

Living Transition Plan

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Introduction

In early 2014, the members of Dancers' Group's staff were brainstorming a project that would engage our emerging leadership (those under the age of 35). We had batted around a few thoughts when the idea came up: What happens if our executive director, Wayne (Hazzard), spontaneously combusts? While we all laughed, we knew we were on to something. What would be lost, what and who might come next, if our long-time executive director and one of the organization's founders left, whether in a dramatic puff of smoke or not.

So, with support from the Center for Cultural Innovation, our emerging leaders¹ received training and consultation to develop this "Living Transition Plan," a document that provides guidance and strategies for DG to remain agile in the face of staff changes. Because this planning is taking place without any imminent staff change, it is intended to be a "Living" document, which can be revisited and updated as new needs, ideas, and perspectives emerge. We also hope that this document can serve as a template for other organizations with their own transition needs—either as a useful guide or as a launching pad for new thinking.

The plan that follows is broken out into two parts. Part One offers insight into transition planning that we gleaned through this process, that we hope is general and open enough for use by any organization. We have included an outline of our process, key learnings, spaces for you to write in your thoughts and prompts to get you started.

As a continuation, Part Two dives more specifically into Dancers' Group's own transition planning, including observations of our own organizational culture and structure, and recommendations for the future. In the Appendix, you'll find a list of resources and other materials that may be of use if you are embarking on planning of your own, at any scale.

Change is inevitable. Even if it is unplanned or not "wanted," staff changes can bring opportunities to rethink how things get done, invite new perspectives, and ultimately best serve a vibrant and growing dance ecosystem.

¹ The grant was awarded to program director, Michelle Lynch Reynolds and outreach director, Shae Colett. Colett left DG early in the process, which provided us the opportunity to capture some of the processes DG has in place for staff transitions. New program assistant, Sharon Benitez joined the project in late 2014, participating in some of the interviews and the full writing process.

Part One: Transition Planning for All

Over its lifetime, Dancers' Group has experienced many transitions, and has seen countless other organizations navigate the challenge of change, including a staff change. When this happens, a formal planning process such as the one undertaken here are not always feasible, in particular for organizations with fewer resources.

While all organizations are unique and will face their own challenges and opportunities, many of the questions we asked ourselves and our stakeholders are universal and can be used to prompt conversations regardless of whether they are a part of an organized "Succession Planning" undertaking. Similarly, some of the key takeaways we discovered, such as sharing knowledge and fostering leadership across an organization are principles that we believe can support the work of our community of dance entities small, medium or large.

Guiding Principles

- Communication is vital. It seems obvious to say and yet it should be said, when change happens at an organization, it is critical to keep stakeholders informed. This communication can take many forms, and a priority will be to preserve and continue trust, even if the voice and primary leader of an organization has changed.
- Transitions are emotional. Through any planning process or organizational change, respect and take care of the emotional well-being of those involved. This includes an outgoing staff-person, staff and board still at the organization, and the wide network of stakeholders, partner organizations, and even funders.
- Recognize your cultural values. Change to leadership will certainly bring with it cultural changes in the office, impacting staff and the artists served. Dancers' Group, for example, has developed organizational practices, the collection of which is our culture. Many of these practices came organically through the leadership of executive director Wayne Hazzard, and are further developed through the day-to-day interactions with the entire staff.

Throughout Part Two, we highlight some of Dancers' Group's own cultural values and practices.

What are your organization's cultural values and practices?

Use this space to add reflections about your own organization's cultural values and practices.

A Process

The basic framework for a transition plan can be simple.

1. Compile questions, “what if’s,” “what then’s,” “how’s” and “when’s.”
2. Talk to other people, your stakeholders and communities, to learn about how they perceive your organization, what concerns they would have if they heard about a transition, and what questions they have to add to your list. You’ll find a list of questions we asked DG’s stakeholders in the Appendix and some questions to get you started to the right.
3. Look around you to learn what your peers are (or aren’t) doing in regards to transition planning. From other transitions you’ve observed, are there things you can learn or templates (like this one!) that can make your planning easier? See the resource list in the Appendix.
4. Think about your internal systems for getting your work done. Does only one person know how to do something vital? Is there a process in place to share institutional memory? How do you usually communicate with your community of stakeholders, especially funders?
5. Compile your notes and recommendations based on what you’ve learned. This doesn’t need to be formal. You can review Dancers’ Group’s list on page 15.
6. Share your ideas with the staff and board at your organization; consider how, and when, to start enacting any recommendations.

Asking Questions

After Dancers’ Group posed the initial question that sparked this planning—what if Wayne spontaneously combusts?—additional questions arose. What would we need to successfully lead the organization? What skill or knowledge gaps do we have? What new opportunities would this bring forward?

Branching off of these larger questions, more specific questions emerged²:

- What are the essential qualities the organization would want in a leader?
- Will there be desire/opportunity to alter the leadership structure during a transition?
- What will the financial impact of this transition be? If identified, how might negative financial impacts be lessened?
- How dependent is the organization on the founder’s, Artistic or Executive Director’s charisma and/or personal connections? What are ways to transfer those “soft” skills and relationships?
- How will those who remain within the organization be sustained?
- How will tools for the new leaders be prepared and created?
- Who makes the decision about choosing the succeeding director?
- Who participates in the decision-making process? How? In what order?
- Because of the transition, who else is might leave or change their relationship to the organization?

² Questions reworked from “Founding Artistic Director Transitions & Evolutions: How Two Organizations Cope with Change,” *Grantmakers in the Arts* Spring 2010



What questions come to mind that you would add to this list?

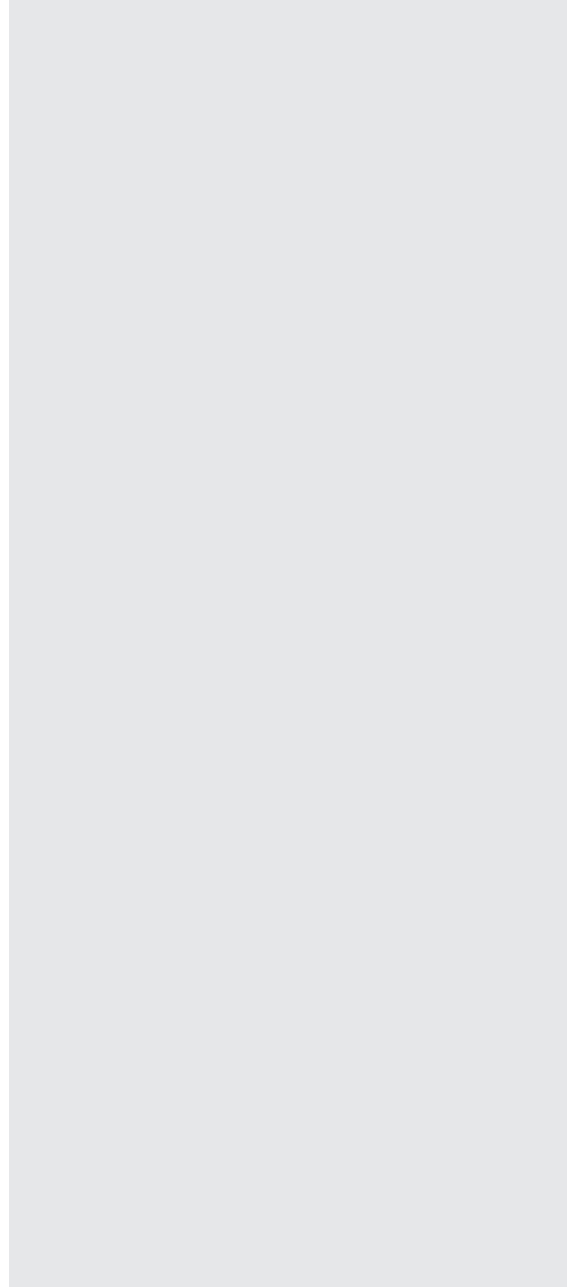
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Asking Questions (cont.)

As future staff transitions are considered, certain commonalities will emerge—practical and value-based—that support transitions and extend to every person at the organization. We have posed these as questions below, and have included observations about Dancers’ Group’s own process in Part Two. They are asked as questions—not statements—since many procedures will be reflective of the individual personalities and cultural values within your unique organization.

- How is communication of a staff departure shared with the organization’s community?
- Would it be beneficial to have crossover between outgoing and incoming staff for job shadowing, cross-training, and process sharing?
- How and to whom are job opportunities primarily disseminated?
- Are there internal rituals in place to acknowledge or celebrate the outgoing staff-person? If so, what are they?

What are some of your organization’s practices for staff transitions?



Transitions for Founders & Directors

While there are practices that extend to all staff, the departure of a founder, executive or artistic director will very likely be unique from other staff departures in several key ways:

- The Board of Directors—board subcommittee or other leadership body—would lead the hiring process.
- The communication with stakeholders and the organization’s community might be more significant, reflective of the person’s tenure and his/her significant contribution to organization and the ecosystem it serves.
- His/her future role in the organization would be considered based both on his/her interest and what would best serve the well being of the organization.
- The search for a new ED or AD would require the Board and staff to engage in a process of determining what are the needs at that time and what qualities a person should have to uphold the culture and relevancy established by a predecessor and successfully usher the organization into a new chapter with possibly a new vision.

When it comes time to engage in a major staff transition, the Board and staff will need to address additional considerations such as whether to find a “replacement” with similar responsibilities or if it is time to re-structure and establish new roles; if there is someone within or close to the organization who may be the right fit, or if a wider search is wanted/needed; and, establish an appropriate timeline for hiring.

What does your organization need or want to consider for an executive or artistic director transition?

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Communicating Change

As stated within the Guiding Principles, communicating change is a critical part of a major staff transition. This communication may come from either staff or Board and will be different depending on the type of relationship, investment, and history with the organization.

After staff and board are notified, funders/donors, fiscally sponsored projects, and programmatic partners are examples of those who would first learn of a major transition. They need to know that they are a priority to the organization, a sentiment that should be expressed promptly and often. These communications may take place in person, over the phone, or via email. Be mindful that a transition might be emotional for those close to the organization.

Following notifying these groups, the organization would most likely need to communicate the change to its wider community, through its already established modes of communication (email, facebook, performances, etc.). In particular with an executive/artistic director transition, it may be appropriate to offer more insight, such as offering open conversations with the community to keep them informed and have the process be as transparent as possible. Embedded in all messages should be that the staff and board are available for further conversations and questions and care about the well-being of the those invested in the entity.

From there, the search begins for a new staff-person, which inevitably involves bumps in the road or simply takes longer than expected. Once someone has been identified, he/she would introduce themselves to the stakeholders and wider community. Similarly as with a departure, introductions would begin with

major stakeholders and communications with the wider network would follow. The Board and staff might also organize additional activities to support welcoming a new staff person, such as a public forum or gathering, as appropriate.

Reflecting on Change

“Always remember to ask yourself, day to day and when making major strategic decisions: what is essential versus what is urgent?”

-Stakeholder interviewee

Regardless of how well planned, a change to staff brings a shift in overall organizational capacity, at least for a certain period of time. One of the individuals we spoke with in this planning process compelled Dancers’ Group to be realistic with our capacity, and feel confident to determine and focus on what is essential, not what is simply urgent. This practice of self-reflection extends to any organization—particularly small but mighty ones—as it enables us all to be more effective in our work and make good decisions about the programs that serve our community.

In our own self-reflection, presented in Part Two, we discovered that some of our own practices, such as the way we develop leadership, maintain our relationships with others, and work collaboratively, help us to be more resilient through transitions. Continue on to Part Two to read more about Dancers’ Group’s own transitions, cultural values, and practices³.

³ See page 20 for more resources on transition planning

Part Two: Dancers' Group's Living Transition Plan

As we began this planning process, we asked ourselves: If the executive director, or any vital staff, were to spontaneously combust or otherwise disappear from Dancers' Group, what would we need to successfully lead the organization? What skill or knowledge gaps do we have? What new opportunities would this bring forward?

This plan seeks to establish frameworks for answering these questions, in both short- and long-term timeframes. Since it is not being developed at a point where our executive director or anyone on staff is imminently looking to move on from DG, we see the plan as a living document that can and should be updated as new concepts, needs, or ideas emerge.

The plan has been developed to be open and modular to facilitate the unique circumstances and people impacted by any transition, in untold ways.

In an effort to glean valuable insights from a variety of perspectives, Dancers' Group conducted eight interviews with stakeholders and those who have perspective on staff transitions and planning. We spoke with Julie Phelps, new Artistic Director at CounterPulse (former Program Director); Felicia Rosenfeld, Co-Director of Pentacle; Julie Fry, Program Officer at the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, a funder of Dancers' Group; Rich Noguchi, Program Officer at the James Irvine Foundation, another funder of Dancers' Group; Moy Eng, Executive Director at CAST and longtime member of the Bay Area arts ecology; Adam Fong, Director of the Center for New Music and part of Emerging Arts Professionals/ SF Bay Area; Tammy Johnson, a fiscally sponsored artist with Raks

Africa; Gianna Shepard and Mary Armentrout, DG Board members. Following these conversations, we interviewed DG's Executive Director (and one of the organization's founders), Wayne Hazzard, to get his perspective on transitions within DG, as well as his reflections on his own trajectory and long-view dreams for the organization.

Interviewees spoke candidly about staff transitions, leadership sustainability and their perceptions of Dancers' Group seen through the lens of transitions. These thoughts are embedded throughout this document, in particular in our Guiding Principles (see page 3): Communication is vital; Transitions are emotional; Recognize your cultural values.

A Bit of History

Several interviewees suggested that knowing Dancers' Group's history would provide further context in considering our staff transitions. Below is a brief overview:

In 1982, Dancers' Group was founded by a highly respected group of teachers, choreographers, community activists and students. Of this group, three primary founders emerged providing the vision and skills to create a new entity. The founders were Vernon Fuquay, executive director; Aaron Osborne, teacher, choreographer and artistic director; and Wayne Hazzard, dancer and school/facility manager. The facility that the organization occupied was known to many as Footwork Studio and to a later generation of artists, students and the general public, Dancers' Group Studio Theater. In its first ten years, Dancers' Group emerged as a highly respected school and presenting organization aiming to unify, strengthen, and amplify the contemporary dance community in San Francisco. In 1992, the region's then service organization, Dance Bay Area, dissolved and DG stepped forward to ensure that several of its vital services would remain intact. These services to the dance community continue today and are the Parachute Fund, fiscal sponsorship and In Dance.

Transitions: At the height of the first dot-com boom in 1999 Dancers' Group was evicted from its studio home and shortly after that, in 2000, Wayne Hazzard left the organization to pursue other professional opportunities. DG's Board of Directors guided the organization through the transition and welcomed a new executive director. During the next six years, DG maintained its core programs (fiscal sponsorship, In Dance, workshops, Bay Area Dance

Week, etc.) and experienced another executive director transition. It was at that time, in 2006, that Wayne expressed interest in returning to the helm of Dancers' Group, with new perspective and vision for the organization.

Since 2006, Dancers' Group has developed new services, re-granting programs and presenting opportunities for dance artists and audiences. Today, DG is recognized as a national model for service delivery in the field of dance, run by a 4-person staff, along with consultants in bookkeeping, grant writing, graphic design, public relations, website management, and a 9 to 11 person Board of Directors consisting primarily of working dance artists and educators.

Dancers' Group's Organizational Culture & Structure

Similarly to the above, the next section provides a brief overview of DG's operating structure and organizational culture. This information is intended to highlight the values and practices that help to define us, that we wish to carry forward through staff transitions, and that impact how we look to achieve our mission.

Like most mid-size nonprofits, DG has an efficient staffing structure that has relied on the few staff (3-4) members having the capacity to take on multiple roles within the organization. The staff has then been supported by a variety of consultants to augment and support our mission and programs. DG's "cross-training model" enables staff to support DG's programs and services.

**DG operates using a
"cross-training" model.**

In practice, this involves multiple people understanding and working to develop and maintain each system or program offered by the organization. This model of working requires frequent in-office communication and updates to ensure that any changes and or questions are shared with as many staff as possible. This sharing of information works well in the DG office setting as most of our programs and services are developed and maintained using collaborative processes involving all staff whenever possible. This last action is perhaps the most embedded practice of developing and sustaining leaders within the organization.

**Staff collaborates on
programs.**

For example, all staff participated in DG's 2014 strategic planning process and regularly attend board meetings. This staff-led transition planning project is also an example of how DG supports the leadership development of non-executive staff.

Dancers' Group believes it is at its strongest and most responsive when each staff person has opportunities to step into leadership and feel leaderful - supported and empowered to practice and develop leadership skills.

Over its 30+ year history, Dancers' Group has fostered the careers of its staff, all of whom have backgrounds in dance and may have active artistic lives while working at DG. The same holds true for its Board of Directors, the majority of whom are working artists. DG believes that this depth of knowledge helps us to be responsive and understand the opportunities and challenges facing the artists, organizations and audiences we look to serve.

Planning for Leadership Succession

Organizational Practices for Staff Transitions

Dancers' Group is fortunate to be a stable and financially healthy organization. Through our recent strategic plan, we interviewed dozens of stakeholders, revealing that DG is a trusted member of the dance ecosystem, whose services and programs are relevant and valued.

Embarking on a process such as this—without an imminent transition—was an opportunity to assess ways in which we can best prepare for a major staff transition. This includes calling out practices already firmly in place that we intend to continue, those that have been established but could be expanded upon, and those that can be implemented for the first time.

When it comes to staff transitions at DG, we have observed the following processes for any transition:

- Communicate a staff departure with stakeholders that include our membership and the greater dance community.
- Whenever possible, have crossover between outgoing and incoming staff for job shadowing, cross-training, and process sharing.
- New job opportunities at DG are primarily disseminated through our membership e-communications.
- Involve as many staff as possible in the interviews for a new hire.
- When searching for a new hire, we consider how that person's background and experiences might round out the full staff, in an effort to be representative of the diversity of the dance ecosystem DG supports.
- Provide an opportunity for the staff to gather together to celebrate the departing person's work at DG.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are our ideas to support staff with opportunities to be leaderful, which in turn ensures that Dancers' Group is well situated to handle transitions and any changes the future may hold:

Establish multiple relationships with funders

Dancers' Group provides opportunities for more than one person on staff to meet and engage with pivotal funders. Continuing this practice will establish a bridge in the event of a transition as well as offer early leadership opportunities between the staff and the Program Officers. This can provide additional insight into the culture of DG and confidence in the people managing and supporting the day-to-day of the organization.

Recommendations: Continue engaging multiple staff people in meetings and conversations with funders; participate/collaborate in research, grant-writing and reporting.

Provide opportunities for everyone on staff to be a representative of DG

Staff have had the opportunity to represent DG in public settings—introducing performances; speaking at panel conversations, writing for our In Dance publication, teaching classes at local Universities, etc.—ensuring that the dance community sees DG as a team, and has trust in the full organization.

Recommendations: Continue to provide such opportunities.

Consider whether new strategies and programs are educational opportunities

In late 2014, DG approved an aspirational strategic plan that calls out several major opportunities for new and expanded programming to serve the dance ecosystem. As we undertake research, planning, fundraising, and implementing these strategies, there is an opportunity to mentor emerging leaders to be in direct leadership roles. This will help to deepen the strategic skills of the full staff.

Recommendations: When beginning to research or enact new initiatives laid out in the strategic plan, consider if it is an opportunity for emerging leadership.

Recommendations (cont.)

Facilitate shared decision-making

Dancers' Group fosters an environment for staff to express their opinions and visions in team settings, and have opinions seriously considered when at a point of decision-making, even if the ultimate choice is up to a single person or a smaller team.

Recommendations: Continue to prioritize shared decision-making; set aside time to reflect on process.

Expanding and deepening fiscal sponsorship program may require new practices

A major priority in DG's strategic plan is to invest in our fiscal sponsorship program, which continues to grow, and where we can impact the ecosystem at scale. Ideas to support our fiscally sponsored artists range from technological upgrades to establishing a matching fund to support our 120+ projects. These new initiatives may demand a re-structuring and/or expansion of staff roles, in particular to support Wayne, as he is a primary point person for sponsored projects. We also recognize that the close involvement and responsiveness of our director is highly valued by our projects, so any changes would need to be done in a way that ensures that the trust of our projects is a major priority.

Our artists value the Director's involvement and responsiveness.

Recommendations: Include clarification of roles and assess staff capacity regularly in regards to fiscal sponsorship. Continue to engage in cross training among staff for policies and procedures related to fiscal sponsorship.

Share financial management practices

Careful budgeting and financial management is handled by Wayne with the oversight of the Board Treasurer and the full Board of Directors. During this planning we noticed that this is an aspect of the organization where our "cross training" model is less embedded. While maintaining clear leadership and responsibility at a high level is necessary, sharing financial management practices across more of the staff will help to increase competency, and ensure that the organization is best prepared in case of a sudden event, as noted above with the question "what if Wayne spontaneously combusts?"

Recommendations: Invest in financial management training for several staff; invite staff to shadow or be trained during the next organizational budgeting season.

Implementation

Dancers' Group's Transition Plan was led and written by staff with input and support from the Board of Directors. Staff will also lead the implementation of recommendations and continue to update the Board on any new findings or other recommendations to fully imbed future ideas in the organizational structure. DG plans to revisit the plan annually and reflect on its pertinence. This will also be when we consider new ideas or questions that have come up since it was last reviewed, and amend the plan with any new actions that we may want to take in response to them. Through regular self-reflection, we hope this living document allows us to best serve our community and dance ecosystem long into the future.

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Appendix

Dancers' Group Stakeholder Interview Questions

1. What has been your experience with leadership transitions in the arts? Is there a particular transition story that you'd be willing to share with us that you feel would enhance our learning and thinking about leadership development and sustainability?
2. Based upon your knowledge of Dancers Group, the way we work, and our structure, what do you think we should be thinking about with regard to leadership sustainability?
3. What are your thoughts on how DG is currently positioned in the dance ecosystem?
4. In terms of our relationship with you and your organization, what things should we be paying particular attention to moving forward?
5. As you know, we are in the midst of a new staff transition, is there anything that you'd recommend us to think about as we proceed with this transition?
6. Do you have thoughts around how DG might welcome a new staff-person someone into the dance community and the organization?
7. (for those familiar with our fiscal sponsorship program) What do you think we should be mindful of if we were to consider growing our fiscal sponsorship program? Any lessons learned, cautionary tales, and/or words of wisdom you would offer to assist us in our thinking?
8. (for those familiar with our fiscal sponsorship program) Based on your experience as a sponsored project, are there processes and regulations you feel can be done more efficiently?
9. (for institutional funders) As part of our process for building leadership sustainability we are practicing more shared leadership in relationships with our funders. In particular, we've begun expanding funder contact and relationships with more staff. Are you noticing an increasing staff presence or do you still view Wayne as the primary contact?

10. (for institutional funders) What are some “best practices” or successful models you’ve witnessed for organizations developing relationships with funders that involve more than the ED? Follow-up: What does shared leadership mean to you within this context?
11. (for those experiencing transitions) How were the initial decisions made around your organization’s transition? How was the staff informed? How did you balance workload for the missing hand?
12. (for those experiencing transitions) What have you learned?
13. (for those experiencing transitions) What are you learning?
14. (for those experiencing transitions) What has gone well?
15. *(for those experiencing transitions) Not so well? Follow-up, if needed: What would you do differently or improve upon, knowing what you know now?*
16. *Do you have any questions for us about this process?*
17. *Anything to add that we have not asked you?*

Resources: Learn More about Succession Planning

CompassPoint: compasspoint.org/et

Succession planning tools available for download include:

- A template for an emergency succession plan
- An example of a plan for strategic leader development
- Surveys for use in conducting a sustainability audit:
 - Questions to present to staff
 - Questions to present to funders and other external stakeholders

Annie E. Casey Foundation: aecf.org

Research reports on Next Generation Leadership and succession planning for non-profit organizations including:

- Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Nonprofits
- Interim Executive Directors: The Power in the Middle
- Capturing the Power of Leadership Change: Using Executive Transition Management to Strengthen Organizational Capacity
- Stepping Up, Staying Engaged: Succession Planning and Executive Transition Management for Nonprofit Boards of Directors
- Up Next: Generation Change and the Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations
- Founder Transitions: Creating Good Endings and New Beginnings: A Guide for Executive Directors and Boards

Allison, Michael, and Misra, Susan, "Doing More with More: Putting Shared Leadership into Practice." Nonprofit Quarterly, Summer 2011. nonprofitquarterly.org

Bell, Jeanne, and Masaoka, Jan, Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability. Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Bridgespan Group: bridgestar.org/library

Numerous articles and tools for succession planning and nonprofit talent development

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unify



strengthen



amplify