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Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

by Rob Moran

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Buffalo Springfield struck a chord with their now famous line, "Something's happening here - what it is, ain't exactly clear." In fact, something *is* happening here within the Association and nonprofit community that deserves our attention.

A massive exodus of leadership talent is beginning and will continue into the foreseeable future. As baby boomers move into their 50's and 60's they are leaving the ranks of Executive Directors, members of Boards of Directors, and experienced senior managers. The implications of this exodus are noteworthy, especially given the strong link between leadership and an organization's performance and success.

Recently, significant energies and brainpower have gone into quantifying the magnitude of the problem and exploring solutions. A study funded by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), "[Up Next](#)," chronicles the looming leadership gap in the non-profit community. The study finds there will be a 65% turnover in leadership by 2009 (2,200 nonprofits polled) and that 55% of current Executive Directors were 50 years of age or older. Furthermore, a study of 119 community foundations revealed that while 61% had the same CEO over the past decade, 55% expected them to leave their positions within the next five years.

Two additional studies support these findings. [The Bridgespan Group's](#) "[The Non-Profit Sector's Leadership Deficit](#)", which sampled non-profit organizations with revenues above \$250,000, found that over the next 10 years these organizations will need to attract and develop some 640,000 new senior managers (2.4 times the number currently employed). By 2016 these organizations will need *almost 80,000* new senior managers. The second study, "[Daring to Lead 2006](#)," funded by the [Meyers Foundation](#) and conducted by [CompassPoint](#), found that 75% of the executives interviewed plan to leave their jobs within the next five years, and that only 29% of them had discussed succession planning with their Boards. The Association community is witnessing high-profile job openings, abrupt departures, an unusual number of job changes and retirements, and strong turnover in key positions.

How will this migration of leaders impact the Association community? What implications and opportunities will emerge? What does this mean for those involved in the search for great leaders?

For associations, the impact will likely be experienced in tandem with the departures and the diminishing talent pool. Points to consider in the short term:

- The world of work and the perspective of the workforce is changing. It is important to acknowledge and adapt to shifts in values, a desire for work/life balance, and the new language of participation, contribution, and incentives.
- The community needs to commit resources to identify and develop new leaders.
- Organizations need to address the issue of succession planning and building “bench strength” to ensure sustained success.
- The process of attracting and retaining leaders should be reexamined, with special attention to understanding and meeting the different career and personal motivations of emerging leaders.
- Organizations need to prepare to successfully navigate this period and consider the role and contribution of leadership, from a contextual and continuity perspective. What does this mean?
- Thought should be given to creating “departure routes” for senior leaders that will address economic concerns as well as establish a process for experienced leaders to share and mutually benefit from discussions with emerging leaders.
- This next five-to-ten year period represents a critical opportunity to make needed changes to ensure organizational stability and growth.

In moving forward, we need a new conversation - one that is more expansive, accesses a higher level of thinking and creativity, and involves a range of perspectives. Our focus should include consideration of the increasing numbers of organizations who will undergo leadership change, the fluid nature of organizations in general, and the types of leaders that evolving organizations will seek.

We need to acknowledge the increasing complexity in the role and expectations of leaders and the accompanying shift in perception of what leaders actually do – how they inspire and behave, their values, their capacity to understand and act, and the needs, wants, and motivations of emerging leaders.

In addition to existing choices, consideration should also be given to opportunities and incentives used to entice emerging leaders. We need to put in place creative thinking, imagination, and comprehensive strategies for succession planning, along with intentional mentoring to prepare, introduce, and develop new leaders.

The implications and opportunities resulting from this leadership exodus will be numerous. It will be crucial to identify new leaders, invest in their professional development, expand their repertoire and provide on-going guidance and direction. Educating and supporting emerging leaders will become more accelerated, with an emphasis on experiential learning and coaching. A premium will be placed on readiness and converting potential. Individuals who can provide direction and support to organizations in transition will be in demand.

What is happening in these communities is actually “exactly clear.” We are entering a period of loss and turbulence, with the potential for profound change. While the focal point is the flight of the aging leader, we would be shortsighted if we merely pursued a replacement strategy. We have a chance to dramatically change the face of leadership and to transform the models we have tinkered with for years. The association community needs to be bold and seize this opportunity.

It is vital that we rethink much of what we believe about leadership and the development of leaders. We should challenge many of our basic tenets and involve the folks who are stepping into these positions. We need to revisit our views on the amount of time a leader wants to serve, on strategies for preventing/reducing burnout, and on the potential that Association Boards of Directors may increasingly be the creators and protectors of the culture and continuity for organizations.

Imagine if, for the survival and sustainability of an organization, it were agreed that we need leaders who can collaborate, who can step beyond mere experience and integrate their accumulated wisdom, and who are emotionally intelligent. Our challenge then is to translate these factors into all facets of the process – training and development, mentoring, coaching, searching, interviewing, and hiring.

It is my hope that we view this transition time as a potential turning point in the leadership of the association community. Think about your own role in creating future leaders and consider your reply the next time a member of your staff or a colleague approaches you and expresses an interest in leading. Could be a pivotal moment - prepare yourself!

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