** (See Application Information on pages iii and iv.): This research fits the precise requirements of category 2 of the exemption categories of 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Exempt applications only categories 4-6:

**Exempt Category #4: Pathological Specimens**

All pathological specimens should be stripped of identifiable information prior to use. Describe the source of the specimens. How will they be obtained? If not obtained by the principal investigator, then by whom?

**Exempt Category #5: Public Service programs**

In addition to the information provided under *abstract*, above, provide documentation or cooperation from the public agency involved in the research.

**Exempt Category #6: Taste Testing**

Food ingredients must be at or below the levels found to be safe by federal regulatory agencies. Describe the food to be tested and provide assurance that these conditions are met.

#### 14. Lay Summary

The purpose of this is to inform the IRB about your research in order to assess its risks and benefits. Describe your research project using lay language--language understood by a person unfamiliar with the area of research. Include your research question and methods to be used (hypothesis and methodology). Provide the justification for the research (what is the need or problem being addressed by the study, why this research should be done). Describe in detail the tasks subjects will be asked to complete/what subjects will be asked to do.

There are both opportunities and challenges associated with executive transitions. Succession planning is becoming an increasingly significant topic for many nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities. The retirement of the large generation of baby-boom leaders during the next decade is likely to have a direct impact on the capacity of an organization to sustain its work. This is especially critical for smaller organizations and those with founders or long-term executive directors who leave. Founder-leaders have shaped their organizations throughout their tenure and are seen as synonymous with their organizations. Founders have a strong presence and vision for an organization, but when their time has come to move on, it's critical to be prepared for the transition. Understanding the traits of founders and knowing how to engage the next generation of leaders can facilitate a positive transition, which creates a sustainable organization.

Leadership transitions of founders or long-term executives of nonprofit organizations are on the rise as the baby-boom generation begins to retire or pursue other interests. The purpose of this research study is to deepen an understanding of why founder-led nonprofits must engage in succession planning. Transitions of founders or long-term executives do not need to create a crisis. Transitions will occur, so it is best to leverage the shift in a way that helps an organization fulfill its mission. This research also hopes to clarify the ideal tenure of a founder so a leadership transition allows the organization to grow and thrive even after the founder or long-term executive leaves. Lastly, the research should assist other nonprofits who might be dealing with an impending leadership transition to better understand the positive role a founder can play.

Interviews will be conducted by the researcher with the founder or long-term executive and the successor of a nonprofit organization. Each individual will be interviewed independently and with a different set of questions. The following are the questions that will be asked of each participant:

**Founder:**

1. When was the organization founded? What precipitated you starting the organization? What significant changes has the organization experienced since it was first started?
2. When did you realize it was time to leave? Were there any particular factors that made the decision easier or harder to leave? What role do you play now in the organization?
3. Evaluate your leadership transition/succession. What went well? How could it have been improved? What would you have done differently? Is successor still in position?
4. Were any steps taken to develop staff within the organization to take over your role? What was the process to recruit, assess, and select your successor? What role did you play to mentor your successor in this position?

**Successor:**

1. What interested you most in this position? What kind of research did you do in order to learn about the organization and the founder?
2. Did you have concerns about following a founder? If so, what were those concerns? What was the best part of assuming the position and what were some of the challenges?
3. Describe the interview and selection process that you experienced for this position. How did you feel about the process? Were the responsibilities of the position clearly identified? Was there a job description? Is it still current?
4. Evaluate the transition. What went well? How could it have been improved? What would you have done differently?

The results of these questions will be analyzed using a qualitative research process. This form of analysis was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the importance of succession planning. It will also help to identify the factors that determine a successful transition and further explore the effects on the organization once the founder or long-term executive has left.

15. **Subject Population (Please note all items: a-d)**

a. Number: Male      Female      Total 10

b. Age Range: 35 to 70

c. Location of Subjects:

(Check all that apply)

     elementary / secondary schools

     outpatients

     hospitals and clinics

     college students

     other special institutions: specify:

X Family service agencies/social service agencies

     other: specify: \_\_\_\_\_

d. Special Characteristics:

(Check all that apply)

     children

     inpatients

     prisons/halfway houses

     patient controls

X adult volunteers

- e. If research is conducted off-campus, written documentation of approval/cooperation from that outside agency (school, clinic, etc.) should accompany this application. Be sure all levels with this authority within the agency/organization have given approval.

Agency: Nonprofit organization where successor is the current executive director

Name and title of agency representative: Dependent on interviewee (see consent form)

- f. Describe how subjects will be identified or recruited. Attach recruitment information, i.e., advertisements, bulletin board notices, recruitment letters, etc.  
An initial phone call was made to determine interest in study. Once verbal affirmation is indicated, a follow-up phone call will be made to schedule interview. Once interview date is confirmed, an email will then be sent to interviewee confirming date and time, along with a copy of interview questions and consent form.
- g. If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If these are private medical recording agency records, or student records, provide the protocol for securing consent of the subjects of the records and approval from the custodian of the records.  
N/A
- h. Who will make the initial contact with the subject? Describe how contact is made. **If recruitment is verbal, provide the specific script to be used.**  
Researcher will make initial contact by phone. The script used is the following:  
*"Hello, my name is Joanne Kosciolk and I am completing my masters in Leadership Studies at Augsburg College. I am beginning to work on my final thesis, which is about founder-leader transitions in nonprofit organizations. I received your name from Patty Wilder who was at the Center for Nonprofit Management at St. Thomas when they were conducting their succession planning series. I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in my research on leadership transitions? I want to speak with both the founder and the successor of your organization. I have about four questions I'd like to ask you and would send them to you ahead a time for you to think about. I haven't conducted any sessions yet, but I don't think it would take more than an hour or an hour and a half of your time. I am willing to meet you at a convenient location for you. Thank you for your interest and your time. I will be in touch with you soon."*
- i. Will subjects receive inducements before, or rewards after the study? If yes, explain how and when they will be distributed.  
N/A
- j. If subjects are school children, and class time is used to collect data, describe in detail the activity planned for non-participants. Who will supervise those children? (This information should be included in the consent form.)  
N/A

16. **Risks to participation:** (check all that apply)

- use of private records (medical, agency or educational records);
- possible invasion of privacy of subject or family;
- manipulation of psychological or social variables such as sensory deprivation, social isolation, psychological stresses;
- any probing for personal or sensitive information in surveys or interviews;
- use of deception as part of experimental protocol; the protocol must include a "debriefing procedure" which will be followed upon completion of the study, or withdrawal of the subjects. Provide this protocol for IRB review;
- presentation of materials which subjects might consider offensive, threatening, or degrading;
- other risks: specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the precautions taken to minimize risks:

There is some risk to participating due to probing for sensitive information in the interview process that may make interviewee uncomfortable. All interviews and survey results will be kept confidential. Names will not be used to identify any data. Participants will be identified using a numbering and lettering system. The name of the organization or the founder/successor will not be used in the written thesis.

17. **Benefits to participation:**

List any anticipated direct benefits (money, or other incentives) to participation in this research project. If none, state that fact here and in the consent form. Also, list indirect benefits to participation (e.g., improved programs or policies; contribution to knowledge)

There are no direct benefits to participation other than a copy of the final thesis for participant's information or reference. Indirect benefits to participation are a contribution to the topic of leadership transitions among nonprofit organizations.

18. **Describe provisions made to maintain confidentiality of data:**

A. How will you disseminate results or findings? Who will receive copies of results and in what form?

The results of the personal interviews will be summarized using qualitative methods. Researcher will identify trends, similarities, and differences based on the responses. The results will be disseminated through the final research paper, but will be made available to participants if requested.

B. Where will the raw data be kept and for how long? (Federal IRB guidelines suggest all data have to be kept a minimum of three years.)

The raw data will be kept at the researcher's home in a locked file cabinet (address identified on page one (1) of IRB application).

Give the date for destruction of raw data. If raw data is retained, give date when identifiers will be removed.

All raw data will be destroyed by May 1, 2009. Identifiers will be removed by May 1, 2006.

The researcher will be the only one with access to the interview tapes. These tapes will be retained until May 1, 2006.

C. What security provisions will be used? Who will have access to the collected data? If tapes will be transcribed by someone other than the researcher, how will confidentiality be assured?

All interviews will be conducted in a location to ensure privacy. The collected raw data will be kept in a locked cabinet and only the researcher will have access to this data. Names will not be used to identify any data. Participants will be identified using a numbering and lettering system.

D. Will data identifying the subjects be made available to anyone other than the principal investigator, e.g., school officials, etc.?

No  Yes If yes, explain below and in the consent form.

E. Will the data be part of the subject's chart or other permanent record?

No  Yes If yes, explain.

19. **Informed consent process:** Prepare and attach a consent form or a consent letter:

A consent form is required for research involving risk, and for research where permanent record of results are retained (including videotapes). Signatures of subject (and parent) are required.

A consent statement or letter to participant(s) may be used in surveys but does not require the signature of the subject. Provide text of consent statements read to study subjects, distributed to participants prior to interviews or used as a cover sheet for a written survey.

20. **Consenting Process:**

A. Describe what will be said to the subjects to explain the research.

The researcher has worked in the nonprofit arena for more than 20 years and is interested in improving the succession planning process in organizations that will be experiencing a leader transition. Through this research and the participation of the founder and successor in this interview process, the researcher hopes to answer the following questions:

- What factors determine a successful transition?
- What is the ideal tenure of a founder?
- Is there a specific stage of an organization's development when a founder is more likely to leave?
- What role can a founder play in a successful transition?
- What processes work in the recruitment, assessment, and selection of successor?

B. What specific questions will be asked to assess the participant's understanding?

- What is your understanding of the purpose of this study?
- What is your understanding of how your responses will be used?
- What type of questions or concerns do you have regarding how your answers to my questions will be used?
- Do you have any other questions or concerns regarding any aspect of this study?

C. In relation to the actual data-gathering, when will consent be obtained?

Consent will be obtained at the time of the initial interview.

D. Will the investigator(s) be securing all of the informed consent?  Yes  No If no, name the specific individuals who will obtain informed consent.

E. The investigator should not use a home phone number in communications with subjects. A mobile, office, or departmental phone number may be used. (The IRB does need a home phone number on page 1 of this application form for its use.)

Appendix B –Interview Questions

**Founder:**

1. When was the organization founded? What precipitated you starting the organization?  
What significant changes has the organization experienced since it was first started?
2. When did you realize it was time to leave? Were there any particular factors that made the decision easier or harder to leave? What role do you play now in the organization?
3. Evaluate your leadership transition/succession. What went well? How could it have been improved? What would you have done differently? Is successor still in position?
4. Were any steps taken to develop staff within the organization to take over your role? What was the process to recruit, assess, and select your successor? What role did you play to mentor your successor in this position?

**Successor:**

1. What interested you most in this position? What kind of research did you do in order to learn about the organization and the founder?
2. Did you have concerns about following a founder? If so, what were those concerns? What was the best part of assuming the position and what were some of the challenges?
3. Describe the interview and selection process that you experienced for this position. How did you feel about the process? Were the responsibilities of the position clearly identified? Was there a job description? Is it still current?
4. Evaluate the transition. What went well? How could it have been improved? What would you have done differently?



Appendix C – Consent Form

FOUNDER-LEADER TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF SUCCESSION PLANNING IN  
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

You are invited to be in a research study on founder-leader transitions. You were selected as a possible participant because of your organization's experience in a leadership transition. I'm asking that you read this form and let me know if you have any questions before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Joanne Kosciolk as part of her master's thesis in Leadership Studies at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

*Background Information:*

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of both a founder or long-term executive and the successor during the leadership transition process. This study will discover a rationale for organizations dealing with a founder-leader transition to develop a succession plan.

This research study will analyze data obtained by you through an interview process because you are a founder or long-term executive or the successor, and your organization has experienced a leadership transition.

The data will be analyzed using a qualitative research process, which is used to answer questions about a specific experience with the purpose of understanding the experience from your point of view. This type of study is likely to end with tentative answers or hypotheses about what was discovered based on your experiences. This form of analysis was selected because this methodology allows the exploration of leadership transitions and what kind of succession planning process was established to sustain the viability of your organization.

*Procedures:*

The interview will be conducted at **(location) at (date and time)**. I will be asking you four questions requiring answers based on your experience with a leadership transition in a nonprofit organization. The interview should take no longer than 90 minutes.

*Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:*

This study has some risks to participation due to the probing of potentially sensitive information in the interview process that may make you uncomfortable. If at any time, a question makes you uncomfortable or you do not want to answer the question due to sensitivity, please alert me so we can move on to the next question. All interviews and survey results will be kept confidential. Names will not be used to identify any data. As a participant, you will be identified by a number and letter. The name of the organization or the founder/successor will not be used in the written thesis.

There are no direct benefits to participation other than a copy of the final thesis for your information. Indirect benefits to participation are a contribution to the topic of leadership transitions among nonprofit organizations.

*Confidentiality:*

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your organization. Your name and the name of your organization will be kept confidential, but your anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. Raw data will be destroyed by May 1, 2009.

When possible, I'd like to audiotape the interview. The tapes will be labeled only with a number, which will be assigned to each interview session. These tapes will also be kept in a locked file and only used by the researcher. They will be destroyed by May 1, 2006.

*Voluntary Nature of the Study:*

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the College. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

*Contacts and Questions:*

The researcher conducting this study is Joanne Kosciolk. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-408-3819 or my adviser, Dan Hanson at 612-330-1540. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

*Statement of Consent:*

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to be audiotaped:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Augsburg College  
Lindell Library  
Minneapolis, MN 55454