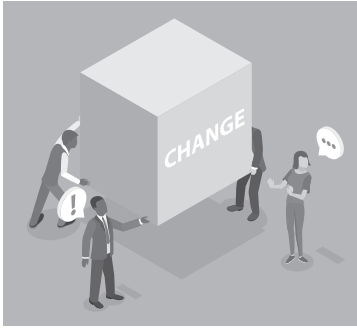




Leading Through Transition

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Transitions are challenging. Leading through transitions can be even more so. But what happens when multiple transitions occur at the same time, both externally and internally? That was my experience. When I took over as Chief Executive Officer for my organization, team morale was low for a variety of reasons that required trust repair. Additionally, our organization required some external reputational repair. This was all at the same time



as our operational environment was rapidly shifting. Funding disruptions were occurring by the minute, and our work was being challenged at all levels of the government. A leadership transition without these unique dynamics would have already come with its natural challenges, but this added layers of complexity to my transition. And yet, it has been one of the best moves of my career. I thoroughly enjoy my colleagues, value our organization's impact on our community, and am successfully navigating these transitions and continue to make progress.

Here are some things I wish I had known or would share with anyone stepping into this role, especially when unique dynamics are at play (which, let's be honest, everyone has their own variety of when they step into these roles).

#1: Accept what you cannot control and work hard at what you can

The well-known serenity prayer has become a daily reminder to myself: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." This should be a motto for anyone in life, but especially for those in leadership. There was so much about my transition that I could not control, and I imagine that

is the case for most new executive directors. The socio-political and economic climate, former organizational decisions and changes, staff decisions that were made in response to external factors prior to me joining, and more, are all things that I had no control over whatsoever. What I could focus on was how to move forward. That required significant courage to take educated and calculated risks, as I worked to build trust internally and externally, knowing that not every decision would be liked or understood. I changed the organizational structure, made some tough personnel choices early on, and consistently shared my vision. Most of those decisions worked, and some did not, but what evolved was incredible progress over the course of a year with steps in the right direction.

#2: Lead with empathy and integrity

Just as important, if not more important, as what I did was how I did it. When I introduced myself to others in the organization or community as the new leader, made initial changes to our organizational structure, or responded to funding disruptions, I led with authenticity, transparency and compassion. The skills that helped me as a legal aid staff attorney are the same skills that help me lead staff well. When I was a staff attorney, there were many times I had to deliver challenging news and make strategic decisions about someone's case that they did not want to hear. Sometimes, I had to say, "while I 100% believe you and what you have experienced, you are not eligible for relief under our current laws — let's see how else we can help you or connect you with resources." When the client across from you is dealing with a matter of life or death, delivering that news sits heavy for the both of you — but it is important to be honest and give the client a realistic picture of what is likely to happen so they can make informed decisions about their own lives. The same is true in this role when delivering any news, both good or bad, with staff members or the community.

It is important for us to say what needs to be said, honestly, timely, and compassionately.

#3: Be open to surprises, both good and bad

I was very fortunate to have incredible training and mentorship prior to stepping into this role. I led the regional offices and local office for my prior organization and that experience largely gave me the tools I needed for this role. My mentors there became friends and are still some of my confidants to this day. We work well together and collaborate to make our community fairer and more just. That said, there is always a learning curve in a new role. I am constantly learning new concepts, creating new processes, and trying new ideas. We even integrated a new program from a different organization within my first few months on the job! Talk about a new experience, but one that was incredibly well worth it.

There were also some heartbreaking surprises throughout my first year, both from people and experiences that I would never have expected. Learn to roll with it. It is par for the course and will happen with any leadership role in any job. Not everyone is a supporter or friend, and even for those that are, not everyone will agree with everything you do. That is okay and leads to growth. The quicker you learn to adapt and remain flexible and open-minded, the less likely you are to allow yourself to be moved by the waves of any given day and allow for innovative creativity to have its place.

#4: Find your village

I am lucky to have great group of executive director friends who walk similar paths to me. We enjoy each other's company. We chat about the intricacies of our worlds that only we would understand. We support each other and attend each other's events and big moments. We commiserate and laugh together. We affirm each other. We keep up with each other's personal and professional lives, regularly checking in with each other. This nugget is just as important as any strategic decision you must make. This work can be

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hard and long some days, but also so incredibly fulfilling, and your tribe is part of what makes it sustainable.

Likewise, your supporters — board members, funders, community partners — want to see you do just as well as you do. Their time and resources are invested in the well-being of the organization. Strategically share with them. Keep them involved. Let them know what is happening. Allow them to be a mouthpiece for you and the organization. Sometimes they are better positioned to articulate something that would not be received if it came from you. Let them help you. We are better together than in siloes.

#5: Balance & Restoration

I cannot overemphasize the importance of finding a way to restore yourself — whatever that looks like for you. For me, it involves nature, physical activity, mediation, prayer, reading, music, and spending time with my loved ones. For others, it may look different. The most important thing is that it works for you, and you feel like a more balanced and restored version of yourself after doing it. Like the parent who must put on their life vest and oxygen mask before assisting their child, is how we must take care of ourselves to lead others well.

There are so many other experiences I could share from my first year on the job, including specifics about collaborative projects, experiences with funding disruptions, successful fundraising amid challenging times, how we acquired another program, our organizational restructure, and so much more. While I am still available and open to sharing any of that information one-on-one if anyone in a similar boat ever wants to reach out, I thought it was important to share some of the foundational principles that I think gave me a smooth transition, even when everything around me said it would not be smooth; especially because so many of us are navigating challenging times right now.

“Fight for the things you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” Ruth Bader Ginsburg

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Continued on page 47

☉ LEADING THROUGH TRANSITION,
Continued from page 49

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