

*The NCFP Guide to...*  
**Navigating  
Transitions**

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
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# Introduction

Transitions in family philanthropy can bring personal joy and pride, such as when one generation is able to watch members of the next embrace the family’s tradition of giving or when a family onboards its first staff member. Transitions can also usher deep grief and loss, particularly when following a death or divorce, forcing important decisions during painful times.

Changes can be momentous—arising from worldwide events or crises, responses to policy shifts, or an evolving need in a community—or minor, stemming from a needed operational shift and more. Transitions can pose opportunity and inspiration alongside confusion and frustration.

All organizational leaders will face significant transitions during their tenures, but in family philanthropy, transitions are often exceptionally complex. This is partly due to the fact that many of the individuals involved in the work of the philanthropy hold an array of roles and responsibilities across a dynamic ecosystem of family, staff, and community members. “What happens in one area of the ecosystem can affect another. Family philanthropy leaders need to be ready for those complications,” says Kathleen Simpson, CEO of the Russell Family Foundation.

Families that thrive through transitions understand that change is inevitable, and they build organizations that are nimble, learning-centered, empathetic, and strategically able to anticipate how to handle transitions as they come.

While transitions most often include challenges, readying the organization to effectively move through them can provide great comfort and increased confidence for leaders and decision-makers. This guide offers leaders in family philanthropy a framework to think about transitions in straightforward, realistic, and actionable ways. We drew lessons from many well-known change management models, including Lewin’s Change Theory, Kotter’s Methodology, and Bridges Transition Model. We combined these ideas with insights from *Generations of Giving* and our experience working with hundreds of families over the years to create a way to think about healthy transitions in family philanthropies. While the governance structure of private foundations is such that boards of directors are critical to many transitions outlined in this guide, the framework applies to leaders of all types of family philanthropies, including those that do not have a board.

Healthy transitions have four phases:

### **1. Prepare the organization**

Leaders will need to create an environment where change is not feared, strong governance and operational structures are in place, and everyone involved in the transition has the confidence in the organization's ability to successfully move through transitions.

### **2. Recognize when a change is needed**

Leaders must build awareness and understanding that a previous approach is no longer working or feasible and encourage the team's desire to address the transition in a thoughtful and strategic manner, even when this includes disappointment or grief.

### **3. Choose the next direction**

The organization will explore and test options; determine the details of what the future will look like; and understand the skills, behaviors, and abilities that the organization will need for the transition.

### **4. Embed the change**

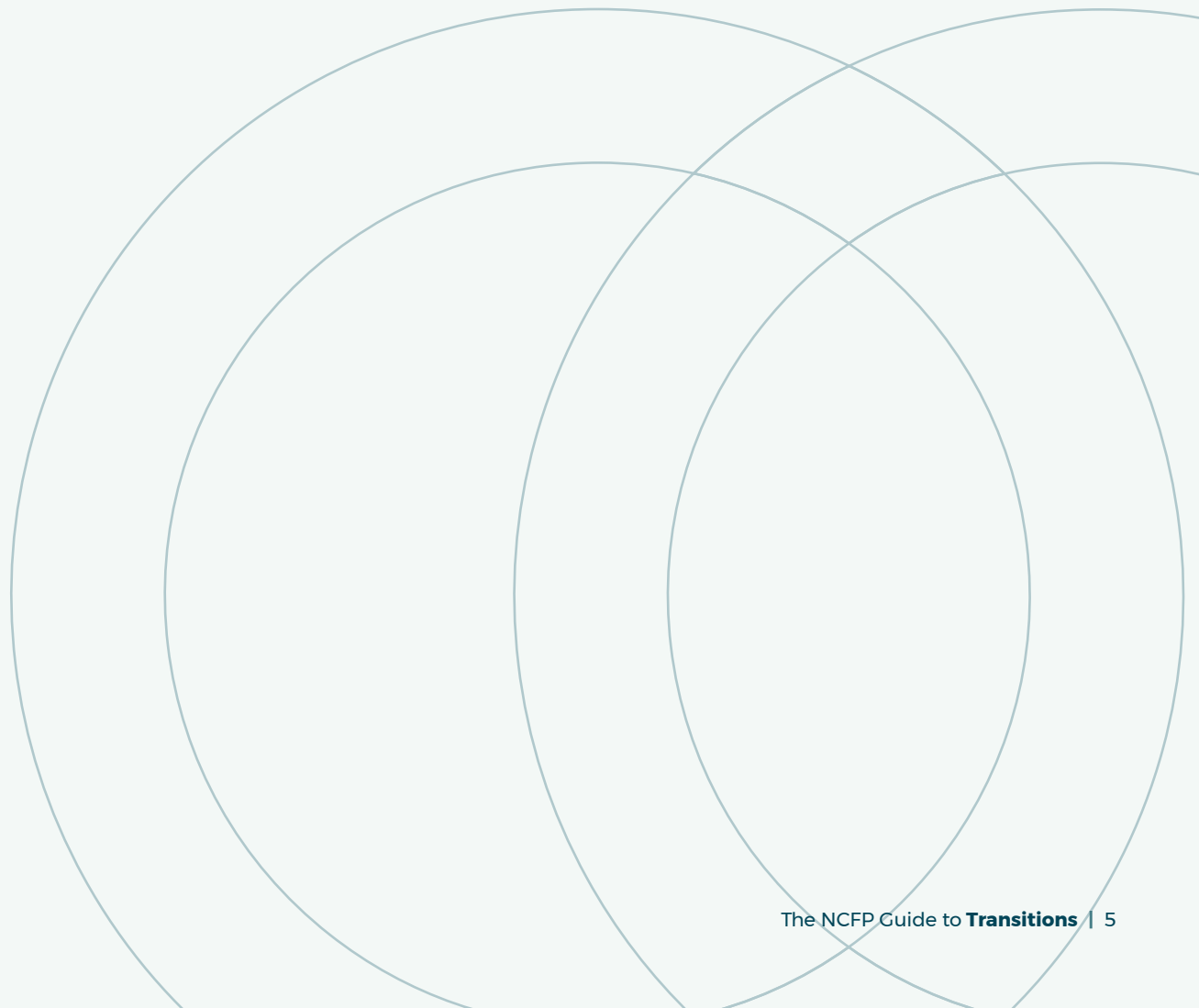
This phase reinforces and stabilizes the organization's "new normal" in a way that is supportive, open, and deliberate. It includes focusing on both human emotion and experience as well as structural and operational support.

In general, each phase leads to the next, and the framework is best experienced in a fairly linear fashion, even if there are some moments that require you to rethink or adjust a previous phase's work. While we encourage families to approach transitions one phase at a time, it is important to keep in mind that one organization often experiences multiple transitions at once, and those transitions may be in different phases (e.g., embedding a CEO shift while choosing a new strategic direction). This demands especially skillful leadership.

In some cases, moving through these phases may be swift, lasting only a month or two, while with more significant transitions, such as CEO or board chair shifts, this process can take up to two years to do well.

It is normal for transitions to feel destabilizing and overwhelming, but having a framework to rely on in these times can offer a sense of stability and a peek into the future. Olivia Zale, vice chair of the M.B. & Edna Zale Foundation, notes how important having a framework has been to her family, especially as she plans for her transition to the position of board chair next year. "Using a transition framework became something

of a North Star. It allowed us to recognize where we each are and to understand how we can all move through the change. As a board, a transition framework allowed us to pause, acknowledge, and discuss the emotional side of the process. As a leader, I have used the framework to help me recognize when someone is having a more difficult time so I can support them, specifically, through it. You must have empathy for anyone you work with, but it's incredibly important when you are working with your family.”



# The Four Phases of Healthy Transitions

## Phase One: Prepare the Organization

Perhaps the most overlooked part of any transition is what family philanthropies can do before a major change occurs—whether imminent or unexpected. When leaders take the time to build genuine connection and a collective commitment to learning during more stable periods, teams are better poised to face change together with grace, compassion, and real care for each other.

“If organizational culture is strong, you can work through planned or unplanned transitions, but you must take time to build that culture and work on it,” says Simpson. “Take the retreats, spend time together, invest in opportunities to connect even when you think you don’t think you have the time because it will help you when the harder times inevitably come.”

Some ways to prepare your organization include:

### **Ensure your mission and values are up to date and widely known**

As with all decisions in family philanthropy, nothing will help you more than having a strong mission and set of values in place. There will likely be moments during a transition when a decision is unclear or there are differing opinions about the best next step. In these instances, leaning on a shared understanding of your mission and values can offer great insight into what the right decision is.

Once you have gone through the process of articulating the family’s mission and values, be sure to keep them alive and embedded in the culture of and the dynamics between the board, staff, consultants, and grantee partners. Ways to do this may include:

- 1. Start each board or team meeting with a spotlight** on values, potentially by including a story from a grantee partner or staff member that aligns with a specific value, to continually remind and display real examples of the values in practice

- 2. Build mission and values exercises** into next-generation training and onboarding plans that will ensure values are expressed and deepened over time, even as individual team members will evolve
- 3. Incorporate questions** about values and mission into all hiring processes, which will ultimately build a team that is fundamentally connected
- 4. Communicate clearly and transparently** with grantee partners about the family's mission and values to ensure alignment across all connected organizations

## **Align on and document decision-making practices**

Once a major transition starts, there will be myriad decisions that need to be made. Aligning on decision-making practices in advance will make moving into a transition much smoother. Assess, update, and revisit the family's governance practices to be sure they are in a state that the full family and team understands and feels good about. A helpful exercise is to scenario plan under different governance models to work within hypothetical shifts and pressure test whether they will work once a transition is in motion. If there are questions or concerns, address them in times of stability to offer everyone a clear head and a stable emotional state when making any changes or updates.

## **Build a culture of trust and connection**

Once a transition is on the horizon, you will need a team that feels safe and ready. People need to both trust their leaders and feel trusted by their leaders during transitions. Often, this can happen most meaningfully from taking the time to get to know one another on a personal level during big moments like retreats and, most importantly, through day-to-day care and connection, including finding regular ways to bring the team together across roles. Pui Ling Tam, a senior leader at the Walter & Elise Haas Fund, says, "We decided to bring together all staff and all board members in meetings, which was a great step. We brought people in as people and had gentle ice breakers, so we all got to know each other better." Building bridges across all members of the team, whether in meetings or otherwise, is a thoughtful and profound step in building a connected and trusting team.

## **Encourage exploration and learning**

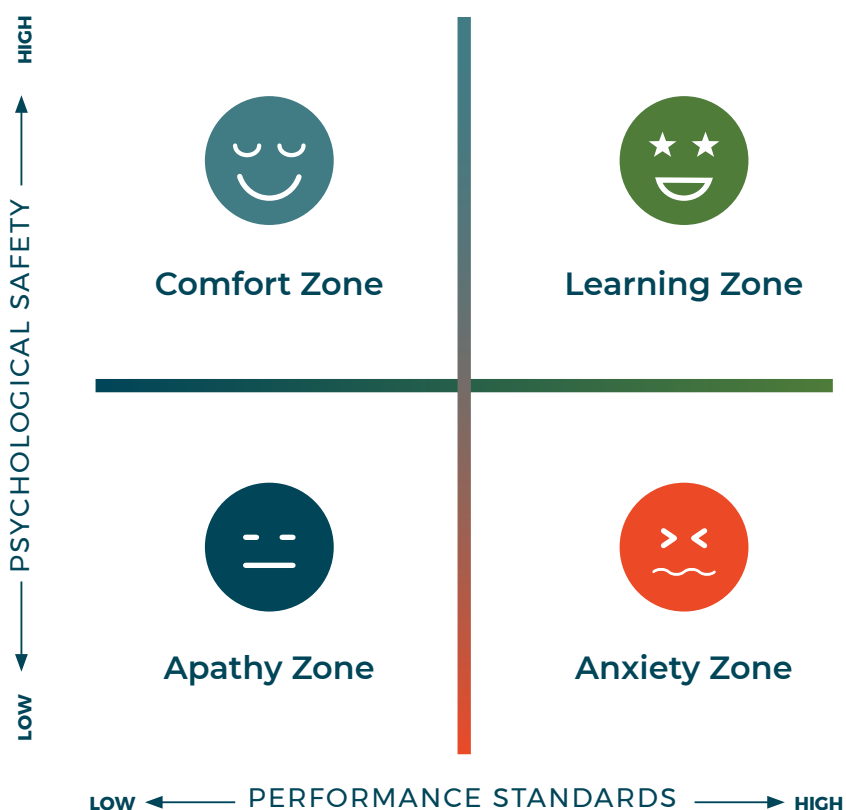
During transitions, people across the family and philanthropy will be required to try new things. Most people will undoubtedly make mistakes and need to learn from them to move forward. If teams are not used to learning together, transitions become significantly more fraught as they both navigate change and build their learning muscles. Instead, it is most helpful for leaders to encourage learning, failing, and trying again each day.

Frank Baiocchi, executive director of the Hunter Family Foundation, always makes sure he builds an explicit place for learning. “I always want to create an organization that allows people to respond to curiosity and discover together. When you make learning an explicit goal, people are more free to ask questions, co-create, and work more collaboratively.” When learning is normal and questions are encouraged, future transitions can flow more smoothly.

Amy Edmondson, PhD, a Harvard Business School professor, popularized the concept of psychological safety in *The Fearless Organization*. She shares that being able to take risks, ask questions, admit mistakes, and challenge ideas creates the happiest and most effective teams. All leaders should endeavor to lead their boards and teams into the learning zone where people are both comfortable and have high standards. (See the appendix for more information.)

Some people assume that with a high level of psychological safety performance may slip, but the happiest and most learning-centered teams and individuals have both a high sense of safety and high standards of performance. When people feel they are learning without anxiety while being expected to perform well, they generally stay in their roles and continue to grow within an organization.

**FIGURE 1.** The Relationship Between Psychological Safety and Performance Standards



## Document what you can

Your future team will always be in a better place if there is some level of clear and honest documentation about the organization. There are two basic ways to use documentation to prepare your organization for upcoming transitions:

- 1. As-is state:** Make it easy to understand the current status quo prior to any shifts. This can and should be a simple set of documents clearly outlining the most important aspects of the organization as it operates today. This can include mission and values, board makeup and bylaws, decision-making practices, staffing structure, current strategies and grantee partners, and operational and administrative tools. Having this at the ready will limit future conversations or debates about how things have been and will allow the team to more swiftly move to future state conversations.
- 2. In case of emergency:** There are some transitions your team knows may happen but does not know if or when they will occur. This may include the death, retirement, or departure of an important board or staff member; responses to natural or human-made disasters; or potential family divorce or estrangement. As Simpson advises, “Even if it is basic and simple, always write down the if-something-were-to-happen plan. This can avoid what is often a panic moment.” For example, the Dyson Foundation created this [disaster plan](#) and another foundation documented its [emergency plan for succession](#).

## Don't wait for a transformational transition to build skills

When families think about transitions, they often only consider the large, transformational shifts such as launching a new strategy that requires ending long-term grantee partner relationships or finding a new board chair who will likely change the ethos of the whole board. In reality, family philanthropies navigate change regularly, and family philanthropies can use this framework for smaller shifts such as implementing software or revising a small policy. Using less complex transitions as an opportunity to work through the four transition phases offers teams a way to practice working together and getting more comfortable with the idea of change.

## Phase Two: Recognize When a Change is Needed

An important element of a smooth transition is identifying the catalyst to set a transition in motion in a thoughtful and precise way. Sometimes, a major transition is clear and known well in advance, such as when a long-standing CEO gives ample notice for her upcoming retirement plans. In this case, the organization has a clear indicator of when to start a shift. Other times, a shocking disruption catalyzes a major transition that requires the team to make changes immediately, as was the case with most family philanthropies during the Covid pandemic, beginning in 2020.

Tam recalls 2020 as an especially critical time for the Haas Fund, “It forced us to move right away. We had known there were better practices than what we had been using, and we knew we were going to use them *right then* because that is what the community needed. The external change made our internal transformation to true trust-based grantmaking possible.”

Some ideas for thoughtfully recognizing the catalyst and taking steps toward a transition include:

### **Create a practice of continually checking in**

The state of a family’s philanthropy is constantly in flux, even during what may be considered steady periods. Baiocchi works on getting extremely clear about practices and aims for each aspect of the Hunter Family Foundation’s work to create an easy way to continually align. “We have a dashboard with goals and timelines for granting, governance, investing, and learning. It’s a unifying document that allows everyone to know exactly where things are and where we are going. It’s visual, it’s concise, and it gets us all on the same page,” says Baiocchi. Using these kinds of tools alongside individual check-ins puts in motion a culture of continual assessment and improvement that makes it easier to recognize and respond to areas in need of a transition. While this alone will not allow you to anticipate all upcoming transitions, it will build a practice of looking around the corner and aligning together on next steps across different areas of the philanthropy.

## When possible, consider the right timeframe

You cannot determine the timeframe for many transitions, but for those you can, consider the length that will set up your team for success. For example, it's common for longtime CEOs to give several years' notice for retirement. For some families, this feels like a gracious and thoughtful approach, allowing them to get used to the idea and start to put some plans in place in an unhurried manner. On the other hand, sometimes a long timeline can lead to a lack of urgency and or a team that feels as though they cannot move forward on big decisions without knowing the perspectives of their next leader. Finding the sweet spot between too much and too little time for a transition is a challenge and will depend on the culture, size, and age of the organization. When needed, consider reaching out to a peer, consultant, or coach to help you think through the best way to manage timing for a known transition.

## Take time to acknowledge the past

Once you determine that a transition is needed, it is critical to take time to accept this fact, which may include grieving and/or celebrating the past. Baiocchi thinks about the Hunter Family Foundation in three overlapping spheres: family, business, and foundation. Each sphere has a distinct culture, norms, and ways of operating that should be considered during transitions. "Especially when a transition is due to a family milestone like a death, don't push people out of their family culture into foundation or business roles too quickly. Stay there and honor their love and emotions," he advises.

Other shifts that are more strategic in nature also benefit from a thoughtful pause. Tam explained, "We exited several grantee relationships as we changed our strategy. The board and staff members were excited about the shifts, but we regret not thinking more about the grieving process. We made a choice, but we all miss some of our former partners."

## Build excitement for what is next

To move forward, you need a team that feels optimistic enough about the future to take on the work and challenges ahead. While different individuals will be excited and motivated in different ways, some things to consider include:

- **Clearly sharing the "why"** behind the coming transition (even if you think it may be obvious)
- **Showing your own excitement and confidence** as a leader including why you believe in where the team is heading
- **Offering some early ideas** for engagement across the team, building hopeful anticipation for what is to come

## Be thoughtful about communications

Communications will be important at every phase in a transition, but starting on the right foot will pay dividends throughout the process. Graham Murphy, founder and principal of Emerald Wave Consulting, notes, “As a good rule of thumb, at least fifty percent of a successful transition is about communication. That means during a transition you should spend half your time or more developing, planning, and sharing communication about the change, including the who, when, and how.” Transitions will heighten the vulnerability and anxiety of those involved. Clear, thoughtful, and honest communications can help ease those tensions. Ways to strengthen communications include:

- **Set the tone for transition**, modeling and encouraging others to stay positive, keep learning, and address challenges directly
- **Continue to build credibility and trust** amidst uncertainty so people do not fill any information gaps with worries or rumors
- **Mitigate anxiety, fear, and resistance** by bringing people along for the entirety of the transition
- **Model steadiness and confidence**, not blind positivity, acknowledging and welcoming inevitable pain and pushback that comes with transitions while offering sturdy and supportive leadership throughout

## Phase Three: Choose the Next Direction

For some, choosing the next direction is the only phase they consider when thinking about a transition, and it is, indeed, where most of the work happens. In the Bridges Model, this phase is within what is called the “Neutral Zone,” which is often marked by chaos and confusion as a team moves beyond the “old way” before the “new way” is determined or launched.

Murphy explains that this phase will feel like a straight line with loop backs. He notes that decision-makers need to stay the course and keep things moving forward in this phase, but that it is critical to allow for flexibility, input, and iteration. “Those leading change should expect and be open to productive and unproductive resistance and feedback at this phase. People around you may be anxious, but you need to be committed to support adoption. You also need to be open to helpful input and recognize when there are blind spots you missed. Don’t let resistance throw you completely off course, but listen for those things that can improve the change,” he says. While this phase is most often the toughest for leaders, there are several ways to make it smoother and more effective:

### Start with a vision for success

As you move into considering the details of what the next direction will look like, start with a vision of success and build alignment on this as a team. This may take a bit of time up front, but this will make all other decisions following it much more evident as you work through the process. As an example, Simpson shares what she learned from going through a major CEO search with her team, “For CEO transitions, you have to start with aligning on the archetype of who you are looking for and why. Otherwise, you can do a whole search and end up with great but very different candidates and not be sure which is the right one to choose.” Ensuring there is a vision for success in place, regardless of the type of transition, advances the mission and bolsters the values. This will help the team to know when a decision is the right one for your specific organization.

### Assess the impact of the change across the organization

It is important to map all individuals, systems, and organizations who will feel this transition and consider what they will experience throughout it. It can be very helpful to begin this work with a big brainstorm to surface the many people and relationships involved. Many organizations choose to use a formal change impact assessment to help them uncover potential impact on people, processes, culture, technology, and/or

structure. This kind of tool can allow teams to proactively identify potential risks in the decision-making and implementation process. (See See Appendix B for sample tool.) While a formal process may not be necessary for some transitions or some philanthropies, using elements of it can ensure you have thought of as much as you can prior to a transition.

Without taking time to think this through, you may leave out important individuals or groups. For example, Baiocchi notes it could be meaningful to include the family office in conversations about foundation transitions. “Those in a family office often hold a lot of power and responsibilities and have deep relationships with family members. They can have a significant impact on how nonfamily leaders and staff members experience the foundation.”

While much of the work of transitions is inherently internal (and occasionally sensitive and private), grantee partners and others will eventually feel significant internal transitions. Be honest and transparent about this and be as thoughtful as possible about communicating to partners to quell fears and offer reassurance when you are able.

### **Use a decision-making framework**

Decision-making frameworks and responsibility charts help a team think through the different elements of this phase, pinpointing the many decisions that you will need to make. Having a trusted framework helps ensure your planning is comprehensive, and your thinking is transparent. “I find that during a big change most team members don’t feel like they need to be in the room to make the decisions and trust those leading change, but almost everyone wants to be heard and included in some way,” says Murphy. “It’s vital to find a way to include everyone that is significant to the organization, including sharing what is happening and asking for input along the way. This is how you support adoption.” One helpful decision-making framework is the DARE framework, which helps eliminate confusion and provide clarity on each person’s role for a decision.

- **Deciders:** This is the person or people who *make the ultimate decision*. While it is traditionally recommended that this is a single person, in family philanthropy it may be a decision the full board makes based on its governance structures, bylaws, and decision-making practices.
- **Advisors:** People who advise share important expertise or experience that will help *shape a recommendation*. The best processes seek input from several people with various perspectives, including teasing out decision-makers’ nonnegotiables and feasibility details from people who will implement. This also includes people who need to agree to a recommendation (such as lawyers or finance professionals) who will help the recommender(s) meet specific mandatory requirements. While they do not decide, they can veto.

- **Recommenders:** This person or people *make the recommendation(s)* for the decision-maker. They oversee the process, managing stakeholder engagement and bringing forth what they believe is the right path forward to the Deciders. This is where 80 percent of the work happens.
- **Execution Stakeholders:** These are the person or persons who *implement the decision* once it is made. They often do not hold decision-making power but are critical to the success of the transition. In family philanthropies, this may be staff members or consultants to the organization.

## Embrace questions

With all changes, there will be moments of pushback, which can be destabilizing as a leader trying to get things right. Resistance can be healthy, if it is known and addressed, and often, the pushback is truly people seeking answers to their questions. “A wheel on smooth ice cannot move. There is real value in raising the friction points so to learn from them,” says Tam. One way Tam surfaced healthy friction during a transition is by asking each board member to share their questions at a board meeting. “Gather all the questions from every person—you cannot address questions you do not know about. It made some people uncomfortable to hear all of the questions, but we took them in and then answered them at the next meeting. The process made us confident we were addressing the right concerns and considerations,” she says.

## Avoid pressure to decide too quickly

It is critical to make the most of this time to truly explore several avenues and build a depth of knowledge about what options exist for this new normal. “Ask all of the questions. Meet all of the people. Revisit topics. Consider how this transition will impact other transitions. Take it all in and take your time,” says Zale.

The authors of *Generations of Giving* echo Zale’s advice: “Leaders can increase the chances of long-term success if they open the process to a range of possibilities, test the feasibility of each option, and make decisions based on adequate, reliable data. If a choice is made prematurely, it may not stand the pressure of implementation, and in the end the organization will pay dearly if it has to undo a poor choice and start again to find a better one.”

## Thoughtfully complete exploration

One of the most challenging aspects of this phase is to know when to stop exploring and make the decision. While a thorough analysis of options is smart, some leaders might get stuck in a loop and have a difficult time making a final decision. Murphy notes that for

some organizations, it is helpful to adopt an approach of “good enough to try,” a phrase he adopted from a client. This stance helps leaders who lean toward indecision and perfectionism to move forward knowing that there is always room for adjustment and improvement (especially when working with a team that is open to learning).

## **Phase Four: Embed the Change**

**It is human nature to breathe a sigh of relief once you’ve made a decision. However, it is important to steward this next phase well to ensure the transition is effective and lasting. For transitions that span more than a year, this is typically the phase that takes the longest.**

For example, you may bring on a new board chair or CEO, but if they are following a long-tenured leader, it may take an additional year or two of listening, learning, and getting settled to truly feel like the change is “embedded” into the organization and you have solidified trust in both directions. Similarly, you may make strategic decisions that lead to changes in grantee partner relationships, but depending on length of current grants, this, too, may take some time to reach the new status quo. Some of the most thoughtful and meaningful work happens in this phase. Some ways to navigate it include:

### **Continue to be open and listen to team feedback, even when it’s hard**

You may feel like at this point, that you have surely answered all questions and everyone is ready to implement the decision. However, be open to the need for additional alignment, clarity, and potential tweaks (especially as you get further into the details of implementation).

“As a leader, you have to understand not everyone is going to agree and you cannot make everyone happy. Every time I’ve had a difficult conversation—engaging in the emotional process and really listening—I’m glad I did. Even if I can’t fix everything for everyone, I come away better understanding their perspectives and can incorporate them in different ways at different times,” says Zale.

### **Offer training and other supports to the full team**

People thrive in new environments when they have the skills and abilities to succeed; when they lack this confidence, anxiety escalates and morale dips. It’s important to address this early in the embedding phase to ward off any potential doubt and

frustration. Simpson recalls, “Longtime staff members got nervous when the CEO of 20 years announced his retirement. They were worried about what their own roles would be like moving forward. We didn’t want to make them feel beholden to the next leader’s decisions or make them nervous that they couldn’t find a great new role elsewhere if they wanted to. We gave each staff member a stipend to find a coach to help them think about their roles and build their confidence. It was very helpful to build team morale and lessen fears.”

The right support will depend on the type of transition and the level of needs across your team. The critical piece is to listen and create the scaffolding around your team to ensure they can learn, grow, and excel within the new path.

## **Celebrate**

As a leader, take the time to recognize the hard work the team, including board and staff members, consultants, and grantee partners, have put in to make the transition successful. Celebrate them with shout outs at meetings, spot bonuses, a special lunch, flowers, or other acknowledgment tailored to the individual and rightsized for the effort. Highlighting and truly celebrating the bright spots (even when they may seem small or early in the process) reminds people that the effort is worth it and is genuinely appreciated, which builds morale, increases connectedness, and keeps momentum up.

## **Remember to document the transition**

While the details are fresh, set aside time to document the transition. This can help answer questions when specifics get fuzzy down the line and will offer a helpful lesson for future transitions the family undertakes. Brittany Collins and Lindsay Stradley of the Betty and Davis Fitzgerald Foundation led a large transition that resulted in multiple governance shifts. “Writing expectations down is a gift to the next generation. When governance relies on custom and memory rather than shared guidance, community trustees and next-generation family members are left to navigate implied norms as they join the board,” they share [here](#).

Some details to consider documenting include:

- **Rationale for the decision**, including what changed, why, and what other options you considered
- **Any tools that supported the transition**, such as a DARE chart, change impact assessments, or communications plans
- **All information on the new state** in as much detail as possible, including new processes/systems and/or staffing structures/roles

- **A path forward for implementation**, including plans for continual check-ins and assessment
- **What you learned about transition processes** that you want to bring forward to the next transition, including areas of success and challenge

### **Be on the lookout for other transitions**

Once you embed a change, it is highly likely it may lead to other transitions, particularly if the shift is one related to the philanthropy's leadership. Be aware of this and ready for it. Additional changes may feel overwhelming coming off a major transition but is often a period of fresh new thinking and excitement. Done well, transitions build teams ready to take on and do more together.

Zale experienced this upon hiring a new president after 20 years under the foundation's previous leader. "It was a catalytic change. Having a new leader introduced us to conversations with different people and reinvigorated our energy at the perfect time to lead us through many subsequent transitions, such as a new strategic plan, refreshed governance, intentional next-generation engagement, and a totally new way to do grantmaking."

# Conclusion

Leading transitions in family philanthropy can be a trying period for even the most skilled, empathetic, and experienced leaders. Across these four phases we hope you will remember three things when specific moments feel especially tricky or sensitive.

## 1. Offer grace and patience to your family and team

It is typical for leaders to be the most eager member of a team when it comes to transitions. “As a person leading change, you’re 10 miles ahead of the people you need to lead through the change. You must remember to go back to where you started and bring people along at the right pace,” says Murphy. Whether it’s your mother, cousin, or a nonfamily staff member who may be struggling, be generous with your empathy and patience. When needed, look back at some of these steps to better understand what might be feeling tricky and how to help others move beyond it.

## 2. Offer grace and patience to yourself

Being a leader, especially in a transitional period, can be lonely, and it takes a lot of energy to constantly be caring for others. Take time to care for yourself. Time away from work is critical, but one of the most important ways to do this is to find peers outside of your organization. Simpson regularly meets with a group of peer CEOs to discuss challenges openly and get advice. She calls this experience invaluable, particularly when there are shared experiences like leading teams following George Floyd’s murder and needing to navigate personal, staff, and board values and perspectives in a thoughtful way.

## 3. Bring in facilitation and project management help

A strong internal leader is vital, but it can be detrimental (and is unnecessary) to do it all on your own. Bringing in a trusted advisor to help you through some of the most complex moments will allow you to participate differently and gain insights from someone who has been through similar experiences. “Those with an outside perspective are critical. They can hear threads of disconnection and figure out how to engage everyone in a way that makes sense for them. It also allows everyone to participate in a transition so that people like the board chair or president can fully be a part of the conversations,” says Zale.

Be ready for transitions to be challenging but stay motivated by the promise of a better, more connected organization on the other side. Tam reflects, “Change is hard even when it’s planned, approved, and everyone is on board. Remember: Caterpillars in the cocoon liquify at some point before they transform into a beautiful butterfly.”

## Additional transitions resources

- [Family Giving Lifecycle: Succession and Legacy](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2025.
- [Family Philanthropy Transitions: Possibilities, Problems and Potential](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2022.
- [Clarifying Your Purpose and Legacy: Generational Transitions webinar](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2024.
- [Death, Legacy, and Leadership Transition](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2020.
- [Breaking Up: Divorce in Family Philanthropy](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2022.
- [Breaking up is Hard to Do](#), *The Foundation Review*, 2017.
- [Lessons from the Durfee Foundation’s Dual Leadership Transition](#), National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2025.

# Appendix A: Additional Transition Frameworks

While there are many change-management frameworks, this guide primarily draws inspiration from Lewin's Change Theory, Kotter's Methodology, and Bridges Transition Model. This guide includes elements of each of these approaches, and it may be helpful for your team to think about them individually as well. Graham Murphy, founder and principal of Emerald Wave Consulting, warns, "Do not try to throw every model at every transition. Take time to think through what you need and what matches that need best."

## Lewin's Change Theory

Lewin's is most helpful for expansion and growth. It is often thought of as a way to think about organizational maturity and scale. Consider this framework if your family is bringing on the next generation, adding in a new issue area, or expanding geographic focus. This theory includes three stages.

- **Unfreeze:** This stage includes disrupting the status quo and communicating the need for change. The focus in this stage is reducing resistance and preparing for a new state.
- **Change:** This stage is focused on implementation of a new status quo. It includes the formal shifts, training, and communication required to transition.
- **Refreeze:** This is the final stage focused on long-term reinforcement and stabilization of the new normal.

## Kotter's Methodology

Kotter's Methodology can be very useful for decision-makers and leaders who want to understand the mechanics of a transition and crave actionable steps to steward a team through a change. If you know a big shift is coming but feel overwhelmed by how to walk your team through it, Kotter's can help you get granular on how to build and sustain positive momentum. It offers eight steps to change, including:

1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Build a guiding coalition

3. Develop and vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision
5. Empower broad-based action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Sustain acceleration
8. Anchor new approaches in culture

## Bridges Transition Model

Bridges Transition Model offers an emotions-first lens to transitions. When team members seem stuck or you are having a hard time understanding how your team is experiencing a transition, look into Bridges to better understand common experiences. Bridges focuses on three stages of emotions.

- **Stage 1:** Ending, losing, and letting go where teams acknowledge the past and overcome resistance to change.
- **Stage 2:** The neutral zone where teams may be confused as the old way has ended, but the new way has not yet emerged.
- **Stage 3:** The new beginning where teams embrace the new normal and build competence and confidence.

# Appendix B: Additional Transition Tools

## Psychological Safety Worksheet (Phase 1)

In Phase 1, you are setting up your organization to be prepared for thriving transitions of any kind. One of the best ways you can do this is by building a culture of psychological safety on your team. Amy Edmundson, PhD, defines psychological safety as a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. As families include new generations or perhaps begin to hire nonfamily staff or consultants, creating an environment of psychological safety is core to the success of the team, but it can be hard for leaders to know if this is present on the team.

Edmundson created a simple seven-question survey for leaders to gain understanding of how their teams feel about psychological safety in their organization. Asking some or all of these questions in anonymous surveys or one-on-one conversations may help you to understand if and where you need to spend time improving this. The higher the score, the safer your team feels which will result in an organization that is ready to thrive through transitions.

Feeling	Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.					
Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.					
People on this team do not reject others for being different.					

Feeling	Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
It is safe to take a risk on this team.					
It is not difficult to ask other members of this team for help.					
No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.					
Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.					

## Change Impact Brainstorm & Assessment (Phase 3)

As you begin Phase 3 of your transition, you want to be very sure you are thinking of each person and aspect of your family’s philanthropy that will be impacted by this transition. As a first step, ask questions of yourself and others in a brainstorm fashion and then move into an assessment that will help you build an engagement strategy throughout the transition.

### Example Early Brainstorm Questions

#### Board and family members

- Who are our current board members?
- Do we expect this transition to impact the makeup of the board? How and for whom?

- Are there family members outside of the board who will need to be involved in this transition in any way? If so, who and how?
- If the board includes nonfamily members, how might they experience this transition differently than family board members?

### **Staff and consultants**

- Who is currently on staff and/or in a regular consulting role? Consider everyone who touches foundation business, including family office, legal, and technology support teams.
- Do we expect this transition to impact the makeup of the team? How and for whom?
- Are there family members on staff? How might they experience this transition differently than nonfamily staff members?

### **Grantee partners and community members**

- Who are our current grantee partners? How will they potentially be impacted by this transition?
- Are there other community members, partners, or peer funders that may be impacted?

### **Governance and operations**

- What are our current bylaws and governance practices? Will any of these be impacted by the transition?
- What kinds of processes, systems, and technology does the team currently rely on? Will the transition impact any of these?

### **Open brainstorm**

- Who and what do we expect will be the most helpful in this transition? How can we make the most of this?
- Who and what do we expect will be the most challenging in this transition? How can we address this?
- What are we not thinking about?

Completing an open brainstorm individually, with team members, or with outside peers will be helpful to start to organize your thinking and planning for a transition. Having this much information on the table may feel overwhelming at first. One way to address this overwhelm is to move all of the gathered information into a structure to help you track and manage these different elements.

The right structure will be dependent on your working style, how many people and who else may be expected to interact with this tool, and the complexity of the transition. An easy way to start is to create a basic table with what you know about the impact of this change. This will help you keep an eye on important shifts, understand when challenges arise, and plan communications at the right time and in the right tone accordingly.

An example table may look like:

Aspect of the organization (individual, organization, process, technology)	Summary of the impact of the change on this aspect of the organization	Expected level of change (low, medium, high)	Expected level of acceptance of change (low, medium, high)	Timeframe for when change will be experienced

## Check in Template (Phase 4)

In Phase 4, you want to be sure you are staying highly connected with all people who are involved in the transitions—from board member to grantee partners to staff, consultants, and vendors. Having a standard check-in template can help you ensure you're getting similar information from different people and are able to see changes over time as the change becomes more embedded in the organization.

### Question bank for check-ins

#### Reflection questions

1. Are there parts of this transition that went more smoothly than you expected?
2. Are there areas that were more challenging? How can I/we do this better next time?
3. Looking back, are there any elements of our old way that you are still missing?
4. What was most helpful for you as we moved through this transition? What support do you wish you would have had?

#### Current state questions

5. How are you really doing with this transition now?
6. Is there anything about this new direction that you still have questions about or want more clarity on?
7. What is starting to feel more comfortable about this new way of working?
8. What is still challenging?
9. Do you have any ideas on what might help make these challenges easier for you to overcome? How can I help?

#### Looking forward questions

10. What are you feeling hopeful about when you look at the future?
11. What are you feeling anxious about in the future?
12. What can I do to help you next week/month to make things easier for you?
13. Do you have a clear sense of what success will be like once we are all settled in this new direction? How can I help make this possible?

## About NCFP

The National Center for Family Philanthropy is a network of philanthropic families committed to a world that is vibrant, equitable, and resilient. We share proven practices, work through common challenges, and learn together to strengthen our ability to effect meaningful change. As a trusted partner to philanthropic families, we understand the complexities and opportunities of giving together, and we equip families to effectively navigate the changing world. We support family philanthropy decision-makers by offering signature programs and events, peer-based learning opportunities, tools and resources, community, and personalized support. Learn more at [www.ncfp.org](http://www.ncfp.org).

## About the Author

**Cara Binder-Kopchick** is a donor advisor partnering with families and individuals nationally to engage in purposeful, values-driven philanthropy. She has a passion for facilitating meaningful conversations, nurturing trusting relationships between donors and grantee partners, and building smart operations. Prior to starting her own consulting practice in 2022, Cara spent 15 years focused on many different angles of philanthropy, working on both international and local grantmaking teams at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation; facilitating workforce development grants through the City and County of San Francisco; leading the Midwest regional advisory team at Arabella Advisors; and serving as the founding director at Samvid Ventures, a family foundation based in New York City. She has an MPA from the University of San Francisco, graduating with high honors, and a BA in journalism from Michigan State University, where she specialized in social justice. She lives in Michigan with her husband and two young children.

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