

## **Nonprofit Executive Succession: A Preliminary Model**

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## **Nonprofit Executive Succession: A Preliminary Model**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is present a conceptual model of nonprofit executive succession that can be universally applied to nonprofits in any setting. Our model is based on both the literature in the field and our experiences with executive succession in nonprofits. Our model consists of two-phases: 1) antecedents or causes and 2) consequences or effects of executive succession. Our model should be considered a work in progress subject to modification based on application in the field. We provide support and explication of our model from the for-profit literature. We have support and explication of our model from for-profit models (e.g., Exley, 2007; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Fredrickson *et al*, 1988; Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2008).

Key Words: Executive succession, model, nonprofits,

### **Nonprofit Executive Succession: A Preliminary Model**

Research on executive succession in nonprofit organizations has gained significant interest in recent years. Two nonprofit practitioner periodicals, *Nonprofit Quarterly* (2002) and the *Journal of Nonprofit Management* (2005), have devoted their entire issues to succession in nonprofits. In addition, several nonprofit scholars (e.g., Fisher & Comini, 2009; Golensky, 2005; Hailey & James, 2004; Markham, Walters, & Bonjean, 2001; Mentzer, 1993; Santora & Sarros, 2001) have made contributions to the field by their research of nonprofit executive succession in various international settings. Despite some bold initiatives into this area of research, the field remains basically underdeveloped and can benefit from additional research.

The aim of this paper is present a model of nonprofit executive succession that can be applied universally to any type of nonprofit organization. We created our model based on the literature in the field, drawing from both nonprofit and for profit literature, and from our own experiences with executive succession in then nonprofit arena during the last 15 years. This paper is delimited to a discussion of the not-for-profit sector. We do acknowledge the need for comparative studies of succession in both the not-for-profit and private sectors, but these studies are beyond the scope of this paper.

Our model consists of two-phases: Phase I, antecedents or causes, and Phase II, consequences or effects of executive succession. Our model should be considered a work in progress subject to modification based on application and results from field research. It can be used by nonprofit scholars and nonprofit executive directors and their boards of directors alike to help them better understand the concept of executive succession. Our model has been benefited from the work of

Exley (2007), Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996), Fredrickson *et al* (1988) and Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008).

## **THE MODEL OF NONPROFIT EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION**

Our model consists of two phases: Figure 1 details Phase I: the antecedents or causes of executive succession and those factors connected to 1) succession planning, 2) the departure of the executive, 3) the selection and role of successors by the board, incumbent, and a joint selection by the board, incumbents, and organizational founders, 4) the various hiring options available to the organizational decision-makers, and concludes with 5) the hiring of a new executive director. Figure 2 details Phase II: the consequences or effects of executive succession and those factors connected to 1) the new executive and transition and taking charge period, 2) strategic change and values, 3) organizational performance, 4) the retention and dismissal of the executive, and 5) organizational sustainability.

### **PHASE I: ANTECEDENTS OR CAUSES**

#### **SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Most nonprofit organizations do not plan for executive succession. The results of surveys conducted during the last decade have reported that anywhere from 12 percent (Randall et al , 2004) to 50 percent (Kittleman & Associates, 2007) had no written succession plan. In fact, even when founders are forced to plan for executive succession, they change their minds over time and resort to their old ways (Santora & Sarros, 2007).

Researchers have called for the need to plan for succession for a host of reasons: a smooth transition between old and new executives (e.g., Khaliq, Walston & Thompson, 2007), reduced costs associated with the succession process (Parrino, 1997), and reducing the time of the succession process so the organization can move forward without any major interruptions. Sinclair (1991) has stated that nonprofits are not ready to deal with the issue of succession. However, those organizations that do have formal succession plans had performed better because the transition was more fluid (Giambatista *et al.*, 2006).

## DEPARTURE OF EXECUTIVE

As a result of the extraordinarily high number of executive directors who are expected to retire within the next few years, a serious deficit in nonprofit leadership has been predicted (Tierney, 2006a). Recent surveys (Bell *et al*, 2006; DRG, 2006, Peters & Wolfred , 2001; Teegarden, 2004) confirm the exodus of nonprofit executive directors and suggest that anywhere from 40 to 80 percent of nonprofit executives will leave their organizations within the next few years. Unless nonprofit executives and their boards of directors, who have not prepared for executive succession, take some immediate actions, the departure of executives will create a major crisis for nonprofits (Tierney, 2006b).

In addition to retirement, some executives will either die in office or will become incapacitated and unable to carry out the duties and responsibilities of their offices. Still other executive directors will be evicted by their boards of directors for political reasons, misdeeds, and/or poor personal and organizational performance (See Gibelman & Gelman, 2002 for three examples of nonprofit executives' departure).

### Selection and Role

#### Power and Politics

Succession has been viewed as a contest of power and politics. Early on, Zald (1965) reported on a community service organization and the political aspects of succession. He found that the incumbent was instrumental in getting the board to select his candidate. A few years later, Zald (1969) offered several propositions about executive power *vis-à-vis* the board of directors. Golensky (1993) discussed the relationship between the board and the executive. Cannella and Lubatkin (1993) make the observation that succession is social-political in nature. For Zajac and Westphal (1996), the appointment of a successor is power-based: it reveals who has more power, the board or the CEO. If the board holds more power than the CEO, then the board will select a successor who has similar characteristics to the board. Conversely, if the CEO has more power than the board, then the successor will resemble the incumbent. Ocasio and Kim (1999) call

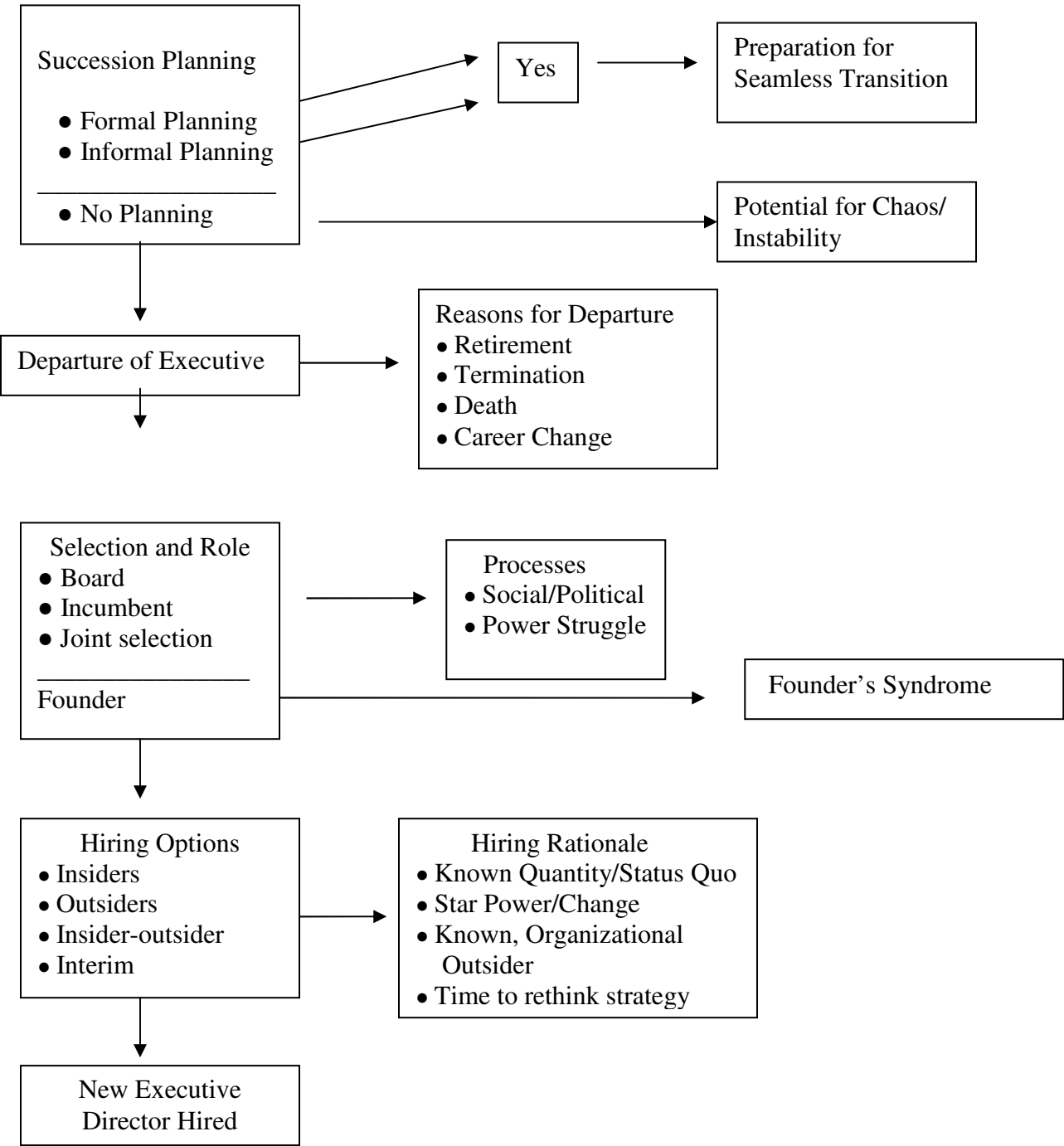
executive selection a “political contest” and “ideological struggle” between the executive and the board. Westphal and Fredrickson (2001) view the selection of a successor as an executive who possesses similar strategies to their own firms. Shen (2003) believes that a power structure exists in organizations when a board has influence in the decision. Golensky (2005) chronicles a leadership transition, but does not reveal the “behind the scenes” story that is so often the very fabric of the selection process. Finally, Iecovich and Bar-Mor (2007) found that almost an equal distribution of power between nonprofit executives and the board chairs, with a slight edge of power leaning toward the executive.

### Board

Cook and & Brown (1990), Duca (1996) and Zald (1969) have very clearly articulated the distinct roles and responsibilities of nonprofit boards and their executives. In essence, the board sets policies for the organization and the executive implements policy. The board also has the authority to “hire and fire” the CEO. Allison (2002), Bowen (1994), Golensky (2005, 2008), and Howe (2004) have commented on the importance of the board of directors in selecting nonprofit executive directors. In particular, Allison (2002) believes that “selecting an executive director is arguably the most important act a nonprofit board can perform (346).” Levinson (1974) and Lawler and Finegold (1997) believe that selecting a successor is the job of the board. Biggs (2004) cautions boards not to abandon their role in executive succession. Finally, Exley (2007) offers a “Crisis Model” of executive succession which calls for the board and its chair to be actively engaged to manage the succession process.

Figure 1

PHASE I: ANTECEDENTS AND CAUSES OF SUCCESSION



### Incumbent

Incumbents have an interest in selecting their successors for a number of reasons. By identifying and selecting their replacement, incumbents believe there will be continuity and their strategy will be maintained. In a sense, they will continue to lead, have their presence felt even though they are no longer physically present in the organization, and have a legacy. When incumbents are able to select their replacements, they are said to have more power than the board. Zald (1965) found that the incumbent was instrumental in getting the board to select his candidate. Hambrick *et al* (1993) found that incumbents select successors who are “like them.” Zajac and Westphal (1996) also found that incumbents seek replacement “who are like them” and the power of the incumbent over the board.

### Joint Selection

Some writers believe that the selection of a successor requires input from incumbent executives. For example, Biggs (2004) considers the selection process to be a joint responsibility between the board and the incumbent, not just the executive. Berke (2005), too, believes that selecting a successor is a joint act of the board and the incumbent. Both parties have an obligation to collaborate in this process to ensure that the best possible candidate has been identified and selected to replace the incumbent. Exley (2007) offers a Collaborative Model which calls for the board and the CEO to work cooperatively as “active partners.”

### Founder's Syndrome

Many founders of nonprofit organizations are unique people. They are entrepreneurs and they often have distinctive leadership skills. Many times their strengths are their weaknesses. McNamara (1998) calls one of their weaknesses the inability of the founder to change leadership styles or the Founder's Syndrome, when founders exhibit “negative or undesirable behavior”. Block and Rosenberg (2002) define Founder's Syndrome in another way. They state that it “refers to the influence powers and prestige that the founder exercises or that others attribute to



the founder (354).” Block and Rosenberg (2002) found that nonprofit executive directors who were founders were able to influence board decisions slightly more than 50 percent of the time. Miller and Simmons (1992) found that founders had greater control over their organizations including their boards which are often small in size. Thus, founders are able to get their “way.” Other research found similar results, with specific reference to controlling the executive succession selection and appointment process (See Gilmore & Brown, 1985; Santora & Sarros, 1995; Santora *et al*, 2007; Santora & Sarros, 2007). By contrast, Santora and Sarros (2009) found that of the three founding nonprofit executive directors, one insisted that she would control the selection process for her successor, while the other two executive directors were willing to defer the selection of their successors to the board, but they wanted their voices heard. Carver (1992) offers his prescription to avoid the board becoming subservient to the nonprofit founder.

### **Available Hiring Options**

Nonprofit organizations have the option from choosing among several possibilities: 1) insiders, 2) outsiders, 3) insider-outsider, and 4) interim appointments. Each hiring option has its own strengths and weaknesses.

#### Insiders

Insiders are individuals who are current employees of the organization. In general, if organizations want to maintain the status quo, they tend to hire insiders. Kotter (1982) believes that insiders hold an advantage over outsiders, for two reasons: their ability to apply their specific knowledge about their organization in the decision-making process, and their established work networks. Insiders also have the edge in large organizations that by their very nature (e.g., complex, power structure) cannot accommodate outsiders (Dalton & Kesner, 1983). Chung *et al*. (1987) found that low-performing firms tend to hire insiders. Chan (1996) viewed internal versus external candidates within the context of an “economic contest.”

Insiders maintain the upper hand in the selection process when they are equal to or better than outsiders, and when internal candidates are more plentiful (Agrawal *et al*, 2006). Behn *et al*.

(2006) found that insiders are more effective than outsiders: “[firms] that choose insider successors outperform firms that chose outside successors (p. 43).”

Insiders consist of heirs-apparent who have been groomed to succeed incumbents. Behn *et al.* (2005) found that when a CEO dies in office and an heir-apparent has been identified, firms experience “higher cumulative returns on the date of death than firms that have not identified an heir apparent (p. 168).” While insiders—seconds-in-command — represent a potential source of candidates as successors, they are not always viewed favorably as successors (Santora, 2005, 2007). Santora *et al* (2007: 29) found that “Even in those agencies that had a second-in-command, an heir apparent had not been identified by either the incumbent or the board.”

### Outsiders

Despite the compelling reasons for selecting insiders, most nonprofit organizations select outsiders to replace departing executives. Outsiders are individuals who have no connection with the organization. If an organization desires change, then it tends to hire outsiders. One survey (Randall *et al*, 2004) found that almost 70 percent of the executive directors in their survey were outsiders. Santora *et al* (1997) found that boards of directors select outsiders over insiders in philanthropic nonprofit organizations. Santora and Sarros (2001) found similar results in their study of community-based nonprofit organizations: boards of directors turned to outsiders when hiring their next executive director. Santora *et al* (2007) found that 50 percent of the executive directors’ predecessors were outsiders and 25 percent were founders.

Bowen (1994) believes that the organizational structure (less bureaucratic with fewer layers) of nonprofits creates opportunities for outsiders. He believes that the successor will be an outsider. McClusky (2002) found that the size of most nonprofits give outsiders the edge as successors. Santora and Sarros (2001) and Santora *et al* (2007) found similar results. From another perspective, outsiders have a greater visibility in the larger community, can attract external funding, and are often viewed as possessing “star” power.

### Insider-Outsiders

Recently, Bower (2007) has suggested an interesting twist on the insider-outsider perspective. He has called for the selection of an “inside outsider”, someone who works for the organization, but is not a traditional organizational insider, that is, an individual who is not connected to any one constituency.

### Interim Appointments

Research on interim executive directorships in nonprofits has been interesting. Allison (2002) rejects the idea that an interim executive director should become a candidate for the position. Chapman and Vogelsang (2005) claim that an interim executive director is a good strategy for nonprofits; it buys time for the organization to revisit its organizational vision. These authors believe that the appointment of an external interim executive director is a better choice than an internal interim executive director. Wolfred (2005) has added some advantages of appointing an interim director to lead a nonprofit.

With regards to research on interim to permanent executive directorships, Farquhar (1991) found, based on her study of 43 legal service programs, that of the 17 acting executives who were possible candidates for the permanent position, eight (47 percent) were made permanent. Goler's (2001) study of 52 interim museum directorships found quite different results: 10 (20 percent) of these interim appointees were made permanent, including 10 interim appointees (20 percent) who departed after their interim directorship. Recently, Kittleman and Associates (2007) found that more than 85 percent of boards in their survey knew about a plan for interim leadership and 100 percent of these boards agreed to such a plan.

## **HIRING THE NEW EXECUTIVE**

Once the organization completes Phase I, the board of directors appoints the new executive director. Phase II details the consequences of executive succession in nonprofits.

### **Phase II: Consequences of Succession**

Nonprofit organizations should look at the consequences of executive succession.

This phase consists of the following elements: 1) transition and taking charge, 2) strategic change and executive values, 3) improved organizational performance, 4) retention and dismissal of the executive directors, and 5) organizational sustainability.

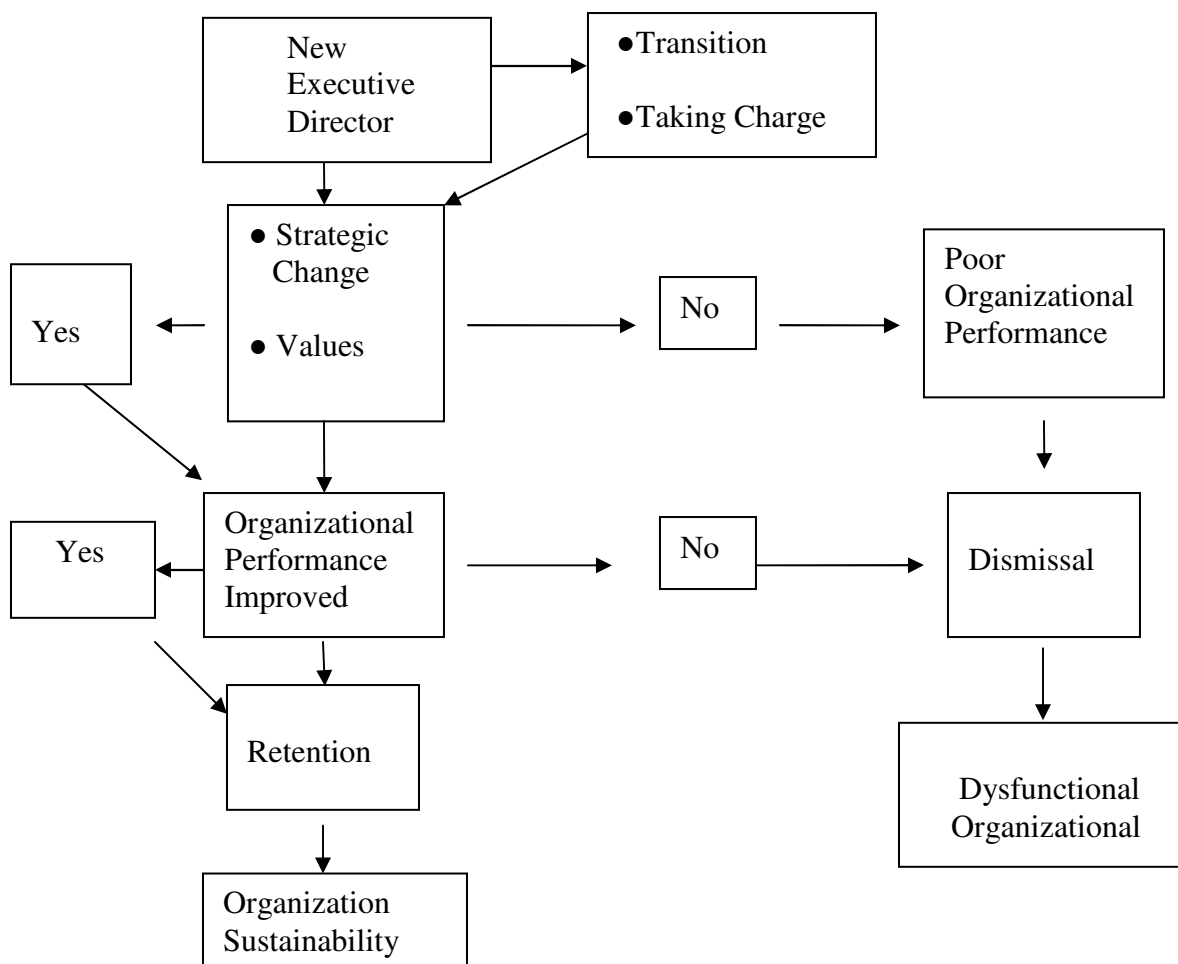
## NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### Transition and Taking Charge

Once the board has hired the new executive director, the executive needs time to transition into the organization. Admittedly, internal appointees will transition into the executive chair more easily than externally appointed executives, and they will be able to

**Figure 2**

### PHASE II: CONSEQUENCES OF SUCCESSION



take charge more quickly for apparent reasons, i.e., they know the organization, its policies and its politics. Austin (1989) points the way for nonprofit executives who are new entrants to the position by suggesting the executives take on the appointment over three phases: 1) take an introspective view of themselves, 2) learn about the ways employee were previously led, and 3) create a plan for leading the organization. Gabarro (1987) has developed a five (5) stage model for taking charge: 1) taking hold, 2) immersion, 3) reshaping, 4) consolidation, and 5) refinement. Ciampa and Watkins (1999) offer a six month prescriptive list for new leaders to follow, Watkins (2003) believes that leaders get three months to prove their mettle, while Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) believe that the transition period ranges anywhere from “one day to nine months (125).” These findings suggest that insiders are more likely to transition into the organization and take charge faster than do outsiders.

## **STRATEGY AND CHANGE**

The arrival of the new executive brings the opportunity for a new strategic direction and change. Several researchers have found that successors do exactly that. Wiersema (1992) found outsider successors tend to create strategic change in their organizations. Miller (1993) found that succession is accompanied by change in both structure and strategy. Westphal and Fredrickson (2001) found that boards select CEOs with similar strategies to their own firms. Overall, it appears that the literature points to development of strategic initiatives and changes with the arrival of the new executive.

## **VALUES**

Values are part of the very essence of an organization. Incumbents perpetuate them through succession planning by identifying successors who have similar values (Hansen & Kahnweila, 1997). McKee and Driscoll (2008) found that the incumbent in their study sought a successor who had similar organizational values. On the other hand, external successors bring their own set of values with them which should not be at odds with the organization's values. A conflict may

ensue if successors attempt to impose their values into their new organizations and thereby alter the value system of the organization (Brougham, 2002).

### **IMPROVED ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE**

The literature offers mixed results about succession and organizational performance. Early research found that succession improves organizational performance (Guest, 1962), that leadership, not executive succession alone, is necessary for organizational performance (Smith *et al*, 1984; Tushman & Rosenkoft, 1996), that succession is disruptive and therefore causes negative organizational performance (Brown, 1982), and that succession has no effect on organizational performance. Mentzer (1993) found that succession did not significantly increase funding for the nonprofit organizations in his study.

Ndofor and Rathburn (2003) found that it is more than the succession event that impact organizational performance; “it is the subsequent set of actions that a new CEO takes, and how these actions relate (to) the new CEO’s skills this is more important in affecting organizational performance (K5).” Recently, Rowe *et al* (2005) found that organizational performance is improved as a result of succession (changing leaders).

### **DISMISSAL/RETENTION**

Two major conceptual models on the dismissal of CEOs are especially instructive for nonprofits. Fredrickson *et al* (1988) offer a model of dismissal. These researchers focus their attention on the executive and the board of directors. Haleblian and Rajagopalan (2006) have developed a three stage model of executive dismissal by boards of directors: 1) sense maker (perception of performance), 2) interpretation (attributions for performances and CEO efficacy assessment), and 3) action (CEO dismissal). Dismissal of nonprofit executive directors may cause organizations to lose their momentum and may lead to an irreversible loss of clients and external funders, resulting in the inability of these organizations to provide goods and services to their constituents.

Retention, on the other hand, leads to organizational sustainability (see Price, nd for a discussion of succession planning and sustainability, that is, the ability of the organization to

exist and to fulfill its mission to provide services to its constituents).

### **Uses of the Model**

The model of executive succession in nonprofit organizations offers a two-phase approach that can be used by nonprofit scholars and nonprofit executive directors and their boards of directors when deciding who and how to appoint a successor. Nonprofit scholars have just begun to address the issue of executive succession in earnest, and are encouraged to explore additional areas of investigation not investigated by the model. The model of executive succession for not-for-profit organizations should be considered a work in progress requiring validation through further modifications and research from the field. For practitioners, executive directors and boards of directors, our model offer them a more holistic way of viewing executive succession, and provides a better understanding of all those factors impacting on executive succession within their organizations, beyond a simple hiring of a replacement for the departing executive director.

### **Conclusion**

The succession model should yield some interesting findings for nonprofit researchers and practitioners alike. For instance, do the paths hypothesized in the model hold true for different forms of nonprofits, both in function as well as size? Are the relationships among key components of the model representative across cultures, so that what works in the USA also works in the UK, Canada, or Australia? Finally, we invite researchers to expand our model and to address questions such as to what degree do interim executives create organizational change; to what degree do external successors attract external funding in smaller nonprofits; how long does it take outsiders to improve organizational performance; and to what degree do nonprofit executive directors get dismissed for poor organizational performance? Answers to these and other questions will enhance our understanding of executive succession in nonprofit organizations.

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