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PREPARING FOR YOUR COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCY'S FUTURE: Sustainability, Succession & Transition

PART 1 Organizational Sustainability Planning Guide

Preparing for Your Community Action Agency's Future: Sustainability, Succession and Transition

September, 2012

This document is intended for use of Community Action Agencies and other CSBG Eligible Entities within the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Network.

Community Action Partnership

The Community Action Partnership is the nonprofit, national membership organization representing the interests of the 1,000+ Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the country that annually help 17 million low-income Americans achieve economic security. Whether it's a Head Start program, weatherization, job training, housing, food bank, energy assistance, financial education, or any of the other 40-plus distinct programs, CAAs work to make America a better place to live.

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TransitionGuides values every organization's essential need for talented leaders, positioned to enable the nonprofit to survive and succeed. Their consulting firm finds, supports, and guides nonprofit leaders to build and sustain effective, vital organizations. Their consultants, all former nonprofit leaders themselves, specialize in working with senior level executives. Since 1995, the TransitionGuides team has led over 400 nonprofit leadership search, transition, and succession planning projects for organizations across the country. TransitionGuides, with extensive nonprofit experience and knowledge, offers guidance and processes that deliver proven results.

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Background about the series

The three guides in the Community Action Partnership Sustainability Toolkit were written specifically with Community Action in mind. These guides were designed to help Community Action Agency (CAA) leaders strengthen the capacity of their organizations, especially those organizations that may be facing a chief executive or other leadership transition in the near future.

The first guide, *Organizational Sustainability Planning*, is a tool for assessing and strengthening the four areas critical to the organization's long-term sustainability by conducting an organizational sustainability assessment and using the results of the assessment to develop an organizational sustainability action plan.

The second guide, *Executive Succession Planning,* provides an overview of three approaches to succession planning and presents a detailed approach for developing "succession essentials," a board-adopted succession policy for the chief executive position and a companion emergency backup plan for the CEO position, but it can be adapted to other staff leadership positions as well.

The third guide, *Executive Transition Management*, presents a three-phase approach for managing turnover in a leadership position, especially the agency chief executive position.

While each of the guides can be used individually, together they are designed to help leaders strengthen their organizations and manage leadership turnover, especially important for agencies that have a long-term or founder chief executive in place. Quite often long tenured executives leave "big shoes" to fill, and careful planning for their succession is paramount.

The timing of the Executive Director/CEOs departure can be a guiding factor in the choice of which tool to use. In CAAs where the executive has no intention of leaving soon, or where retirement may be three or more years off, the *Organizational Sustainability Guide* can be an excellent tool for strengthening the organization, ensuring that when the transition occurs, there is a strong team in place with a clear plan for the future, solid systems and resources, and a resilient culture.

In agencies where the transition is two or more years away, the "succession essentials" in the *Succession Planning Guide* can help the leadership understand more deeply the role of the chief executive and develop the tools, principles and understanding for how to best manage that transition when it does occur. Moreover, development of the emergency backup plan ensures that the organization has a plan in place if something unforeseen were to happen to the incumbent executive. More importantly, the development of that backup plan provides a deep exploration of the chief executive role, and the sense of bench depth in the agency to back him or her up.

In situations where the transition is imminent – within the next 18 months or less – the *Executive Transition Management Guide* provides a well-tested framework for managing the entire transition process, including the search.

What is sustainability?

Because of the recent recession, leaders everywhere have been engaging some version of the question, "how do I build a sustainable organization?" Typically these discussions have focused on financial sustainability, but the roots of financial sustainability are much more complicated than just how much money you have in the bank or what your recent financial statement says. This guide goes beyond finances and looks at four areas critical to organizational sustainability.

This guide has three purposes.

1. Unpack the sustainability question and review what factors drive organizational sustainability.
2. Provide Community Action Agencies with an easy to use assessment tool – a sustainability mini assessment – that will help you identify which of four key elements are ripe for action in your organization. Actions that will help you increase your organizations sustainability.
3. Guide you through the process of developing an organizational sustainability action plan.

The first part of the guide discusses some terms and concepts that are used to develop the action plan and provide a frame of reference for the work that lies ahead.

Many leaders use the words "stability," "sustainability," and "vitality" interchangeably. While these terms are closely related each of them means something quite distinct:

- <u>Stability</u> – this is a basic level of health or firmness in an organization or an entity. It means that you have enough resources to carry out short to midterm activities. In the current environment, "stability" has almost become synonymous with the concept of financial stability. In that regard, financial stability typically means "having enough money in the short- to mid-term to carry out an organization's planned activities." There are other forms of stability other than financial. For example, emotional and political stability are often impacted during transitions involving a long term executive. The announcement of the executive's pending departure can affect the emotional climate in an organization. In some cases it may even lead to some political instability, particularly in fractious environments where the executive has been the "political glue."

- <u>Sustainability</u> – this involves having strong organization or "business" fundamentals in place that enable the agency to become or continue to be a high-value community asset over the long-term. Like a really good sports team, the agency has a solid team in place that understands the fundamentals of the agency's "business" and carries out those fundamentals on a consistent basis. There are good systems in place. The organization is a humming machine.

- <u>Vitality</u> – the typical dictionary definition of vitality includes terms like exuberant strength or vigor; the capacity to live, grow and develop; powerful. In the organizational context, vitality pertains to the energy level and forward momentum of the organization. People within the agency are engaged, aligned and energized.

There is a hierarchy at play here – stability is a prerequisite for sustainability and sustainability is a prerequisite for true vitality. In other words, the organization must be stable in order to be sustainable. An organization's immediate vital signs must be healthy before you can begin to plan for sustainability or take on any sort of long-term planning. In short, stability is the platform upon which sustainability occurs.

Similarly, sustainability precedes true vitality. Good systems and a well-oiled team are necessary conditions that precede the power, exuberant strength and long-term vigor that comes with true vitality.

If you conducted a quick review of nonprofit management literature, you would see a wide variety of notions about what constitutes organizational sustainability and many different "mental maps." Some of these maps emphasize program sustainability and pay little attention to other organizational factors. Other maps focus on finances and fundraising and are silent on other important factors, such as leadership. Still others focus on the business model. The vast majority of these ignore organizational culture. With that in mind, there are four points to consider as you begin to think about organizational sustainability:

1. <u>The reality is that true organizational sustainability involves all these factors and more</u>. But there are four areas that are critical: *organizational strategy/business model, leadership, resources and culture*.
2. <u>There's probably one area in your organization where you key sustainability "presenting issue" is located</u>. Most likely, there's an area that is riper for action than others.
3. <u>These four areas are therefore interrelated</u>. Organizations are systems, so as you focus on addressing your "presenting issue," understand that there may be implications in other areas.
4. <u>Beware of locking in on finances, your financial situation is only an indicator</u>. It is easy to be naturally drawn towards the financial resource area in discussions about sustainability. Your CAA's financial situation is a marker of strength, action, and attention in other areas, - such as strength of your business model,, soundness of your organizational strategy, attention paid by leadership and the strength of their skill sets, and strength of your CAA's soft assets – all influenced, if not dictated, by organizational culture.

Four Elements of Organizational Sustainability & Top Level Criteria

There are four areas of sustainability and accompanying criteria that will be used in the action planning section and the "mini assessment" (see Appendix 1),. The criteria presented here are not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive. In some areas they may just scratch the surface. The idea is to get your team in conversation about these areas, and particularly how they are interrelated, and then encourage you to dig as deep as you need to address your CAA's critical sustainability issues.

Figure 1: The Four Elements of Organizational Sustainability

Organizational Strategy/Business Model

- A solid business model (your business "rationale") built on quality services/products that are needed by clients and valued by donors/funders
- A written plan outlining strategic direction; the plan is recent and relevant to the current market conditions
- A high degree of board, executive and management alignment about the direction and strategy; progress against the plan is frequently reviewed and is the subject of priority setting discussions. For more information on strategic alignment and review please see "Improving Performance, Scoring Success: Using Balanced Scorecards for Organizational Excellence"

Leadership

- Staff and board leadership are in place who meet present and future leadership needs. For more information on developing future leadership please see "Batter Up! Building Your Leadership Bench"
- Clear roles and expectations for board, executive and staff; touch points and overlaps in the board and executive roles are clear and based on complementing strengths and not covering for deficiencies
- A strategy to recruit, develop and deploy new leaders, both staff and board leaders; processes in place and followed for new board member orientation and officer succession
- Succession plans for all key employees that include cross-training plans

Resources

- Sufficient financial resources to meet the organization's commitments in the short to mid-term
- Favorable trends in revenue, expense and margin over the past five years, i.e., surplus or breakeven budgets; good financial ratios

- Good stewardship of the organization's assets – financial assets as well as other assets such as organizational reputation, intellectual property, etc.
- The organization's funding or revenue streams have longevity – the majority are likely to continue beyond the current year's budget or current grant cycle. There's an appropriate degree of diversification among the revenue streams
- A proactive resource development strategy is in place that is tuned to the organization's particular market – the present market as well as its future market
- A revenue development strategy that has a sound logical link to the business model and overall organization strategy

Culture

- A resilient organizational culture that is forward-focused, results-oriented and action-based
- The value and worth of the organization is widely understood throughout the board, staff and volunteers; virtually anyone on the team could make a compelling case for supporting the organization

The sustainability planning process

The remainder of this guide is a step-by-step action plan for the organization and implementation of a sustainability planning project.

How you approach sustainability planning will be influenced by where you are in your strategic planning cycle. If you are beginning a new strategic planning process, you simply incorporate some of the concepts outlined under the four elements & criteria section above. If you do not want to revisit your strategic plan and want to address sustainability, this section lays out a sustainability planning process.

1. Organize a small task force

In most cases its best to have a small team (3 to 5 members) working on this project. Typically the task force should include the chief executive plus one or two members of senior management team and one or two board members. Board members might include the board chair and another officer, or the chair of your personnel committee, if you have one. Staff members might include the COO and/or your HR, director if you have one.

2. Orient the task force, organize the project and make assignments

Review with the task force this guide, particularly this step-by-step action plan and Appendix 1. As for the assignments, someone needs to be assigned to the role of "author," taking responsibility for the writing and rewriting of the action plan. The role of the other team members is to contribute to the strategic thinking that goes into the plan, and to review the documents before they are submitted to the board for their review and approval.

3. Gather and update the supporting documents

The supporting documents that you will want to have on hand include your current strategic and/or business plan, and your resource development plan, if applicable. And any other documents that you think will support the planning process.

4. Conduct the sustainability mini assessment

Appendix 1 includes a simple one-page, sustainability mini assessment. Your board and senior management should complete the assessment and then discuss the results with each other to gain a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences in their assessment of each of the criteria.

5. Review the mini assessment results with the task force

The task force should digest the results of the mini assessment. Some questions to consider are:

a. What do the collective results say about our CAA's key sustainability issue or issues?
b. Where were the similarities and differences between the board's collective assessment versus the senior management team's assessment? How do those similarities and differences further inform the sustainability planning process?
c. As we think about our sustainability issue or issues, are there places where we need to dig deeper? Do we need additional information to inform the action planning process?

6. Drill down on your sustainability issue(s), if needed

Consider whether additional information or research is needed on your key sustainability issue(s). In some cases, the issue or issues are obvious and the action plan readily apparent. In other cases, your presenting issue may not really be the core issue, but a pointer to some underlying factors. Sometimes the need to drill down does not become obvious until you get into the action planning process. Do not get paralyzed with analysis, but you will certainly want to drill down to the real issue or issues. Good questions to ask are, "why is this so?"; Are there organizational strategy/business model implications? Leadership implications? Resource implications? Organizational culture implications?

7. Develop your action plan & secure commitments

Now that you have clarified your critical sustainability issue(s), you are ready to develop your action plan. As you begin your planning process, consider whether your sustainability issue points you to actions in one or more of the other areas. While it's impossible to consider all of the possible combinations of issues, here are some examples from TransitionGuides' base of experience:

Case #1

"Organization A" is a human service organization that enjoys a great relationship with the key state agencies in the two states in which it works. Several years ago they developed a foundation with plans to build an endowment that would help secure the agency's future. They were disappointed with the results over the past five years. They concluded that they did not have the appropriate level of staff leadership heading the foundation nor the appropriate board composition. While the obvious presenting issue appeared to be in the area of leadership., "By asking "why is this so?" they concluded that there were implications in other areas, most notably culture. While a robust fundraising program requires a certain level of entrepreneurism, the success of the agency was built on their adherence to state rules and regulations. They needed to enlarge their sense of organizational culture to embrace success in both areas. To do that they spent time developing a "both/and" picture of success - how would Organization A look if it were wildly successful in fundraising and maintained its extraordinary success in state-funded client services. This picture of success continued to be a conversation throughout the organization from board meetings to staff meetings. Returning to the leadership area, when they hired a new foundation director, they chose someone who had experience in supporting that kind of organizational culture change.

Case #2

Until four years ago, "Organization B" had generated a small financial deficit each year over the previous 10 years. They had dismissed this as an artifact of the recession and "would be back in the black" after the recession. Fortunately, they had enough reserves to cover the deficits. As the economy improved, the organization's financial picture did not. The immediate candidate was their business model. They did a drill down and concluded that was not the issue. Asking "why this is so?", the conclusion was the situation was a result of a combination of issues -, each of which had a revenue implications. They found they had weak execution on their organizational strategy, particularly the recruitment of new program participants. Moreover, a change in senior staff had led to less than optimal cost controls because of the loss of institutional history and relatively weak systems. A change in those two areas has put them back on track towards balanced budgets.

Case #3

Two years ago "Organization C" had a change in CEOs. Two years into the job the new CEO was frustrated and the board disappointed. The new CEO had a dramatically different profile than her predecessor. As part of the transition process, the board said they wanted someone who would shake things up and take the organization in new directions. The new course she charted certainly had that effect. Some long-term staff left the organization and the CEO felt stymied in carrying out the new strategy she had developed. Digging into the issue, there were implications in a number of areas. First, in culture, the strategy she developed rubbed against the organization's relatively conservative culture, resulting in some staff departures and a sense of concern on the part of the board. In the area of leadership, the board did not consider how its role might change as a result of new leadership, new directions and new strategy. They had a cultural norm of deferring to the executive's leadership and they had weak evaluation mechanisms. The organization had peaked a few years ago and really needed a new strategy. Securing board and executive alignment on the new strategy was a good first step. The second step was getting the board to break out of a "business as usual" mindset and look at its role, contribution and composition in light of the new strategy. Finally, they had many robust discussions about mutually held expectations and put some new evaluation mechanisms in place that give the board a better sense being "on track" and the executive the feedback and support that she finds valuable.

Case #4

Organization D is headed by the founding CEO who has 36 years tenure with the organization. In his own mind, he knew that he wanted to retire in two years but had not discussed it with the board. For its part, the board collectively knew that he was an age where retirement was certainly an option, but did not want to bring the topic up for fear of sending the wrong signals. The sustainability planning process opened up that conversation and gave them the freedom to really look at "what was the best and highest use of the CEOs time" over the next several years and what preparations were needed for a successful succession. While they focused their action planning on leadership by strengthening the senior management team ahead of the transition, they also looked at implications for their business model and were mindful of the implications that organizational culture would have on the transition.

Most likely none of these cases mirrors what is going on in your CAA, but the point is that in organizational sustainability planning the presenting issue is often a pointer to actions that may involve several or all of the four core areas discussed. The key is to not rush to judgment, taking action on an issue that may or may not be a "root" issue while not getting sucked into "paralysis through analysis."

Moreover, as we see in Case #4, the combination of sustainability planning coupled with succession planning (see the Community Action Partnership Succession Planning Guide) can be an especially powerful combination, particularly for organizations where the CEO plans to retire in the next 2 to 5 years.

8. Implement your plan

Responsibility for implementation of a sustainability plan can vary widely based on organization size, culture and life stage. Typically this responsibility falls on the shoulders of the management team, supported by the board and its committees. In some cases the board committees may be more involved than in others, depending on the issue, structure of the board, expectations, etc. For example, if your key area for sustainability is resource development, and your resource development committee is a key factor in carrying out the resource plan, then they would certainly have some responsibility for implementation.

9. Review & adjust

The results, accomplishments, learnings, and adjustments on your sustainability plan should be a frequent topic on board meeting agendas as well as meetings of the senior staff. It should be included on every board agenda, creating an opening for the board and executive to have not only a robust discussion about "how is it going", but what's needed to move the plan forward, and how the next iteration of the plan should look.

Conclusion

Organizational sustainability is the responsibility of the top-level leadership. The commitment to sustainability, the planning, plan oversight and periodic progress review must involve the CEO and top board leadership. Much like leadership succession, it's one of those core responsibilities that cannot be delegated. That said, *involvement* in sustainability planning should be broad-based. Your plan will be much stronger and implementation much easier with broader involvement from your team and their buy in.

Finally, the process presented here offers a balanced approach to organizational planning. Quite often organizations take on strategic planning and end up exhausting themselves in the process, failing to get to the leadership and cultural implications of its implementation. The approach offered in this guide provides a simple but powerful framework for keeping organizational sustainability and capacity building front and center in the minds and actions of the board and executive leadership.

Additional Reading

Bell, J., J. Masaoka, et al. (2010). Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. *Provides an excellent overview of organization-wide business plans and includes step-by-step tools to develop, modify, and adopt plans. Includes analyses of various earned income types, fundraising income types, and quantitative tools for analysis. Identifies five archetypal business strategies for organizations.*

Center for Civic Partnerships. (2001). Sustainability Toolkit: 10 Steps to Maintaining Your Community Improvements. Sacramento, CA, Center for Civic Partnerships. *A comprehensive tool for sustaining programs, but does not address overall organizational sustainability.*

The Finance Project. (2003). Sustainability Planning Workbook. New York, NY, The Finance Project. *A set of six workbooks with five planning modules: Plan to Plan, (1) Building a Sustainability Initiative, (2) Developing a Vision, (3) Creating a Strategic Finance Plan, (4) Building Organizational Capacity and Community Support, and (5) Developing and Writing the Plan.*

La Piana, D. (2012). The Nonprofit Business Plan: a Leader's Guide to Creating a Successful Business Model. Nashville, TN, Turner Publishing. *An excellent guide to developing a business plan including chapters on assessing your current business model and financial projections. Offers many examples through a number of case studies.*

Appendix 1 - Organizational Sustainability Mini-Assessment

Please read the following questions and note your response. As it applies to your organization, is this statement completely true (yes), partially true (part), not at all true (no), or you don't know (DK)?

Strategy	Our organization has a solid business model (what we do and how we pay for it) that has at least 5-7 years of life in front of it and is built on quality services/products that are needed by clients and valued by donors/funders.	Yes Part No DK
	Our strategic or long-range plan (or business/organization strategy) is current and relevant to today's and tomorrow's market conditions. Progress toward the plan is frequently reviewed and is the subject of priority-setting discussions.	Yes Part No DK
	Among the board, executive and management team there's a high degree of alignment about the direction and strategy.	Yes Part No DK
Leadership	We have the staff and board leadership in place who meets our present and near-term future leadership needs.	Yes Part No DK
	We have written succession plans in place for all key employees that include cross training plans. We have a strategy in place to recruit, develop and deploy new leaders, both staff and board.	Yes Part No DK
	Our chief executive could go on a six-month sabbatical tomorrow and the organization would not miss a beat.	Yes Part No DK
	Our board is a high-value asset to the organization. Processes are in place and followed for orientation of new board members and we have a pipeline of leaders and a process for board officer succession.	Yes Part No DK
Resources	Our organization has sufficient financial resources to meet its commitments in the short to mid-term.	Yes Part No DK
	Our organization's funding or revenue streams have longevity – the majority are likely to continue beyond the current year's budget or current grant cycle. We have an appropriate degree of diversification of revenue streams.	Yes Part No DK
	A proactive resource development strategy is in place that is tuned to our organization's particular market – the present market as well as future market. There is a clear logical link between our revenue development strategy and our overall business/organization strategy.	Yes Part No DK
Culture	Our organization's culture could be described as resilient, forward-focused, results-oriented and action-based.	Yes Part No DK
	The value and worth of the organization is widely understood throughout the board, staff and volunteers. Virtually anyone on the team could make a compelling case for supporting the organization.	Yes Part No DK

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