

Change in Leadership: A Glimpse into Succession Planning

By Marco Clark

In recent years, leadership succession planning and managing leadership transitions have emerged as important issues confronting Catholic schools. The scene is a familiar one to Catholic schools throughout the United States. The president, principal, or head of school has announced retirement plans after many years in that position. Several questions begin to swirl: Who will be the replacement? Is there an in-house candidate? Should we conduct a national search? Should a consultant lead the search? Is there a successor in the pipeline? Will this school be able to survive without this longstanding leader? Why are there so few interested candidates? These and many more questions are the reality that Catholic schools are facing all over the nation, and the question that looms the largest is, what are we doing to prepare for this inevitability?

A change in leadership is one of the most significant events in the life of a school. Yet, the research indicates that leadership succession planning is often unplanned, mismanaged, and disruptive. Conversely, there is a strong link between succession planning and the long-term health and viability of a school. The research indicates that a well thought out succession plan sustains and builds on the culture and previous successes. So why don't more of our schools and boards prioritize succession planning? Among the many responsibilities of a head of school, emphasis must be placed on establishing a set of processes and systems to address transitions that will maximize continuity and minimize disruptions.

Brother Robert Lavelle, C.S.C., served as the head of school at Gilmour Academy for the past 35 years. He retired at the conclusion of the 2014-2015 school year; and yet, he provides a great example of the important role that current leaders have in succession planning. Blessed Father Basil Moreau, C.S.C., founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, stated that "education is the art of bringing young people to completeness." Brother Robert epitomizes the "complete" Catholic school leader in that he recognized that there can be no success to the mission if there are no successors to the mission. With this in mind, Brother



Robert made leadership development and succession planning a priority.

Spend just a few minutes with Brother Robert and you'll quickly learn why he has been such an effective Catholic school leader and why his school has enjoyed consistent and sustained success for so many years. This past spring, I had the chance to interview Brother Robert and several members of the Gilmour Academy faculty, staff and administration to learn more about Brother Robert's leadership approach. The first characteristic that resonated in each of the interviews was his personal witness and how he modeled effective leadership. He was described as humble, joyful, authentic, inspirational, passionate, personal and visionary. In spite of the many demands of the job and the long hours, Brother Robert embraced his vocation and led with honor, integrity and respect for the important leadership role he held.

A second dominant characteristic was Brother Robert's emphasis on the mission and charism of Holy Cross. Brother Robert indicated to me that he believes that the stewardship of the mission is the most important part of his job. One teacher commented that Brother Robert "oozes mission." Another teacher pointed to the example of the president stating, "He is everything that the mission is meant to be. He is ready to promote it and live it every single day, whether in just a brief conversation or in front of the entire school, it doesn't matter." Brother Robert's commitment to mission is a primary incentive to becoming a Catholic school administrator. One administrator saw his role as "improving our world and our society by giving our students the tools to go out and make that change." Another spoke about the joy of influencing the direction of the school. Another saw her administrative role as an opportunity to make "meaningful change ... to make a difference

for young people, the Church, Holy Cross, and the school." One department member said it best, "I saw that I could work for a meaningful cause that I believed and wanted to carry forth...it's about legacy!"

A third common theme from the interviews was the intentional efforts made by Brother Robert to mentor aspiring leaders. Referring to it as "inviting them to the balcony," Brother Robert made leadership development a priority. He took a personal interest in and cultivated those he identified as prospective leaders and those who expressed interest in leadership positions. He provided opportunities for aspirant leaders to lead, which helped to build their confidence and self-efficacy. Brother Robert would also "invite them to the table" for collaborative decision-making. This helped each of the aspiring leaders to learn more about the layers and complexities of Catholic school leadership. Providing more opportunities to lead also was cited as a way to encourage more people to consider leadership and administration. Overwhelmingly, both the teachers and mid-level administrators saw the importance of getting people involved, empowering and trusting them, finding opportunities that speak to their passions, and giving people influence as ways to engage more people and expose them to the possibility of leadership. One mid-level administrator stated, "As those leadership roles got bigger and bigger, it felt more natural. By providing more opportunities to lead, and cultivating and mentoring aspirant leaders,

Brother Robert also was effective at helping to demystify the role of administrative leadership and encourage more to consider this as a good way to continue their vocation in Catholic education.

The sense of intentionality with which Brother Robert approached his eventual retirement helped to develop numerous leaders within the Gilmour Academy community at multiple levels. Some of those leaders went on to lead other schools, and one among them became his successor. In the 2015-2016 school year, Gilmour Academy

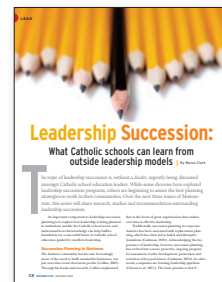
opened its doors without Brother Robert as its head of school. This school year also marks the first time that a lay administrator holds this position. While the school community misses Brother Robert dearly, there remains great confidence that the school will continue to thrive. Brother Robert and the board of trustees at Gilmour Academy are to be commended for recognizing that being a complete Catholic school leader includes preparing for the inevitability of change.

..... 

A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP IS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SCHOOL.

.....

A Change in Leadership is the second of a Momentum series by Marco Clark. Please visit our digital archives to read *Leadership Succession: What Catholic schools can learn from outside leadership models* from our Winter 2016 issue.



Marco Clark

Marco.Clark@bmhs.org