

How to weather the loss of a leader and keep up the mission

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The way leaders choose to say good-bye is likely to be one of the ways they are remembered.

The unexpected passing of Anne d'Harnoncourt, Director and CEO of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, last month was a tragic shock to the region and the arts community around the world. For more than 25 years, her leadership helped shape the museum, touched its millions of visitors and left an indelible impact on the Philadelphia area.

Now that the museum has appointed an interim director, its leadership is faced with a daunting question: what next?

Recovering after an unexpected departure – or in this unfortunate case, an untimely passing – can be a major challenge for nonprofits and corporations alike and it can happen to any group, at any time, regardless of its size.

For the thousands of non-profits in the Delaware Valley area, the loss of a leader can strike the very heart of an organization's motivation and mission. Often, the loss is compounded because the CEO or president is also the founder and chief fundraiser.

With so much at stake, many organizations are – understandably –tempted to act quickly. However, hasty decisions made immediately after the departure of a trusted leader can have long-term consequences that might not be foreseen in the stress of the moment.

Rather, non-profits, arts organizations and companies should take their time in charting a course for new leadership. Organizations, like the individuals that make them up, need time to grieve for their loss. Stability can be a precious commodity in a tumultuous time; changing too much too quickly can create even more uncertainty.

Groups should also consider unexpected departures as part of their leadership succession planning process. Acknowledging and preparing for that risk in advance can keep organizations on solid ground and bring their boards and funders piece of mind.

And, when possible, the departing leader can play a role. The way leaders choose to say good-bye is likely to be one of the ways they are remembered. If they execute their final leadership responsibility with the same care and attention that they gave to the first, their departure can be an inspiring gift to the enterprise and the people in it.

So how long should an organization wait before moving on and appointing a new president or CEO? There's no single answer for every group, but appointing an interim executive following the departure of a high-profile leader can position the organization for change, and can also give the board and employees additional time to adjust and prepare for the next generation of leadership.

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