

Onboarding and Handoff Checklists

This document includes six checklists to assist in planning and carrying out the onboarding and handoff process covered in Chapter 12 of *The Nonprofit CEO Succession Roadmap*.

PART 1 – Onboarding Checklist for the New CEO outlines the timeline and suggested onboarding activities. It also includes an outline of some talking points that the new CEO should be prepared to discuss as they build a relationship with their new team.

PART 2 – Information & Briefings for the New CEO covers the hard copy/electronic information and briefings that should be provided to the new CEO.

PART 3 – Handoff Checklist for the Departing CEO provides a framework for the departing executive's handoff plan.

PART 4 – Onboarding & Support Checklist for the Board Chair outlines key actions the board chair should take before and during the early stages of the new executive's tenure.

PART 5 – Questionnaire for the Executive Team Members is a set of questions intended to accelerate the process of building a mutual understanding and working relationship between the new CEO and members of the executive team.

PART 6 – Critical Information and Contact Inventory is intended for use in smaller organizations where the departing CEO is the principal information custodian for the organization, and thus the handoff between the two executives involves turning over most or all of the critical information necessary to keep the organization in operation.

PART 1 – Onboarding Checklist for the New CEO

This checklist outlines the timeline and suggested activities for onboarding the new CEO. It also includes an outline of some talking points that the new CEO should be prepared to discuss as they build a relationship with their new team.

A copy of this checklist should be provided to everyone who will be involved in the onboarding process, including the new CEO. Typically, the list of those involved includes:

- The departing executive
- The board chair, treasurer, and certain board committee chairs
- Executive team members and others who report to the CEO
- Others identified in “PART 2 – Briefings for the New CEO” checklist below

BACKGROUND: The new CEO’s objectives during their first 90 days are to learn about the organization and its people, build relationships, and start to become assimilated and make the CEO job their own. **The organization’s and board’s objectives** should be to set the stage for the new CEO to take full advantage of this unique time and to properly set the stage for the new CEO’s leadership tenure with the organization.

The purpose of the onboarding process is to make sure that the new CEO...

- Is properly introduced to the organization and its community of stakeholders.
- Is fully briefed so they can get up to speed in the new role as quickly as possible.
- Thoroughly understands the organization’s...
 - ...mission, vision, values, strategic priorities, and its strengths and challenges.
 - ...programs, logic model, outcomes, and measures.
 - ...business model, funding strategy, revenue streams, expense structure, and financial management systems.
- Gets to know their new executive leadership and management teams and forges positive working relationships with the teams and the individuals.
- Builds a powerful working relationship with the board — a partnership framed by a mutual understanding of the goals, roles, expectations, and performance measures inherent in that relationship.
- Understands the organization’s critical internal and external stakeholders and begins to build working relationships with them.
- Gets assimilated into the organization and begins to fully occupy the CEO role.

ONBOARDING SEQUENCE

Here’s a suggested sequencing of the major activities in the onboarding process.

BEFORE THE START DATE

- The organization announces the appointment inside the organization and externally in the community.
- The board chair and/or transition committee chair briefs the executive team on their decision in selecting the new CEO.
- The executive team and program managers prepare a series of briefings on critical aspects of the organization as well as its programs. (See the “briefings” section below.)

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- To break the ice and accelerate the process of learning about each other ...
 - The new CEO should be prepared to discuss the items listed under the “TALKING POINTS – Things Your Team Will Want to Know About You” section below.
 - The executive team should be asked to complete a “get to know you” questionnaire (see “PART 5 – Questionnaire for the Executive Team Members” below). The results of those questionnaires should be compiled and provided to the new CEO in advance of their start date.

BY END OF DAY 1

- Hold a welcome meeting with the senior executive and management teams (or all staff in small organizations) in which the new CEO covers some of the “Tell Us About Yourself” questions below. Ideally, this should be the first item of business on the new CEO’s first day.
- The departing and new CEOs begin (and possibly complete) the one-on-one handoff discussions.
- The new CEO completes an office tour/walk around with the departing CEO.
- The new CEO schedules any site visits, if applicable.
- The new CEO briefings begin, including one-on-ones with the CEO’s direct reports.

BY END OF WEEK 1

The new CEO...

- Completes the one-on-ones with direct reports and meetings with teams or departments.
- Starts participating in routine and non-routine internal and external meetings.
- Begins one-on-one meetings/phone calls with board members.
- Begins the joint (with the departing CEO) relationship handoff meetings with major donors, collaboration partners, referral sources, and other critical stakeholders.
- Completes the introductions to the board committee chairs.
- Begins weekly check-in calls with the board chair.
- Thoroughly understands the organization’s financial status and funding outlook.

BY END OF WEEK 2

- The team completes the briefings.
- The new CEO creates an action plan for any areas of concern.

BY END OF MONTH 1

The new CEO completes...

- The one-on-one meetings/phone calls with all board members.
- The introductions to the major donors, collaboration partners, referral sources, and other critical stakeholders.
- The contacts with chapter leaders and key member representatives (if a membership organization).
- The outreach contacts to other key stakeholders and influencers.

BY END OF MONTH 3

- The board and new CEO complete the board-executive partnership-building session.
- The new CEO puts the priorities identified at that session on every board meeting agenda thereafter.

TALKING POINTS – Things Your Team Will Want to Know About You

The staff and leadership team will want to get to know the new CEO and understand how to work with their new boss effectively. Here are some talking points the new CEO should be prepared to discuss.

1. Personal/Professional

- a. Professional Experience
- b. Education
- c. Interests/Passions
- d. Family
- e. Hobbies

2. Your leadership style

- a. How would you describe your leadership style?
- b. What are your leadership strengths? Weaknesses?
- c. How do you deliver feedback (both positive and negative)?
- d. What is the best way to give you feedback?
- e. How do you go about making decisions?
- f. What types of decisions do you see as directive, consultative, or consensus?
- g. What qualities do you believe are essential for a top performer to possess?
- h. What can we do to help you be at your leadership best?
- i. What can we do to help you be as successful as possible?

3. Your work style

- a. What hours can your employees expect you to be available?
- b. What's your meeting style for the executive team members? One-on-ones? Group meetings? Frequency?
- c. What is the best way to communicate with you? Email, phone, "drop-by"?
- d. What does it mean if your door is closed?
- e. What's your workplace "hot button"?
- f. What gets you excited at work?

THINGS THE NEW CEO SHOULD CONSIDER FOR A SUCCESSFUL ONBOARDING

- Embrace the onboarding objectives. They're all about you and your success.
- Understand that your first 90 days are largely about learning, assimilation, and ramping up in the role.
- Early on, focus on building critical relationships and powerful partnerships. You only get one shot at being a new executive. The relationships you build during this phase set the stage for your leadership tenure.
- Realize that relationships are built through understanding, and understanding is derived from meaningful conversations and interactions.
- Finally, recognize that it's natural for people to be both generous and skeptical as they encounter you, especially if you're coming from outside the organization. They hope that you're going to be the leader of their dreams but they're also vigilant about the "threat" you pose. That's just how the human brain works when confronted by change. (For more on how people come to terms with change, see Chapter 5 – *Understanding the Psychology of Transitions* and Chapter 6 – *Using Brain Science to Manage the Transition in The Nonprofit CEO Succession Roadmap*.)

PART 2 – Information & Briefings for the New CEO

This checklist outlines hard copy/electronic information and briefings that should be provided to the new CEO.

HARD COPY/ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

Provide the new CEO with this hard copy/electronic information before their start date.

ORGANIZATION

- Mission
- Vision
- Values
- 3- to 5-Year Strategic Imperatives/Priorities
- Recent audits and current financial reports, if not already provided during the interview process
- Recent annual reports, newsletters, etc.
- Other materials that will help the CEO start to learn about the organization that may not be covered on the organization's website

EXECUTIVE TEAM

(Add the following info for the COO, CFO, HR Director, Program or Division Managers, etc. — all direct reports including the Admin Assistant.)

- Title
- Name
- Phone
- Email

BOARD MEMBERS

(Add the following info for each board member.)

- Title
- Name
- Phone
- Email

BRIEFINGS

The following briefings should take place in the first week or two of the new CEO's tenure. Those who should be involved in each briefing are included in (parentheses).

STRATEGIC DIRECTION, PRIORITIES, AND BUSINESS MODEL (Departing CEO & Board Chair or Planning Committee Chair)

- Mission, vision, values, and 3- to 5-year strategic imperatives. (This information should have been discussed during the interview process. If not, now's the time.)
- 12- to 18-month priorities for the new executive's tenure. (This also should have been discussed during the interview process.)
- What's working/not working about the organization's business model.

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PROGRAMS – program-by-program, or line-of-business by line-of-business briefings. (Program Directors)

- Program/line of business name.
- Alignment – alignment with the organization’s mission and social impact vision.
- Client/constituent base – who’s being served.
- Location or service area – where services are delivered.
- Funding and funders – who supports this program.
- Scale – how many are served.
- Depth – depth of the impact on individual program participants.
- Theory of change or value proposition – the logic model for how we get from mission and vision to actual outcomes for the client/constituent.
- Leverage – the synergy that this program creates, such as fundraising, cross-program involvement, constituency building, awareness, etc.
- Cooperators – who works with us to deliver this program.
- Competition – who competes with us for these clients or services.
- Unmet need – who would suffer or what would be missed if this program went away.
- Excellence in execution – why we are best positioned to deliver this program’s services.
- Capacity building – what we’re working on to take this program to the next level and the constraints we face/challenges we’re addressing.

FINANCES (CFO & Treasurer)

- Accounting method – discuss.
- People with signature or contracting authority and current financial checks and balances – identify.
- Current financial statements – review.

FUNDING (Development Officer & Development Committee Chair)

- The current fund development strategy and CEO’s involvement.
- The funding outlook: projected revenues, bright spots, areas of concern, things that need the CEO’s attention, etc.

KEY VENDOR/CONTRACTORS (CFO & Departing CEO)

- Discuss all vendors who are critical to the organization’s service delivery or business operations. Who? How long? Relationship status? Whatever else that’s important for the CEO to know.
- Ongoing or proposed contracts with current or past officers – disclose and discuss.

REFERRAL/COLLABORATION PARTNERS (Departing CEO & COO)

- Collaboration partners and their place in the service delivery value stream. Who? How long? Relationship status? Whatever else that’s important for the CEO to know.
- Referral sources that the organization depends on. Who? How long? Relationship status? Whatever else that’s important for the CEO to know.

HUMAN RESOURCES (HR Director)

- Key vacancies and plans to fill them.
- Talent management/promotion plans.
- Status of personnel reviews.
- Other HR issues.

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LEGAL (Departing CEO & legal counsel if appropriate)

- Outstanding legal and regulatory issues the organization is facing – review and discuss. (These should have been disclosed and discussed during the finalist’s interview, or before the job offer.)
- Risk management – the organization’s major risk exposures and how they’re currently managed.

GOVERNANCE (Board Chair & Board Development Committee Chair)

- How board members are identified and appointed, and the criteria for selecting board members.
- The board leadership succession process.
- Results of any recent board assessment.
- Current vacancies and who you’re seeking to fill them.
- Current board committees and the rationale for their existence.
- Board development efforts – those recently completed and those on the horizon.
- The board’s involvement in strategic planning and follow-up.
- The board’s process for evaluating the performance of the CEO.

KEY MEETINGS (Departing CEO & COO)

(Add the following info for each recurring meeting in which the CEO is involved or attends.)

- Meeting name:
- What’s the meeting’s purpose:
- Who attends:
- What’s the meeting’s frequency:
- What’s the meeting’s location:
- Who chairs the meeting:
- What’s the CEO’s role:

CRITICAL PROJECTS (Departing CEO & COO)

(Add the following info for each of the major projects the CEO should be aware of or needs to manage.)

- Project name:
- What’s the project objective:
- What’s the project completion or end date:
- Who’s the project lead:
- Who’s on the team:
- What’s the project status:
- What’s the project prognosis:
- What’s the next major action or milestone:

PART 3 – Handoff Checklist for the Departing CEO

This checklist provides a framework for the departing executive to use to build their handoff plan. Drafted by the departing CEO, the handoff plan should be reviewed ahead of time with the board chair, transition committee, and, of course, with the incoming CEO.

The handoff discussion(s) between the departing and incoming CEOs are an integral part of the new executive’s onboarding process. And the handoff process serves important informational, psychological, and symbolic purposes. (For more about the psychological and symbolic impact of the handoff, see *Planning the Handoff* at [https://dontebe.com/planning-the-handoff/.](https://dontebe.com/planning-the-handoff/))

THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE HANDOFF

- Make sure that the board “gets” the importance of onboarding and support for their new executive.
- Make sure that the board is clear about the objectives of the onboarding and relationship-building process.
- Ensure that the board chair is carving out the time for frequent check-ins and relationship-building conversations with your successor.
- Minimize distractions for the new CEO by making sure the organization, the executive team, and the board are as ready as possible.

THINGS TO DECIDE BEFORE THE HANDOFF

Executive Overlap. Clarify the duration of the overlap between the departing and incoming executives by identifying the beginning and ending dates of the overlap period. In small organizations, the overlap might be a matter of hours. In larger organizations or more complicated situations it may be days or perhaps even weeks.

- Begins: [date/time]
- Ends: [date/time]

Titles. What titles will the departing and incoming executives hold during the overlap period? “CEO” and “CEO Emeritus,” “CEO Elect” and “CEO,” etc. You should also clarify who’s in charge during the overlap, e.g. who’s chairing staff meetings.

- Departing Executive’s Overlap Title:
- Incoming Executive’s Overlap Title:

Offices. The offices the executives will each occupy during the overlap.

- Departing Executive’s Office:
- Incoming Executive’s Office:

NOTE: As we discussed in Chapter 21, in most cases, it’s best for the successor to assume the CEO title and move into the CEO’s physical office on Day 1. The exception to that is cases where there’s an extensive overlap due to an extended orientation or ramp-up process. For example, say the incoming CEO goes on a listening tour while the departing CEO attends to operations.

DURING THE HANDOFF

Typically, the handoff discussion is a one-on-one, confidential conversation between the departing and incoming executives.

Organization overview. Note that some of the topics in this section overlap with the "briefing" topics in the overall onboarding plan. This part of the handoff conversation is intended to provide an overview and an opportunity for the departing executive to provide "their take" on these topics. The briefings outlined in the onboarding plan are meant to be more in-depth and involve other staff and board members.

- Organization history and evolution
- Direction and outlook – status of the current strategic, long-range, or business plan
- Business outlook, emerging opportunities, and ongoing challenges
- Financial status and outlook
- Current staff and executive leadership
- Board and board leadership
- Programs and locations
- Key stakeholders (see below)
- Collaboration partners
- Referral sources
- Culture and important customs

Calendar walk-through. Review upcoming internal and external events that require the incoming CEO's time and attention or other events/activities that they simply need to be made aware of. Point out significant events on the horizon that will help your successor build their visibility and become embedded in the role, community, or profession. Be generous.

Office routines and systems. The plan should ensure that the handoff discussion covers:

- Office routines, systems, and files
- Computer passwords and login information
- Alarm codes
- Safe combination
- Office keys
- Signature cards

Key stakeholders. The departing and incoming executives should discuss the key internal and external stakeholders. They should also consider holding in-person meetings with the "A-List," top-tier stakeholders, to hand off those relationships.

- A List. Top-tier stakeholders. Hold handoff meetings.
- B List. Mid-tier stakeholders. Discuss individually.
- C List. Low-tier stakeholders. Discuss categorically.
- Makers and breakers, enablers and detractors. Folks, who regardless of their tier, hold sway over the organization or the CEO role.

PART 4 – Onboarding & Support Checklist for the Board Chair

PURPOSE: This checklist outlines key actions the board chair should take before and during the early stages of the new executive’s tenure.

- ❑ **After the selection of the new CEO has been made, fully brief the executive leadership team** on the decision-making process and rationale for the selection of the new CEO or ask the transition committee chair to conduct that briefing.
- ❑ **Before the new CEO starts, refresh the board’s understanding of its roles and update its responsibilities.** Lead a dialogue with the board about the kind of partnership it wants to establish with its new executive and what changes in governance might be in order. (This discussion could take place anytime during the search process.)
- ❑ **After the new CEO starts, hold weekly check-in calls or meetings with the new executive.** Here are some suggested questions and discussion points for those early-stage conversations:
 - What are some of the highlights of what you’ve learned or encountered so far?
 - What's exciting you?
 - What's your biggest concern?
 - What barrier can I help you get out of your way?
 - What support do you need from me or the board?
 - What’s your sense of the priorities that should be on our leadership agenda — priorities for you and the board?
- ❑ **Schedule a board-executive partnership-building session.** Towards the end of the new CEO’s first 90 days, the board and new CEO should have an intentional conversation to clarify the four critical aspects of this relationship that are outlined below. This should be a special meeting devoted to this topic.
 - **Priorities.** The top 3 to 6 priorities for the new executive’s first year. The “leadership agenda.” This could build on the current strategic plan or other priorities identified during the transition process.
 - **Roles/responsibilities.** A refreshed understanding of both the executive’s and the board’s roles and responsibilities, especially the board’s in light of having a new CEO in place.
 - **Expectations.** The mutual expectations, especially about how to achieve the priorities; there should be lots of room for discussion about what the executive needs and wants from the board.
 - **Success measures.** How performance will be measured – the criteria, when, how, and by whom. This should include a discussion about how the board will hold itself accountable.

PART 5 – Questionnaire for the Executive Team Members

PURPOSE: This section includes a set of questions intended to facilitate the mutual understanding and relationship-building process between the new CEO and the executive team. The point of this exercise is to break the ice and help frame those relationship-building meetings.

INSTRUCTIONS: The departing executive should ask the members of the executive team to complete the following questionnaire, then gather the results and share the completed questionnaires with the new CEO.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS: *

1. What do you know about the new CEO?
2. What are some things you would like to know about the new CEO?
3. What are some things the new CEO should know about you?
4. What hours and where can the new CEO expect to find you working?
5. Regarding your team or area, what are you most excited about?
6. What does your team or area of responsibility most need?
7. What are the major near-term work challenges you're currently facing?
8. What do you need from the new CEO to help you be successful?
9. Think of your favorite supervisor and write down at least two things that you liked most about them.
10. Think of your favorite team that you've worked on and write down at least two things that you liked most about that team.

* Again, thanks to Goodwill Columbus (Ohio) for providing these questions.

PART 6 – Critical Information and Contact Inventory

This inventory is intended for small organizations where the CEO is the sole administrator.

Last updated:

Organization’s Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN):

State Employer Identification Number (if applicable):

Corporate Records	Location
Articles of Incorporation and Related Filings	
IRS Determination Letter	
IRS Form 1023	
Bylaws	
Board and Committee Membership Lists	
Board and Committee Minutes	
Committee Charters	
Board Policies	
Corporate Seal	

Administrative Records	Location
Form 990 File	
Audit File	
Financial Statement File	
Federal and State Employee Withholding Files	
Unrelated Business Income Tax File (if applicable)	
State Charitable Solicitation Registration and Report File	
State Property or Sales Tax Exemption Certificates	
Blank Checks	
Computer Passwords	
Donor Records	
Client Records	
Vendor Records	
Volunteer Records	
Personnel Files (Job Descriptions, Resumes, and Performance Reviews)	
Personnel Policy/Handbook	
Contracts File	
Building Lease/Deed	

Auditor

Company Name:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Bank

Bank Name(s) & Account Number(s):
Authorized check/document signers:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Legal Counsel

Company Name:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Payroll

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Investments

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Office Safe

Who has the combination/keys?

Building Management

Company Name:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Office Security System

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

General/Umbrella Liability Insurance

Company Name & Policy Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Directors & Officers Liability Insurance

Company Name & Policy Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Professional Liability Insurance

Company Name & Policy Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Other Insurance

Company Name & Policy Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

IT Consultant

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Web Host

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Other External Technology Providers

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email:

Telephone System

Company Name & Account Number:
Contact Name, Phone Number, & Email: