

Passing the Baton

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Passing the baton on to our successor is not an easy task, but it is incredibly important for the continuity and future of the organizations that we have served and led in. Unfortunately, few leaders develop succession plans and fewer still actually implement them. There are all sorts of reasons for this. Some of the more obvious include:

- Fear of loss of power and control.
- Fear of loss of prestige and prosperity.
- Personal insecurity.
- Uncertainty about retirement.
- Lack of planning.
- Lack of foresight.

Failure to make healthy and effective leadership transitions can cause all sorts of personal and organization difficulties. All you have to do is look at the messes caused by poor transitions in the Bible or the corporate world. For our purposes here, let's look at some of the poor transitions described in the Bible:

- Judges (Judges 3-13)
- Eli to his sons (I Samuel 4)
- Samuel to Saul (I Samuel 9-15)
- Saul to David (I Samuel 16-19 and I Samuel 31-II Samuel 2)
- David to Absalom (II Samuel 13-15 and 18-19)
- David to Solomon (I Kings 1-2 and 10-11)
- Solomon to his sons (I Kings 12-14)

Without going into a lot of detail, these transitions were pretty tragic. These stories read more like a soap opera: nepotism, intrigue, betrayal, jealousy, rejection, idolatry, immorality, greed, murder, civil strife and war, etc. Pretty nasty stuff! Now contrast these transitions with those that went well:

- Moses to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31)
- Elijah to Elisha (II Kings 2)
- Jesus to his disciples (John 13-21)
- Barnabas to Paul (Acts 9 and 12-13)
- Paul to Silas, Timothy, and Titus (Acts 15-16 and I/II Timothy, Titus)

Quite a different picture here! The transitions were not always smooth, but because the primary leader intentionally transitioned positional power to a younger leader with spiritual authority as his base, the transition was much smoother and impacting.

From my study of these transition stories and other sources, I have discovered a general understanding of how to transition in ways that empower others and honor God. This has more to do with who we are than with techniques, but a few general guidelines may be helpful here. Transition is inevitable! Leaders transition all the time for a variety of reasons – another job, poor performance, down-sizing, out-sourcing, death, etc. – so it best to be prepared. Here are a few guidelines:

1. Learn how to be an effective mentor throughout life.
2. Sponsor younger leaders along the way and learn from your experience.
3. Prayerfully develop a transition plan in a timely fashion.
4. Seek the counsel of others who have successfully made transitions.
5. Cultivate a leadership development culture within the organization you lead.
6. Prayerfully watch for potential successors within your organization or network.
7. Remember that the true qualities of a leader are best demonstrated in crisis, so watch how your potential successor handles stress.
8. Once you have a successor in mind who is acceptable to other organizational leadership (i.e. boards), begin to share responsibilities.
9. Groom successor through exposure, networking, affirmation, critique, etc. so he/she has a better understanding of the organizational culture and job responsibilities.
10. Once the transition is completed, take a vacation and do not micromanage from the sideline.
11. Pray! Pray! Pray!
12. Be available in healthy ways as a mentor for your successor on an as need basis.

How we transition in leadership will have a significant impact on our legacy and the continued impact of the people and organizations that we once lead.

Legacy

From my studies and life experience, I have come to believe that there are three major stages involving potential transitions in life and leadership. Each of these has its own issues and dynamics, but basically we all face these stages during general time frames and must navigate them successfully in order to realize our purpose and legacy:

- Stage 1: Belonging – childhood through early adulthood
- Stage 2: Competency – early adulthood through middle age
- Stage 3: Significance – later middle age through the end of life

It is stage 3: Significance, where issues of legacy become the focus. Has my life and leadership really mattered? What will I be remembered for by my spouse, children, family members, colleagues, community, etc.? How can I impart what I have learned in life and leadership to others? Will they even care?

I could go on and on with questions like this that I have wrestled with over the past few years. The bottom line is: “If we have ordered our lives and leadership in such a way so that we are finishing well,

we have a lot to give!” As we transition from positions of responsibility, we will have more time (and less pressure) to insure that we establish a lasting legacy of empowering others.