

Reflections on Transitional Leadership

Part II | The Emerging Leader

By Sue Offutt

When I first came to the McCormick Center people would say, “You have such big shoes to fill in replacing Paula Bloom.”

With our four-year succession plan, I never looked at it as replacing her as much as I looked at it as walking alongside her. By having this perspective I was able to learn and grow from Paula’s wisdom, yet remain true to myself.

Sometimes it has been too easy to try to change to be more like Paula. When that occurred, chaos began to unfold. This is especially true because she is the McCormick Center founder, and 30 years of embedded cultural norms relating to her leadership style began to surface.

Through much conversation with Paula, I was able to better understand how she made decisions, why she chose a certain path to pursue, what course of action in approaching funders was successful, and where I needed to focus for the future. I was also supported to draw upon my expertise and encouraged to express my opinions—even if they differed. This resulted in both of us having the opportunity to expand our knowledge and perspectives.

In the long run, the McCormick Center benefitted from the time and energy expanded by both of us during in the last four years. The McCormick Center remains a great place to work and will continue to thrive in the future.

Here are some simple tips I discovered in my succession planning journey:

1. Be true to yourself, and remain open to reflect, learn, and grow.
2. Establish an open relationship for sharing and giving feedback between you and the exiting leader. Developing trust and respect—and designating time to share—are critical pieces to the success of the relationship.
3. Be transparent with your senior management along the way so they are not caught “in the middle.” For us that meant having a standing agenda item called Transitional Leadership for our monthly meetings.

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4. Look outside of the organization for new and different ideas on how to lead; there is not just one way to lead.
5. Find an outside support network where you can bounce ideas, share frustration and concerns, and gather a fresh perspective on what it is you need to do.

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