

# Changes in the Weather

## How to deal with 'handover' in youth organisations

*Handing over responsibilities from one executive to the next is a critical procedure in the life of a youth organisation. But how to ensure that the new team can use all their enthusiasm and ideas and also has the skills and knowledge needed to do the job? Could training help? Based on his own experiences, György Lissauer puts forward some thought-provoking reflections.*

Suddenly, or may be not so suddenly, that time of year arrived. It is exactly the same time of year as last year, except that now I am seeing it from the 'other side'. Oh, and last year I am sure it was sunny while now it's raining nonstop. It is not the first time I have come across the 'problem' and not the first time that I have seen it from both sides... but I think it is the first time that we are beginning to get it right. And I would like to share it with you.

In all non-governmental youth organisations there is a periodic personnel change in the executive. I will use 'executive' to describe the group of people who run the organisation on a day-to-day basis. The point of change is perhaps the most exciting point in the organisational cycle. Something is completed and something new is beginning. But can you really 'complete', and can you really start 'anew'? And this, I think, is the crucial question. If that 'turning point' is the most exciting, it is also probably the most important in the life of the organisation. Let us briefly look at what the excitement is all about, and why it is perhaps so important. Then we should consider how to manage both effectively.

The excitement is all about the new possibilities, the new breath, the new perspectives, the grand ideas, the new projects, the innovation, inspiration, the naivety, the belief that everything is possible and that this year we will make the world turn faster! All that is in-bedded in being 'youthful'. And I always understood the phrase 'youth' in these terms. But it

is not about age, it is about attitude. It is about our approach to the work, the reasons why we are doing it, and our belief that the sky is the limit – and oh, that we can certainly do it better than our predecessors. This is what youth organisations are all about: not only changing the world, but also continuous motivation, change and forward looking. And the reason why youth movements are able to keep going in this way, is because their executives periodically change. Just when the old lot are about to wear out, just when they are about to launch their last 'new' project, the rug is pulled from under their feet and the new lot climbs the trees and shouts 'victory!' They are about to put right everything that has gone wrong, steer the movement to where 'no movement has moved before,' excite and get more people involved than ever before, and generally find paradise.

So clearly it is the most important part of the organisational cycle: this point of turnover is the lifeline that any self-respecting organisation must have, and the one that has made youth organisations a success. We know this, and I probably have not said much that is new. What we know too, is that while what I have said is all well-and-good, with that attitude alone the new lot will go astray. We know this because we have experienced it, and because we believe we know more about the job that needs doing than anyone else at this precise moment. We know that one year, or two years, or whatever it is, is just about enough to learn all the ins and outs of the

by György Lissauer



organisation, of its relation to external bodies, and to begin to understand what the work is that we are trying to do. If the new lot is going to start 'anew', then they will have a prolonged learning period which will do little good to the organisation. The truth is that they aren't starting afresh, but they are starting in a given context. It is critical for the organisation how the transition from the old team to the new takes place. If this turning point is to be a lifeline, it can only deliver the new blood to the right place if it is injected correctly. It is okay to turn, but you can only turn from an existing position. If that position is misunderstood or ignored, and the organisation begins to float in thin air, enthusiasm quickly wears out, the organisation's fortunes begin to tumble; surprises come at the new team from every corner, projects that have been started do not get finished; it stops being sunny and it just does not stop raining.

So the question is this: how do we channel the enthusiasm that the new team brings to the office into an organisational life which is a continuum, and shape the existing context to serve as a springboard for all the thoughts and ideas that the new executive has? And I can hear your answers: the picture I have painted is inaccurate. It does not quite work like that. Those who begin to work for an NGYO on that level have been involved in its work for a number of years, and almost certainly as activists. They have been to seminars, done exchanges, sat on advisory boards and policy-making councils, represented the organisation at various events, been around the office, and generally know the 'missions' and 'strategies' of the organisation insideout. Yes, I accept that 95% of those ending up in 'executive' positions fit most of the above description. But on the basis of that, the following transmission process tends to unfold: the new executive is elected, and through their previous involvement they develop an understanding of what is done by the executive and what they would like to get done. There is a period, often a few months, when the old executive is still in office and the new one has already been elected. During this time they talk to each other, discuss decisions, have one-to-one conversations over the state of affairs. It is all very organic, very clean, very flowery. Then comes the few days when the old executive is 'moving out' and the new executive is 'moving in'. Papers are handed over, the two groups sit together and one explains to the other what is happening, what they need to know, how to treat certain people, react to certain circumstances. Then individuals sit with their counterparts and go through a similar ritual. Then desks are cleared (at least in a metaphorical sense).

The 'organic' way has worked, to some extent. But most responses I received when I sent a quick questionnaire to a sample group of NGYOs, suggested that the one thing that the 'new' group wants to do better than its predecessors is the handing over of the running of the organisation.

The 'transition', as someone called it, is beginning to be professionalised and is slowly moving away from the purely organic model. A structured and more thought-through handover period is what we, at my organisation, have moved towards. There is an underlying change in our attitude towards the process, stemming from the change of perspective we have on the incoming crowd. We do not believe that simply because they have the job (because they managed to get elected, appointed, or whatever the process is) they can jump into the water head-first and swim through it without any prior training. They may have been involved, but frankly they have not done this job before, and it is substantially different from anything they have as yet experienced. In most NGYOs the executive is made up of people who are either still studying or have just completed their degrees. They could not have run an organisation before, and if they have, they know only too well that, as far as this organisation is concerned, they know very little. So before they jump, what they need is training, so that the enthusiasm they jump with will be coupled with skills and knowledge to ensure that they are not stranded on this side of the Atlantic, but that they have the 'strength' to swim across it. By approaching handover as a training project, a context can be developed, skills can be strengthened and enthusiasm channelled.

The objectives may be summarised as follows:

- To ensure that the people to whom the 'project' is being handed over begin to feel ownership of it and the ability to bring it to fruition.
- To ensure smooth transition from one year to the next.
- To determine (operational) objectives for the coming year.
- To ensure that the new incumbents have the necessary skills to follow through objectives.

There are a number of questions and issues which are particularly relevant to the training involved in transitions or handovers. I would like to raise, for discussion, some of those which I have come across in the last month or so while I have been involved in planning our handover. I think the subject is wide open for discussion and development and, at least in the organisations I have been around, there is plenty of scope for keeping on trying to get it right. So here's my penny's worth (known as 'cent' in Euroland).

The main questions are these: who is to run the training; what are the main elements of the training; how does it act as a 'transition platform'; and, as for all other trainings, who is it for and how can it be evaluated?

Clearly the outgoing executive needs to coordinate the training. They are the ones who need to make sure that it happens. But are they the right people to run it? Part of the



challenge is to allow the new group to develop the work in its own style, to bring to the organisation that 'youth' spirit that we have talked about. Can those who have been in the job for a year or more, and in the organisation for even more time, let go, and simply set the context? If the training is a 'transition platform', is a third party not needed to assist in moving work from one executive to the next? The question is up for grabs and very much up to the individual executives, and of course there will be financial issues if an external trainer has to be paid. In my organisation we are doing it all ourselves, and still my feeling is that a third party might have been useful. But if the organisation employs some permanent staff, as does mine, then it might be easier for them to assist and perhaps oversee the transition from one set of sabbaticals to the next and then an external may not be necessary.

If handover is treated as a training project, then the questions are: 'who is it for' and 'what are the elements that it must encompass.' The 'who is it for' may be obvious, but 'who are the individuals involved'; 'what experience do they have'; and 'what jobs are they going to be doing (or leaving behind)' are some of the questions worth pondering over. As for the elements, my starting point was to think through what I wanted to pass on under two headings: 'issues' and 'responsibilities'. What are the issues that the person taking over from me needs to know about and consider? What responsibilities will he or she be taking on, what responsibilities does the job come with? Are there any ongoing projects, etc? The second part of my assessment looked at the sort of 'process' I would want the transition to take shape in. In a soapy way this is split into three parts: 'formation', 'creation' and 'completion'.

The formation begins the process and deals with expectations, group formations and building up the context into which the new executive is stepping, including roles, long-term strategy and update on where the organisation is at.

The 'creation' bit looks forward to the next year and builds a year plan on the basis of what was beginning to be 'formed'. How can the organisation and its work be taken forward, what are the wild plans, what can be realistically achieved and how does it all fit into the organisation's continuum? This is the stage where the incoming executive has to begin to feel ownership over the 'project' and the outgoing executive has to begin to let go, to understand that the same job can be done in many different ways. Nevertheless the outgoing executive still has a role to play, but not a directive one—an assisting one instead. Their knowledge and experience remain invaluable, but only as a source of information and resource.

'Completion' creates the work environment and deals with issues such as relations between the officers, work patterns and the like. But the most important part of this section is ensuring that the new team has the skills to complete the tasks they have 'created'. Their existing skills need to be assessed in relation to the work they have to do. Particular skills may need to be passed on, and some of these may include the more mundane ones like computer skills and budgeting. It is also nice to round it all off by passing on specific objects from one executive to the next, objects that signify in some way the work and symbolise the 'letting go' and 'taking over'.

It is worth bearing in mind that while this looks good on paper, the three sections can be merged or taken apart depending on the training programme that is being built. It is not necessarily rigid. There are things that can be fitted into more than one place. For example, it is almost certainly worth providing a session on 'conflict resolution in the work place', but whether it fits into 'formation' or 'completion' is not clear to me.

The above elements need to be fed into a training programme that is filled with innovative, challenging and thought-provoking sessions. The handover cannot be based purely on talking and papers. It needs to, dare I say, empower. It needs to make it possible for the next team to continue and create - to keep the organisational continuum up, but at the same time to create new possibilities and new challenges. Handover is a transition, a process and also a ritual. A ritual that needs space to develop and become central to the organisational turning point.

And now the sun has come out, and it has stopped raining, so it's time to pack up, clear my desk and move on.

Thanks to <tftsauna> for acting as a focus group.

**Contact address: [gyorgy\\_lissauer@hotmail.com](mailto:gyorgy_lissauer@hotmail.com)**

**....By approaching handover as a training project, a context can be developed, skills can be strengthened and enthusiasm channelled....**