

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

THE NEXT STAGE: LEAVING LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP

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You wonder, who am I and how can I still be useful?



Over four decades ago, the large Baby Boom cohort in the U.S. began entering the workforce in significant numbers with many deciding to dedicate their careers to social sector work. Now this cohort is entering the traditional age of retirement and looking to their next stage of life and work. Whether in nonprofits or government, their work has been a reflection of their life purpose ranging from serving vulnerable populations, solving community problems, or making systems change. And even as they prepare for leaving positional power, they have every intention of continuing to contribute to the social good.

The Next Stage: Leaving Long-term Leadership presents how some of these leaders – both those who have exited and those who are planning their departures – describe the process of leaving and figuring out what is next. The findings – based on two in-depth focus groups – draws from the research and experience of its authors who have been collecting information through the lens of succession planning and from surveys/interviews on defining this new stage of life and work. The report is part of a series of papers sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation describing the impact of pending leadership changes on older cohorts, the generations that follow, social sector organizations and the nonprofit field.

THERE ARE FOUR MAJOR THEMES THAT EMERGED:

1. **THERE IS A NEXT PHASE OF SOCIAL SECTOR WORK AFTER LEAVING LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP.** Confirming recent studies in both the nonprofit sector and with the general public, Baby Boom age leaders are not entering into traditional retirement. They plan to continue meaningful work after leaving leadership roles.
2. **THIS NEW STAGE OF WORK LIFE IS NOT YET DEFINED.** Long-term leaders are eager to make contributions based on their experience, skills, and interests, but there are no roadmaps for going from their leadership role to what is next.
3. **MAKING THE TRANSITION IS A PRACTICAL AND AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY.** Whether the transition is smooth or rocky, leaving leadership positions raises issues and feelings, some personal and some about the organization. These range from emotions connected with losing positional power to issues related to planning for the future.
4. **FEW SUPPORTS EXIST TO HELP LEADERS WITH THIS TRANSITION.** Leaders making this transition are often on their own, making the process more challenging than if there were systems to deal with this change of life.

PARTICIPANTS HAD THREE MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES:

1. **PROVIDE INFORMATION.** Those leaving long-term nonprofit positions have spent a lifetime of giving to others often at the expense of thinking about their own future. Practical advice should be made available on a range of issues, from financial planning to how to start a consulting practice to expectations for this new stage of work and life.
2. **OFFER SUPPORT.** Leaving a long-term leadership position is a lonely endeavor and individuals are left to cope on their own. Support groups, coaching, transition services can help individuals and organizations make a healthy transition.
3. **PUT SYSTEMS IN PLACE.** This new stage of work and life for older nonprofit leaders and workers will require new systems for guidance and support to address the growing needs of an aging and engaged workforce.

THE FOCUS GROUPS

The first focus group was comprised of boomer-age graduates of the Children and Family Fellowship program assembled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Every two years, this Fellowship is awarded to a select group of accomplished child welfare administrators, nonprofit leaders, and community development professionals from across the country in an effort to build and develop the leadership potential of individuals at the helm of public and nonprofit organizations working to improve outcomes for children.

The second group was a convening of six long-term nonprofit executives who had left their human service leadership positions within the previous three years. The shortest tenure among the six had been 25 years. They were questioned about what barriers they had encountered in planning to leave their positions and what resources they had used to surmount the barriers. They also described the ways they had stayed engaged in community service, both paid and volunteer. None had gone into a full-time paid position after exiting their ED position.

MAJOR THEMES

DON'T SAY RETIREMENT

The idea of traditional retirement was certainly not on the minds of the long-term leaders we convened, though they struggled to define this new stage of work and life. Several used the word “retired” to describe their exit from a long-term leadership positions, but it did not fit the 1960s view of a life without work. One participant talked about retirement as a “construct that has lived its time.” For social sector leaders, their work has been an expression of their life mission, not a job. They talked about their readiness to give up positional power seeking what one person described as a next stage where it was possible to have, “more control of your life.” Another participant described the next stage as, “doing what’s important to me.”

“I retired when I was 67. I knew at around 65 that this job was too much for me. I knew the organization needed to go to a new other level. I knew I didn’t have it. It was okay... You are aging. The world sees you in a different way regardless of your job.”

We were surprised to learn that some of the public sector leaders were also worried about their financial future. Several had sacrificed secure pensions as they

PAT LOOMES was executive director of Girls Inc. of Alameda County (Girls Inc) in California for 30 years. During her tenure, Girls Inc grew from 5 to 100 staff in multiple programs that seek to inspire girls living in high-risk East Bay communities “to be strong, smart, and bold.”

Pat began her transition two years in advance. She hired a planning consultant to engage board and staff in assessing Girls Inc’s future; a fund development consultant came in to grow the organization’s ability to draw private dollars; and a coach worked with her and her senior managers to strengthen the team.

Despite these preparations, Pat reflects that those final two years were fraught with personal anxieties. “I feared I would lose my identity as a person who was being of use in the community, who was having an impact.” She had no clear idea of what she would do after Girls Inc. “It seemed the next thing after leaving a job at 65 is death. It was pretty sobering.”

But opportunities came to her. She was invited to join the board of directors of a local foundation and then was funded by a major Girls Inc donor to promote replications of GIRL Start, one of Girls Inc’s most successful programs.

In hindsight, Pat wishes she had been less anxious during the end of her tenure. “I should have trusted my Board more to handle it well. I could have invested more energy in partnering with the Board on transition activities rather than in being worried and anxious.”

advanced in their careers deciding to move to positions in different public systems in order to have the most impact. This meant they never were in one system long enough to take full advantage of the retirement benefits.

NO CLEAR ROADMAP

“I never thought of having an answer on what I would do. Of course I would do something. I’d say I am going to continue my work, I don’t know the form it’s going to take.”

The striking rejection by participants of traditional retirement was matched by their lack of direction on what to do after leaving their long-term leadership positions. Many entered their work life assuming they would work their way up the career ladder and then out of work altogether. Now at the top of that ladder, long-term leaders see no more rungs up and yet they are not interested in moving out. Participants talked about the need for new pathways for a new stage of work and life.

Those who had not yet left their leadership roles were particularly uneasy about the future: how would they use their knowledge and expertise, did they have one last big push, could they simply stay connected by serving on boards and engaging in political work, and as one participant mused, was it possible to enact, “a desire to share what I have learned and learn some more.” Those who had already left their positions told us how difficult it was to think about what was next while they were in the exit process. Some had plans that they were able to fulfill such as running for school board or consulting or writing a book. Others talked about needing time to go through the transition before they could find their next place. And there were some who found that their plans changed as they tried different ways to make their next contribution in a way that felt right to them.

“Who I was, was incredibly wrapped up in this organization. All my passion, political beliefs were embedded in this organization. I was incredibly lucky to have the job I had. Leaving it was weird – led me to reflecting, who am I?”

Overall, this talented and enormously accomplished group of people felt they were on their own trying to figure out what to do with little information on what to expect, what to do, and how to navigate the change from positional leadership to a next stage of work and life.

MAKING THE JOURNEY

“I have so much more energy than before. I can rest up in ways I could not do before. I used to worry a lot – a part of the ED job – it is very consuming. I don’t have to worry anymore.”

Leaving a long-term leadership position takes preparation both for the organization and personally. Some participants had carefully planned their next steps; for others the departure had been more abrupt. Either way it was hard to predict how the transition would

go. Participants who had left their positions talked about the practical issues they faced as well as the emotional impact of the transition. Their experiences varied: it went smoothly in some cases where a successor was successful and welcomed the former leader into the organization but others had more difficulty. For example, one participant who gave two and a half years notice described his disappointment that the board hired a successor who has not, “stepped up the plate. I had raised

millions of dollars for a specific project and as the months passed I realized that nothing was being done.” Despite his disappointment, this participant reached out to, “old and new colleagues,” which “opened a new flood of opportunities that I really hadn’t thought of until I retired.”

Those who had already exited also noted that leaving required a delicate balance of supporting the new leader while giving them the room to do things in their own way. This combination of support and letting go paralleled the process they went through in their own lives. Several talked about the need to plan and prepare but also to allow for new opportunities to emerge. In many ways, the process is one that continues to unfold and often takes unexpected turns both in their personal lives as well as a professionally. As one person described it, “the new ED seems right; I am delighted with the choice... What has become possible for me? I barely know. I am a part-time caretaker for my granddaughter. I am also providing care for my elderly mother. I felt I made the decision at the right time.”

GOING IT ALONE

“Unless baby boomers begin to think about, talk about, and internalize what’s happening to them in a more life-affirming way, it’s going to be difficult and scary.”

Our discussion with participants surfaced the challenges people face at this time of their life. Most striking is how individuals are on their own in coping with their moves into a new stage of life. Although some had assistance with the organizational transition, few had resources to help them with their personal transitions. Participants – both those still in their leadership jobs and those who had left – worried about their future financial situation, their finding the “right” way to make a contribution, as well as the loss of connections to professional colleagues as they stepped out of their role. As one person put it, “if your visibility and your power and your influence were tied to your role – and you don’t have [that role] any more – you have to have something else going on inside to be able to reframe that for yourself and still be okay.”

“I don’t say I am not certain. I like the idea that I have options. I just haven’t made my mind yet about what I am going to pursue.”

On the most basic level, several people noted that there is no name for this next phase of life. And the lack of acknowledgement – that it exists and it will grow – has resulted in a lack of planning. Some participants noted that a new framework is necessary so that nonprofit leaders will begin to think about their exit strategies earlier to allow enough time to prepare themselves. One participant noted, “you can get so high on the tree that you forget to – or people don’t think that you need to – talk to others to get answers to some of [the] deeper questions.”

NORMAN YEE grew up in San Francisco’s Chinatown and worked in his family’s grocery store located in a blue collar neighborhood across town. Living in the immigrant culture of Chinatown and seeing the economic struggles of the store’s clientele taught him compassion, “I’ve always wanted help people.”

In 1983, Norman joined the staff of the Wu Yee Children’s Services in San Francisco, an organization founded to help immigrant families. A decade later he became the Executive Director. After a Fellowship with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Norman decided to leave Wu Yee, but was not sure what to do next.

He first became a program officer with the San Francisco Foundation. But his life changed in 2004 when, seeing a need, Norman ran for and won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Education. He was re-elected for a second term in 2008 serving as board president all 8 years. Norman set his sights higher by winning a seat on the Board of Supervisors for the City and County of San Francisco in 2012. “I want to continue to bring up people on the bottom. I’ve been there!”

Norman relates that his family has been a critical source of support as he has transitioned from one leadership role to the next. “My family was totally into my campaign for city supervisor. In fact my daughter was initially running the campaign.” After leaving his nonprofit executive role, Norman is surprised, “I’m in politics! I didn’t really plan it. But the opportunity to impact education for all of San Francisco’s public school students came to me and I went for it. Now I will work for policies that will improve opportunities for working class families across the city.”

WHAT IS NEEDED

It was clear to us as we analyzed the conversations of these two groups that there is much that could be done to make this transition less difficult and more certain to produce good outcomes both for individuals and organizations. Here we offer three recommendations.

PROVIDE INFORMATION

We heard from participants that there are three stages where good and practical information is crucial: before leaving, during the transition, and after the departure. All three of these stages have a personal and organizational component, though the organizational tends to take precedence in the first stage and the personal in the last.

Preparing for these stages of transition on the personal side includes providing tools and resources for financial planning, for advice and options on new opportunities for volunteer and paid service, and for identifying the resources and tools for simply understanding the process of moving from a position of positional power to a new stage of work and life.

For the organization, participants identified the need for training for executives and their boards on what typically needs to be addressed in an exit planning process, such as strengthening the board, building the internal leadership bench, attending to staff concerns, and communicating with stakeholders about the transition process. They also highlighted the value of coaching for departing executives and management teams preparing to engage with a new executive.

OFFER SUPPORT

Participants, even those who had gone through a successful transition to a new type of work life, were clear that we need to break the isolation of this process. Several recommended more formal support groups or cohorts that would meet regularly to share information and experiences. Personal or life coaches were regularly referred to as crucial resources during this period, offering both practical and emotional support. Several people who used transition services talked about how important they were in making their transitions successful. They stressed that finding ways to make these services broadly available is key.

In addition to emotional support, participants also identified the need for:

- Financial advice and creative solutions for addressing issues, such as depressed retirement savings;
- Legal help in negotiating exit contracts; and
- Opportunities to learn how they might put their hard-earned wisdom and knowledge to use in supporting other government and social service leaders.

PUT SYSTEMS IN PLACE

In the end, the participants strongly recommended an emphasis on the larger issues these transitions raise for their generation and for generations in the future. They discussed the need to rethink retirement savings and pension plans, address long-term health care issues, and recognize the need for new systems to absorb and address the longer (and changing) work life in the U.S.

Some participants suggested it was time to create a national institute that would serve as container for personal, organizational, and systemic issues such as those covered in this report. Anticipating that

this new phase of life and career would continue beyond this cohort, a national entity could be both a resource and a monitor for policies that affect work/life issues for nonprofit leaders and staffers as they age.

The exit of older leaders, the new phase of work and life for those who have dedicated their life to social sector work, and the concern about the future – both personal and for those we serve – are issues that are not going away. Now is the time to start putting into place new supports and systems that will help all generations doing social sector work. As one participant in our groups said,

We can think of our work as a spiral. Our core values and connection to the work remaining at the center as we circle around them, but there is really no end.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

This report was generously funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The decision to bring together older long-term leaders was a natural extension of previous work supported by the Foundation. First, there has been a ten-year investment, still ongoing, in learning about and supporting new leadership for the nonprofit and public sector, especially younger leaders of color. Second, the Foundation has been in the forefront of developing the field of Executive Transition Management to help organizations, including those with long-term leaders, put succession plans in place and to take a whole organization approach to executive leadership change.

ABOUT THE BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

The goal of the Building Movement Project is to build a strong social justice ethos into the nonprofit sector, strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in the United States as sites of democratic practice, and promote nonprofit groups as partners in building a movement for progressive social change.

To accomplish its goals, the Building Movement Project makes use of four core strategies:

- Changing the discourse and practice within the nonprofit sector to endorse social change and social justice values.
- Identifying and working with social service organizations as sites for social change activities in which staff and constituencies can be engaged to participate in movement building.
- Supporting young leaders who bring new ideas and energy to social change work.
- Listening to and engaging people who work in social change organizations—especially grassroots and community-based groups—to strengthen their ability to shape the policies that affect their work and the communities they serve.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Wolfred is a Senior Affiliate Consultant with CompassPoint Nonprofit Services in Oakland, California. Tim joined CompassPoint in 1997 to create its executive search and transition program. Since then Tim and CompassPoint's team of transition consultants have provided succession planning and search services for over 300 Bay Area nonprofits. With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Tim has also trained over 200 nonprofit transition consultants in a number of cities across the country. Tim is author of the book "Managing Executive Transitions: A Guide for Nonprofits" which was released in June 2009 by the Fieldstone Alliance. In addition he has written two monographs on transition topics, "Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Nonprofits" (2008) and "Interim Executive Directors: The Power in the Middle" (2005). They were published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Other publications on which Tim was co-author include: "Next Generation Organizations: Nine Key Traits" (2010) and "Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership."

Frances Kunreuther co-directs the Building Movement Project, which works to strengthen U.S. nonprofits as sites of civic engagement and social change. She is co-author of *From the Ground Up: Grassroots Organizations Making Social Change* (Cornell, 2006) and *Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership* (Jossey Bass, 2008). Frances is also a senior fellow at the Research Center for Leadership and Action at NYU and spent five years at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard University. She headed the Hetrick-Martin Institute for LGBT youth, and was awarded a year-long Annie E. Casey Foundation fellowship in 1997 for this and her previous work. Over the years, Frances has worked with homeless youth and families, undocumented immigrants, crime victims, battered women, and substance users. She is a writer and presenter on a variety of issues related to nonprofits, leadership and social change.

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