

Delivering effective leadership transitions and succession planning in nonprofits

Nils Geib – Universität Hamburg | Silke Boenigk – Universität Hamburg

This study argues that effective nonprofit leadership continuity or succession planning should be a shared leadership responsibility that Boards deliver, Executive Directors/Division Executives and Human Resources (HR) professionals working together.

The researchers hypothesise that nonprofit succession planning is rarely considered or applied by nonprofits and primarily involves Boards and Executive Directors/Division Executives.

Shared leadership is positively related to succession management activities. However, the data shows that few nonprofits practiced tripartite leadership in succession management (about one in ten). The authors advise nonprofit managers to focus on tripartite pooling of boards, executives, and HR and their competencies in implementation efforts.

[#Leadership](#) [#Management](#) [#NonprofitLeadership](#) [#SuccessionManagement](#)
[#SharedLeadership](#)

Background

&

Context



- Succession management has become an important research topic, especially given that **succession will become more prevalent** as more planned succession occurs, e.g. as the baby boomer generation retires, or unplanned succession occurs, e.g. through emergency circumstances and operating in more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous cases.
- The research literature increasingly argues that **HR professionals should be involved in succession management** alongside Boards and Executive Directors/Division.
- This research argues for a **three-part conceptual framework** comprising a **shared leadership approach** to succession management **involving HR professionals, Boards and Executive Directors/Division Executives** all working together to implement a succession management process that leads to **an effective process that ensures nonprofit leadership continuity**. The framework is primarily focused on planned succession management.
- The research argues that **proactive work is needed to keep the issue of succession management on the radar of nonprofits at all levels**, and that the tripartite leadership group needs to **work in ways that apply hierarchical and distributed leadership responsibilities**, as well as working **in the task and relation-oriented ways** to deliver successful succession management.

ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The study is based on surveys of **1,020 anonymised responses** (4.13% response rate) of **German-based nonprofits**. The sample was deemed robust, but unrepresentative of the complete German nonprofit sector.
- **Shared leadership is positively related to succession management activities**, and the authors advise nonprofit managers to focus on the **tripartite pooling of boards, executives, and HR** and their competencies in implementation efforts.
- **The authors report that 12.3% practised tripartite leadership in succession management, and 62% practised this to some extent** (see Figure 1). Only 28.4% of those surveyed have Boards and Executive Directors/Division Executives listed as responsible for succession management, with 1.8% having Boards and HR professionals responsible.
- **14.6% of respondents felt they planned for nonprofit leadership continuity sufficiently, and 32.7% felt that leadership continuity is at risk in their organisations.** The research argues well for further research being delivered on succession management as it applies to nonprofits, specifically in Germany and beyond, and that nonprofits should prepare for un/planned for succession management.
- Nonprofits **should focus more on shared leadership**. For instance, by facilitating a collaboration between boards, executives, and HR to **discuss internal prioritization of the planning and implementation of a systematic succession management process**. Such a focus could **improve succession management and leadership continuity**.
- **Comprehensive suggestion management should be monitored on a regular basis.** By monitoring the effectiveness of engagements already undertaken concerning succession management.

Figure 1. Shared leadership composition in succession management



ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2023/18 is published in June 2023 and has been provided to you by Sufina Ahmad from John Ellerman Foundation. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.