



THE SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT

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www.communityprojectscentre.org.uk.

THE SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT

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SECTION 1: A Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators

Research suggests that organisations which make no preparations for changes in their leadership are more likely to face problems and setbacks. This checklist is designed to alert staff and board members if they need to talk about and prepare for more sustainable leadership arrangements.

Where you agree with a statement below, enter a tick against it in the box on the right.

Although individual indicators may be insignificant on their own, the more ticks you end up with, the more at risk your organisation may be. More importantly, this exercise should be carried out at the same time by several board members and senior staff and the results compared. *Strongly differing views may also be a sign of vulnerability.*

Checklist
of
Sustainable
leadership
indicators

A Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators

There is little awareness here of the need to plan for a change in leadership	
The organisation is not in a position to make advance plans for a change in leadership	
The chief officer or chair has been in office continuously for 5 years or more	
It would be difficult to replace the leader's skills if they left	
Colleagues regard the leader as "indispensable"	
The organisation would face setbacks if the leader leaves	
The organisation relies on the leader to guide them on most of the important decisions	
Important information about the organisation is generally not shared	
It is not easy to discuss with the leader what would happen if they left	
There is risk of taking the leader's commitment for granted	
Steps are not routinely taken to ensure the leader is properly supported	
Steps are not routinely taken to ensure the leader avoids suffering from excessive overwork and burnout	
The manager's career development is not discussed at annual appraisals	
Leadership succession issues are not discussed openly in staff appraisals	
Leadership succession issues are not discussed openly in organisational reviews	
The leader's long involvement in the organisation may or has become a barrier to progress	
Limits are not placed on the period of office for the chair and committee members	
The leader could be better at delegating responsibility to others	
The leader could be better at communicating what they do for the organisation	
There is no written "operations manual" to record the organisation's key operational procedures	
Our policies on equal opportunities could limit our flexibility when we recruit a new leader.	
The leader has no designated deputy	
The leader has a designated deputy, but they do not have the knowledge or skills to take over	
There are few or no contingency management arrangements in case the leader is incapacitated by illness or accident	
We depend on the leader for their key skills (such as fundraising, finance, business development or personnel) but there is no training programme to pass on these skills to others.	

SECTION 2: Guidance Notes for Managers and Board Members

1. BEFORE YOU START

- **The basics:**
 - Raising awareness and getting acceptance that leadership is a suitable subject for discussion are vital first steps. But they may be harder than you expect.
 - Plan in advance; don't wait until a crisis is looming.
 - Don't delay if you see warning signs in your leaders, such as excessive stress, or reduced commitment.
 - Choose steps which are relevant to your own organisation. Everyone is different, so not all the items in these Notes will apply to you.
 - Be prepared to be co-operative, to be innovative, to be challenged.
 - Take a systematic approach, and don't panic.
- **Step by step to a sustainable leadership policy:** The approach recommended by this paper is in outline as follows:
 - Cautiously introduce the idea of sustainable leadership as a legitimate and important issue.
 - Get the topic on to a formal agenda for discussion, so that it is more difficult to ignore.
 - Use the Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators as a lead-in to the discussion.
 - Agree an approach to working on leadership issues which will not be unnecessarily challenging or painful for those directly involved.
 - Work together to draw up an action plan or a formal policy using the options for practical steps (Section 6 of these Guidance Notes) - for the chief officer, the chair and board, and the organisation generally.
 - Even if your leader is leaving imminently, take the time to discuss the options and draw up a plan.

2. INTRODUCING THE SUBJECT

- **Act promptly:** The sooner you start the better, but particularly:
 - if the leader has mentioned resignation or retirement
 - automatically as the chief executive officer's retirement age approaches (but be careful not to do anything which will appear to encourage their retirement)
 - if the leader is showing signs of excessive work-related stress or suffers from ill health which affects their work.
- **Get the ball rolling:** It does not need to be the Chair or CEO who introduces the subject - any board member or a member of the senior management team can suggest a discussion.
- **Act within the law:** Achieving sustainable leadership is about good management and good governance, but you need to be careful that it is not perceived as constructive dismissal or age discrimination. If in doubt seek advice.
- **Introduce the issue in a non-threatening way:**
 - sound out key individuals first to ensure you are not alone
 - cite an *external authority* which supports the idea of succession planning (eg, this Report and CPC's research, a development officer or an umbrella agency, such as the Development Trusts Association Wales)
 - make it clear that succession planning is a matter of good practice rather than a personal challenge
 - if the leader is suffering from excessive job-related stress the board must deal with the problem seriously, not just by discussing the succession
 - if you expect resistance to discussing leadership matters, be prepared to deal with objections:
 - this is a practical exercise, not another piece of voluntary sector bureaucracy
 - the group will decide how much time to spend on it once you have had the discussion, so it need not entail a lot more work
 - the group will be in control - no one else will tell you what you have to do.

- **Decide who will be involved:** Consider in advance how you may need to develop your planning approach to ensure you don't go off at half cock: for example, you may need to have:
 - informal preliminary discussions with close colleagues
 - an open debate at a board meeting or in some other context
 - a wider consultation with junior staff or volunteers.
- **Decide how they will be involved:**
 - colleagues may feel more comfortable if the subject is dealt with confidentially, initially at least, without the knowledge of all staff members
 - you might want to start with a small informal team and open up a wider consultation with staff and/or volunteers later
 - be careful not to exclude people from the consultations if you will need their co-operation later - eg if you need to retrain them or change job descriptions
 - be extremely wary about excluding your leader/s from the debate even initially - otherwise you could be seen as disloyal plotters and be prevented from taking the discussion further.

3. GETTING SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP ON THE AGENDA

- **Start talking and sharing your thoughts:** Sustainable leadership affects everyone, and serious progress can't be made unless it is discussed formally by the people who have responsibility for the organisation - the board members, the chief officer and (usually) senior management staff. So the most important first step is to get a debate going, and encourage people to share their ideas and any concerns they may have.
- **Options for the context of the discussion:** Choose an approach which suits your group, and make it as natural as possible. You might treat it as:
 - an open-ended awareness-raising exercise - to give colleagues a chance to find out what "sustainable leadership" means
 - a useful way to explore leadership and management issues that group members have already raised informally or expressed concern about
 - part of an existing programme of board training or staff development
 - part of a regular review process
 - the first step to writing a Sustainable Leadership Policy
 - an emergency discussion if you have just heard your leader is leaving (see Section 7 of these Guidance Notes).
- **Options for the format:** Choose any suitable format, eg:
 - an agenda item at a board meeting
 - a workshop during your organisation's annual Development Day or strategy planning "away-day"
 - a formal training session
 - a facilitated session led by an outsider such as a development worker (who can depersonalise the issues)
 - if all else fails, in informal chats over lunch or in the pub.
- **Use the Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators:** The Checklist can be an icebreaker. Get everyone to fill in a form and then compare and discuss the results:
 - how many boxes have been ticked?



- is everyone ticking the *same* boxes, or do people have different views and perspectives on the issue
- does the form tell you anything you didn't know already? (Maybe the form causes confusion or doesn't properly reflect the way your organisation works. This won't matter if it gets a debate going about your leadership.)

Guidance
Notes for
Managers
and Board
Members

4. STRATEGIES, POLICIES AND ACTION

- **Taking action:** Your organisation may decide that it does not need to write a formal policy or strategy for achieving sustainable leadership because the action it needs to take is perfectly clear. You may, for instance, take the view that a package which involves designating a senior employee as the Deputy Manager, beefing up staff training and writing a job description for the Chair includes all the necessary immediate steps. But be careful that your enthusiasm for taking quick decisions does not deter you from continuing to think about other less obvious improvements and building these into a longer term strategy.
- **A Sustainable Leadership Policy:** This will set out the organisation's objectives for safeguarding its leadership and the steps that you have agreed to take to get there. It can cover *both*:
 - management by the chief executive officer and other senior staff and
 - the board level role of the chair and perhaps other board officers.
- **A Sustainable Leadership Strategy:** A strategy will do the same job as a Sustainable Leadership Policy, with the addition of set targets and a timetable for achieving them.
- **Reviewing progress:** Whatever course you choose, you should:
 - **have an agreed process** so that it is clear what future steps you will take
 - **review progress regularly** to make sure that you are taking the action you need and that it is producing the leadership arrangements which you need.

5. ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- **The approach:** However you deal with leadership issues, the team doing the job should approach it:
 - supportively (leaders often work under great stress, and one important benefit of talking about leadership is that you can probably find ways of sharing or reducing the pressure)
 - with sensitivity (you want to strengthen your leaders, after all, not undermine them)
 - with great care, so that you do not inadvertently make changes which have adverse consequences
 - from more than one angle to ensure that you are not missing anything.
- **You need to look at:**
 - the organisation's leadership needs
 - the roles of your present leaders, primarily the chief executive officer and the chair - especially their job descriptions
 - their strengths (the qualities and skills which you value and would not want to lose) and the things they are less good at
 - how you currently support each of them professionally and personally
 - how they are appointed
 - communications and delegation - how your leaders communicate with others and vice versa
 - tomorrow's potential leaders - your other staff, board members and volunteers.
- **A health warning:** There is no right or wrong way to build sustainable leadership which has the capacity to withstand changes in personnel. But there are some clear techniques which work well in many organisations. You should not be over-cautious in identifying the changes which will suit your situation, but bear in mind that if they don't *feel* right for you (ie if they don't seem appropriate or consistent with your organisation's structure and ethos) they probably won't work.

6. OPTIONS FOR ACTION AT STAFF LEVEL MANAGEMENT

- **Review the structure:**
 - analyse the risks involved in leadership change
 - check whether the structure meets current needs
 - check whether other staff or volunteers can take on more responsibility?
- **Designate a senior member of staff as the deputy**, and create opportunities to shadow the chief officer. (This is often regarded as the single most useful step which can be taken.) The deputy's functions might include:
 - helping to take pressure off the chief officer
 - providing interim management if the chief officer is absent for any length of time (eg through illness)
 - being trained up to take over the chief officer's role if a vacancy occurs.
- **Prepare a written "operations manual"** containing all key policies and procedures for running the organisation. If the task is too large for one person, try encouraging people to write up procedures as they undergo training.
- **Review communications:** Could the chief officer:
 - make board reports more informative?
 - keep others better informed?
 - delegate more?
- **Have appraisal and supervision procedures for the chief executive officer.** The arrangements for the ceo (and other senior employees) should always be at least as good as those for other staff. If supervision or appraisal can't be carried out internally, consider
 - a reciprocal arrangement with the ceo of a similar organisation nearby
 - recruiting a volunteer with suitable skills
 - employing an outside specialist.
- **Encourage the chief officer to take up training opportunities** to fill skill gaps identified during appraisals or supervision
- **Encourage the chief officer to use a "second brain"**
 - find a trusted person outside the organisation to help deal with the problem
 - use "peer support" to depersonalise issues



- use formal or informal mentoring schemes.
- **Make arrangements for interim management:** Consider what will happen if the chief executive officer left or was unable to do her or his job; decide what procedures you will put into operation.
- **Adjust the Equal Opportunities Policy** if necessary so that you are not prevented from making internal appointments of senior staff if you want to.

7. OPTIONS FOR ACTION AT BOARD LEVEL GOVERNANCE

- **Write a job description for the chair**
- **Examine the role of board members**
 - give them job descriptions too
 - emphasise their obligation to support the chair
- **Provide appraisal and support arrangements for the Chair** which correspond with those for the chief executive officer
- **Prepare standing orders** for running meetings, elections etc
- **Appoint a potential successor:** The role of deputy chair is often extremely imprecise - is it someone who chairs an occasional meeting if the chair can't attend? or a leader-in-waiting ready for office if and when the chair stands down? or (as some chairs fear) an enemy who is plotting to oust them given half a chance? Your organisation may need to:
 - clarify arrangements for deputising in the chair's absence and on an interim basis if the post becomes vacant
 - clarify how a new chair will be appointed if the present leader leaves
 - appoint a deputy chair (with job description)
 - provide induction or guidance for the deputy as part of the job of supporting the chair.
- **Consider introducing fixed terms of office** for chairs, board officers or all board members. The requirement for a chair or all members to stand down for at least 12 months after they have been in office for four, five or six years can help to keep boards fresh and alert to the need to develop leadership skills among members. (This is not the same as the common constitutional arrangement for "rotating" board members, where members retire after three years but can be reappointed immediately.)
- **Review communications:** Could the chair:
 - keep board members better informed?
 - work more closely with the chief executive officer?
 - delegate more work to committees or staff?
- **Provide occasional training** for the chairs and vice chairs of committees and subsidiaries.

8. OPTIONS AT ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

- **Gearing up the organisation generally:** You should aim to make the discussion of leadership issues a natural and routine part of developing management and governance arrangements. (In fact, people argue that developing sustainable leadership is an integral part of good practice in management and training, and ideally should not need to be dealt with as a separate matter. Pursuing the Investors in People standard might be a way to ensure this.)
- **Confirm your organisation's vision and objectives:** No one can lead effectively if you have not clarified collectively what you are trying to achieve and why. And if you fail to take this basic step, a new leader - particularly someone recruited from outside - could be an expensive disaster for your organisation.
- **Build awareness of leadership issues into training** for board members and senior staff.
- **Make succession planning a requirement** for chief officers and chairs by writing it into their job descriptions. Refer to it in the terms of reference/standing orders of major subcommittees.
- **Encourage skill sharing throughout the organisation** to create positive career and personnel development opportunities as well as sustainable leadership:
 - aim to have key tasks covered by more than one person
 - make sure that volunteers as well as staff have training opportunities
 - don't be afraid to make people at all levels of the organisation aware of sustainable leadership issues
 - foster understanding of the need to share skills by drawing up an "at risk register" (where all staff report what they think would happen if they experienced a lengthy absence from work).
- **Encourage team working** and teambuilding (eg at review meetings and away-days)
- **Share information** widely with staff, board members and volunteers using internal newsletters and bulletins

- **Encourage constructive challenge** - so that discussing the leader's role does not seem threatening
- **Discuss what leadership means** generally and to your organisation, eg:
 - what makes a good leader?
 - what motivates the leader?
 - what should leaders expect from their colleagues?
- **Look for leadership potential in others**, and foster it by giving them responsibility.
- **Encourage positive attitudes:** Community groups which have carried out succession planning and developed sustainable leadership policies argue that people should not be afraid of change and innovation. Their suggestions include:
 - “make change constant” - don't resist it
 - “give people space to grow and learn through failing”
 - “recruit people who are better than you are”
 - “look outside the voluntary sector” at leadership development in private enterprise
 - give staff (controlled) opportunities to suggest improvements to management
 - allow leadership to change as the organisation changes direction.
- **Make arrangements for a regular review of progress** on sustainable leadership development, preferably away from your normal workplace. (particularly when you are carrying out wider management and governance reviews):
 - use these to build trust internally
 - talk about roles and responsibilities
 - formally review your performance, and identify gaps
 - include a “risk assessment” of the organisation's leadership - use the Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators to check whether there have been any changes since the previous discussion
 - take periodic “health checks” such as the one used by the Development Trusts Association.

9. IF A LEADER IS LEAVING NOW

- **Prepare - don't panic:** There is still a lot you can do to prepare for an orderly leadership succession.
- **Think positively:** This might be an opportunity for useful change in your organisation.
- **Use the Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators** to get you started, if there is time (see Section 3 of these Notes).
- **Bring board members (and senior staff) together to assess the challenge:** The way you handle this step will depend on how vulnerable you feel. The more “irreplaceable” the departing leader seems, the more thorough you will need to be.
 - **identify all the important roles in the organisation**, and highlight the knowledge and skills you are about to lose
 - **check your operational procedures** - are they available in writing?
 - **review the organisation's current work priorities** and decide whether you need to focus on fewer issues/activities/projects for a while
 - **decide which are the really critical leadership tasks** which must continue (and others which may be less important).
- **Start planning immediately:**
 - refer to sections 5 and 6 above and decide which steps are appropriate and achievable (immediately, and in the longer term)
 - involve the existing leaders in the discussion if possible.
- **Confirm interim arrangements:** If there is going to be a gap before a new leader comes into the job, be clear about:
 - who will have authority and take decisions in the meantime
 - *how much* authority they will have to keep things running
 - who will be available to support them.
- **Consider inviting an outsider in to advise** and/or facilitate the discussion. Your staff and board members may be too

close to the situation to be completely objective.

- **Discuss the situation with key stakeholders**, and identify anyone else outside the organisation who may be able to help you through the transition to a new leader.
- **Reflect on past achievements** - this shouldn't be a totally negative experience.
- **Agree recruitment and appointment arrangements** for replacing the leader. You will need to answer questions such as:
 - do job descriptions need to be revised?
 - what induction training will be provided?
 - what arrangements will you make to ensure the new person is properly supported?
 - how will their early progress be monitored, and what steps will be taken if they need training or extra support.
- **Finally, be philosophical:** Should you assume your group should run forever? Some organisations run their course and come to a natural end. You might need to consider this possibility when the indispensable leader leaves.

SECTION 3: Sustainable Leadership Mentoring Procedure

This section describes how an outside mentor or facilitator can help senior managers and trustees to start thinking about leadership in their organisation and to share their ideas.

1. GETTING STARTED

- **Context:** This sustainable leadership mentoring procedure is mainly intended to be used by an external support worker or facilitator working with senior staff and the Chair of the board or trustees.
- **Aims:** The mentoring procedure involves work in an organisation where the leadership succession has not previously been fully explored, or perhaps not openly discussed at all. Its purpose is to open the matter up for discussion so that leadership can be considered routinely as part of normal management planning or with other work to develop good board-level governance.
- **Consent:** Because of the possible sensitivity of issues discussed, the chief officer and the chair should be made aware of the process involved and should give their consent before the mentoring starts. It is also a good idea to agree on the scope of the discussion in advance to avoid straying into an open-ended exploration of management development or personnel issues which may be beyond the competence of the mentor. All those involved should do so voluntarily, and should be free to opt out at any stage.
- **Who to include:**
 - The participation of the chief officer and chair is probably essential.
 - But to be effective *at least* three or four senior members of the staff and/or the board should take part. These numbers are necessary to ensure that there will be a group large enough to communicate the benefits and convince others in the organisation if and when a wider debate is needed.
 - Involving a significantly larger number of people will lead to a more complicated and time-consuming process which may not be entirely necessary at first.



However, there may be advantages to consulting all the board members and the most senior staff individually if leadership issues are contentious.

2. THE MENTORING PROCESS:

- Each participant is asked to complete the Checklist of Sustainable Leadership Risk Indicators form and return these to the mentor in advance.
- The mentor meets each person in turn for a private interview.
- At the start of each interview:
 - The mentor explains the process and checks that this is understood.
 - The terms of confidentiality are agreed (for instance: the whole conversation is confidential except where the participant makes it clear that their comments can be passed on to others, *or*, none of the conversation is confidential, except where the participant specifically says that it is).
- **The interviews:** The mentor uses the responses on the Checklist as starting points for a discussion of leadership in the organisation, and takes a note of significant comments. The mentor should work to explore and take note of any issues which emerge, such as
 - who provides leadership (the chief officer, the chair, both, others?)
 - the level of awareness of leadership succession issues, and existing arrangements
 - how key information about the organisation is documented and shared
 - delegation, and deputy leader roles
 - the way the leader is supported and how their well-being is considered
 - the leader's role in driving or supporting change in the organisation
 - what would happen if the leader left.
- **The report:** The mentor then produces a report which covers:
 - an assessment of the current need for, and the state of, succession planning in the organisation
 - any issues which are obstacles to the organisation carrying out succession planning
 - areas where there is common ground between the interviewees
 - areas where there may not be agreement



- any areas of uncertainty where the interviews failed to clarify issues
 - recommendations for action, which will commonly include a proposal for the way the members of the organisation can continue to discuss the issues internally and involve a larger group of people.
- **Circulating the report:** The next stage of the mentoring process is to circulate the report to the interviewees. But the permission of the chief officer or chair should be received before doing so, in case there are concerns that it might have a negative effect.
 - **Reviewing the report:** The personnel involved then have one of three options for discussing the report:
 - a second individual interview with the mentor (which may be followed by a meeting of all the interviewees)
 - a meeting of everyone involved, facilitated by the mentor
 - an internal group discussion without the mentor.This completes the main mentoring procedure.

3. OTHER ISSUES

The way ahead: Unless there are reasons for not pursuing these discussions, the mentor is likely to encourage the group to agree on the way they plan to continue considering the recommendations and issues raised by the report and to open up a wider debate about leadership in the organisation. The options include:

- further discussion among those involved in the mentoring
- circulation of the mentor's report to board members
- a board level discussion of leadership issues
- a discussion with senior management staff based on the mentoring report.

Evaluation: It is advisable that mentors offer the interviewees the opportunity to feed back on the process so they can highlight any aspects which they were unhappy with. A form for this purpose which can be amended to suit the mentor's needs is attached.

Further support: Organisations which use the mentoring approach but subsequently encounter difficulties with developing sustainable leadership policies may need to use external facilitation, mediation, or sources of outside advice from development workers to make progress. They can contact their local council for voluntary service (CVS) for information about who may be available to help.

Precautions: Discussions about the leadership succession need to be carried out with sensitivity. They may expose strong feelings and views which have been previously suppressed. The mentor may need to mediate between individuals with strongly opposing views and should be extremely careful to avoid creating antagonisms where they did not previously exist. There is also a real risk that a discussion about the succession can stray into a debate about management styles or strategy planning which was never anticipated or agreed by the organisation. Interviewees and the organisation as a whole must have the option to halt or redirect any line of discussion or the whole process if they are unhappy with where it is leading.

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SECTION 4: Mentoring Evaluation Form

Many thanks for taking part in the recent mentoring sessions on sustainable leadership. We would be very grateful if you would give us feedback on this work by completing this form. Please return this form to

Name of organisation _____

Overall, how helpful was the Sustainable Leadership Mentoring for your organisation?

☐ Very helpful ☐ fairly helpful ☐ not helpful ☐ fairly unhelpful ☐ very unhelpful

Were the aims of the mentoring properly explained to you? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Did you find the discussions relevant and appropriate? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Do you think your views were properly considered? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Was confidentiality respected? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Did you receive feedback in writing? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

If so, was the report accurate? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Was the report fair? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

Was the report useful? ☐ Yes ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ not sure

How did you find the sustainable leadership mentoring process?

Informative or enlightening? ☐ Very ☐ a little ☐ not at all ☐ not sure

Intrusive or threatening? ☐ Very ☐ a little ☐ not at all ☐ not sure

Embarrassing or uncomfortable? ☐ Very ☐ a little ☐ not at all ☐ not sure

Personally rewarding or beneficial? ☐ Very ☐ a little ☐ not at all ☐ not sure

Any comments?

Will colleagues continue to discuss sustainable leadership ☐ Yes ☐ No

How do you think your organisation is likely to change as a result of the sustainable leadership mentoring?

☐ It will be much stronger ☐ it will be little stronger ☐ it won't change ☐ it will be a little weaker ☐ it will be much weaker

Any other comments?

Signed.....Date.....