

What Now?

Reflections on When You Are No Longer the Interim Leader

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Introduction

Interim roles come to an end in a handful of ways: a permanent person for the role was hired; the permanent person returned from their leave, their interim position, or whatever temporarily took them away from the permanent role; the interim role was switched to a different person; or the position itself was changed, redefined, or eliminated such that an interim position is no longer appropriate or necessary. Regardless of how, interim leadership, sooner or later, comes to an end. When an interim role turns into a permanent position, everyone needs to make some kind of transition. There is considerable advice and scholarship available about how to begin a new leadership role.¹ Thus, this chapter starts from the assumption that you are no longer the interim leader *and* that you are not the permanent leader. It reflects on the end of interim roles and what thoughts need to go into stepping out of a leadership role. This chapter addresses questions of learning to “unknow” sensitive information that one gained only through one’s leadership responsibilities, how to adjust into a previous role that might feel very different as a returning leader, how to rebuild old or new relationships with a different team, and getting on board with new organizational directions. This chapter describes opportunities for creating insight into the leadership responsibilities for people stepping away from it as well as how to re-introduce oneself

returning to a permanent role and navigate attempting to shift the perspectives of others about one's longevity in a permanent position.

Identifying Your Emotional Response

Former interims may have a wide variety of emotions, perhaps sometimes feelings that conflict with one another. Recognizing and acknowledging the nature of your feelings is an essential step to moving on and critical to being able to separate your feelings from your actions, which will almost always be required for a former interim leader. Some of the most common emotional responses to the end of an interim role might be the following:

- **Relief.** There is likely to be some level of relief, regardless of the outcome for which you hoped. Interim roles are stressful, unstable roles, and simply knowing the outcome can generate substantial relief, even if the outcome is undesirable and especially if the outcome aligns with your hopes.
- **Anxiety.** As much as knowing the outcome might provide relief, the end of an interim role creates a new set of unknowns, regardless of your opinion about the outcome of the process or the incoming leader. Much has been written about new leadership and the toll that transition takes on the library staff.² That same stress extends to the former interim if they are staying in the organization. Even if you didn't want, or apply for, the permanent position and are thrilled with the new leader, anxiety over the transition to a new leader is to be expected.
- **Happiness.** If you didn't want or seek the permanent position and you're happy about the new permanent leader who has begun the position, you might feel very happy to be handing off the difficulties of the role and to be moving on or returning to a different permanent position.
- **Disappointment.** Regardless of whether or not you applied for the permanent role, if the incoming leader is not the candidate you hoped for, you might feel disappointed in the outcome of the search, in the search process, or in the decision-making that resulted in a hire about which you do not feel confident. You may also feel some disappointment in the prospect of your new role, whatever that might be.
- **Anger or bitterness.** If you wanted and applied for the permanent position but were not selected, you might feel anger over the process or the decision, or you might be bitter about the outcome or the cost to you of holding the interim position and then being passed over for the permanent role.
- **Embarrassment or shame.** If you applied for the permanent position and were not selected, you might feel embarrassment or shame. As an interim leader you can probably recognize how much chance plays into decisions about positions like these, and that shame is not necessarily warranted.

Yet knowing how one “should” feel and actually feeling it are two different things. It’s entirely possible that you are enthusiastic about the candidate who was chosen and even genuinely satisfied with the outcome. Even in those best-possible circumstances, not being selected might still create the sting of embarrassment or shame through worry about how others might perceive you after having applied.

- Coming out of a fog. Leadership positions generally—and interim positions especially—require an intense pace. Stepping away from that intensity might feel like walking into the sunshine or rising out of the water to take a breath. The release of the pressure can generate new lightness.
- Identity crisis. If you have become accustomed to seeing yourself as the leader, you might be asking yourself: who am I now? The experience of interim leadership may have changed you from who you were before, but you are no longer the formal leader either, so who is left? It might take time to revise how you see yourself and envision your professional identity.
- Career crisis. If you had counted on the interim role to serve as a launching pad into a permanent one but that expectation hasn’t come to fruition, you might have to ask yourself: what do I do now? You might need to consider deeply whether that kind of leadership is what you want permanently and, if so, whether you are willing to move and start applying for jobs. This might be a time for introspection about what you really want to focus your energies on and to seek professional development to expand your strengths or to pivot to something different.

Your specific situation as the former interim leader and the circumstances of the new permanent leader will influence your individual profile of emotional responses to your new situation. Transitioning into your new or former responsibilities, whatever they may be, requires you to identify your feelings, separate them from your actions, and plan your next steps with intention.

Separating Feelings and Actions

As an interim leader, you played a visible role in the organization, and it’s likely that most people were aware of the circumstances of your transition back to a permanent position. If you applied for the permanent role and weren’t selected, that was probably public knowledge. If you did not apply, that was also probably widely known or surmised. People will make assumptions about your wishes and reactions to the outcome regardless of what you say. However, what you say or don’t say will have an enormous influence on your ability to transition into a different role. Your transition can be productive or unproductive, both for you and for your organization as a whole.

If your primary feelings about the end of your role are relief, happiness, and coming out of the fog, how you talk to your colleagues about your emotions

might be easy. You might be able to simply express your optimism about the new leadership and then move on to the business of the day. Reassuring your colleagues that you are satisfied with the outcome and that they do not need to feel pity, guilt, or awkwardness around you will generate a productive atmosphere to allow everyone to focus on a positive transition.

If, however, your primary feelings about the end of your interim role are anger, bitterness, disappointment, or shame, tread carefully as you navigate the transition. Take some time to reflect. Question your own motives before you act or speak and ask if the action you are about to take accomplishes your professional goals now or serves to satisfy your emotions. If the latter, stop yourself and rethink your actions. Remember that it accomplishes nothing to antagonize decision-makers who selected another candidate for the permanent position other than to demonstrate to them that they made the right choice in not selecting you. Hopefully, you were offered an explanation and coaching on how you need to grow your skill set. If you weren't and you think an explanation will help you, ask for one. When you get it, listen, ask for examples that might help ground the feedback, learn, and then move on. Arguing, debating, discounting, or disagreeing with the explanation will not reverse the decision, and it may sour your relationship with the decision-makers, perhaps irretrievably. If you object strongly to the feedback you receive, consider what you might do to shift that perception in the future, rather than to shift it in the past.

If your feelings about the outcome of the search are bitter and you share that fact with others in your workplace, it harms both you personally and the institution overall. Coming from a place of authenticity might require you to acknowledge disappointment. It is necessary to find a way to do so that is authentic and constructive. Coupling your disappointment with hopeful sentiments about the actual outcome might be a requirement. Sharing your bitterness hampers the ability of the organization to transition smoothly and will create barriers for others to approach you honestly about the transition. Focusing on your disappointment risks inadvertently positioning yourself in opposition to the new leader. Even if that might feel gratifying in the short term, setting yourself up against the person coming into the permanent role is destructive for you, for the new leader, and for your colleagues, especially if you remain in middle management. Give yourself space to acknowledge your feelings, then focus on channeling your energies and emotions into a more productive place.

Feelings are not something we can easily control, but actions are. Regardless of your private feelings, publicly express and act in ways that demonstrate support and hopefulness. Authenticity does not require you to make your feelings widely known, nor does it require you to express support you don't actually feel. You don't have to lie, but you do have to choose discretion. Surely, everyone can feel hope for a positive outcome, even if they doubt the likelihood of it. For the sake

of yourself and your colleagues, express the hope and not the doubt. Take your negative feelings, if you have them, to a different place, like your family, friends, or therapist, to express them. Recognize that these feelings are not productive in the long term, so finding a way to move past them will help you better achieve your greater professional goals.

Unknowing the Unknowable

In your interim leadership role, it is likely that you had access to a variety of information related to personnel, budget, or other confidential topics. Part of transitioning out of an interim role requires reframing your relationships with those who continue to be privy to personnel and budget information that is no longer appropriate for you to know. While it's not actually possible to unknow something, it is possible to structure your actions and your expectations of yourself to accommodate what you are technically not supposed to know. If you have documentation of confidential information that is no longer appropriate for you to have access to, consider passing that documentation to the person who should have it now and then removing it from your own files. Presumably, when it was appropriate for you to have confidential information, you kept it confidential. Rather than relaxing your hold on confidentiality, it is even more important to maintain confidentiality now that not only are you not supposed to share it, you aren't even supposed to know it. Prepare yourself with a script if someone asks you for information you can't share that refers them to the correct information source so that you are not caught off guard by a question regarding a confidential topic. Perhaps the hardest part about stepping back from unresolved confidential information is not knowing the outcome. Resolution is always desirable, but you may have to find a way to live with curiosity and with the disappointing lack of resolution. Either the situation will resolve the way you wanted it to or it won't, but either way, you will not get to know. Do what you need to do to be able to pass on information to the appropriate person and then walk away. Maybe express your burning curiosity to your therapist or write an email that you never send but choose to move on. Eventually, the curiosity will pass. Any ongoing issues will come to an end and you no longer know about the new concerning situations. Take a moment to bask in the freedom of your newfound ignorance.

Returning to a Previous Role

If you're returning to a previous role, especially if you are returning after a significant time away, this is the right moment to reflect on how your interim role can inform the return to your previous role. Having seen behind the curtain, so to speak, you might want to make some changes to how you were performing the role before. For example, you might have seen from your viewpoint in the interim

role how communication breakdowns influence the organization as a whole and want to institute new communication norms in your previous role to help ameliorate this problem. Or you might have seen how the work of other departments overlaps more with your previous role than you realized and seek to build better structures and relationships to enable and support those connections anew. You may have better insight on how to structure and prepare funding requests for new initiatives. Having seen your previous role from a distance, you might have noticed in a new way how that role might benefit from revision. Perhaps there is some restructuring to do, such as rebalancing scopes of work for your department or specific members of your department that you didn't notice previously.

If all or most of your previous role was delegated elsewhere, such as to a different interim manager, now is the time to consider the best ways to take it back up and ask questions about whatever role that interim manager was doing, too. Depending on the length of your interim term, returning to an old role might not feel at all like a return—it may instead feel like beginning anew. If that is the case (or perhaps even if it isn't), it might be worthwhile to approach your previous role as though it is new, including re-introduction meetings with people attached to your new role where you can regain the more-detailed familiarity with whatever work or processes you need to know.

Conversely, if little or none of your previous role was delegated while you held the interim position, you might ask yourself different questions. If some of the work assigned to your previous position simply did not get done while you were juggling two jobs, is it definitely the case that the work needs to be done now? Or is it something that could be given up permanently or done differently? If projects or processes were put on hold, this is a good time to ask if the processes need to be modified, if the projects need to be revised to incorporate new timelines or overall goals, or if your attention upon your return should be somewhere else entirely.

Many of your relationships would have morphed into something different during your interim role. Returning to a previous role will require transitioning your relationships again, perhaps to recapture what they were before or to morph once again into something new. Some of your once-close interactions might have become more distant as your responsibilities required you to focus on a higher level of organizational function. Others might have become closer as you worked more with people who were outside of your usual sphere of influence and connection. Returning to your previous role is a chance to rebuild relationships that have grown more distant and perhaps to identify ways to maintain new relationships that grew closer. Some of your relationships are likely to have permanently changed, and you might need to consider what a new goal might be for the state of your relationships in order to arrive at a new interaction, rather than to try to return to an old one.

Transitioning to a Different Role

Not everyone who completes an interim role returns to the same position they had before. Depending on the length and nature of your interim responsibilities, it's possible that your previous role is no longer available or no longer possible for you to do. If that is the case, you might be transitioning to a new role that is different from the interim role and different from the permanent role you left behind. If that is the case, it is important to approach the new role with intentionality, rather than to be swept along by chance.

Consider how you conceptualize your role in the organization now. Reflect, in particular, on what you bring to the organization that you didn't before your interim responsibilities and how you can employ your new expertise in ways that are useful to the organization and fulfilling for you. Consider the relationship of both your previous permanent position and your previous interim position to your new role. Is there overlap that needs to be clarified, or are there missing pieces of one that need to be assigned? If your new role did not come with a clear position description, write one in consultation with whomever your new leader is. Make sure that everyone has shared expectations of what you will be doing now and how you can bring your best work to the organization as a whole.

At least for the first several months, it is likely that a significant part of your responsibilities will be to support and facilitate a smooth transition to the new permanent leader. Focus on how a smooth transition benefits everyone, including you, by establishing norms, stability, and clarity. Consider how supporting this transition should influence your responsibilities in the first six months. If you have the opportunity to build in a structured reconsideration of your work scope after the first several months, you may find that your capacity increases somewhat with each element of the transition that is completed. Especially if your role is new, be clear with your leadership about what kind of support you need to succeed in your new responsibilities, including any professional development that might be required to bolster your own success.

Helping Others Understand

One of the most useful things you can do for your organization is to help others understand the role of the leader. Having been in the role, you had the opportunity to see what others don't. There are numerous ways that you can employ this new understanding to benefit the organization.

As a general rule, the boss doesn't get to ask for compassion, as you probably learned in your time as an interim leader. Or if leaders do choose to ask for compassion, they don't often get it. As a former interim leader, you have a unique opportunity to build compassion on behalf of the new leader. You have a unique ability to humanize the new leader. Building compassion and

humanity in the new leader benefits everyone; your colleagues might find new understanding and patience with the leader, and the leader will likely be grateful. It is a good idea to be explicit with the new leader if it is your intention to build compassion and humanity through your unique experience so that they understand your goals. As a former interim leader, your colleagues might come to you asking for explanations of the new leader's choices. While you might not be free to discuss those, you could help your colleagues understand processes, rules, and the structures by which the leader is bound. These processes and structures can often generate significant ease if your colleagues are anxious about the leader's power since your colleagues might not realize what boundaries are in place.

You have an opportunity as well to bring visibility to the invisible responsibilities of the leader. While you were the interim leader, you probably had a clear vision of the expectations of the leader for work and relationships outside the library that the leader is required to prioritize but might not be visible to others, such as relationships with other campus leaders, donors, or engagement with consortia and other professional groups that is required rather than voluntary. Describing to your colleagues the volume of work that is required of the leader but that they can't necessarily see might help them to better understand the nature of the leader's work and the context that the leader is bringing to the library. This is especially true for confidential information. The leader is not at liberty to share how much time they spend managing an explosive personnel challenge, for example. As a former interim leader, you do have the ability to share, without including any specific examples, the amount of time and the type of burden required to handle personnel situations. Remind your colleagues that, most of the time, they won't even know that personnel problem is happening.

In your interim role, you probably noticed how little positive feedback leaders receive. Some staff members might consider their silence to clearly communicate approval to the leaders, while others will be equally convinced that their silence clearly communicates disapproval. Both will assume that the leader knows what the problems are, knows how the staff feel about it, and has decided on a course of action. As an interim leader, you probably observed how much harder it is to learn exactly these things: what is or isn't working, how people feel about the options for solving it, and what to do about it. Knowing the difficulty of seeing and hearing from the organization, choose to become a conduit for feedback by making sure that things "everyone" is aware of actually make it to the leader's desk. Most of all, look for ways to provide positive feedback to the leader, either by gathering it from others and passing it along or offering it yourself. It's probably the only positive feedback they're going to be getting and is an excellent way to reinforce actions that you appreciate.

Make a Formal Career Plan

You don't have to be buffeted by the winds of chance. Career planning is not deciding in advance what every step of your career will be; the world is too unpredictable for that. Making a career plan is thinking about your short- and long-term goals, thinking creatively about ways to prepare yourself for those goals, and being open to lots of different routes to achieve them. But make your career planning intentional. Write it down if that helps you.³

Take some time to consider what this transition out of interim leadership means for you now. Ask yourself what success looks like for you right now in the role you are in. And ask yourself what it looks like for you down the road. Now that you've returned to a permanent role, either the one you had before or a new one, consider your intent.

Did you learn as an interim that you don't want a similar leadership role long term? How do you see your career progressing in that case? If you plan to stay in your current position, consider what excellence looks like in this role, determine what you need to be proud of your work and your contributions, and develop a plan to make those contributions possible. Determine what goal is likely to result in some level of professional fulfillment and direct your energies toward that goal.

If you learned, through your interim leadership role, that you want to take on a similar leadership role in a permanent capacity, identify what that means for you. If your professional portfolio isn't quite ready for that step, determine what professional development would make you ready and look for ways to get that development. Consider whether you're ready to move locations to achieve your leadership goals. You might want to seek a career coach or mentor to help guide you through the application process. If additional education or other certifications are necessary for the kind of promotion you seek, decide whether that is something you are willing to tackle. Apply your leadership skills in other capacities, such as in professional service organizations, to continue your growth as a leader.

Beware the temptation to wait out the new leader and try again at the next opportunity. It's tricky to think of yourself as the next potential leader without subconsciously, or overtly, conveying a lack of support to the current leader. Inadvertently telegraphing that lack of support not only harms the organization overall but harms your personal opportunities for future leadership as well. Commit yourself to the current role, identify how you want to grow as a professional, but decide another day whether to pursue the leadership you just left behind again in the future.

Regardless of your career intentions at this stage, establish mentoring relationships with other professionals who can help you make that next step. Senior library professionals are far less likely than new professionals to have mentors,⁴

and yet senior professionals need mentoring every bit as much as new professionals do. Consider a constellation of mentors who provide guidance in different areas of your career.⁵ Align your mentoring relationships with your new goals.

What Now?

When your interim role ends, mindfully plan your transition into your new position and focus on your future. If returning to a previous role, treat it as new and use your new perspective to inform how you approach your work. If at the end of your interim responsibilities your previous position does not exist, propose a position description that will provide you with professional fulfillment. If you are placed in a new position or department, focus on finding your joy in your new position, plan for your future career goals, and then work toward achieving your plan.

Demonstrate support for the new leader even if you disagree with decisions that are made or disagree with the choices that brought the new leader on board. Committing to the organization's success is critical to your success as you transition into your new position. Also, recognize that you are not the only person who has experienced being an interim leader who returns to a subordinate position. These experiences as an interim leader form who you are today and into the future and will continue to enhance your understanding of the organization and your ability to make a lasting impact. These experiences will also set you up for upcoming leadership opportunities, whether at your current or another organization.

If we had it to do over again, would we agree to take on interim leadership responsibilities? Absolutely.

Endnotes

1. See, among many others: Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter, Updated and Expanded*, updated, expanded ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013); Brian L. Baker, "Who Wants to Be the Boss—Strategies for Success as a Law Library Director Feature: Professional Development Series," *AALL Spectrum* 7, no. 6 (2003, 2002): 12–15; Thomas N. Gilmore, *Making a Leadership Change: How Organisations and Leaders Can Handle Leadership Transitions Successfully* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2003); Guangrong Dai, Kenneth P. De Meuse, and Dee Gaeddert, "Onboarding Externally Hired Executives: Avoiding Derailment—Accelerating Contribution," *Journal of Management & Organization* 17, no. 2 (March 2011): 165–78, <https://doi.org/10.5172/jmo.2011.17.2.165>; Robert D. Herman and David O. Renz, eds., *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, 4th ed., Essential Texts for Nonprofit and Public Leadership and Management (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Joseph Mccool, "Onboarding: Crucial Feedback for Executive Hires," *Bloomberg.Com*, December 2, 2008, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2008-12-02/onboarding-crucial-feedback-for-executive-hiresbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.
2. Gilmore, *Making a Leadership Change*; Watkins, *The First 90 Days*.

3. Jennie Gerke, Juliann Couture, and Jennifer Knievel, "Not Just for the New Librarians: Mentoring and Professional Planning at Mid-Career," in *Academic Library Mentoring: Fostering Growth and Renewal*, eds. Barbara E. Weeg and Leila Rod-Welch (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2021).
4. Juliann Couture, Jennie Gerke, and Jennifer Knievel, "Getting into the Club: Existence and Availability of Mentoring for Tenured Librarians in Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 4 (2020): 676. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.4.676>.
5. Dorie Clark, "Your Career Needs Many Mentors, Not Just One," *Harvard Business Review* (January 19, 2017), <https://hbr.org/2017/01/your-career-needs-many-mentors-not-just-one>; Kerry Ann Rockquemore, "NCFDD Mentoring Map," *Inside Higher Ed* (2011), [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/Mentoring%20Map%5B1%5D\(1\).pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/Mentoring%20Map%5B1%5D(1).pdf).

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