

Passing the Torch: Rethinking Succession Planning in Independent Living Leadership

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Learning Objectives

- Understand the organizational and cultural risks associated with the lack of succession planning in CILs.
- Explore the benefits and challenges of traditional single-leader structures versus shared leadership models.
- Learn how Disability Connection Midsouth implemented a successful co-director model as part of a long-term succession strategy—and how your organization might do the same.

About Disability Connection Midsouth

- Founded in 1985, our mission is to facilitate the full integration of people with disabilities into all aspects of community life.
- We serve Shelby, Tipton, Fayette, and Lauderdale county.
- Provides services and programs that empower individuals with disabilities to live independently.
- Advocates to ensure individuals with disabilities have the right to choose where they want to live and receive services.
- History of promoting accessibility, leadership development, and community engagement.



What is Succession Planning?

Succession planning is making a plan for how leadership roles and responsibilities will be passed on when leaders leave, retire, or move into new roles.

- Goal: To make sure the organization continues to run smoothly during leadership changes.

Symbol of Continuity



- Torch symbolizing continuity in leadership.

Symbol of Guidance



- Lighthouse symbolizing guidance and mentorship

Symbol of Succession Planning (Bridge)



- Bridge symbolizing connection, transition in leadership, and succession planning as a bridge between leaders.

Symbol of Legacy



- Relay runner handing off baton symbolizing legacy and transition.

Symbol of Growth



- Tree with roots symbolizing organizational growth and stability

Who Needs a Succession Plan?

- Executive Directors and Senior Leaders
- Board Members
- Program Managers and Key Staff
- Volunteers in critical roles
- Anyone whose absence would disrupt the organization's mission

Examples:

- IT Manager leaves → risk to systems/security. Backup: cross-train, documentation.
- Financial Accountant leaves → payroll & reporting delays. Backup: procedures, consultant.
- Program Manager leaves → participants lose services. Backup: guides, co-lead.

Single Leader Model

Traditional structure with one executive director.

- Strengths: Clear authority, fast decision-making.
- Challenges: Risk of burnout, lack of shared vision, vulnerability when leader departs.

Co-Director Model

Shared leadership structure.

- Strengths: Collaboration, continuity, diverse perspectives.
- Challenges: Requires strong communication, role clarity, and shared accountability.

Pros and Cons

Pros:

- Shared responsibility
- Increased sustainability
- Broader expertise

Cons:

- Potential for conflict
- Requires intentional planning
- May slow decision-making

Revisiting Learning Objectives

- Risks of no succession planning → Organizational instability, cultural stagnation.
- Single vs. shared leadership → Trade-offs in authority, collaboration, and sustainability.
- DCM's co-director model → Example of successful implementation.

Key Takeaways

- Succession planning protects organizations from disruption.
- Everyone in leadership and key roles should be included.
- Shared leadership models can increase sustainability.
- Preparing backup plans ensures continuity of services.

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