



PASSAGES Issue Brief

EXPLORING KEY ISSUES IN FAMILY GIVING

Death, Legacy, and Leadership Transition in Family Philanthropy

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IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Introduction
- 3 Starting the Legacy Conversation
- 6 Coping with Loss and Grief
- 8 Managing Practical Matters
- 13 Three Stories of Sudden Loss
- 18 Letting Go and Moving On
- 22 Resources to Learn More
- 23 About the Author

**Family foundations
can find opportunities
even in times of great
change or crisis.**

About this Guide

The death of a foundation leader or senior family member is likely the most emotional change a foundation will undergo. Suddenly, or not so suddenly, family members and the board face grief and loss, and also an onslaught of financial, legal, and organizational issues. How can you plan ahead, as a foundation and as a family? And how can you honor your late leader's legacy while moving the foundation forward?

If you are reading this *Passages*, chances are you've recently lost a family foundation leader and loved one, or perhaps you are anticipating it. In times of loss, it can be incredibly helpful to seek out resources and hear from others who have been through a similar situation. In this guide, you will find stories and advice from family foundations who have grappled with deep loss, managed a rapid change in leadership, and learned to move on in a way that best served the family and the foundation. You'll also find tools that will help guide you through the process of change.

Just as there is no timetable or set schedule for the grieving process, families and boards will dip into these tools at a different pace, when the time feels right. As difficult as any loss may be, planning ahead does make it easier, and it is possible to find opportunities in times of great change and crisis.

Introduction

Losing someone we love and respect is one of life's biggest challenges. Death is perfectly natural and universal—every single one of us has to do it—yet, for many, the idea of it alone can be terrifying or dreadful. No one wants to suffer or witness suffering at the end of life, nor can we imagine a day when our loved ones leave us.

If you haven't yet lost a family member, board member, or executive leader, you will. It could be years from now, or it could be tomorrow. How prepared are your board and staff to deal with sudden or anticipated change? How much have the founders (or senior family leaders) clued in their children and grandchildren about the foundation, and the influx of assets that may occur upon their death? How have they shared their hopes and intentions for the philanthropy and family involvement going forward?

While there is so much to plan for, having the “what happens when...” conversation is among the least discussed and most difficult realities confronting family foundations. Most of us live with death phobia or death denial. Even those family foundations that have recently experienced the loss of one leader have said they are hesitant to bring up death and succession with the living leader. Adult children, sensing it is too grim or taboo, often wait for their parents to bring it up. And some family leaders cannot imagine a day when they are not at the head of the table, and they may *never* bring it up. One day, it may be too late.

With the COVID-19 pandemic underway at the time of this writing, this sentiment may change. As the world seems less certain and mortality feels closer than ever for each of us, thinking about, talking about, and planning for death may become more commonplace—and more urgent—than ever.

Amy Liebman Rapp, a nationally recognized expert on grieving children, teens, and families, says of her work on death, grief, and COVID-19: “What is the gift we are given when something terrible happens? We have the opportunity to pause, reflect, and speak about death, loss, and grief in a way we as families, and as a culture, have never done before.”

We hope this *Passages* will inspire your family and board to pause, reflect, and plan ahead for the unexpected and inevitable. If not now, when?

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Starting the Legacy Conversation

Money and Death: Elusive Topics

While many donors establish family foundations and donor-advised funds, fewer have open conversations with their kids about money. This can leave a big surprise for the second generation if a parent's death creates a significant influx of assets to the foundation or fund.

This is what happened to the Satterberg Foundation in Seattle. Family members expected there would be a sizeable increase to the Foundation when their father William Helsell passed away in 2012, but were surprised to find out how large the bequest was. According to board and family member Mary Pigott, "Dad never shared the details with us, and we thought we would grow to around \$100 million at most. Over a period of 12-18 months after Dad died, assets started to trickle into the Foundation to the tune of \$400 million. We had no idea it was coming." The Foundation, she says, was left reeling in the process.

In another family, a father left \$100 million of his estate to a new private foundation—one the rest of the family had never heard of. "This is a case study in what not to do," says his granddaughter. "I believe the founder, my grandfather, received bad advice from his estate planner. He had a complicated estate, and likely set up the foundation as a placeholder, something to figure out later." This surprise foundation created a huge feud between brother and sister in how to manage it—a rift from which they never recovered.

Keeping future generations in the dark "can cause tremendous pressure and discord among members of the family," says Mary Phillips of GMA Foundations, a Boston-based philanthropic advisory firm. "I tell donors: you must tell your children what you are leaving them and what you are not. If your foundation will get much larger, your children need to know that. They need to prepare," she says.

When donors stay silent about money and legacy, it can be a lost opportunity for a sense of shared purpose within the philanthropy. "What donors regret most at the end of life is if there was not a lot of time

doing the philanthropy together, or telling the children why they wanted them involved or what they wanted for the foundation," says Ginny Esposito, senior fellow at National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP). "It leaves younger people wondering: what would Mom or Dad have wanted?"

She recalls a donor who was proud of his family, and had written a donor legacy statement, unbeknownst to the kids. "I suggested to him: 'wouldn't it be more fun if you invited the kids into the conversation?' And he did! He passed away a few years later. What if all that family pride had not been shared with his loved ones while he was living?"



"Not many people want to talk about money or their own death. People avoid the issue entirely; they don't want to create issues or have to answer questions. Yet that's not helpful to the people left behind," says Phillips. "If donors are reluctant to talk about their death and legacy, I ask them: 'what will happen to your foundation if someday in the future there are no family members to manage it?' That's usually an eye-opening moment where they realize they should be thinking about this question."

Another way to approach the conversation might be to ask: 'how do you want the next chair to lead the family and board?' "This can give the founder a feeling of control in spite of the sensitive topic," says Suzanne Hammer of Hammer & Associates, a Denver-based national philanthropic advisory firm.

Hammer says she has worked with many family leaders, even those advanced in age, who refuse to talk about their own death, or the pending death of family members. “Some aren’t willing to let go and are determined to remain in control. Others are more in denial, or simply too scared (or stubborn) to consider what life may be like when they’re gone.”

When one person is in death denial, it can disrupt the entire family system—and the potential for a planned succession. “A family can’t move forward on succession planning if members don’t engage in open conversations about the future. Open, honest conversations enhance the leadership potential for the next generation, and ensure a clear passing of family legacy,” she says.

Until an individual or family member is ready to accept the reality of death or talk about it openly, there’s not much family or staff can (or should) do to convince them otherwise, she says. “What you can do is ask them questions, give them space to talk about it, present different future-focused scenarios, and what those situations will result in—for example, the tax or leadership implications,” she says.

In other words, keep the conversation on the practical side, and it may be more productive.

Having the ‘What Happens When’ Conversation

In a family philanthropy setting, it may be up to a brave family member or one lead staff member to get a conversation started around death and succession. This can be a delicate situation, particularly if you play the dual-role of family member and staff. Here are some tips that will help both family and non-family staff prepare.

- **Be clear on roles and expectations.** What is the purpose of the conversation? Who should be in the room for it (and who gets to decide)? What is the role of the board chair, senior members of the family, and the next generation in the conversation?
- **Set boundaries for the extent of your involvement.** What is your role as a family member who staffs the foundation? Or as non-family staff? How can you best help the family overall? If you are non-family staff, be clear this is the family’s work, and encourage the family to address it. It helps to serve as a guide, give them options within the conversation, and offer your honest opinion, but they must be the ones to make these decisions.
- **Bring in an outside facilitator when needed.** If you are a family staff member, anticipate that it might be challenging to guide your family members through such an emotional conversation. It can be a productive and worthwhile investment to bring in a neutral philanthropy advisor skilled in holding these conversations around legacy and succession.

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*– Suzanne Hammer,
Hammer & Associates*

- **Plan for foundation effectiveness over family desires.** A succession plan needs to work for both the family *and* the foundation. One at the expense of another will not work for anyone. Make sure whatever solution the family comes up with works for the foundation. Remind the family there are many people outside the board room who are waiting for the foundation to make good decisions.
- **Gauge the family’s comfort level.** You know the family’s nuances and personalities. Rely on your own emotional intelligence in deciding the right time to broach the topic, and think about the language you use. The family might not be ready to talk about death or succession, but if they are in business, they might find it fine to talk about “contingency plans.” Meet the family where they are at, and guide the conversation toward the goals at hand.
- **Strengthen the board.** A strong governance structure gets you where you want to go, and builds the future leadership of the foundation. When a board has clear policies in place on board eligibility, nominations, terms, and expectations, it can make the succession conversation much more straightforward—less about personalities, more about principles.

Creating a Donor Intent Statement: What Questions Should You Ask the Founders?

The best time to articulate donor intent (also called a legacy statement) is when the founders and/or senior leaders are still alive. The following list is a starting place to guide these personal conversations, or an audio or video recording. Remember—you don’t have to label them ‘death and doom discussions.’ Meet your parent, grandparent, or founder where he or she is at. Focus on the positive, and hopes for the family and philanthropy long-term.

- Why did you start (or join) the foundation?
- What were the key moments in your life that led you to think about giving to others?
- Who were the major influences in your life, and how did they influence your philanthropy?
- How has your background and experience limited or favored you?
- What did you hope to accomplish through your philanthropy, and how has that changed over time? What led you to choose the particular funding interests, program areas, or geographic focus of the foundation?
- What are the most important values you wish to impart to your family?
- How would you most like to be remembered...by the family, by the community, by any other specific groups?
- How might the family and foundation best honor your lifetime and contribution going forward? What would give you the most satisfaction in this sense?
- What is more important to you for the philanthropy over time—keeping the family together, or making a difference in the communities or causes you and/or your family members care about?
- Imagine your adult children and/or grandchildren are at the board table. What do you hope for how they approach the philanthropy, and govern the foundation? How involved do you wish for them to be? How do we get them there?
- Imagine a day when no family members wish to keep the foundation going. What do you wish to happen if that’s the case?
- What gives you the most hope for the family philanthropy in the future?
- What else would you like to share?

Coping with Loss and Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. It's an emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. Often, the pain of loss can feel overwhelming. The writer Jamie Anderson described it as: "Grief is love that has no place to go."

Coping with loss, for any of us, is one of life's biggest hardships. A person may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. The pain of grief can also disrupt physical health, making it difficult to sleep, eat, or even think straight. These are normal reactions to loss—and the more significant the loss, the more intense your grief will be.

Grief is personal, highly individualized, and has no linear time schedule. It can also look quite different based on someone's background, personality, faith, and family culture.

"Families react differently to grief. Some keep a stiff upper lip, stay calm, and carry on. For others, a parent or grandparent might be the person who holds the family together, and when they lose that person, the family comes unglued," says Mary Phillips.

A death in the family—particularly a patriarch or matriarch—can shift the power and roles and responsibilities among those that are living. Suzanne Hammer experienced this in her family after the death of her father. "Losing a parent was hard enough, but I wasn't quite prepared for how it intensified the family dynamics between my siblings and me," she says. "I come from a blended family with two older brothers and two younger stepsisters. We all wanted the best for our dad, yet we each had strong opinions on what 'the best' meant to us."

"The stress of it all brought things to the surface (good, bad, and ugly) that in the moment caused more rifts than connection," Hammer says. "If only we had seen it as an opportunity at the time to work through some of our less-helpful family dynamics, it could have been an easier experience on all of us."

"In grief-stricken families, everyone is likely to have a different idea of what Mom or Dad would've wanted," says Ginny Esposito. "No one is wrong, and it's hurtful to say they are. They are seeing things based on their



relationships and experience of their parents. I tell them: 'hold that vision close to your heart because that's yours.'" It's when families put the effort into listening to each other, rather than fighting their perspectives, they can find the shared space and the commonality of their visions, she says.

"Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."

—Earl Grollman

Give Yourself Time to Grieve

Grieving is a time to remember and celebrate your loved one, while taking care of yourselves as individuals and as a family. For example, one family took a year after the passing of their patriarch to do

some real thinking. They made a series of grants they felt would honor their parent's commitment to the community, and then they took time off to think about where to go from there.

This grace period can be much-needed for personal and family healing. Grief can exacerbate any underlying family tensions, and how family members understand issues of power and authority. It can leave some family members bitter, angry, lonely, or confused. "Don't try to plow into this territory immediately. That's a burden you don't need to add to those who will come after you. Deal with the fact of the passing before layering in all the dynamics and decision making," says Esposito.

In other words, take a breather before making any big decisions. "I advise families in crisis: if you have to make decisions, make them interim decisions. Agree as a board on something that will work for 12-18 months, and revisit any decisions you make after that time. Give yourself space as a family for that healing and recovery to occur."

The Dean & Margaret Leshner Foundation took a six-month hiatus from grantmaking following the sudden death of the matriarch in 1997. "Whether a death is sudden or expected, you are never quite prepared," says board member Kathleen Odne, who was formerly executive director. "It was important for the board to pause and get re-grounded. We needed that time. Everyone was healing."

After taking that time to recover, the board gathered once again for a facilitated strategic planning retreat. At this retreat, they re-affirmed the mission and issue areas that the founders held dear. This allowed the board to honor their late founders and recommit to the philanthropy going forward. "In the midst of an emotional media roller coaster, the Foundation became a refuge that focused on the best parts of the founder's legacy," says Odne.

Even after the most painful loss, becoming more closely engaged in shared philanthropy can be what gives the family hope for the future. "When people are grieving, it's important to have something that transcends the grief," says Esposito. "Philanthropy can do that. It's part of what your loved ones leave behind."

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- Ginny Esposito, NCFP Senior Fellow

What to Expect: Five Stages of Grief

While no single pathway through grief exists, people do share common responses. In 1969, the late psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced what became known as the “five stages of grief,” which represent feelings of those who have faced death and tragedy.

1. Denial: “This can’t be happening to me.”
2. Anger: “Why is this happening? Who is to blame?”
3. Bargaining: “Make this not happen, and in return I will ____.”
4. Depression: “I’m too sad to do anything.”
5. Acceptance: “I’m at peace with what has happened.”

Although these are common responses to loss, there is no structure or timetable for the grieving process. In her last book before her death in 2004, Kübler-Ross said of the five stages of grief: “They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives.”

To learn more, see Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D. (1969) *On Death and Dying*, New York: Macmillan.

Managing Practical Matters

There is so much to do when a leader and loved one dies. Even for those families and staff who have prepared well in advance, there are immediate decisions to be made. There are arrangements and event planning. People to contact, public announcements, possible media interviews. Obituaries, eulogies, memorials. Money, paperwork, and property. And of course, an honoring of final wishes and figuring out what to do with all the “stuff.”

If you are a non-family staff, the family and board may look to you to assist them in their time of grief. If a public figure has passed, the foundation CEO/executive director, at times with the board chair, will typically take the role of primary media spokesperson. In addition, staff might do any number of tasks in lieu of the family, such as: send death announcements; contact grantees, colleagues, and community members; prepare board member speeches; and more. A family may even ask non-family staff to do the unexpected.

Colleague Story: Planning for Practical Matters

In March 2017, David Rockefeller Sr., the son of John D. Rockefeller, passed away at 101 years of age. He left behind four daughters and a son, ten grandchildren, as well as beloved great-grandchildren he had the opportunity to meet. His wife of 55 years, the former Margaret (Peggy) McGrath, died in March 1996.

Rockefeller established the David Rockefeller Fund (DR Fund) with his wife in 1989. In 2001, he invited his family to take a more active role. Today, the Fund’s work is guided by a board largely comprising Rockefeller’s children, grandchildren and their spouses, as well as four non-family members. Lukas Haynes joined the Fund as its second executive director in 2015.

Shortly after joining, Haynes saw a practical need to prepare for the passing of the Fund’s patriarch by taking care of a practical yet sensitive matter.

“The Fund had been receiving an annual gift from David Sr. that was the equivalent of a 5% annual endowment draw on eventual estate bequests. The terms of endowment growth were clear upon his passing, yet this would come to fruition only after his estate was settled, which, given its complexity, could take a period of time,” he recalls. “I realized that given the reliance of grantees and DR Fund operations on his annual gift, the moment of his passing could create a potential discontinuity of funding. I discussed this

with his grandson, the chair, and with the help of David’s longtime philanthropic advisor, Marnie Pillsbury, we were able to document that his executors would continue the annual gifts until the estate was settled.”

“These are delicate conversations for a non-family staff member to have, but they are a necessary part of a family foundation’s fiduciary responsibility and obligation to grantees, especially those receiving multi-year gifts,” says Haynes. “They also may not be issues that estate planners, attorneys, and family foundation leaders are thinking about.”

He says there was also an unexpected pleasure in working through that delicate situation.

“David Rockefeller had a chance to weigh in on the work that his grandson, as board chair, and I were doing. It was deeply meaningful to us to see that approbation about the work of the DR Fund in his pledge letter.”

Rockefeller attended every board meeting until he died, and he was increasingly warm and gracious about how meaningful it was for him to experience the family coming together around the board table, says Haynes. “He took visible pleasure in seeing his grandchildren stepping into board leadership, and taking the foundation’s work so seriously—I imagine in the same way he and his brothers did earlier in life with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.”

For example, four daughters, still in shock from their mother's death, pleaded for the non-family executive director to pick out the deceased's outfit for the wake. "I didn't want to do it," confides the former executive director, "but the daughters were distraught, and told me, 'we just *can't* go into Mother's closet.' So, I did it. Out of affection for the family, I did the things they found too hard to do."

Assisting the Family in Mourning

When he learned that David Rockefeller, Sr. passed away, Lukas Haynes happened to be standing on the street outside of Riverside Church, where Rockefeller's eventual memorial would take place. He took a few minutes at the church that morning to reflect on the trust that had now been placed in the board and staff. He also concluded that the large family would need plenty of time to mourn privately.

As staff, Haynes and his team served the family board by posting a statement on the Fund's website, coordinating philanthropy-related family media interviews, and facilitating a series of special memorial grants to institutions Rockefeller was close to. "As donations came in to the DR Fund in his honor, we kept DR's philanthropic values top of mind as we thought about these gifts and initiatives." Staff also gathered all the media clippings and remembrances from grantees and community members. "The family had enough on their minds and hearts without having to pull this all together. This was something simple yet important we, as staff, could do."

The Fund also made space at the top of every board meeting to share moments of reflection and gratitude, says Haynes. He remembers one meeting where board members shared what David Sr.'s long presence at board meetings had meant, and how it felt to hold his values close going forward. "The board meeting can become an important place after a founder has

How to Write an Obituary

After the death of a leader—or in advance if possible—you as a family member, board member, or staff, may be called upon to write an obituary. Typically, an obituary is sent to newspapers, and/or published in field publications, social media sites, and on the foundation's website. While obituary formats will vary based on the family's religious affiliation or culture, at a minimum, its purpose is to inform others of the death and provide details concerning the funeral, memorial service, and/or other arrangements and wishes. In addition, an obituary can also provide a meaningful summary of a person's life and legacy.

Here are the basic elements you will want to include in an obituary:

- Full name, age, date of death, place of death
- Cause of death (optional)
- Surviving family members and predeceased immediate relatives
- A description of the deceased's leadership in work and the family philanthropy; when they founded or joined the foundation; the foundation values and mission; and how they most made a difference through the philanthropy
- Quote from family member and/or foundation spokesperson (optional)
- A brief description of early years, former employers, military service, memberships, etc.
- Personal accomplishments or passions
- Information regarding visitation times, funeral services, memorials, etc. (if public)
- Charities or memorial funds in which people may make donations

Tip: Look online to find obituaries of well-known philanthropic or business leaders to get ideas. (Legacy.com or *The New York Times* are good sites to search.)

passed to bring the family together—one where they convene and carry forth the values that the senior family member brought to their lives.”

“Family foundation boards are more than a professional space; it’s a family space as well,” says Haynes. “Staff need to bear in mind when there is a deep loss like this, when a family has someone in their life, in this case for more than 100 years, that they lose an enormous presence. The founders are the original reason these foundations exist. They can play a huge role in centering families, anchoring them, and animating them with values such as civic responsibility, generosity, and social service. Their passing is more than an event and a series of estate processes; it’s an emotional experience for trustees.”

A founder or co-founder’s passing is more than an event and a series of estate processes; it’s an emotional and spiritual experience for trustees.

– Lukas Haynes, *David Rockefeller Fund*

Bringing on New Leadership

In 2018, one year after David Sr.’s passing, the David Rockefeller Fund board brought on Camilla Rockefeller, the great-great-granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, as board chair. “It felt significant. There had been a series of male chairs since the founding, and we were coming up on a 30-year anniversary milestone. Camilla had served as vice chair, and we had a mid-year ‘passing of the gavel’ at a special summer board retreat.”

The Fund initiated two things on the board to foster smooth leadership transitions. First, it created a vice chair role, giving that person time to becoming oriented to the chair role before taking it on. Second, it created a standing nominating committee that includes a non-family trustee. “We deliberately recognized that to avoid parent-child conflict of interests on the matter of board chair selection and succession, we needed to have a trusted non-family member on the nominating committee,” says Haynes. “This person is an objective facilitator of the conversation that can help us work through any conflicts that arise. Everyone was so professional that the selection process was smooth and unanimous.”

How to Prepare for a Eulogy

Have you been asked to write or deliver a eulogy? Some foundation staff write draft eulogies for family leaders in advance, as it can be so much harder to do it when grieving. Here are some suggestions:

- Before you begin, make a list of special moments and memories. You might want to ask other family members or close colleagues to share their memories as well.
- Consider the tone or theme for your eulogy/tribute.
- Always write down what you are going to say, even if you decide to abandon your notes. Aim for 1,000 words, or approximately six-or-seven minutes of speaking time.
- If you aren’t introduced, you will want to say who you are and how you knew the person.
- Start with a story about the person. People come alive through specific anecdotes.
- Be personal and conversational. This isn’t a formal speech; it’s an appreciation. Share your most poignant experiences or memories.
- Be humorous if appropriate. The best eulogies are respectful and solemn, but they also give mourners some comic relief.
- Consider the other speakers, and try to offer a different perspective.
- End with some of this person’s words of wisdom, or by directly addressing the person who died, such as “Grandma, thank you for teaching me how to overcome obstacles, keep fighting for what I believe in, and live from a place of generosity and love.”

Adapted from “Writing a Creative Eulogy for your Beloved,” *Psychology Today*, 2018 and “How to Give a Eulogy that Truly Celebrates the Person You’re Honoring,” *Ideas.Ted.com*, 2019. (See the latter link for a eulogy example written by author Rebecca Solnit.)

Colleague Story: Transitioning Leaders

The Dyson Foundation was formed in 1957 by Charles “Charlie” (1909-1997) and Margaret Dyson (1911-1990), and within three decades, has experienced several losses in terms of its leaders. When Charlie Dyson began having significant health problems, staff planned in advance—contacting *The New York Times*, and putting a public relations plan in place with pre-written obituaries and press releases. Following his death in 1997, the Foundation’s assets jumped from \$4.8 million to \$308 million at the end of the next year, and grantmaking increased from \$2-3 million to \$12-13 million per year.

Two years after Mr. Dyson died, his adult daughter Anne Dyson, who had been the Foundation’s president since 1978, developed breast cancer and died within a year, quite unexpectedly. At the time, she was the principal public figure for the Foundation.

“My sister Anne and I divided responsibilities in that I ran the family business, and she ran the Foundation. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer, she became debilitated by the treatments and was no longer able to effectively run the Foundation,” says board chair Rob Dyson.

At the time of both Charlie’s and Anne’s deaths, the Foundation was enlisted to manage the public and the media. While Charlie Dyson’s death changed the total dollars available to grant, Anne Dyson’s death changed the Foundation in other ways in terms of its priorities, grantmaking, and board membership.

“Over time, we exited out of a couple programs that my sister had initiated that no longer resonated with the board, or that had gotten too unwieldy or far-reaching. We also had to transition a few staff members,” says Dyson. “Yet we had Diana Gurieva running the day-to-day operations of the Foundation since 1991, and we were lucky she was so intelligent, calm, and loyal. She was able to keep the Foundation going with incredible continuity.”

In 2015, Diana Gurieva stepped down as executive vice president of the Foundation after she too was diagnosed with a terminal illness.

“It was much harder for the Foundation, from an administrative perspective, when Diana needed to step down,” says Dyson. “We had an emotional meeting at her home when she told me she needed to leave the Foundation. In a rare moment, she said: ‘I’ve got to think about myself now and not the Foundation.’ We knew it was time to look for a new executive director.”

The Foundation hired Andrea Reynolds, formerly of the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley, as Gurieva’s successor. “I was in contact with Diana regularly, up until the last month of her life,” says Reynolds. Gurieva passed away in early 2017. “Diana was a planner and extremely practical, realistic. She wanted to be in control of everything related to her passing. She drafted her own obituary for the local papers and *The New York Times*.”

“She didn’t want any kind of memorial service or gathering. This was hard on everyone,” says Reynolds. “Two years earlier, as she shifted out of her role as executive director, the Foundation held a big reception for her where hundreds of people came. She felt this was enough, yet for some of those left behind, it wasn’t. There’s a difference between being able to say how wonderful someone is to them in person, and the comradery and connection people need to feel when someone dies.”

The board and staff, along with close colleagues, did hold a small private memorial luncheon where they shared stories about Gurieva. In addition, a group of nonprofit colleagues who had a close relationship with Diana gathered at a children’s museum in Poughkeepsie that Diana had been instrumental in saving. “We had our own fellowship, and it was tremendously helpful to be with each other.”

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—Andrea Reynolds, Dyson Foundation

When Gurieva passed, the Foundation made a significant grant in her memory. Additionally, the staff joined together in making a cash donation to a cause Gurieva cared about. “Even today, if something comes up that is a classic Diana saying or how she would react, we all laugh and bring her into the room, so to speak. We share memories and moments of Diana. It helps keep her around.”

Reynolds and Dyson offer the following practical tips for family foundations preparing for or coping with death:

- **Ask leaders their vision for the future.**

If a leader is willing to have the death and dying conversation during their lifetime, ask how they



would like to be remembered. Which parts of their legacy would they like to carry forward? Or are they okay with a future foundation that is whatever their children decide? If you can record these conversations or a legacy statement via video, audio-recording, or in writing, it can be tremendously helpful—and meaningful—to the next generations.

- **Surface conflicts before the leadership transition occurs.** “Our Foundation agenda is not complicated, and we had no underlying conflicts that arose when we faced our leadership transitions,” says Rob Dyson. “In any family foundation, the key is eliminating the potential areas of conflict before they occur, including any existing loose ends or differences in priorities among board members. That involves a continual board effort to surface differences and conflicts, and fully address them with an ‘all hands on deck’ approach. It’s a dynamic approach that minimizes disruption and ensures continuity—and maintains the reputation and effectiveness of the foundation in the long run.”

- **Prepare for a potential influx of assets.** Most family foundations, at some point, experience a change in asset size. When this change is significant, it can be a powerful transition point that affects the mission, grantmaking, and operations of a foundation. If an influx comes as a complete surprise or to those who haven’t planned in advance, it can be challenging. Be sure family leaders share their estate plans so that the foundation can plan accordingly, and seek expert philanthropy advisor and financial planning assistance. For more on this, read *[In Times of Growth: Planning for an Influx of Assets](#)*.
- **Assign a stand-in.** Appoint a staff or board member to make de-facto decisions or co-sign documents or checks on behalf of the leader, so that staff isn’t left scrambling in the void when that person is unable to participate because of treatments. This is especially important to have in case of fatal accidents or those that result in an individual being unable to communicate. “No one knows what their particular journey will be. Name a person who can ‘be you’ when needed.”
- **Prepare talking points.** Be prepared to speak at events, and prepare your board members with talking points, whether you think they need them or not. You or they may be asked to share some words to honor your late leader.
- **Plan ahead.** Be mindful ahead of time, so that you aren’t trying to get everything done while in a grief state. Write obituaries in advance when possible; have a list ready of everyone to call and notify; and have a media plan with talking points in place. While it may seem morbid to do these things while a leader is still living, it can save staff and board from being unprepared when the time comes.
- **Finally, give space where space is needed.** “We all deal with death in our own ways,” says Reynolds. “Some throw themselves into their work, and others need time to mourn their losses. Give people time to go through their process.”

Three Stories of Sudden Loss

No one believes it will happen to them or those they love. Yet accidents, illnesses, dying, and disability can happen, and often at the most unexpected and troubling times. Here are three stories from family foundation board and staff who have lived and led through sudden loss, gaining wisdom through the experience.

Colleague Story: Maintaining Calm within a Crisis

In 1997, Margaret Lesher died unexpectedly at age 65 in what was determined a sudden boating accident. The family was understandably shocked, and looked to a non-family staff member to guide them. “I tried my best to support the family at an incredibly fragile moment,” says Former Executive Director Kathleen Odne. Within hours of Mrs. Lesher’s death, Odne became immediately in charge of handling the intense media inquiries, which lasted for many grueling months.

“The family leaned on me; they trusted me to field all the unpleasant things that came our way. We kept a united front when dealing with the media and dealing with the family. Trust is an important factor for anyone who works with a family foundation, especially in a time of crisis.”

Oodne also prepared and delivered the eulogy on behalf of the Foundation. “The only time I revealed my personal feelings overtly was in the eulogy. I spoke from the heart, and although it was emotional, I maintained my composure. There was so much going on, and as the non-family staff, I felt I had to be the strong one. I tried to maintain an air of calm and competency for the board, letting them know that they were in charge of strategy and decision making, but day-to-day, I’ve got this.”

The best thing Mrs. Lesher did as board president was name a successor, says Odne. This managed everyone’s expectations and made it clear what would happen next within

the Foundation. “It was a blended family. The founders each had four kids coming into the marriage, and none together. I can imagine there could have been difficult dynamics among siblings if a successor hadn’t been named.”



Margaret and Dean Lesher

Even for those donors who don’t wish to name a specific successor, there are other options.

For example, they might establish or approve a process in advance, such as a joint decision by a board subcommittee, that appoints a successor upon his or her death.

“Whether a death is sudden or expected, you are never quite prepared,” says Odne. Still, having a leadership succession plan in place is one way to avoid unnecessary hardship and uncertainty for those left behind.

Colleague Story: Leading through Loss

When the General Service Foundation's (GSF) executive director, Lani Shaw, died suddenly in 2014, it left the board, staff, and everyone who knew her in shock. Shaw, who was 46, was a leader in social change philanthropy, an activist, and a mom of two.

Robin Snidow, a fourth-generation family member, had been board chair for eight years. "Lani had been at GSF for 20 years and our executive director for the last 15. We were the same age, and had grown up together. We were intertwined in our work and very good friends. It was tough," says Snidow.

"Not only was it a terrible shock that she was gone, but also, as board chair, I immediately recognized that the responsibility of the Foundation was all mine. Board chairs say 'yes' to the role all the time, but in a crisis, you quickly realize, the weight and responsibility falls in your lap," she says.



"I had to gather myself and take charge. I was lucky to have a supportive board and family, yet I knew it was on me to be the one to lead. The staff were all close with Lani, and in the days and weeks following her death, they were very sad. None of them had experienced a loss like that. I came from a place of some experience with death and a psychology background. I had to put that good muscle memory to use and be a support for the staff."

Within a week of her passing, the family, board, and staff gathered in Aspen, where the

Foundation office was located. "We had two dinners together as a family and staff, and then held a ceremony with just us. It felt important to take those first few healing steps together. We met in a beautiful Japanese garden, and sat on rocks by a stream. Each of us brought something that reminded us of Lani, and placed them together on a stone. It gave us our moment of grieving together."

Operationally, Snidow shut down the office for a couple months. "Everyone needed the summer to be with their families and do their own grieving. And I needed that time to do research on how we were to move forward. I didn't have the answers, and I told the staff that. It was completely the right move to take the time off."

During that time, Snidow says she talked with anyone she could find who could offer her some advice. "It helped to speak with a few colleagues who had lost an executive director. I was able to more fully accept the new level of leadership I had to assume and hear ideas and next steps. Taking this time and talking with others helped me process what to do next."

By mid-August of that year, the Foundation began to pick back up. "I knew we wouldn't be able to hire someone right away, and I would need to be the container to hold it all together. Everyone rallied, and we maintained status-quo with our grantmaking."

Snidow hired an interim executive director that October. "She had been on our board and had a lot of management and consulting experience. She knew us, she knew me, and the staff had a sounding board outside of a family member and board chair. We had a small fragile team that needed a lot of attention and support, and the board was shaky too. It really helped to have an interim director as a partner until we started our search for a new executive director."

"Everyone told me: don't hire right away. I knew we had to be deliberate in our search for a new executive director. I wasn't going to do it twice," she says. She shares this advice: "I can't

emphasize it enough: take your time. You have the time.”

Bottom line, says Snidow, is you can prepare as much as possible—yet you will never be completely prepared, period.

“It’s easier if the board chair is integrated into the systems of the organization. In my case, I wasn’t fully integrated, and I am now. Sometimes there is too big a gap between the organization and the board. The executive director and board chair are the cornerstone of the foundation. When one half goes away, it’s hard.”

Finding the opportunity within the crisis

Even in the midst of the unexpected and unwanted, there are opportunities to grow and look to the future.

“There’s no benefit to losing someone you care about, but it does present an opportunity for change. You get to do something different,” says Snidow. “As a foundation, we had to reinvent ourselves in a way. We started talking about new models and different structures, and having conversations we had never had before.” The Foundation changed its family office model, and moved to Berkeley, California,

where the current executive director and staff members reside. “That took some shifting among board member mindsets. Yet, we found that if we take enough time, people move through transition. We realized: You can’t rush it. You have to go slow.”

The transition also led the Foundation to formalize in ways it never had. “We were forced to grow up,” says Snidow. “We went from a Mom-and-Pop shop to one where our policies are written, structures were put in place, and we formalized our communications. We are more structurally sound and set up to pass on a clean house to whoever might be in a leadership role next.”

Today, the Foundation continues to honor its former executive director through an annual award program, which the next generation designed. “For my younger brothers and cousins, Lani was a mentor and their guiding light. I asked the fourth generation to come together and make a recommendation to the board on how we could honor her legacy. They wrote a beautiful letter describing who she was and what she meant to them, and the Foundation now makes the Lani Shaw Annual Movement Award to someone or an organization who would have inspired Lani. “It is a wonderful way to honor Lani and keep her passions imbedded in our work,” says Snidow.

Saying No to Well-meaning Nonprofits

When a leader passes away, family members and boards can find themselves caught off-guard by the number of well-meaning grantees and community members who wish to “honor” the deceased in some way—be it a memorial event, a naming, or some other kind of private or publicized expression of thanks. In some cases, these “honors” can become emotionally and logistically taxing, especially for family members. According to Ginny Esposito, “Some may be deeply moving expressions of gratitude, yet others may come with grant request strings or other agendas attached,” she says.

Families should know, even to the most heartfelt requests: it’s okay to say thank you, but no.

Esposito recommends creating a division of labor, so that the job of vetting these honor requests doesn’t fall on one or two family members alone. A staff member, if available, often serves as the gatekeeper in this regard, and protects family members as appropriate from what can feel like a deluge of people reaching out. Esposito says it also helps to plan legacy grants in advance—the organizations the deceased loved one valued—so that there is a clear structure to say no to organizations when needed.

Colleague Story: Changes after Loss

For 18 years, Katie Everett, executive director of The Lynch Foundation, worked closely with Carolyn Lynch, who was co-founder of the foundation with her husband Peter Lynch, and served as president and chairwoman for 26 years.

“For more than two decades, she was my boss, my mentor, a friend and confidant. We shared office space and did 99 percent of our work together. She brought an extraordinary spirit to the Foundation—one of curiosity, tenacity, adventure, humility, and humor.”

In 2015, Lynch received an unexpected diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia, and she progressed rapidly. She died due to complications within a matter of days. “There was very brief opportunity for the family to come in and say goodbye.”

For Everett, who had a close professional relationship with Lynch, it was a difficult loss. “I shut down the office for two weeks following her death, and moved office spaces simply because it was too hard to see her desk every day,” she says. “I don’t know how you can ever prepare for something like this.”

For the family, she says, it was extremely complicated. “Given the family’s notoriety, they could have had thousands of people show up for the funeral.” In the end, they decided to hold a private ceremony.

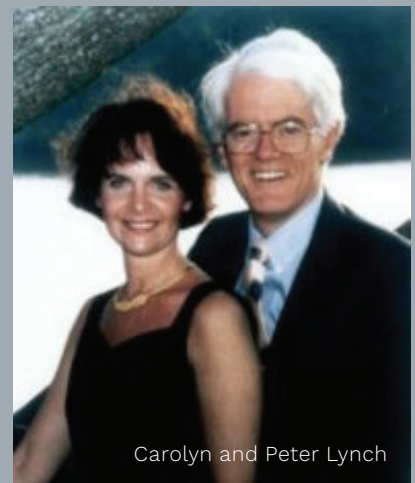
Everett supported the family after the death by helping write the obituary, communicating the news to grantee partners, friends and partners, and planning a memorial service held a month later for grantee partners and professional colleagues to celebrate Carolyn’s life.

“Grantees came out and did exceptional things in how they honored Carolyn and her spirit,” says Everett. Though there were others in the community who weren’t as respectful. “Immediately after Carolyn’s passing, we were inundated with cancer research requests in a grotesque way. As staff, we tried to shield the family from that while they were grieving.”

Eventually, the board changed the wording of the Foundation’s mission because it felt too painful to receive the medical research requests. “The family couldn’t review those requests. It was easy to shut that door.”

After a time for grieving, the Foundation reconvened to look at what was next. “Two of the three daughters were already on the board, and we had previously planned a board retreat to bring on the third daughter. Over the two-day retreat, the board (which has family as well as non-family members) discussed the work of the

Foundation, what it means to be a trustee, and how can we ensure Carolyn’s principles, spirit, and values will live on through this work,” she says.



Carolyn and Peter Lynch

Today, Carolyn’s daughters have assumed leadership roles at the Foundation, and Everett has built trust and relationships with them. “When Carolyn died, I suddenly had four bosses—Peter and their three daughters—instead of one. I continue to show up and speak honestly and directly with them, and I’m not afraid of difficult conversations. Sometimes they will ask me: ‘what would my Mom say? What would my Mom do?’ They want to understand all sides to her.”

“I was 23 when I came and worked for the family. I think back in awe of the trust they had in me, and all the things we did together,” says Everett. When Lynch was in the hospital, Everett did a speaking engagement on her behalf. “One of the last texts I got from her said: ‘as long as you’re in charge, I know everything will be okay.’”

“I’ve never experienced that sense of loss and trauma. The best advice I can give to someone going through it is try to be your best self, lead with integrity, and be patient,” she says. “I’m in this work because

it’s an incredible honor, and I never take that for granted. I remain loyal to their mom and the family. It is important to honor Carolyn, continue on the path, and make her proud.”

What to Do When a Leader has an Illness or Disability

What would your board do if a family member or leader was serving beyond their ability to be an effective participant? Would you ask the board member to resign? Offer a leave of absence? Vote the leader off the board? This can be an incredibly delicate situation, particularly if the person is a founder or senior family member and is resisting (or refusing) to step down.

A leader with a disability, such as dementia, can at times be more difficult to deal with than a death, says Ginny Esposito. “I’ve seen people want to hold on and rule the foundation with an iron fist, even when their judgment or decision making is impaired. It can be disruptive, both emotionally and in terms of governing well,” she says. “Family foundations are reluctant to have term limits or retirement ages, and this can present a problem. The bylaws may say the board can vote out any trustee, but who wants to vote out Mom or Dad?”

Families are incredibly good at avoiding conflict or confrontation. No one wants to hurt feelings; yet sometimes you can’t go forward unless you confront that which is most difficult. “For the good of the foundation and its governance, a family strategy needs to come first,” says Esposito. She recalls one elderly board member who felt it was her sacred duty to her late brother to remain in board service, even after she developed memory impairment. “I’m not sure she realized how unable she was to participate. Her nephew, who had been named the next leader, had to visit her and gently let her know it was time to step down. It was hard, but for the good of the whole.”

Other family foundations choose “workarounds” for these situations—such as keeping the family

member formally on the board, perhaps in an ex officio role, yet having someone else take responsibility for decision making. Others offer roles on committees or advisory groups, in lieu of a voting role, and/or involve the person solely in the social aspects of board and family meetings. Or they offer a leave of absence, which is one way to offer the member a gracious exit while allowing the board to assign tasks elsewhere.

The best thing a foundation can do is establish preventative policies well before they are needed. This will help the board easefully take action in the unfortunate event a board member can no longer meet his or her responsibilities. For example, one foundation required any trustee who reached a certain age to submit their resignation at each annual meeting. The rest of the board could either choose to accept or not accept it. When the person becomes too elderly to make it to board meetings, at that point the board could say ‘we regretfully accept your resignation.’

Here is a checklist of policies to put in place if your board hasn’t already:

- Eligibility, including age limits
- Board member job descriptions
- Board member performance appraisals (including self-appraisals)
- Term limits and rotation policies
- Committee or advisory group service
- Leaves of absence
- Board removal

Visit the [Policy Central](#) section of NCFP’s Knowledge Center for sample policies and practices.



Letting Go and Moving On

Change happens. Sometimes we anticipate it, and other times we don't see it coming. Whether it's the loss of a loved one, the unforeseen sale of a company, or a sudden increase in wealth, a big change can leave us bewildered as to the best way to move forward. The life we've known is gone and in its place is a world of uncertainty. Somehow, as a board, as a family, as a foundation, we must go on.

Many foundations set up grants or memorial awards to honor their leader's legacy. They choose a cause or organization that meant something to that person, and continue to fund it going forward. "I like to see legacy grants that have a sense of future, such as a scholarship or nonprofit capacity grant," says Ginny Esposito. "Something that honors the leader yet looks forward."

Memorial Documents: Honoring a Leader's Life and Legacy

Some foundations choose to create a memorial document to their leader and loved one, honoring their life and legacy. This might take the form of a letter, a biography, a preface to an annual report, a video, or a family scrapbook. It might include press clippings from or about the foundation and leader, or written letters or emails from colleagues, grantees, and community members. It might also take the form of a eulogy spoken aloud at the funeral or life celebration.

If you have the opportunity, create this memorial document or video while the leader is living. It can be incredibly meaningful to the family to share a gift like this during their loved one's lifetime. If it's something your board or family is considering, don't put it off.

If the leader has already passed, it may feel even more poignant to create something that feels lasting in their memory. It takes great strength and concentration to sum up a person's life in a few pages or paragraphs. However, it is an important step in documenting history and creating something the family will appreciate for generations to come.

Where do you start? The memorial can include information about the person's life, work, and family, yet it also can express the feelings and perspective of the person who is offering the gratitude and remembering. Here are a few questions to help guide the process.

- How did you and the person you are honoring become close?
- What was their greatest contribution to the family, the foundation, the community?
- What was the person's early life like? Who or what were their biggest influencers?
- What values did they hold dear? How did these values show up in choices and actions?
- What were some of the biggest challenges in their lifetime? How did they overcome those challenges?
- Is there a humorous or heartfelt moment, event, or saying that captures their essence?
- What did you and others admire most about this person? What would you consider their biggest successes?
- How will this person be remembered and revered? What has changed as a result of their life, their philanthropy, their love of others, their legacy?

If you need help writing a book or preparing a memorial document or video, know that you don't have to go it alone. Contact NCFP for referrals to consultants who can help craft family foundation histories and memorial documents.

For example, one memorial grant made possible a David Rockefeller board service award for the retiring board chair of Philanthropy New York, recognizing Rockefeller's lifelong commitment to both nonprofit board service and philanthropy in his home region.

Additionally, in 2018, the David Rockefeller Fund and two grandchildren began the Richard Rockefeller Climate Change Initiatives, which honor David Rockefeller's late son, Richard, and his long-time work on climate change at three different Rockefeller foundations. This time-limited grantmaking initiative seeks to respond to the climate crisis and its impact on future generations. Legacy grants such as these honor the intergenerational mission of extending David Rockefeller's philanthropic values, while being responsive to the big challenges of our time.

While it's important to honor legacy, it's also helpful to reflect on when it's time to let go of the past. "Families and boards have a real desire and in some cases a feeling of obligation to continue funding a founder's favorite organizations, whether or not they fit the mission. Letting that go is often important to successful generational succession," says Mary Phillips. If boards aren't careful, she says, emotional clinging can take precedence over foundation effectiveness.

She recalls a foundation where a key family member passed away. Eight years later, they were able to finally let go of a grantee that was one of his favorite organizations. None of the other family board members were interested in it and it no longer fit the mission. Yet they felt a sense of responsibility to hold on to what the founder had cared about deeply. "It can feel like the final tie to a leader, and family members take it personally when it's time to let go," Phillips says.

Colleague Story: Turning Grief into Grantmaking

Amy Liebman Rapp is no stranger to loss. "As a teen, I saw firsthand how loss affects families and how the death of one person can cause a whole family to fall apart." When she was in her early 40s, her husband, Dr. Sidney Rapp, died after suffering through years of illness. At the time, her son Alex was eight years old, and entering third grade.



Amy Liebman Rapp

"That entire year, he spaced out in school. The teachers didn't have the tools to handle it; they had never been with a grieving child before," she says. "My son was distracted, and instead of recognizing it as grief and supporting him, they told me he had an attention deficit disorder."

As a young widow, she was driven to understand her own grieving process and how she could help her son. She returned to graduate school to become a grief counselor, and subsequently entered into a postgraduate Thanatology (death, dying, and bereavement) program, while simultaneously facilitating adult, children, and teen bereavement groups.

"I saw a huge hole in the education system that needed to be addressed. At the time, I was simply trying to meet my own needs. Yet I used my own personal connection to this issue as an opportunity

to help other people, so that they wouldn't have to go through what we did," she says.

In an example of turning personal experience into a life passion, in 2000 she founded [The Sanctuary – National Grief Support Network](#), which provides grief counseling, bereavement education, and outreach services for children and teens as well as adults, families, communities, and businesses that have experienced loss. After the September 11 tragedy, a family asked her to help create a foundation called [A Little Hope, Inc.](#), the first national foundation dedicated to advancing the growth of children's grief support and the development of bereavement centers, camps, and school outreach programs in the United States. In early 2016, she identified yet another gap in service and launched the public charity [Alex Cares for Grieving Youth, Inc.](#), which provides grief services for marginalized youth in communities that are committed to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Today, Amy Liebman Rapp is a nationally recognized authority in childhood and young adult bereavement, loss, and grief, and is currently creating a national strategy to serve those who are grieving a death of a family member as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excerpts of this story originally written by Elaine Gast Fawcett for [Outsized Impact](#).

Death, Legacy, and Leadership Transition: Preparedness Quiz

How prepared is your family philanthropy for the death or illness of a donor or senior leader? While it may be impossible to be fully ready for the loss of any leader or loved one, there are steps you can take to plan ahead, making it much easier should a crisis occur.

Take this two-minute quiz to find out how prepared your family philanthropy is, and in what areas you might improve. For each question, assign a score from 0-5 based on where you think your family philanthropy falls: 0 being “never/not at all” and 5 being “always/all the time.”

1. The founder/leader willingly participates in planning what will follow his or her death, including leadership succession and any influx of assets, and engages in honest conversation about this with the adult children.

0 1 2 3 4 5

2. The founder/senior family member has a written or recorded donor intent/legacy statement that addresses their wishes for the philanthropy and family involvement, and shares this statement with the next generation and board.

0 1 2 3 4 5

3. There is a well-known plan and a clear process for leadership transition for the founder(s) and/or board chair, and possibly a named preselected successor. There is also a leadership transition plan in place for the CEO/staff executive, as applicable. The board and/or staff revisits these plans periodically to reaffirm or update them.

0 1 2 3 4 5

4. The family and/or foundation celebrates the legacy carried forth by the founders and senior family members, ideally while they are still living, as well as after their death.

0 1 2 3 4 5

5. There are bylaws addressing terms, rotation policies, and board member eligibility, retirement age, and removal.

0 1 2 3 4 5

6. There are solid investment and spending policies in place, and the board is prepared to manage an influx of assets, and staff appropriately, as applicable.

0 1 2 3 4 5

7. Board, family, and/or staff connect with others in the field for ongoing learning and peer support, and know where to go for resources or advice when needed.

0 1 2 3 4 5

8. The board and/or family engages outside advisors when needed to facilitate difficult conversations, navigate family dynamics, and guide the board through leadership transitions.

0 1 2 3 4 5

9. The board and/or family actively engages the next generation, offering them opportunities to formally participate in grant decisions, or some other form of participation in governance.

0 1 2 3 4 5

10. Next generation successors feel confident, clear, and prepared to step into a leadership role within the family philanthropy.

0 1 2 3 4 5

How Did You Score?

0-10: Denial. Your board, family, and/or senior leaders avoid conversations about legacy, death, or leadership transitions. Perhaps no one has brought it up, or someone is unwilling. Take heart: awareness is the first step toward change. Talk with your peers, read resources like this *Passages* (start with “Having the ‘What Happens When’ Conversation on page 4), and engage outside help if needed. Make a plan to broach the important conversations before it’s too late.

11-20: Backburner. Your board, family, and/or staff knows they need to address a potential or pending change. Perhaps the topic has come up in meetings or side conversations, yet it keeps getting pushed to the backburner: “We know we need to address that, and will...someday.” Instead of waiting for someday, schedule a date to hold those intentional conversations and plan ahead.

21-30: Starting to Plan. You’ve held conversations and have a few pieces in place, such as a donor intent statement and/or written board policies that address “what happens when...” changes. There is still more to do. Take inventory on what you know—and what you still need—to appropriately prepare for change.

31-40: Acceptance. Your board, family, and/or staff fully accepts and regularly plans for change that is imminent or expected. You may still need to consider and discuss what happens in the case of unexpected or sudden changes, and make a plan for those as well. Remember, the more you can plan in advance for “worse-case scenarios,” the easier it will be for everyone if or when those scenarios occur.

41-50: Ready as can be. Great work! Your board and/or family members have openly discussed various scenarios, put policies and good practices in place, and have a well-known plan for potential change, crises, and succession. You celebrate the legacy of the founders and/or senior leaders, while supporting and ushering in a future of next generation leaders. You are as ready as you can be for any potential change that comes your way. Please share your experience and stories with NCFP and your family philanthropy peers to inform and encourage them.

In Sum: Navigating Change

As a board or staff member, you can plan ahead for the unknown, and reestablish a sense of balance for yourself and others when it happens. Below is a summary of how you can lead yourself and your board interpersonally through big change.

- **Mourn first, then move on.** Set aside a certain amount of time before diving into decision making. If you do need to make immediate decisions, especially about governance or grantmaking areas, agree to make them “interim” decisions that you will revisit in 12-18 months.
- **Create a safe space for grieving, and know everyone grieves differently.** Change can stir up the emotional pot, and can cause rifts among family members left behind. Acknowledge your own feelings and those of others, respect everyone’s own memories, and in doing so, help the group move forward. As one foundation board member says, “Everyone in the family may have a different relationship with the deceased. No one is wrong—your memory is your memory.”
- **Understand that everyone plays a “role” in the family.** For example, one person’s role may be the

nurturer; another might handle logistics. Knowing these strengths in advance can help manage the process. If you are a family member, what’s your role, and how did it evolve? How effective is your role in the grand scheme of family dynamics? How will your role change once your loved one is no longer living?

- **Break long-term changes into small chunks.** With so much to do in dealing with death, it can easily feel overwhelming. Break up all the practical long-term duties into immediate next best steps. What are the top two or three things the family or board can focus on today to take care of what needs to be done tomorrow? Who’s in charge of what? How can you all work together and share ownership in a way that feels safe and non-threatening?
- **Strive for perfect effort, not perfect results.** Change is about choices, and you and the board may find you don’t get it right on the first try. Take your time in making decisions, and know you can always change course if needed.

To be sure, the death of a leader and loved one isn’t easy. In the best of situations—the family recalibrates, the family foundation evolves, and board and family relationships remain intact or stronger. As the saying goes, it takes time.

Resources to Learn More

Online Resources

[Grief.com](#) – educational and video materials on grief

[In Times of Growth: Planning for an Influx of Assets.](#) NCFP, 2015

[Things We Wish the Founders Would Have Told Us: Interpreting Donor Legacy.](#) Susan Packard Orr. NCFP, 2016

[Difficult Decisions at Difficult Times.](#) NCFP, 2002

[Choosing and Preparing Your Grantmaking Successors.](#) NCFP, 2010

Books on Death, Change, and Grieving

Gast, Elaine. [Facing Forever: Planning for Change in Family Foundations.](#) Washington, DC: Council on Foundations, 2004

Garry, Joan. [Joan Garry’s Guide to Nonprofit Leadership.](#) NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017 (Chapter 8 on Leadership Transition)

Kessler, David, and Kubler Ross, Elizabeth. [On Grief and Grieving: Finding Meaning through the Five Stages of Loss.](#) NY: Scribner, 2005

Levine, Stephen. [A Year to Live: How to Live this Year as if it Were Your Last.](#) NY: Three Rivers Press, 1997

Related Organizations

[American Psychological Association](#) – lists resources on death and dying

[Death Positive DC](#) – promotes conversations about death through death cafes, write-your-own-obituary workshops, and connections to end-of-life doula care

[National Alliance for Grieving Children](#) – resources for children and families

[The Dougy Center: National Center for Grieving Children and Families](#) – resources for children and families

About the Author



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PhilanthropyCommunications.com is an author, advisor, and communications strategist who works with foundations, grantmaker groups, and philanthropic advisory firms. For 20 years, Elaine has worked to strengthen the field of philanthropy by shaping its themes and sharing the stories, tools, and best practices that move the field forward. As a long-time contributing writer for NCFP and others, Elaine has interviewed 1000+ philanthropy leaders, and written dozens of books, toolkits, and guides for grantmakers. She serves as a change management, grants management, and communications consultant for foundations large and small. She lives in the east San Francisco Bay Area (Walnut Creek) with her husband Ted and three young daughters.

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