Future Proof Your Church

The Four Phases of a Successful Succession
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Chapter One

A difficult and complex task
“Succession is one of the most important and most difficult tasks a company’s leadership will ever undertake.”

When a senior leader resigns after many years of leading a church, the succession process of handing over to a new leader is a complex task for both them and their church.

Unfortunately leadership succession is often avoided by churches, organisations and businesses because of the complex challenges it presents. Evasion and inaction are too often the order of the day as people grapple with this often thorny issue. However any church that faces the necessity of succession with proactive steps and appropriate attitudes will future proof their church and ultimately enjoy the benefits of their diligence.

A key initial step in achieving an effective succession is the development of a comprehensive and purposeful plan. Remarkably, many churches possess no such plan, relying on a combination of bravado and luck in journeying to and through succession.

Once a lucid plan is in place any organisation can move confidently through the main issues, implementing a succession plan that will ultimately benefit the organisation, its staff and stakeholders.

A comprehensive succession plan will consist of four key phases.

The first phase is situation assessment which focuses on succession timing, the criteria for a successor and a preliminary list of candidates.

The second phase involves engagement with the organisation’s key stakeholders including the board, outside vested interests and senior staff.
The third phase consists of the search for and *selection of a successor*.

The fourth and final phase is the *transition period* when the succession is implemented.

The key players in the transition are the successor and the departing senior leader whose primary aim should be to leave the organisation “in good shape and in good hands.”
Chapter Two

The power of a plan
A comprehensive succession plan incorporates the key issues of succession while enabling an organisation to maintain a flexible approach to the process.  

Consultants assisting non-profit organisations state that succession planning can prevent or significantly reduce the various problems that organisations face when a senior leader departs.

These problems include:

- decreased income
- waning staff morale
- confusion over organisational objectives
- program cut backs

A good succession plan diminishes this kind of disruption to the organisation’s productivity and to the staff. In fact, it helps senior management prepare for the future whilst alleviating stress about upcoming plans and directions.

In spite of all these benefits many organisations have not developed a succession plan.

“Succession planning is so important, but no one is doing it”

Donna Stark, director of leadership development at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

In fact a Casey Foundation survey of 2,200 executive directors of charities found that more than half of their organisations have no succession plan. Other studies indicate that the number of charities without succession plans is much higher. 86 percent of groups in the Kansas City, MO., area lack such plans, according to the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation.
A senior leader who neglects to shape a plan, assuming that succession will be simple and straightforward, can be caught out when the process “takes on a life of its own.”

Some senior leaders will even avoid even starting a succession process.

Why?

They generally do this because they are …

- fearful of becoming lame duck leaders
- unsure how or where to start
- apprehensive about their own future
- concerned that the succession process will hinder the organisation’s momentum
- threatened by the entire process
- anxious about losing power, privileges and status

In succumbing to these fears a senior leader can ultimately stay in their role too long. The church can suffer as it continues to operate in an outmoded style, losing its ability to take risks and capacity to embrace change.

This avoidance strategy ultimately fails everyone, leading to organisational disruption and higher levels of executive staff turnover.
You can gain significant help for your succession process from an experienced consultant at this juncture.

At Grow A Healthy Church we leverage our expertise and personal experience to customise a succession plan for you and your church. We pay meticulous attention to the needs of the outgoing and incoming leaders, the church and its stakeholders and members.

Our thorough and comprehensive plan will help future proof your church causing it to move sequentially and purposefully through the four key phases of an effective succession process.
Chapter Three

Phase One – situation assessment
The first phase of a comprehensive succession plan is situation assessment.

Unless there is a systematic assessment of your church’s current scenario inaccurate assessment could lead to inappropriate decisions which will lead to substantial problems in your organisation.

Initially the assessment must focus on the **timing** of the succession process. 17

If the resigning senior leader has given sufficient notice of his resignation then the timing of succession will have been determined some time ago. However, if the leader has given little or no thought to succession, then the resignation will be the initiating act.

If the resignation is the initiating act this will place the organisation at a severe disadvantage, because starting early on succession planning is the almost undisputed advice of all succession planning literature. 18 Therefore a senior leader of an organisation must plan the timing of their succession some years in advance.

Next in the situation assessment phase, is the compilation of the selection criteria for successor candidates. The criteria for the selection of a new senior leader should incorporate both **skills** and **values**. 19

Candidates should be chosen because they have the appropriate skill sets for the role of a senior leader.

The resigning senior leader should be able to ascertain these competencies. However, full attention should be given to the future strategic needs of the church and the corresponding skills required by the successor. 20
Nevertheless, a skills only based assessment will leave the church vulnerable to selecting a candidate who has minimal connection with the values and culture of the organisation.

Key values and distinctives should be clearly articulated in the organisation’s policy documents. They become a crucial component of the selection criteria as they outline the church’s ethics and culture.

Lastly, in the situation assessment phase, a preliminary list of the prospective contenders should be compiled.

This identification process should commence with the senior leader looking at the church’s current senior executive staff or emerging next generation leaders. Human nature dictates that a “prophet is not without honour except in his own country”. This bias can cause a leader to magnify the weaknesses of internal candidates and minimise the flaws of external candidates.

When compiling this list of prospective senior leaders it is vital therefore to not undervalue the ones you know and overestimate the capacity of lesser known outsiders.
Chapter Four

Phase Two – engagement with stakeholders
When the initial phase of situation assessment is completed then the senior leader can move onto the second phase of engaging with the key stakeholders. This involves the formal participation of the organisation’s governing board, senior executive staff and leading stakeholders outside the organisation.

These people will have often played a strategic and crucial role in the senior leader’s life and organisation. They will now help define the parameters of the succession process and will play a significant role in the subsequent phases of the process.

A senior leader of long tenure should discuss their proposed future plans individually with key board members then the board as a whole and subsequently key stakeholders outside the organisation.

This personal and consultative dialogue serves several purposes.

- It gives a senior leader a unique opportunity to share one-on-one their journey towards succession.
- Inclusion will cause these key people to take ownership of the succession process. Thus they will bring their unique perspective and add wisdom to the process.
- The personal nature of this approach will assist these stakeholders in their processing of the complexities associated with the imminent departure of a long term, respected leader.

Inclusion causes stakeholders to take ownership of the succession process.
After the meetings with individuals two specific groups of people should be engaged in a more formal process:

- **The board** - the decision to commence a succession process should be discussed and minuted at board meeting of the organisation.

- **Senior executive staff** – key personnel should also be informed of the succession process. However, this should not occur until the next phase which is the selection process. The executive staff should then be told as to whether or not they are on the final list of prospective candidates. The senior leader should clearly explain to staff who are not on the list why they were not selected. Both the selection criteria formed in phase one and the rigorous nature of the selection process should be made clear to these executive staff.

The clear communication and wise leadership of the senior leader at this point is critical. It will help alleviate the stress that the board and key staff will unavoidably face as they grapple with the issues of their ongoing roles within the organisation.

The role of a consultant again becomes critical at this point. Their expertise and reassuring presence can assist the senior leader in their communication processes. They can also highlight to the board and executive staff both the benefits of and potential obstacles they will face in this journey.
Chapter Five

Phase Three – search & selection
The third and critical phase of the succession process is the search for and ultimate selection of a successor.\textsuperscript{26}

When a leader has led their organisation for many years they should also lead this phase of the process and exert a significant influence on both the timing of their succession and the choice of a successor. The reasons for this are apparent:

- They are acutely aware of what is required to lead their organisation and have an in-depth understanding of the role and its functions.
- They understand that the future prosperity of the organisation is predicated upon the successful transition to a new leader.
- They realise that this process will be the culmination of an important period in their leadership life and may in fact be their last major operation as a leader of an organisation.\textsuperscript{27} Their leadership legacy is somewhat at stake here.

All these factors combine to make it preferable for this phase to be led by the senior leader.

The organisation’s board, key outside stakeholders and senior executive staff also play key roles during this phase. Therefore the senior leader must carefully manage the dynamics of both their board, staff and the stakeholders throughout this process.

While this can be demanding it will pay significant dividends to the leader and the organisation. These include a broader perspective, personal support and the wisdom that comes with a multiplicity of counsel. Ultimately, it offers a greater chance of a successful transition.\textsuperscript{28}
When a leader decides to go it alone in this phase, they actually diminish the contribution of key people who have empowered them to successfully lead the organisation for many years. The resultant damage to the leader’s credibility, the organisation’s future and the successor’s capacity to lead is immeasurable. Thus a senior leader should adopt an inclusive and consultative approach. This requires clear communication including regular updates on progress and processes.

The first decision in the search and selection process is whether to consider both internal and external candidates. The phase one’s situation assessment will play a key role in this decision as it will have determined the current status and future leadership needs of the organisation. Also the selection criteria of skills and values will be used to assess candidates but the choice still remains as to where to look for a successor.

There are obvious advantages to choosing an **internal candidate**:

- They already possess an intimate working knowledge of the leadership style, internal procedures and situational nuances of the organisation.
- They have a proven track record of actively supporting the organisation’s vision and leadership whilst incarnating the organisation’s culture.
- They are familiar with and known by the board and the key outside stakeholders, including networks associated with the organisation.
- If they have been the second-in-command they will have had invaluable experience in leading the organisation for short periods of time.
- Lastly, promoting from within sends a message to other staff that diligent and skilful work is rewarded.
However there is a downside to internal promotion.

After a long tenure by the same senior leader, an organisation may in reality need fresh blood and with it, new and provocative ideas. Promoting from within may actually entrench certain habits, styles and procedures that have become counterproductive over time.

Choosing a leader from the current senior executive team may also unfortunately invoke the Peter Principle. This principle indicates that successful employees may be continually promoted until they reach a level where they lack appropriate competence. Rather than be demoted they remain stuck, performing incompetently a task that is beyond their expertise.

Thus a very competent second-in-command, whilst possessing all the appropriate values, may lack the necessary skills to fill the senior leader’s position.

The selection of an external candidate brings with it certain advantages.

- They will bring a fresh approach to old programs and procedures.

- Their expertise which has been gained in different surroundings will add new perspective to old obstacles.

- They will bring an outsider’s view to current scenarios, a view which often can release situations that are gridlocked in an organisation.

The ideal external candidate can be a leader who has previously worked within the organisation then left to gain valuable expertise in another like-minded organisation.
However, the major downside to choosing an external candidate has to do with the issue of values. Whilst they may possess superior competencies to any internal candidate, they may bring with them a significantly different set of values and thus a culture that is foreign to the organisation.

The ideal external candidate may prove to be a leader who has previously worked within the organisation, then left to gain valuable expertise in another like-minded organisation. They could return to the organisation with enhanced competencies whilst retaining a comprehensive understanding of the organisation’s values and culture.

Once a successor has been selected and the organisation has been made aware of them, the move can be made into the transition phase.
Chapter Six

Phase Four – transition period
The fourth and final phase of a succession process is the transition period which commences with the selection of a successor and runs into the first year of the new leader’s tenure.33

During the transition period the focus will be on the various personnel involved in the organisation, with the intentional purpose of moving each one into their new future as successfully and seamlessly as possible.

These people are the

- outgoing senior leader
- incoming successor
- board
- key outside stakeholders
- staff
- members of the organisation

The transition period will be challenging and does require both wisdom and flexibility by all parties to be successful.

**The outgoing leader’s link with the organisation**

An essential decision in the transition period concerns the future role of the outgoing senior leader.34 The outgoing leader must thoughtfully consider their future, articulate it, engage with it and then fully align themselves with it.
In some organisations, the senior leader has maintained a board, staff or advisory role after vacating the senior leadership position. The hope is that the outgoing leader will provide stability, continuity and a reassuring presence in what can be a turbulent period.

Unfortunately this can cause more harm than good.\textsuperscript{35}

Their presence is generally stifling for the incoming leader and can provide grounds for division. Outgoing leaders find it difficult to resist sharing their thoughts and opinions and the incoming leader finds it difficult not to accept them.\textsuperscript{36} The political and emotional complexities should be apparent.

Thus, two more preferable options exist:

The \textbf{first and easiest option} is for the outgoing leader to completely leave the organisation at the moment of succession.

A \textbf{second option} sees the outgoing leader given an emeritus role and serving the organisation’s wider network whilst playing no further leadership or governing role in the organisation. This option seeks to honour a leader who has served well for many years and makes the wisdom of an experienced leader widely available.

It should be noted that option two will only be successful if the incoming leader is genuinely supportive of and comfortable with the agreement. Therefore, they should have the final word as to whether the outgoing leader has any ongoing connection with the organisation.\textsuperscript{37}

If the second option is chosen the board should minute a documented plan of action that outlines financial considerations, implementation dates and specific roles and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{38} An enormous amount of uncertainty and grief can be avoided if both an annual review and a sunset clause are included in this document.
This complex yet crucial process should be facilitated by a consultant who is respected by both leaders and the board. It is definitely preferable for the consultant to have had firsthand experience in a succession process.

**The outgoing leader’s future**

Paramount in the collective mind of the incoming leader, board and key stakeholders should be the creation of a significant future for the outgoing leader who has served the organisation for many years. A senior leader will be accustomed to a certain level of status and power whilst at the helm. They will generally be an articulate person with skills and energy. The loss of both positional status and a place to direct energies can cause a gifted leader to flounder.

Unless these energies are harnessed in a new direction, an outgoing leader can end up focussing on what they have left behind rather than what lies ahead. They can then become critical of the incoming leader and their initiatives, causing disruptions and damaging relationships.

Both the board and the incoming leader can help significantly at this point. Their understanding of the major change the senior leader is going through can substantially assist the senior leader through this time.

During the transition a consultant will ensure that the incoming leader, board and key stakeholders continue to connect with the outgoing leader and assist them in creating a viable and significant future.

An organisation can also assist the outgoing leader’s process by acknowledging their long term contribution equitably and honourably. The outgoing leader should be appreciated in a way that is commensurate with their years of service.
The incoming leader

During the transition phase the main focus for an incoming leader is the work required for their development into a senior leader. The outgoing leader plays a key role here, ensuring that the new leader is exposed to a broad range of experiences that enhance their leadership skills.

These experiences can include:

- project assignments
- job rotation
- 360 degree feedback programs
- personalised coaching
- conventional study and internet based educational opportunities

The developmental program should also be linked to the organisation’s future strategic needs so that they are equipped to face the demands of the future. This program can be formalised into an Individual Development Plan which is a learning contract that outlines how specific skills will be enhanced.

The intention is to provide a wide range of both experience and opportunity that provides exposure to the larger world of a senior leader and enlarges the competencies and thinking of the successor.
The incoming leader will also benefit from the mentoring of the senior leader during the transition time. In fact in recent years, organisations have increasingly utilised an intentional mentoring model in the development of successors as mentoring fills in the wisdom gaps that inevitably appear in structured development programs.45

During this mentoring process the senior leader should also connect the successor to their networks both within and outside the organisation. These connections should be established early in the transition phase and the successor mentored in the management of these partnerships.

These connections will give them a significant advantage during and beyond their transition period, generating perspective, insight and encouragement.46 They will complement the incoming leader’s existing networks who will undoubtedly assist them in navigating the uncharted emotional and political waters that inevitably accompany the transition phase.47

The board

The board plays an important and valuable monitoring role during the transition phase.

At board meetings they should regularly monitor and review the development of the senior leader’s future plan and the progress of the successor’s Individual Learning Plan. Appropriate adjustments can be adopted at these board meetings. The board should maintain this monitoring role throughout the first year following the departure of the outgoing leader.

A seminal study done by the Centre for Creative Leadership in 1998, suggests that 40% of transitioning executives fail in their first 18 months.48 Therefore the board should actively review the incoming leader’s adaptation to the senior role, offering full support and encouragement.

They should also monitor the senior leader’s move into their future. This could be achieved by some of the board members meeting regularly with the outgoing leader.49
**Key outside stakeholders**

Key outside stakeholders should be kept informed of any important developments, as their perspective can be enormously helpful to everyone involved in the transition process.

**The staff and members**

Staff can face a turbulent time as they plot a course through this significant change point in the organisation because the succession will impact the staff dynamics, their sense of security and the leadership style in their workplace.

The senior leader can assist them in this process through clear and strategic communication. They should be aware of and remain sensitive to the various emotional stresses their staff are experiencing. Senior leaders can assist their staff through this process by simple measures such as operating an open door policy and increasing their personal contact by walking around the office for informal chats.

The senior leader should carefully outline the role, responsibilities and authority of the successor during the transition phase. Also, all staff should be fully aware of the timeline of this fourth phase.

Both the senior leader and incoming leader should be alert to, and quickly clarify any points of confusion and defuse contentious issues.

Members of the organisation will generally take their lead from the senior leader, board and staff. As long as these people give lucid communication and send unambiguous messages to the organisations’ members, there should be a successful transition.
Chapter Seven

Future proof your church
Successful successions future proof a church.

Successions require skilful leadership. They also demand complex and substantial interaction between the incoming and outgoing leaders, and all of the organisation’s key stakeholders.

Unfortunately some churches baulk at this complexity and adopt a laissez faire approach, believing that everything will work out in the end. Others dread the moment, choosing to ignore its inevitability. Neither approach works well. Churches stall, incoming leaders don’t last and departing leaders suffer a tainted legacy.

Conversely, the churches that handle succession well are those who plan early and comprehensively. They also understand the need to engage a consultant with extensive succession experience to guide them through this often tumultuous season.

They are forward thinking organisations, who upon analysing their future strategic needs, make advance preparations for the inescapable challenge of succession. They readily develop a lucid and detailed, yet flexible plan that serves them well as they implement their plan through the four phases of a succession.

Moving from the analysis of their current situation, they engage with their key people and select a successor after a thorough scrutiny of internal and external candidates.

Ultimately effective leaders future proof their church as they launch their senior leader into an energetic future, seamlessly embedding the incoming leader into their new role and thus causing their church to flourish as it moves through the often turbulent waters of succession into a new day.
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Our thorough and comprehensive plan will future proof your church causing it to move sequentially and purposefully through the four key phases of a successful succession process into a bright future.
John and Di Finkelde are two of the greatest ministries I know in leading a church, guiding a team, bringing people to Christ and in raising up a strong, local church. They have a large wealth of experience in leading transition, raising up leaders and handling difficult circumstances. They will bring the blessing of God wherever they go. Have them in your church!

Dr Phil Pringle
Senior Pastor C3 Church Sydney,
Founder & President C3 Church
During their decades of ministry experience John and Di have successfully transitioned an existing church, overseen a church relocation and building construction, led a diverse multi-staff team and grown a thriving church community. I highly recommend them to you.

Dr Mark Conner
Senor Pastor CityLife Church
Endorsements

John and Dianne are two of the most effective ‘ministers to ministers’ I know. They have a unique blend of experience, heart and ability to empower churches but also to come alongside pastors and empower them personally.

Vicki Simpson Nu Level Ministries
John & Di Finkelde bring together over thirty years experience in Christian ministry, serving as staff pastors and senior ministers of C3 Church Hepburn Heights. Not only are they ministers of good standing in our C3 movement but they are also actively involved in consulting pastors and churches in Australia and abroad of all denominations.

Dr Gordon Moore
Chairman Australian Pentecostal Minister's Fellowship
National Director C3 Church Australia
John loves shooting things (photography that is), thrashing around in surf, the fact that his MA (Lead) will be finished this year and his Android tablet. His wife of 33 years Dianne loves scenic flights, shopping, adrenalin inducing experiences and her Mac Air. They both are besotted with their grandson, Jack. And of course they love their kids.

They have pastored in their church since 1982. Amongst other things they love the fact that their multi generational church has planted 6 churches in the last 18 years and has 67% of their adults in connect groups.

In 2011 they founded Grow A Healthy Church to partner with pastors to grow healthy churches.
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