



British Columbia  
Museums Association  
SINCE 1957

# Best Practices module

## SUCCESSION PLANNING

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**Cultural Resource Management Program**



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## Introduction

Succession management is a continuous strategic process that enables a museum to sustain its operations in times of senior staff transition by proactively recruiting and grooming people for promotion to key roles. Succession planning and management includes systematic analysis of the museum's competency requirements, employee skills analysis, recruitment and retention strategies, and ongoing staff development. While succession planning and management activities generally focus on senior leadership positions, a wise organization also plans for transitions in key managerial, professional, volunteer, and board positions to ensure continuity in operations.



## Relevance and Implications for The Museum Sector

Museums, as knowledge and memory institutions, are reliant on the quality and continuity of staff to accomplish the complex and specialized tasks inherent in museum practice.

Competencies in curatorship, education programming, exhibition development, conservation, marketing and management are vital to all museums regardless of size or nature. Depending upon institutional size and focus, these competencies are combined in varied organizational structures to create a unique, highly specialized workforce. Given the diversity of skills sets, educational preparation, professional entry points, workplace demands, compensation levels, career pathways, and changing occupational demands that characterize contemporary practice, museums face significant challenges in developing and maintaining a skilled workforce. To further complicate matters, many small museums rely on volunteers to perform a range of key functions.

The demands associated with recruiting and retaining this skilled workforce are compounded by the impending retirement of the 'baby boomers' that dominate senior management across all sectors of Canadian society. The rapid growth of museums in the 1960s and 70s attracted the generation of museum professionals who play executive roles across the sector today. Of the nearly 11,000 full-time museum professionals employed in more than 2500 museums and heritage institutions across Canada,<sup>1</sup> it is estimated that as many as 38% may be leaving the field in the next five years, assuming that the demographics of the museum labour force are consistent with the general labour force.<sup>2</sup> Such transitions in staffing are a particular issue in larger institutions that have had the capacity to retain their original highly specialized staff, despite the significant down-sizing and layoffs that have occurred across the sector over the past two decades.

Since the victims of downsizing and layoffs in museums tended to be the entry-level staff who would now be at mid-career, the layer of middle management that might have been groomed to assume more senior positions is, in many cases, missing in both small and large museums. And while younger staff may have great educational backgrounds and potential, they lack the experience and training to assume highly responsible, increasingly complex roles.

At the same time, since government, industry and educational institutions are experiencing similar attrition through retirements, the task of recruiting new staff promises to be challenging, particularly as compensation levels across the museum sector are relatively low and competency requirements are specialized. In this environment, museums are challenged to take strategic and timely approaches to succession planning in order to attract and retain a strong and adaptable talent pool. Despite the growing awareness of an impending crisis, museums in general are slow to articulate strategic human resource and succession plans. A recent survey of the heritage workforce noted that "Less than one in ten Canadian museums currently has a plan to make provisions for the development and replacement of professionals over a period of time and to ensure leadership continuity ... medium-large museums were more than two times as likely than small museums to have such a plan."<sup>3</sup>



## Benefits of Succession Planning and Management

While demographic changes and other staff departures have the potential to create considerable stress across the sector, for museums that take a proactive approach to staff development such change can create opportunities for organizational revitalization. Among the benefits associated with succession planning activities that are aligned with institutional mission and strategic goals are:

- **The opportunity to regularly review and adjust** the alignment of staff skills, knowledge and attitudes with the mission of the museum.
- **Clearly defined competency requirements** along with strategies to develop both existing and new staff to meet these needs.
- **An ongoing supply of appropriately trained, broadly experienced, motivated people** who are ready and able to step into key positions as needed.
- **Capacity to react** in a planned manner to unexpected departures as well as to planned retirements and other job transitions.
- **Provisions to identify and transfer key knowledge and information** that might otherwise be lost to the museum.
- **Defined career paths and a supportive work environment**, which help the museum to recruit and retain better people.
- **Reassurance** for the departing manager that the decision to leave is not likely to cause undue hardship for the institution.

***TIP:***

*Begin the discussion among staff, board and volunteers soliciting their ideas about succession planning.*



## Sectoral Best Practices

While succession processes are applied at the institutional level, the overall sector is influential in creating an environment that supports a healthy workforce along with smooth and effective transitions in leadership, executive, and professional roles. The government services and agencies, academic programs, and professional associations that exist to support the museum sector are encouraged to:

- **Strengthen the appeal of museum careers for young people** through initiatives that stabilize employment prospects, increase compensation levels, and clarify educational expectations.
- **Define and model a strong and inclusive sense of professionalism** that reinforces museum workers' commitment to and support of the sector, and emphasizes their obligation to maintain their competence and share knowledge throughout careers
- **Create accessible opportunities** for ongoing professional and leadership development for both employees and volunteers
- **Support research, policy, program, and resource material development** relating to career planning, human resource management, and workforce dynamics
- **Find a creative role for veterans** to continue to share their experience through mentoring and advisory roles
- **Undertake succession planning for their own organizations** to sustain the broad workforce that serves the museum community.



## Institutional Best Practices

Given the key role that senior executives play in the articulation and implementation of museum vision and goals, smooth transitions in leadership and management are critical to all museums. Regardless of the size or nature of the museum, it will benefit from succession management by observing the following guidelines and adapting them to meet its unique needs and circumstances. Best practice approaches for succession management encourage the museum to:

- **Establish a strategic vision** and direction for the museum that takes into consideration human resource and leadership needs. A comprehensive strategic plan with a strong human resource component provides the museum with a foundation for assessing current and future succession issues and sets out strategies for both long-term leadership transitions and short-term contingencies for interim or acting positions in the event of unexpected senior staff departures.
- **Ensure the full support of the CEO and Board** or other governing authority for succession management and leadership development initiatives. It is essential that the integral relationship between leadership development and succession planning be understood at the executive level, since without leadership, succession initiatives are unlikely to be sustainable or successful.
- **Identify key positions** and/or functions in the museum that are critical to the overall success of the organization and that require continuity. These will be priorities for succession planning and management initiatives.
- **Define current and future leadership, management and professional competency requirements** in the context of institutional mission, strategic and business plans, and museum sector standards.
- **Identify existing skills, knowledge, strengths, and leadership potential** through a range of employee competency assessment tools, and consider current and emerging competency deficits that must be addressed through professional development and/or recruitment. A timeline that identifies when new forms of knowledge and skills will be needed facilitates proactive professional development.
- **Forecast human resource transitions** including both retirements and the creation of new positions, and consider their implications in the context of identified needs and strategic human resource planning.
- **Recognize opportunities for organizational change** or transformation as a result of human resource transitions, including retirements. Given significant shifts in the ways in which work is defined and organized in contemporary museums, the departure of key senior staff can be seen as an opportunity for new ways of defining work and aligning relationships. Rather than automatically filling a position, vacancies should prompt a review of the role, purpose, and expectations associated with the position and with the financial and other resources required to sustain it.



## Institutional Best Practices cont'd...

- **Identify internal succession candidates** and work with them to define and implement a mutually acceptable development program that meets their career goals and strengthens their capacity to assume more senior roles. Given that succession planning should take place over an extended period, the museum should also find ways to engage and challenge (and retain) succession candidates through interesting assignments prior to promotion. Such candidates can gain experience in acting roles, on teams, and through job shadowing and through committee participation.
- **Devise professional development options and career progression opportunities for those who aren't well suited to senior management.** As not all employees can be groomed for senior positions, the museum should strive to communicate that all employees are valued and have the capacity to contribute in varied ways; new assignments and team approaches can provide employees with new challenges within existing positions or job families.
- **Recognize where it will be necessary to seek external candidates** for senior leadership, management and professional positions. While there are many benefits to internal promotion, external recruitment is desirable when appropriate internal candidates aren't available and/or when the infusion of new knowledge, skills and attitudes is required to support and energize the achievement of museum goals.
- **Formalize performance planning** and employee development and progression strategies to ensure equity and consistency in human resource development strategies, and to encourage diverse candidates to emerge.
- **Develop employee retention strategies** to avoid the loss of people whose experience, knowledge and relationships have been developed through significant investment by the museum. Fair compensation, professional development, opportunities for career progression, positive organizational culture, and challenging assignments are all instrumental in employee retention.
- **Foster a positive organizational culture** and a stimulating work environment. Strong leadership, shared values, effective communication, supportive human resource practices, an orientation to organizational and individual learning, and team approaches to decision-making and project management, all contribute to the kind of museum workplace that attracts and retains dynamic professionals.
- **Find ways to enable retirees to leave with dignity and grace.** Retirement can have profound, often negative, implications for many senior workers, particularly if they have had positive and influential working lives and identify strongly with their professional roles. By providing pension benefits that ensure a comfortable retirement and counseling that addresses shifting identity, and by acknowledging and celebrating the contributions that individuals have made to the institution, sector, and community, museums can ease the transition to retirement and, in some cases, maintain advisory and mentoring relationships that are of mutual benefit.





## Institutional Best Practices cont'd...

- **Recognize that successors need orientation, performance planning and support** to settle into new positions, to establish new relationships with colleagues, to set priorities, and to begin to implement change. A challenge for museums, as they attract new leaders with innovative approaches to management, is to incorporate new insights and approaches while adhering to the strategic plan. Since such change may be painful for prior managers, the museum should exercise caution in retaining veterans in formal roles that create confusion around vision and authority.

- **Recognize the succession issues associated with volunteerism.** While succession planning is normally directed to senior professional staff, the reality for many Canadian museums is that volunteers play significant human resource roles. “More than simply willing hands, volunteers are a vital day-to-day connection between the museum and the local community. In this sense, the ebb and flow of volunteers may be seen as a barometer of the museum’s success in engaging the community it serves.” Just as professional staff expanded in late ‘60s and 70s, many volunteers began a life-long commitment to museums in that period. As they also contemplate retirement, museums must undertake succession planning to ensure that they maintain a healthy, diverse, motivated and effectively trained pool of volunteers.

*TIP:*

*Commit some ideas to a document that is reviewed annually.*



## Individual Best Practices

While formal succession planning and management tends to be the domain of the institution, individuals play an influential role as leaders and participants in the process. To achieve satisfying careers in the museum sector, individuals are encouraged to:

- **Undertake ongoing career and personal planning** that identifies professional goals and defines current and desired aptitudes, interests, competencies, and work and leadership styles. With a clear sense of personal and professional capacity, the individual can approach succession opportunities in an informed and proactive way.
- **Participate in systematic continuing education** and professional development activities that provide both the generic and functional competencies necessary for the chosen area of museum practice. As all museum positions rely on mastery of a range of shared competencies, individuals should pay particular attention to the development of leadership, teamwork and communication skills and knowledge, particularly if they have an interest in making the transition to senior management and leadership roles.
- **Participate in professional networks** and communities of learning to develop and maintain professional affiliations and develop a support and advisory network.
- **Understand and support the museum's vision and mission**, and relate day-to-day practice to institutional goals and priorities.



## Knowledge Transfer Best Practices

Since knowledge is a critical resource in most aspects of museum practice, a vital aspect of succession planning and management is the transmission of key information and knowledge among staff and from departing to incoming employees. Without a systematic approach to knowledge management, vast stores of knowledge are lost to the museum and productivity is diminished. Best practice guidelines encourage museums to:

- **Identify the types of knowledge that are critical** to the mission and operations of the museum. In undertaking this task, museums should recognize that while ‘explicit’ or codified knowledge can be recorded and shared through various media, the extensive tacit (or unarticulated) knowledge held by many senior managers is much harder to describe and translate in meaningful ways.
- **Develop systematic knowledge management strategies** to capture and share mission critical explicit information. While collections management systems have made significant strides in storing, manipulating and sharing vital collections-related information, similar integrated database systems have significant potential to also capture programmatic and other forms of museum information. Staff should be encouraged to use these to capture and share knowledge as it is generated and tested so that it becomes the property of the museum rather than the individual.
- **Recognize the kinds of tacit information that are of value to the organization** and encourage museum staff to share their hard-earned knowledge, experience and wisdom with colleagues in ways that allows them to make it explicit. Formal and informal mentoring and coaching programs, opportunities for reminiscence and storytelling, conference presentations, journal articles, interviews, team approaches to work, job sharing, and ongoing advisory roles all provide non-threatening ways in which senior museum professionals can transmit the knowledge and experience gained throughout their careers.

TIP:

*Provide staff and volunteers opportunities to cover different positions in the museum during vacation absences.*



## Pitfalls in Succession Planning

While there are compelling strategic benefits to proactive succession planning, museums must also be conscious of a number of difficulties that can arise as they seek to ensure smooth staffing and leadership transitions:

- Succession planning can create expectations for promotion that are slow to materialize. Clear communication, new work challenges, and incentives to stay are necessary to avoid discontent, particularly if the potential successor is tempted to pursue other career opportunities on the strength of newly developed knowledge and skills.
- Promotions that distance people from their established professional specializations and networks can cause significant problems, particularly if they lose a sense of professional identity and credibility in the process.
- Proactive strategies for leadership transition, particularly toward the end of a director's tenure, may undermine the director's authority and credibility.
- Some employees may see the selective grooming of succession candidates as a threat to their current status or as an opportunity 'jockey' for position.
- Choosing successors without a competency assessment process tends to perpetuate traditional leadership personas and to limit consideration of diverse candidates.
- While some people will be nominated to the succession pool to be groomed for promotion, it is important that those not chosen also be recognized as valued and productive employees with opportunities for growth within their current and potential positions.
- Reduced staffing has created workloads that allow little time or energy to pursue succession management strategies or opportunities.



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