Congratulations! You’ve almost made it to the end of another successful school year as a student leader; the finish line is right around the corner! Your final (and, some would say, most important) task as a leader is waiting right around the track. This final task is effectively transitioning leadership in your organization. Although you may be tired and worn out from your leadership journey, there a few tips you can use to help you be successful. So, tighten your laces and prepare for final hurdle!

8 Tips for Effective Student Leader Transition

By Adrienne M. Craig, Johnson & Wales University-Florida
What Is Effective Leadership Transition?

Effective leadership transition is the process by which past and future student leaders in an organization work together to review and learn from previous events and programs and prepare for the upcoming year. This process can occur in one or several days and may be accomplished in a formal or informal setting. The transition process an organization chooses to use during this time period truly depends on the needs and resources available to the group.

What Are the Benefits of Effective Leadership Transition?

Leadership transition greatly contributes to the success of the organization. Through this process, the organization gains the solid foundation needed to be successful in the upcoming year. This is accomplished through intentional and well-planned programming and the creation of realistic and attainable goals. During the transition period, the incoming leadership develops the skills needed to persevere through all the dynamic changes that occur within an organization.

This transition period also benefits the individuals in the organization. For returning or departing members, this is an opportunity to use the skills and knowledge gained to assist the future members. The future members, in turn, will benefit greatly by hearing personal accounts of the previous leaders' successes and challenges. The past or returning leaders will discover what they have learned through sharing these experiences and ideas with new members. This time is also pivotal for returning leaders to assess their previous programs, events and areas of organizational strengths and challenges.

For the new leaders in the organization, this is the time to gain knowledge from past members. By listening to their wisdom, new leaders are less likely to make the same mistakes and are more likely to be successful in their endeavors. The energy, enthusiasm and new ideas that new members bring may help to revive the excitement of the continuing members. New members can provide new perspectives to events that prior members had not yet considered. It is this convergence of the old and new that can create dynamic programming opportunities.

Tips for Effective Leadership Transition

No. 1: Review the organization’s leadership roles.

Before electing new leaders, review what your organization’s constitution states regarding each role. Often in student organizations, individuals just “pick up” the workload of others. Sometimes, individuals in a role never truly understand their purpose.

By taking time as a group to review the constitutional roles of each leader, everyone can discuss the value of each position, discuss changes to the roles, perhaps consolidate or expand position descriptions, and begin to think of students who would be ideal candidates for those positions.

Benefits

- There is a clear understanding of everyone’s role and purpose in the organization.
- Due to the fair allocation of tasks, there are fewer leaders who are “burned out.”

No. 2: Plan a retreat.

Planning a retreat allows time for members of the organization to focus specifically on its success. An effective retreat can occur in a variety of locations, over varying lengths of time, and can cover a variety of topics. When planning a retreat, it is important to review what type of funding is available. If you are strapped for cash, look at venues on campus to serve as your location. Ask faculty and staff to present sessions on various leadership topics. Also, you can ask all members to donate five dollars for lunch and buy cheap pizza and chips. Even if the food isn’t exceptional, the bonding through the experience will be priceless.

When planning the agenda, ask current organization advisors and student life staff to give you ideas on topics they feel all leaders should address at a retreat. Be sure to include members of the organization in planning the agenda. There may be topics on which they feel they need more guidance and training, therefore requiring more time than other topics.

Benefits

- Members of the organization get to take a time out from everything else in life and focus solely on the organization.
- This is an ideal time of bonding for the group’s members.

No. 3: Create a map of the organization’s journey.

When looking toward the future, it’s always a good idea to reflect on the past. For the new leaders, it is crucial that they have a strong sense of what has occurred before so they can effectively plan future events. By having all the members of the organization saving and recording the details of events, flyers, and contacts, the new individuals will have a stronger sense of the do’s and don’ts involved.

By reflecting as a group, members who were not the lead planners on a particular event can also contribute feedback on the successes and challenges they experienced. This time of open feedback also sets a positive example for new members. After experiencing this process, new members will be more likely to maintain traditions.

Benefits

- This allows every person in the organization to act as historian and give personal feedback on each event.
- The leaders have another outlet for passing on the successes and challenges of their roles to their successors.

No. 4: Be honest about the past and realistic about the future.

Take time as a group to determine how you will discuss and assess past events. It is important to view all aspects of each event, from inception to completion. Doing this as a group
allows for the opinions and ideas of everyone to be considered equally. Consider having an outside facilitator lead this discussion, if needed. Make sure the method of critiquing events is discussed early and is followed. Be sure to include the ideas of new members. They can give the audience perspective and bring up alternate viewpoints not always recognized.

Benefits
- Many times an event can seem successful from the outside, but insiders have a better understanding of what should and shouldn’t be improved.
- Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of an organization and its events can help when setting realistic group goals.
- This also keeps the organization from repeating past mistakes.

No. 5: Take time to learn your available resources.

Many student organizations are strapped for cash, but that shouldn’t hinder the success of any organization. Take a moment to look around you. Are there departments on campus with which you are not connected in your programming efforts? Are there staff and faculty who teach certain subjects or have special talents that could benefit your organization?

New members can definitely use more experienced members as resources. Also, keep in mind that the fresh perspective of new members of the organization is one of the cheapest resources available.

Benefits
- Free or cheap resources may be available to your organization.
- Sometimes the available resources (staff with expertise, currently funded programs) lead to new inter-campus relationships and new collaborative programs.

No. 6: Implement teambuilding exercises and personality assessments.

Once the new leadership group is assembled, it’s great to see how everyone works as a team. There are a variety of free teambuilding exercises available on the Internet. Many schools have access to ropes courses or have leadership offices that can offer assistance in facilitating teambuilding exercises. Working together early as a team can help build bonds that will be needed later in the school year.

Also, conduct personality assessments. By doing this, members can learn about the strengths and challenges of everyone in the organization. By reviewing the information gained through the assessments and teambuilding, members can discover where they best fit in the organization and where they may need to enhance existing skills or develop new ones.

Benefits
- You establish working relationships.
- Members of the organization gain experience that is positive and memorable.
- Members develop a sense of trust for each other.
- Members learn more about themselves as leaders.

No. 7: Build a relationship between group members and the advisor(s).

Relationship building is crucial in a group setting. It is important to not only have positive relationships among members, but also between members and the advisor(s). The style an advisor chooses to use with a group may vary for many reasons. It is important that new members develop rapport with the advisor early in the transition process. Past members are key in helping to establish the beginning phase of this relationship.

It benefits the members and the advisor to establish everyone’s roles early in the transition process. Don’t forget that the advisor is a free resource who can benefit...
the organization in countless ways. New members must understand that keeping the advisor in the loop is essential when building trust. In the end, the advisor/student relationship can yield many positive results for an organization.

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Benefits
- The advisor is a free and knowledgeable resource.
- The advisor can also act as an advocate for the group or members of the group, if needed.

No. 8: Don’t be afraid to try something new in your organization.

Have you ever heard, “But we’ve always done it this way?” As a past or returning member, encourage new thoughts and endeavors. By trying new programs, you keep your group fresh and new members are more likely to stay engaged.

You will never know what new techniques will work in your organization unless you try something different. Many times student groups get stuck in a rut and members lose their enthusiasm for the organization. One of the best ways to tackle this type of boredom is by pursuing new initiatives and focusing in different directions.

Try taking a traditional event and changing the theme. Bring new students on a committee to help develop fresh ideas. Send surveys out to campus residents, asking them what new events your organization might sponsor.

Benefits
- By taking chances, you challenge yourself and your organization in new ways.
- Members of the organization learn how to positively deal with change.
- New ideas emerge.

Roadblocks to Effective Leadership Transition

There are some common mistakes leaders make that can prevent them from being effective in their transitional steps. One of the most common (and easily avoidable) is not effectively planning the times for the entire group to come together for the transition processes. Having only two members of an eight-member executive board available for a retreat will not yield the productive results intended. This type of poor planning and lack of communication should be a red flag as to an area where the group needs to improve.

Not including all appropriate members in the planning of a retreat or important transition meeting can also cause a roadblock.

And yet another is lack of honesty. Many times new and old members may feel unsure or intimidated when giving their opinions on past events or the future direction of the organization. The president and advisor need to assess the level of comfort the members have with one another and arrange ways for open communication to begin without intimidation, malice or ill will. Unspoken challenges in an organization will at some point surface and cause problems.

Where to Begin ...

Review all the above tips for leadership transition, then ask yourself a series of questions when deciding which tips you would like to tackle first with your organization.

- Which tips are feasible for a group your size?
- What is needed for you to complete this tip?
- What current and upcoming members should be involved in the transition planning?
- Are there any tips you can consolidate?
- What are the challenges for your organization?
- Which tip would best help you reduce those challenges?
- What staff and organizational support are available to you?
- What type of monetary support do you have to complete the tips?

After you’ve decided how your organization will tackle its transitions, then set goals and thoroughly plan what you will do next.

Don’t forget that one of the greatest contributors to the success of an organization is the strength of the transitioning period. A transitioning period that allows members new and old to reflect on the past, build relationships and plan a dynamic upcoming school year is sure to be successful!

About the Author

Adrienne M. Craig is director of Student Activities at Johnson & Wales University–Florida. She previously served as director of Student Engagement & Leadership at Guilford College (NC). She was actively involved in residence life as an undergraduate and is currently involved with several higher education-related organizations, including the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., the Association of Fraternity Advisors and the American College Personnel Association. In addition, she is a member of the NPCH Greek Life Advisory Panel. Active in her community, she volunteers with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. She holds a bachelor’s degree in science and biology from Old Dominion University (VA) and a master’s degree in educational leadership/student affairs from Virginia Tech.