

Succession Planning

Guide for Public Agencies

Overview

Succession planning refers to actions, processes and procedures taken by public agencies, boards and commissions (ABCs) to ensure that organizational knowledge, competencies, skills and leadership are retained for effective governance. Succession planning is critical to fill vacancies in a timely manner, address competencies and skills required by the ABC to fulfill its mandate¹, and ensure an effective transition for newly appointed members. As chairs and members of public agency boards and commissions, complete their terms, there is a risk that critical information and skills may be lost during times of transition. As every ABC is unique, consideration and accounting for all the specific roles and their responsibilities is essential.

The purpose of this guide is to inform ABCs, increasing knowledge and application of best practices involved in effective succession planning and the impact on board governance. This guide provides an overview of the following:

- Strategic Outlook
- Outcomes and Benefits
- Knowledge Transfer
- Assessment
- Checklist for Succession Planning

Strategic Outlook

Succession plans ensure organizational knowledge and board competencies are maintained, regardless of term expiry and position turnover. The effectiveness and efficiency of the ABC may be impacted if succession planning does not balance continuity and renewal of members.

ABCs can be strategic about succession and member turnover by:

- Prioritizing succession planning during operational or business planning cycles
- Forecasting and preparing for upcoming membership changes and departures
- Setting expectations for performance and competencies required for reappointment
- Assessing skills and attributes, and incorporating results from performance assessments
- Creating a development plan that prioritizes ABC needs and builds competencies in members for future needs

¹ For effective board governance, the ABC's succession planning process should be included in the Mandate and Roles Document.

In addition to knowing which position(s) are upcoming, the ABC should also develop plans tailored to the type of departure of members.

Ongoing succession planning can address two key departure types:

- An unanticipated departure, in which a member of your organization unexpectedly resigns, has their position terminated or passes away.
- A planned departure, in which an individual announces their departure well in advance of leaving their position, such as term expiry or reaching maximum term limit.

Outcomes and Benefits

Outcomes

ABCs should develop succession-planning mechanisms to balance renewal and continuity of appointed members. Turnover of a large proportion of members at any one time reduces accumulated experience and organizational knowledge. Retaining this knowledge and continuity helps maintain effective agency governance.

Benefits

Succession planning prepares the ABC to be ready and to move quickly should a key role become open, through term expiry or unplanned moves. The board can also begin to develop competencies and skills in their current membership as a whole and be better prepared to manage future opportunities.

Succession planning assists in the early identification of gaps in skills so that they can be addressed. For example, through more strategic hiring decisions or development programs.

Identifying Competencies

A Board Competency Profile describes the competencies needed on a board of directors (or roster for appeals panels) and includes the relevant skills, attitudes and knowledge areas the organization requires to achieve its mandate now and in the future. It should allow for flexibility to ensure that the talent needs of a board are aligned with the shifting annual priorities. The profile should be examined regularly and kept current, for both succession planning and member development purposes.

Competencies that are current and reflective of the needs of the board are critical to succession planning. A competency matrix compares necessary board competencies with the skills of continuing members and those with expiring terms. This comparison identifies the competencies, skills and attributes that are most required in new appointments.

Knowledge Transfer

It is normal and expected that new members are appointed to ABCs regularly. To ensure new members are well prepared to fulfil their responsibilities, the following processes should be in place: onboarding the new member; and knowledge transfer from the outgoing members, as well as other senior members.

Onboarding

Onboarding is the process of training and orientation that a board or appeals panel member must undergo as they transition into their role. During this period, members are:

- Trained in the responsibilities of their role
- Assessed for progress as they acclimate
- Provided with actionable guidelines for improvement to increase their effectiveness as a professional board member
- Transitioned from an introductory period to full participation within their role.

Ideally, the onboarding process should take about three to six months to complete. Providing adequate time and resources is necessary to ensure the success of the new member in their board position. For terms shorter than three years (e.g. 12- 18 months), onboarding should be expedited to ensure the member can participate fully for the majority of their term.

Knowledge Transfer

A new board member will require guidance to learn their role. To facilitate knowledge transfer, it is helpful to prescribe the necessary steps for existing board members to complete to support the new member during the transition. For example, it is recommended that senior members provide mentorship of new members to minimize turnover, and maximize success, and provide new members with the strategic plan, operational plan, policy documents, and process guidebooks when they start.

A best practice involving both record keeping and mentorship is for current chairs to develop resources to share with their successors. This should start shortly after the chair's appointment, ideally maintaining and building on the work of their predecessor. The resources could include:

- Governance practices;
- Specific roles and responsibilities for chair;
- Challenging issues from previous chair's tenure;
- Any unfinished business;
- Details of the partnership with CEO and department staff;
- Balancing competing demands; and
- Addressing strategic and 'big picture' issues.

Assessment

Effective governance practice requires assessment of performance, as individual members and as a collective board. When completing assessments, ABCs are encouraged to consider their unique mandates and functions, as well as the roles of their members, to develop effective performance assessments for their specific situation.

A best practice is to identify strengths and weaknesses of individual members. This can be helpful for future considerations, such as applicable roles on committees and acceptability of reappointment. Members can use performance assessments to identify opportunities for competency improvement.

Areas for the chair or evaluation lead to explore in performance assessments include:

- Examples of ways in which the member continually challenges themselves
- Self-evaluation of the member's skills against the board competencies and examples of improvement
- Examples of the member's willingness to take on leadership roles and look for opportunities to collaborate.

The board as a whole can specifically assess if there are any gaps in competencies that need addressing or strengthening to fulfill the overall priorities, strategy and/or mandate of the ABC.

Appendix: Checklist for ABC Succession Planning Process

- Review the strategic plan
- Clearly consider and outline specific roles and priorities:
 - Member roles (and job descriptions, if applicable)
 - Chair roles (and job descriptions, if applicable)
 - Board committee roles descriptions (if applicable)
 - Current year priorities
 - Future priorities
- Review Board Competency Profile – renew and update as necessary
- Review current membership, officers and committee rosters
- Evaluate board and committee outcomes
- Conduct member assessments every 12 months
- Conduct a board assessment, including identifying:
 - The skills and competencies required to address the overall mandate
 - The priorities of the board
- Complete board development plan:
 - Address the results and requirements identified in member assessments
- Identify and determine upcoming term expirations / vacancies – (in terms of persons and skills)
- Conduct exit interviews with members as they leave the ABC:
 - Identify the challenges and opportunities of their experience as a member
- Develop an orientation and onboarding program for new members:
 - Assign roles for existing members to support onboarding
 - Assign a mentor to each newly appointed member