Session 06.02 - Leadership Transition and Succession

Lab: Leadership Transition and Succession
Date: October 7, 2025
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1. Purpose of today's session

The workshop is framed around neglected succession planning, noting organizations often delay transitions, leading to hard stops/starts and underprepared leaders. The lab seeks to help people understand the process of transition and succession better and look to getting a handle on it earlier rather than later.

2. Starting point

The workshop-panel explores organizational transition and succession, contrasting external change with internal transition through William Bridges' model (Endings → Neutral Zone → New Beginnings). Panelists highlight pervasive resistance, communication failures, identity loss, and cultural/generational tensions. Practical tools include Bridges' four Ps (Purpose, Picture, Plan, Part), structured change frameworks (Kotter, ADKAR), and faith-informed metaphors (Moses/Joshua; Paul/Timothy). Succession requires honoring endings, supporting the neutral zone's ambiguity and creativity, onboarding with humility, clear boundaries for former leaders, and inclusive communication tailored to diverse contexts.

3. Key insights

- Change vs. Transition: Change is an external event; transition is the internal psychological process that determines outcomes. Transitions begin with endings.
- Bridges' Model: Endings involve loss and letting go; the neutral zone blends anxiety with creative potential; new beginnings need risk, identity renewal, and patience.
- Neutral Zone Practices: Create quiet, evaluative pauses; allow experimentation; tolerate ambiguity while communicating direction.
- Communication: Clarity and consistency about purpose, priorities, and implications reduce insecurity; tailor messages to different audiences and cultures.
- Resistance: Often widespread (up to 80–90%), driven by fears of status, competence, influence, and team changes; passive resistance can derail efforts.

- Four Ps for New Beginnings: Purpose (why), Picture (what it looks like), Plan (how), Part (who plays which role).
- Structured Change: Use Kotter's steps and ADKAR for appropriate scales; generate short-term wins, remove obstacles, and anchor change in culture.
- Succession: Plan timelines, milestones, overlaps, and onboarding; honor departing leaders while setting firm post-departure boundaries.
- Leadership Identity: Roles can become identity anchors; letting go requires trust, humility, and communal discernment.
- Governance and Culture: Evangelical networks value diversity and autonomy; pursue unity without centralization, managing healthy tension.
- Resources and Pace: Align ambition with capacity (leaders, budget, time) to avoid unrealistic expectations and disengagement.
- Generational Dynamics: Preferences over worship, preaching, and formats can clash; inclusive processes and consensus-building help.
- Faith-Informed Metaphors: Moses/Joshua and Paul/Timothy illustrate honoring endings, differing leadership styles, and adaptive handovers.
- Experience vs. Ideas: New experiences disrupt more than ideas; leaders must manage the lived impact of change.

4. Challenges identified

Marion:

- Transitions are people-centered; grief, anger, and denial in endings must be acknowledged.
- The neutral zone is liminal yet fertile for innovation; leaders should explain need, mark the past, enable experiments, and encourage commitment.
- Four Ps operationalize new beginnings; leadership style may shift across phases; continual letting go (Paul Tournier) is vital.

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- Expect major resistance and fears of loss; leaders transition alongside staff.
- Failures often stem from abstract messaging; provide practical implications and timely, audience-specific communication.
- Use Kotter and ADKAR to structure change, train staff, and reinforce new behaviors.

Bochra Mansour

- Retirement resistance arises from finances, identity, trust gaps, and founder syndrome, especially in small evangelical contexts.
- Succession needs clear dates, overlap, and milestone-based onboarding; honor predecessors while preventing back-channel influence.

5. Ideas and possible solutions

- Include non-core stakeholders; address historical comparisons and narratives.
    - Healthy handoffs require trust and honoring different leadership styles.
- The neutral zone's tension demands structured reflection and evaluation.
- Communication and coordination are decisive; cultural/generational expectations complicate transitions; beware "wrong energy" driving change.
- Capacity gaps can undermine change; align pace and commitments with resources to avoid frustration.
- Leadership vetting and accountability prevent rigid, agenda-driven misfits; decisions should be transparent and shared.