

# THE ART OF TRANSITION: NAVIGATING CLUB PRESIDENT AND OFFICER SUCCESSIONS



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The sound of the gavel is short, final, and familiar. It signals both an ending and a beginning—the quiet moment when one leader exhales and another inhales. Around the table, there is polite applause, a few relieved smiles, maybe a sense of anticipation. Most clubs see this ritual dozens of times over their lifespans, yet few stop to recognize its depth. That tap of wood against wood doesn't just mark the conclusion of a term; it transfers responsibility for culture, credibility, and confidence.

Some boards handle that shift with elegance. Others, unintentionally, let their rhythm falter—they become tone deaf. In private clubs, leadership transitions are less about new ideas than about sustaining trust. They are emotional events disguised as procedural ones. Regardless, it's an inflection point in the business that has explicit and implicit impact.

## **When Leadership Turns Over, Culture Holds Its Breath**

Every organization has a personality—its customs, tone and ways of deciding what matters. When a new president takes office, even minor differences in communication style can ripple through the culture. Members sense it before they can describe it.



In the clubs I've advised over the last four decades, the strongest transitions share a quiet grace: the new leader moves into the role with confidence, yet without fanfare. They understand authority doesn't need to announce itself. It earns its place in rhythm with the people it leads.

That balance is delicate. Some presidents arrive determined to make their mark; others, hesitant to assert direction, wait too long to lead. The art lies between continuing the club's momentum while allowing a fresh perspective to breathe through its governance.

The first test isn't policy. Its presence. How a new president listens, asks questions, and acknowledges the team sets the tone for their entire term.

### **Beyond Process: The Human Side of Continuity**

Clubs rarely stumble because they lack bylaws or meeting procedures. They stumble when transitions ignore emotion.

Outgoing presidents often underestimate how attached they've become to the role, the rhythm of decision-making, and the identity that leadership brings. Letting go requires reflection and humility. I've seen outgoing presidents privately struggle with watching the next person make decisions differently, even when those choices are sound.

Incoming presidents, meanwhile, inherit both opportunity and shadow. They want to lead boldly but must honor the invisible history that surrounds every decision. The most mature leaders begin their tenure by asking, What do I need to preserve before I make any changes? That question reframes the transition from ownership to stewardship.

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### **The Importance of Continuity Without Sameness**

Continuity is not sameness; it's consistency of principle. The transition must ensure three constants remain intact to avoid "strategic whiplash"—a pattern that undermines organizational credibility:

- Member trust.
- Board and general manager partnership.
- Strategic intent—hold the rudder steady.

When the gavel changes hands, three things must stay intact: member trust, GM partnership, and strategic intent. Boards that preserve these constants navigate transition naturally—those that don't risk "strategic whiplash," a pattern of shifting priorities that undermines credibility.

The most admired clubs keep their compass fixed even as leadership rotates. That's not bureaucracy; it's maturity.



## The Relationship That Anchors Everything

Of all the relationships tested by a change in officers, none matters more than the one between the president and the general manager.

When that partnership works, governance feels effortless; when it wobbles, even the best operations struggle.

- President's role—curiosity, respect, and clarity—to deepen trust, guiding with vision, coaching when needed.
- The GM role—Adapt without losing confidence by anchoring their focus to the Club's mission, not personalities, while being guided by facts, a cogent knowledge of industry trends, and KPI's

After years of supporting one leader's style, it takes discipline to recalibrate without losing confidence. The best of the best remain constant as leadership changes around them.

Early conversations between the new president and GM should go beyond logistics. They should explore expectations, preferred communication rhythm, and how each defines success. The GM can guide with facts; the president guides with vision. When both share those openly, transitions feel like collaboration, not succession.

## Invisible Influence: The Past President's Role

One of the most underestimated elements of healthy transitions is the quiet influence of those who've already served.

Past presidents hold history, relationships and credibility. How they use—or resist using—those assets defines whether their legacy strengthens or complicates governance. The most effective past presidents step back with grace but remain available when asked. They mentor without meddling. They know that their words still carry weight, so they use them sparingly and generously.

Clubs benefit when outgoing leaders offer structured debriefs or exit reflections before stepping off the stage. Sharing context isn't clinging; it's contributing. What derails culture isn't wisdom shared—it's control retained.

## Managing the Perception Gap

Transitions test perception as much as performance. Members watch how leadership changes hands. Staff watch how leaders treat one another. Small gestures—an outgoing president publicly thanking the incoming one, or a new leader acknowledging predecessors by name—build continuity faster than policies ever could.

I often remind boards: the handoff is a message. It tells your staff what respect looks like here. It tells members whether unity is absolute or rehearsed.

A seamless transition signals maturity not just in leadership but in culture. Members who trust leadership alignment worry less about who sits at the head of the table and more about the value of belonging to something consistent.



## The Psychology of Letting Go and Stepping In

Leadership succession is partly about identity. Outgoing presidents must release a title that shaped their sense of purpose. Incoming presidents must grow into those who suddenly elevate their voices. Both can feel uncomfortable.

Effective boards normalize that discomfort. They create space for a few minutes of acknowledgment in the final meeting, a note in the club's newsletter, and a symbolic thank-you event. Recognition allows closure, and closure clears the path for new leadership to lead freely.

Stepping in also demands emotional intelligence. New presidents who rush to prove themselves often misread the tempo of governance. The board doesn't need speed; it needs steadiness. Leadership isn't measured by how quickly decisions are made but by how consistently they align with the club's mission.

## Communication: The First True Test

A change in leadership alters the club's voice. Members notice tone before they notice substance.

A thoughtful first message from the new president can bridge uncertainty. It should sound neither triumphant nor tentative. The best first notes express gratitude, continuity, and curiosity. Something like:

***"Our club thrives because each generation of members and leaders builds upon the one before it. My role is to continue that tradition of stewardship, working with our talented GM and board to strengthen what's already strong and prepare for what's next."***

That kind of language creates belonging rather than division.

Internally, consistency matters as much. Staff listen carefully to how leadership speaks about them. When new presidents publicly affirm their respect for management and the continuity of vision, they instantly stabilize the organization.

## Why Some Transitions Fail Quietly

Most failed transitions don't collapse dramatically—they erode slowly. Miscommunication grows, assumptions multiply and the emotional contract between board and management weakens.

Here are the subtle warning signs I've observed:

- The new president changes the communication flow, bypassing the GM to speak directly with staff.
- Longstanding projects stall because no one wants to claim ownership mid-transition.
- The board agenda shifts abruptly toward personal priorities rather than institutional goals.
- The outgoing president remains too involved, confusing lines of authority.





None of these issues appears catastrophic, but together they create drift. And drift, left uncorrected, becomes dysfunction.

The antidote is deliberate conversation. Boards that spend time clarifying expectations early rarely lose alignment later.

### **Transition as Storytelling**

Every leadership change is a story in motion. The outgoing president writes the final chapter of one era; the incoming one begins the next. The narrative only falters when those chapters read like different books.

The secret is shared authorship. When both leaders collaborate on a final joint message, a town-hall introduction, or even a photograph together, it conveys to the membership that continuity is intentional.

Stories anchor culture because they translate leadership change into meaning. Members remember tone longer than detail. A well-told transition story reassures them that the club's identity remains intact even as its leadership evolves.

### **The Board's Collective Responsibility**

Transitions are often viewed as individual moments, but they are, in truth, collective acts. Every director participates in the culture of change.

A well-prepared board ensures that new officers inherit not chaos but clarity. That means staying consistent in meeting cadence and communication norms, supporting the new president publicly, even if offering counsel privately, and avoiding nostalgia disguised as caution. "That's not how we used to do it" can halt progress before it begins.

Boards that view transition as shared stewardship, not personal territory, naturally sustain alignment. Their members feel a sense of unity even when leadership changes.

### **Moments of Humility**

Perhaps the most telling quality in any transition is humility. Leadership is a borrowed privilege; clubs thrive when each generation of officers remembers that.

I've sat in countless boardrooms watching outgoing presidents thank their teams. The most memorable are those who credit others, not themselves. And I've seen new presidents start their tenure by asking questions rather than giving speeches. Both gestures demonstrate that club leadership prioritizes service over strategy.

When humility leads, continuity follows.



## Building a Culture That Transcends Tenure

Great clubs evolve toward a state where leadership change feels routine, not risky. That's when governance has matured beyond personalities and into principle.

To reach that point, clubs must cultivate habits of transparent decision-making, consistent communication, and respect for roles. Over time, those habits become muscle memory. Each new board inherits a culture strong enough to absorb turnover without losing focus.

In those clubs, the gavel tap is not a warning but a reassurance: things will continue to run well because the foundation is sound.

## A Final Reflection

Transitions test everything an organization believes about itself. They reveal whether its unity is situational or structural, whether its culture depends on personalities or values.

When handled with respect, transparency, and empathy, a leadership handoff becomes more than an administrative act—it becomes an affirmation of what the club stands for.

The gavel, after all, isn't just an instrument of order. It's a reminder that leadership is temporary, but stewardship is forever.

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## Need support navigating a leadership transition?

*DENEHY Club Thinking Partners works with boards and management teams to strengthen continuity, alignment, and confidence through:*

- Board orientations and retreats
- Leadership training and officer development
- President and officer transition planning
- GM–Board alignment and governance support

*If your club is preparing for a leadership change or wants to strengthen governance overall, we're here to help. Contact CTP to continue the conversation.*

