Journal of Library Administration

In Transition: The Special Nature of Leadership Change

Barbara I. Dewey [a]

[a] University Libraries and Scholarly Communications, The
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

Version of record first published: 30 Jan 2012.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

In Transition: The Special Nature of Leadership Change

BARBARA I. DEWEY

University Libraries and Scholarly Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

ABSTRACT. *Research libraries are in a time of major transitions and changes. Research library leadership is also transitioning. This article will define transition, explore its many manifestations, and provide strategies and tools for institutions and individuals dealing with transitional environments. Transition provides special opportunities and challenges for research libraries moving forward, not only at the administrative level but at all levels of the organization.*

KEYWORDS   leadership, transition, strategies, administration, library

INTRODUCTION

I started to take the study of transition seriously when I was asked by the provost for advice on selecting an interim dean to fill the gap between my departure and the arrival of a new dean of libraries. I was also preparing for my own transition to lead libraries at another institution. I realized that the time of transition is unique requiring particular characteristics and sensitivities to bring the library through the passage to new leadership. I inquired whether there were specific tools or resources from professional library organizations that would help the interim dean deal effectively with the situation. I did not find what I was looking for until I began investigating transition in a much broader way. In doing so, I personally feel more prepared to deal with my own transition and to assist others.

Transition in research libraries is occurring at an extremely rapid rate. Leadership transition at the directors' level in ARL libraries is a prime example with 16 openings during the summer of 2010. Transition at other leadership levels in research libraries is also occurring due to demographics and the

Address correspondence to Barbara I. Dewey, Dean of University Libraries and Scholarly Communications, 510 Paterno Library, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA. E-mail: bdewey@psu.edu

domino effect of openings at higher levels. New leaders obviously throw the library into a state of transition, at least initially. Another important outcome of leadership transition is the appointment of interim directors, associate directors, department heads, and so on throughout the organization. A third, more macro outcome, is organizational transition affecting staff at every level. Tools and strategies to weather and even thrive during the journey can be found in transition literature.

TRANSITION TYPES

What is transition? According to the OED it is "a passing or passage from one condition, action, or (rarely) place, to another; change" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2010). The passage, itself, constitutes a unique and special environment requiring a different kind of leadership. Those who navigate the passage effectively internalize a change oriented leadership philosophy sensitive to the characteristics of the journey. Those who are "led" through the passage also play important leadership and support roles provided they are cognizant of the possibilities in the transitional environment.

Transition can occur in a variety of ways including leadership transition, political transition, social transition, cultural transition, economic transition, and technological transition. All of these require different approaches, training, and preparation for everyone involved. While this paper focuses specifically on leadership transition and accompanying occurrences, other kinds of transition provide insight into the unique time of passage.

Although transition periods are often characterized as disruptive, chaotic, and fraught with uncertainty, humans have naturally made the cycle of life passages over eons of time. Strategies for transitioning from babyhood to adulthood to ancestor status are ubiquitous throughout the world. In Africa, for example, transitions are supported by ritual and special objects. Roy notes this:

> Among Mande-speakers, masks are used primarily for the initiation of men into successively higher initiation grades, although they also appear for the funerals of society members . . . They also play a role in the initiation of men and women into the secrets of masks' performances, and they act the parts of characteristics in stories of the history of the clan."
> (Roy, 1992, p. 11)

In fact much of African art, at least originally, serves as useful tools for transition. Sieber notes that "in many ceremonies, the portion that survives—the sculpture—is but a small part of the full ceremony. At the same time, it may serve more than a transitory purpose in its own culture" (Sieber, 1987, p. 24). Cultural anthropology documents these global transitions providing themes helpful in understanding leadership transition as a natural,

but dynamic situation, occurring throughout the life cycle of institutions and individuals.

Transition is such a prominent factor that there are now cultural transition specialists such as Heather Markel. In an article from *ezinearticles* she describes lessons on cultural transition gleaned from the movie "Mean Girls." In the movie, Lindsay Lohan plays the part of a girl who has moved from Africa to America and has to adjust to a new school environment. "The line that caught me was when we learn that Lindsay's character is a math whiz, and someone asks her why she has chosen to join the math club. She replies, 'I like math because it's the same in every country'" (Markel, 2010). Moving to a new setting requires sensitivity to one's own desire for familiarity in a strange land.

The study of political transition also provides insight into characteristics of the process. Karner, in describing Central Asian political transitions uses the concept of three types of vulnerability to describe a framework for nation-state formation—security, identity, and economic (Zartman, 1999, p. 2). All play a part in the dynamics of transitioning from the former USSR to separate nations. Leadership change also features these concepts of vulnerability in varying degrees and is especially related to staff perceptions.

Reconciliation processes are another feature of political and social transitions which can shed light on important interactions that might occur. South Africa's tool and forum for transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was described as "... neither here nor there, located somewhere between the islands of the past and an imagined future of integration—integration for the races, of course, but also integration for South Africa itself within both the continent and the larger world from which it had been severed through years of cultural and economic boycotts (Cole, 2010, p. ix). Its hearings provided people who were previously voiceless to tell their stories publically. While much more dramatic and life changing than organizational and leadership transition, the South African transition process, formal and informal, underscores the importance of voice for all parties to move forward to a new day.

All of these types of transitions provide useful insight and strategies for people moving into new positions, roles, and environments.

ENVIRONMENTS FOR TRANSITION

Each institution has its own unique environment related to transition. Tebbe identified four classic types of transitions relevant to library transition:

- Sustained success where the organization is well led and moving forward
- Underperforming organization where participants, administrators, and/or leaders are worried about operating methods, budget, etc.

- Turnaround where performance is at a perilous state and must be reversed
- Hard-to-follow executive where the departure of a long-term leader implies major change since most aspects of the organization reflect that leader (Tebbe, 2008, pp. 12–13)

Each environment requires a different approach for the new leader and should be factored into entry plans.

WHY IS TRANSITION SPECIAL?

Organizations in transition need special care and feeding. Individuals in transitional roles must be aware of and pay close attention to these needs. People are naturally anxious about transition and what it means for their particular job or role. Transitional environments are rife with questions, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown. What will happen next? How will I fit in? How will the trajectory of the organization significantly change and, if so, how?

Leadership transitions, according to Gilmore, need attention because they involve periods of destabilization including "times of reduced performance and vulnerability to outside forces" (Gilmore, 1988, p. 24). He correctly points out that these transitions are often underinvested and ill planned by the organization. This is particularly common in leadership transitions at the highest level including heads of research libraries because campus administration typically delegates decision making to the head without regard for orientation and training to prepare for the move through the transition. Deans and interim deans of libraries (and other collegiate units) have to develop their own strategies for all aspects of their entry and passage through the initial, but crucial, time in the leadership role.

In fact, the literature of transition does include proactive approaches for the new or interim leader. Christy notes that a model for effective transition incorporates at least seven elements:

- Identifying features worth preserving
- Communicating throughout the organization
- Building strong management teams
- Completing major projects
- Recruiting and selecting successors
- Orienting and training new managers
- Building social networks (Christy, 2009, p. 58)

Watkins offers eleven strategies to enable new leaders to accelerate their progress from net consumers in their learning phase to value creators. The new leader needs to diagnose the situation, assess own strengths and

weaknesses, align strategy accordingly, and manage key relationships. These include:

- Promote yourself, break the mold, take charge
- Accelerate learning
- Match strategy to situation
- Negotiate success
- Secure early wins
- Achieve alignment
- Build team
- Create coalitions
- Keep balance
- Expedite everyone to accelerate their own transition
- Link to core values (Watkins, 2003, pp. 13–14)

Watkins also developed seven most common mistakes made by new leaders including:

- Not taking the time to understand the environment and culture before making changes, coming with "THE ANSWER"
- Failing to build coalition
- Not managing expectations
- Attempting too much too quickly
- Criticize previous work
- Hesitation and lack of confidence
- Not communicating vision (Watkins, 2004, pp. 76–77)

Appelbaum et al. conducted a survey of 175 managers who were asked to rank Watson's common traps and principles of success by order of importance. They ranked isolation and coming with the right answer as the two top problems. The top two core success principles were to leverage time before job entry and organize to learn. "To listen and learn about the culture, the organization and the situation before making too quick decisions is probably the most important advice that stand out in this research . . . and to emphasize early efforts on the human 'stuff'" (Appelbaum & Valero, 2007, pp. 6–7).

   Actually developing a written plan or personal guide incorporating these elements provides a proactive approach for the self directed leader. The plan will be influenced by the position of the organization at that point in time. Is the emphasis start-up, turnaround, realignment, sustaining success or some combination of these? Each has its own challenges and opportunities. Plans will differ depending on whether the new leader is permanent, an insider or outsider, or is designated as an interim leader.

NEW EXTERNAL LIBRARY DIRECTORS

The first three months are a critical time for leaders at all levels. Library directors new to an organization need to consider Watkins' imperative to accelerate their transition from learning to adding value and supporting forward movement for the library. Seeds of the transition should begin at the point of considering whether or not to apply for a particular opening. Is the library and its university strategically compatible with one's experience, strengths, and expectations? This constitutes an intensive research phase about key aspects of the university and the library which, if done correctly, will provide the basis for intelligent decision making regarding the application decision and wise interactions at the interview stage. Accurately feeling out the characteristics of a compatible environment lays the groundwork for a future successful transition into a fully functioning leader. Potential candidates should analyze the campus environment in terms of "fit." Is it collaborative? Does it have a family feel? Is it competitive or edgy? Is there synergy between the library and the campus in terms of the transition to change? How does the administration view and/or interact with the library?

Sharp focus should be given to campus and library strategic directions. Have they gone through "the big change" or are they still stuck in the past? Are they on point? Do they relate? Are they compatible with the potential candidate's interests, views, and beliefs? Is there an expectation that the new director will lead a new or revised strategic planning effort? Are the library and its librarians active and visible nationally?

Once a mutual decision has been reached the new director needs to plan his or her initial entry and transition into the position. The successful candidate should not expect a fully or even partially formed executive orientation program from campus administration. This should not stop the new leader from developing their own customized program prior to starting the new position. The program should balance the need to learn about the library with the need to become familiar with the campus/institution. Both are critically important to the new leader's success in accelerating their transition. Advice can be gathered from a variety of sources including the outgoing director, past directors, individuals known to the new leader who are working or have worked at the institution, preferably at an executive level, other library directors who have knowledge of the institution or have recently transitioned themselves, and the current library management team. Advice should be taken with the knowledge that everyone has a different perspective and, perhaps, their own agenda. During the initial entry into the organization the new leader needs to recognize these interests and seek clarity for their own reality.

Establishing credibility is critical early on. Daly and Watkins enumerate the key elements of credibility:

- Honesty in assessments and statements
- Demanding but capable of being satisfied
- Accessible but not too familiar
- Decisive but judicious
- Focused but flexible
- Active without causing commotion
- Willing to make tough calls humanely (Daly & Watkins, 2006, pp. 141–142)

Balance and a delicate touch combined with a strong orientation towards action require constant analysis of the environment. It is the attention to detail, to individuals, and to the bigger picture that comprise the building blocks of credibility.

A typical orientation program will include gaining knowledge of the library and library staff. This can be accomplished in multiple ways and is an ongoing process. Initially library administrators and/or department heads can supply short briefing packets outlining key initiatives in their operations and background information on staff. Meetings can be scheduled for the director to meet with individual departments, major committees, and task forces. The focus of these meetings is four fold:

- Provides an opportunity for staff to meet the new director in a more informal setting
- Provides new director the opportunity to interact individually with each staff member
- Enables new director to learn about the work of the department from the staff perspective
- Gives the staff a chance to discuss issues, challenges, and hopes for the future

Taking brief notes at the meetings is valuable for gaining insight into common themes, concerns, and hopes for the future. Reviewing these notes several months into the position can confirm current and future directions and provide direction for areas needing follow up.

The new library director simultaneously needs to focus appropriate attention on learning about the new institution and campus(es). Key people to meet in addition to the provost and the president include deans, vice presidents/provosts, and other administrators who play an important role in the library's success. For example, the director of physical plant operations, head of general counsel, HR director, director of risk management, and the chief of campus police are sometimes overlooked by new library directors in the orientation phase of transition but, in fact, may be among the most important partners moving forward. A technique I have used in two transitions is to ask people I know who worked at the new institution who I should see sooner rather than later. I compared lists provided and put

individuals appearing more than once high on my orientation schedule. These meetings can be used to:

- Provide a basis for a long-term, productive relationship on a personal and professional level
- Become more familiar with the campus and quickly gain colleagues' respect by going to their office
- Find out campus leaders' priorities and areas they are working
- Test external campus leaders' buy in to library strategic priorities
- Surface issues and concerns regarding the library
- Bring back valuable information for library staff about their constituencies

New library directors quickly realize that their peer group has drastically changed from inside the library to the campus level. Deans and administrators, along with director colleagues from other institutions, are the new peer group moving forward.

Gilmore notes that balancing internal and external visits is crucial (Gilmore, 1988, p. 133). Research and preparation for the meetings should be done including reading biographies or reviewing staff lists, examining strategic or action plans, and looking at appropriate Web sites. Prepare appropriate remarks and anticipate questions. Follow up with any promised action made at the meetings as soon as feasible to retain credibility in the early going. Care should be taken in how change and vision are discussed. I once worked for a university president who, in his inaugural address, emphasized in a derogatory manner the need for heightened quality which was interpreted by the audience as direct criticism of their efforts. The president lost their respect and never recovered.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

New directors will face a barrage of information in a new situation and, at the same time, be expected to answer questions, make decisions, and set a course sooner than their comfort level allows. In order to prepare, new directors should expect one or more of the following situations to occur and be prepared to act appropriately:

- Staff want to know if there will be a reorganization.
- Individuals want the new director to increase their salary, promote them, or reassign them immediately.
- Surprise commitments and expectations from the past will pop up, some of which will no longer be desirable or even doable.
- Individuals will want to tell their stories of inequity, poor treatment, etc., by others and expect the new director to do something about it.

Use caution when confronted with these kinds of situations and just expect that you will experience them or something like them. Listening is fine but taking immediate action is not advisable.

Once the initial entry period is complete, it is time to demonstrate the director's value added proposition. Is the management team effective? Where is the organization doing well and where are the strategic gaps? Is the communication plan effective or does it need work? Does the staff understand the director's vision and are they clear on priorities moving forward? Are there organizational issues to address? What changes are needed, in what order, by whom, and how? Also, transition goes on for a long time. Once the first months are past, it is time to fully operationalize as a director.

NEW INTERNAL LIBRARY DIRECTORS

Library directors appointed from within the organization face unique challenges during the transition period. They need to quickly assume and distinguish their new identity as separate from their former position. Although the internal hire may have extensive knowledge of the library and the campus, a fresh look at the internal and external environment from the top management perspective is in order. Also, developing a schedule of meetings with key internal and external people as noted above is in order because the director will have different relationships and interactions than previously. In some cases campus administrators may not even know the director even if both have worked on the same campus for many years. Internal library directors may, in their new role, strategically advance the library in different directions so a careful analysis of priorities, plans, and trajectory should be accomplished as soon as possible. Internal directors may find that seeking an outside consultant to review the library in terms of its direction, organization, strengths, and weaknesses is a good tool to break from the "old" environment. The consultant, perhaps a respected and effective library director from another institution, can provide an objective baseline of the environment from which the new internal director can benefit.

INTERIM DIRECTORS

Interim or Acting Directors are often appointed when it appears that there will be a gap between the departure or retirement of the current director and recruitment/appointment/start date of the new director. These appointments might be a few months to several years. Interims face unique challenges including the impact of being seen as "temporary" lame ducks. And, while all transition periods tend to imply disruption, they can be fraught with institutional paralysis, a lack of planning beyond the day-to-day, and unprepared

"temporary" leaders who find themselves clueless as to their role moving forward. However, with appropriate support interims can serve as a bridge to new leadership by maintaining the existing course. Successful interims perform their duties in a calm, confident, and sensitive way. They must be very "people" skilled.

According to Gilmore "interim leaders must strike a balance between authentically leading and acknowledging that their successors are critical stakeholders in their actions" (Gilmore, 1988, p. 100). Interims need to focus on actions currently underway and articulate the issues for the next leader. Interim ministry strategies have a lot to offer. For example the Intentional Interim Ministry Program (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod) "is designed to restore congregational health by offering a safe bridge between challenging times and the selection of the next permanent pastor" (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, n.d.). The concept of safety during transition certainly applies to libraries.

The interim head can be a very effective bridge leader between the former director and the incoming director providing a level of continuity and security for staff. Appropriate activities for an interim library director include:

- Engage staff in getting ready for new leadership
- Provide a safe but inspiring environment
- Re-adjust/right-size where appropriate
- Deal with staff problems before the new director arrives
- Keep the library moving strategically without making major organizational or directional changes unless they are obviously needed
- Help prepare the campus administration for new leadership by providing information about gaps, needed resources, potential components for a new leader's start-up plan

The interim leader should avoid:

- Making irreversible changes
- Implementing a comprehensive reorganization
- Depleting budgetary resources
- Doing nothing and avoiding decisions that need to be made

Interims are a delicate balance between pushing ahead prematurely but avoiding stagnation, backsliding, and unnecessary anxiety. They can use their bridge time wisely by focusing on staff and their needs including opportunities for development and learning. However, once the new director is chosen and begins, the interim must immediately take on a supporting

role. This can be difficult so individuals who are considering an interim role need to take stock as to whether they are able to step back comfortably into a different role. In some cases interims are at or near the end of their career or they become successful candidates for director positions elsewhere.

SUMMARY

Transition periods for library leadership can be fraught with anxiety but may also serve as exciting bridges to new opportunities and transformational change. Transition affords a library organization time and space to prepare for strategic directions needed in our complex global world. In reality we are in permanent transition and, with the right approaches and tools, can grow and thrive in this dynamic environment. The study of transition literature along with the collective experiences of those who have experienced this special state can guide others through a successful journey of new relationships and directions.

REFERENCES

Appelbaum, S. H., & Valero, M. (2007). The crucial first three months: An analysis of leadership transition traps and successes. *Journal of American Academy of Business*, *11*(1), 1–8.

Christy, J. T. (2009). Successful leadership transition. *T & D*, *63*(3), 56–60.

Cole, C. M. (2010). *Performing South Africa's truth commission: Stages of transition*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Daly, P. H., & Watkins, M. (2006). *The first 90 days in government: Critical success strategies for new public managers at all levels*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilmore, T. N. (1988). *Making a leadership change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. (n.d.). *Intentional interim ministry: Providing healing, care and renewal for congregations in transition*. Retrieved from http://interimministrylcms.org/

Markel, H. (2010). *Ezine@rticles, July 18*. Retrieved from http://ezinearticles.com/?Lindsay-Lohan-and-Culture-Transition—Lessons-From-Mean-Girls&id=4690031

Oxford English Dictionary. (2010). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/researchguides/dictionaries.html

Roy, C. D. (1992). *Art and life in Africa: Selections from the Stanley Collection, Exhibitions of 1985 and 1992*. Iowa City, IA: The University of Iowa Museum of Art.

Sieber, R. (1987). "Introduction" in R. Sieber and R. A. Walker, *African art in the cycle of life*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Tebbe, D. (2008). *Chief executive transitions: How to hire and support a nonprofit ceo*. Washington, DC: BoardSource.

Watkins, M. (2003). *The first 90 days: Critical success strategies for new leaders at all levels*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Watkins, M. (2004). Taking charge. *Government Executive*, *36*(6), 76–77.

Zartman, J. (1999). Transition and vulnerability management in Uzbekistan. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, *III*, 1–24.