

SUCCESSION PLANNING

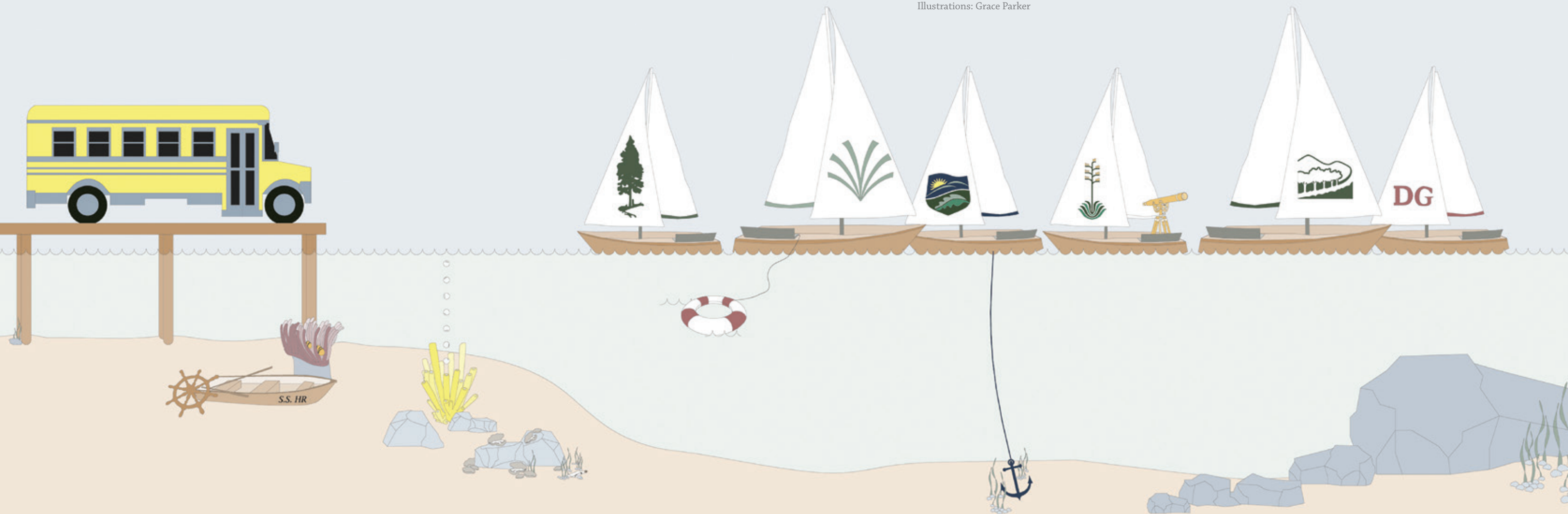
Grace Parker

WHETHER A WELL-EARNED RETIREMENT, A PLANNED DEPARTURE, OR AN UNFORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCE, THE DEPARTURE OF A PUBLIC GARDEN LEADER HAS AN IMPACT ON STAFF, BOARD, AND POTENTIALLY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS.

BEING PROACTIVE IN KNOWING HOW YOUR ORGANIZATION WILL MEET SUCH CHANGES BEFORE THEY UNFOLD CAN BE A SOURCE OF REASSURANCE AND STABILITY.

THERE ARE THREE TYPES OF SUCCESSION PLANNING, AND MANY MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE PROCESS. IN MY THESIS RESEARCH, "SUCCESSION PLANNING: A DIALOGUE FOR LEADERSHIP CONTINUITY," I STUDIED SIX DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS, EACH OF WHICH TOOK A UNIQUE APPROACH TO TACKLING THIS CHALLENGE. HERE, I SHARE THE TYPES OF SUCCESSION PLANNING, AND SOME OF THE KEY POINTS I LEARNED FROM MY INTERVIEW WITH THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE DESERT BOTANICAL GARDEN IN PHOENIX.

Illustrations: Grace Parker



THREE TYPES OF SUCCESSION PLANNING

While strategic planning provides a roadmap for organizational growth and master planning provides a vision for the built environment, succession planning ensures an organization's capacity to respond to change in top leadership. Ideally woven into a strategic plan, succession planning aligns staff development opportunities with the perceived future needs of an organization, increasing institutional flexibility, and staff competencies. In the event of a leadership change, a succession plan also outlines one or more courses of action to navigate times of uncertainty with minimal disruption to mission delivery.

The three types of succession planning are: emergency, departure defined, and strategic leadership development. The first two pertain primarily to "key positions," which each organization defines differently, but can be thought of as mission-critical. (The executive director position is a prime example of a key position.) The third type of planning is more holistic, involves more staff positions, and is infused throughout an institution.

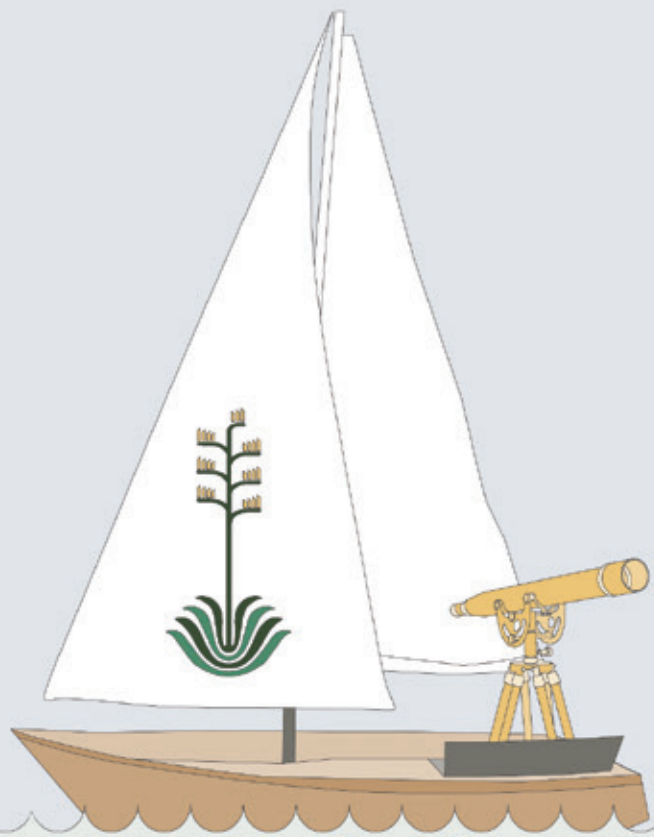


Emergency succession planning aims to address a sudden, unexpected departure of a key position. It is characterized by a sense of urgency, especially if the board is only given a few days' or weeks' notice. You might think of this as the "What if our CEO were hit by the proverbial bus?" strategy.

Departure defined planning begins when a key executive announces their planned departure, typically providing one to three years' notice. The advance notice in this case often prevents panic on the part of the board and staff, but the luxury of time must be used wisely to assure the best selection process and a smooth transition for the new leader. The benefits of formalized emergency and departure defined succession plans are tremendous, especially in the case of a director's departure. Not only is the organization equipped to respond through predetermined roles, timelines, communication procedures, and allocated resources including time and money, but the board can also make critical decisions regarding the organization's future from a place of clarity and confidence. In both of these types of plans, it is the board's responsibility to conduct an inventory and analysis of what the organization needs from its next leader, a step commonly overlooked when organizations feel pressured to launch an executive search and select the next leader as quickly as possible.



Strategic leadership development is the third way to ensure an organization's capacity to respond to a change in top leadership. This approach involves constructing a vision of your organization in the next five years, identifying the skills and competencies necessary to translate this vision into reality, and sourcing these skills either from internal talent or, if necessary, the external labor market. Strategic leadership development supports the concept that the organization's success does not depend entirely upon one individual, namely the executive director, but rather on the continued advancement of staff at every level, contributing to a culture of organizational excellence. As they say, a rising tide lifts all boats.



TACKLING CONCERNS ABOUT THE PROCESS

I found some of the reservations about undertaking the succession planning process result from a misunderstanding of its basic tenets. I was able to identify a number of ways museums and public gardens may allay their fears. Here are just a few examples from the perspective of Ken Schutz, who has been the executive director of the Desert Botanical Garden (DBG) in Phoenix for sixteen years. In 2015, he and his board decided to create succession plans for all the senior managers at the garden, starting with his own position.

WON'T IT BE TIME-CONSUMING?

Those who suspect the process will be time-consuming and expensive may be surprised to learn that DBG's emergency and departure defined succession plans, authored by the board's Succession Plan Committee, only required four meetings over the course of six months and had virtually no cost. Schutz recalled:

"WE CREATED A SMALL TASK FORCE COMPOSED OF BOARD MEMBERS AND ME, AND WE TALKED ABOUT WHAT WE WOULD DO IF I EVER WERE HIT BY THAT PROVERBIAL BUS. WE DISCUSSED WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST PROCESS TO USE IN FINDING MY SUCCESSOR—WHEN THE TIME WAS RIGHT. WE BENCHMARKED WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS THAT ALREADY HAD SUCCESSION PLANS AND WERE WILLING TO SHARE. AND WE INVESTED IN A COPY OF THE BOARD SOURCE PUBLICATION *CHIEF EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING: ESSENTIAL GUIDANCE FOR BOARDS AND CEOs*."

WHO WILL SERVE AS BACKUP?

Another misconception is that succession planning determines a "backup person" to permanently assume the executive director position in the event of a departure. In fact, this approach more closely resembles "replacement planning" and is not a recommended strategy, as it has the potential to create tension in the workplace. Additionally, identifying an internal heir-apparent does not give the board the opportunity to discuss what kind of leader the organization needs when a transition is actually taking place. As a means to bypass this scenario, DBG's plan denotes that an interim

executive director will be appointed by the board until the new director is selected. It also stipulates the interim will not be a current member of the senior staff. Because succession planning is primarily the board's responsibility, progress can be made in a unified and neutral manner that does not invite disharmony among staff.

HOW DO I APPROACH THE SUBJECT?

One of the most common reasons leaders are not inclined to undertake succession planning is the uncertainty of how to approach the subject. For instance, if an executive director suggests that the board construct a succession plan, this may give the board the impression of a desired departure, even if that is not the executive director's intent. Conversely, if the board makes the suggestion, the executive director cannot help but wonder whether they are performing adequately as the leader of the organization. DBG started the conversation in an unusual manner. "We have a strong network of foundations in Phoenix that are committed to the growth and vitality of the arts and culture sector," explained Schutz. "In pursuit of a grant from one of these funders, we needed to audit our current policies and procedures. We were shocked to learn that our garden lacked a board-approved succession plan for the executive director. That's how my conversation with the board began. It wasn't about my needs, and it wasn't about the board's needs. It was about doing what was in the garden's best interest. Framed that way, the conversation about succession was very easy to start."

WORDS OF ADVICE

"Looking back, I can see that I avoided the topic of creating a succession plan for myself," commented Schutz. "It was always there in the back of my mind. I told myself I'd get to it someday, but other priorities just kept getting in the way. From start to finish, I enjoyed the journey—especially after we found a comfortable way to begin the conversation. And our garden was a stronger institute after we finished our work. I will end with a word of caution. If you undertake this task, do be prepared for some moments of quiet introspection that can be quite profound. After all, a key part of the succession planning process requires us to imagine a time when our museum will carry on its mission without us, and vice versa." ❁

Grace Parker is the Assistant Manager of Interpretation at Mt. Cuba Center.

As Chair of the Emerging Professionals Community, she hopes the newly debuted Mentorship Program will promote strategic leadership development across the field. Her thesis, "Succession Planning: A Dialogue for Leadership Continuity," is available in the Association's online Resource Library.

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