

**A Model Succession Process:  
Vancouver International Writers Festival**

**Prepared for the  
Vancouver International Writers Festival**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An analysis of the process that the Vancouver International Writers Festival used in planning and implementing the succession of its founding Artistic Director offers valuable insights into the way such a succession can be managed effectively. This document describes that process in detail so that other cultural organizations might use it as a model. The Festival will make the document available on the Internet and as a printed report, recognizing that its applicability will depend on the nature and situation of an organization.

The impetus for the VIWF's engagement in a succession process<sup>1</sup> came from its founder, who had the foresight to announce her intended retirement more than five years in advance, giving the organization ample time to plan carefully and to secure the necessary resources for a well-managed transition. The work was carried out by the Board of Directors, with the help of senior staff and outside consultants, and was divided into three phases:

- succession planning
- the search for a successor
- a transition period during which the founder mentored her successor

Separate committees were appointed to implement the first two phases. The Succession Planning Committee developed the framework for the overall process, determining a timeline, initial budget, the issues that needed resolution and the actions to resolve them. It initiated the creation of three key documents that would inform the work of the Search Committee when it assumed its role: *Declaration of Values*, *AD Role Description* and *Candidate Profile*.

The Search Committee, having carefully managed the logistical and human relations aspects of the recruitment process, recommended the hiring of a candidate who was well received by all the stakeholders and approved by the Board. The transition phase of the Festival's process, during which the outgoing and incoming Artistic Directors worked together, covered a four-month period that included the Festival itself. This overlap facilitated the systematic transfer of knowledge and a smooth hand-over to new leadership.

A summary of the entire process is provided in **Appendix A**, which outlines the steps taken and identifies the reasons for the successful implementation of each phase.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "succession process" as used in this document refers to the entire process of succession and encompasses all three phases: planning, search and transition. "Succession planning" refers only to the planning phase.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Succession in an arts organization is a leadership change, resulting from implementing plans and procedures for seeking new leadership to realize the organization’s mission and strategic objectives.”* – Roy MacSkimming with Francine d’Entremont, *Legacy, Transition, Succession*, Canada Council for the Arts, March 2005.

The issue of succession planning in Canada’s cultural sector has come to the fore in recent years as the leaders who developed many of the country’s cultural organizations reach retirement age. Yet relatively few cultural organizations are taking a structured approach to succession planning, largely because it takes time and resources, both of which are scarce in the cultural community.

The challenge of replacing the long-time leader of a cultural organization and the need for a structured approach should not be underestimated. All too often, when organizations lack a succession plan, their transition to a new leader is not well managed, and they are put at risk. New leaders take over organizations knowing too little about their current status and needs; experienced but undervalued staff members follow long-time leaders out the door; and the legacy of audience trust, relationships with creators, and confidence of sponsors and funders is lost.

In the past few years, the Canada Council for the Arts, Department of Canadian Heritage, and other government agencies at all levels have begun to recognize the role of succession planning in supporting the health and sustainability of cultural organizations. They have responded by researching and documenting the issues, articulating appropriate policies, and assisting organizations like the Vancouver International Writers Festival with their succession plans and processes.

This document outlines the process used by the VIWF to ensure an orderly and productive transition between its founding Artistic Director and her successor. The sources on which it is based are described in **Appendix B**. The document is intended as a model or reference tool that other organizations, especially those that have been led by a strong individual over a considerable length of time, can use in developing and implementing their own succession plans. It describes and explains the three phases of the process, the conditions and actions that made a successful process possible, and the lessons learned from the experience.

## 2. VIWF BACKGROUND

The Vancouver International Writers Festival is a high-profile literary event held on Granville Island over a six-day period every October. Its program includes public

readings, forums and discussions by both renowned and undiscovered authors from Canada and other countries, and it attracts an average of 12,000 people annually. In addition, the organization produces special events throughout the year. These feature the best of Canadian and international writers, and are designed to further an appreciation of the written word and to promote literacy.

The Festival's annual operating budget is currently \$800,000. It has four permanent staff members (one of them part-time), two contract employees year-round and 13 seasonal contract employees. Another 200 people provide a range of volunteer services.

The Festival was founded by Artistic Director Alma Lee in 1988. Like many founding directors, she was both the visionary and the strategist for the Festival, and her passion and flair gave the Festival its signature. At the same time, her management skills, leadership and relationships with staff, Board and outside stakeholders were critical to the organization's operations.

At the end of the 1990s, when it began to look at succession planning, the VIWF was a well run and fiscally sound organization with a strong, mature and committed board. The Festival had gone through a difficult period earlier in the decade, but had undertaken organizational development work that helped clarify its mission, vision, board roles and responsibilities, consolidating the organization. During this period, according to a former trustee Strachan Birnie, "The Board really bonded."

The Festival's organization had also been restructured and Alma Lee had divested herself of some of the responsibility for it. The organization shifted from a model in which the founding Artistic Director was the sole leader with the administration reporting to her, to a co-leadership model in which the Artistic Director and General Manager were equals who both reported to the Board. The new model created a balance between artistic ideas and the practicalities of the budget. This type of reporting structure has at times been problematic in other organizations, but it strengthened the Festival's organization and provided for continuity during periods of transition.

### **3. FOUNDER'S RETIREMENT DECISION**

*"Alma Lee left such a big foot print that we were concerned that the change to a new director might go wrong."*- Strachan Birnie, Succession Planning Committee member

The VIWF reached a crossroads at the end of the 1990s when Alma Lee started talking about her plans to retire after the 2005 festival and about the need to start planning for her departure. Her timing was good, because the organization was healthy, but she wanted to ensure that it would continue to serve the community well and be a source of pride for all

stakeholders. She was motivated by seeing the problems that other founder-led organizations across the country had experienced. She had seen deteriorating programming, poor staff morale, staff turnover and loss of support in situations where a founder held on for too long, or where there was no succession planning and a new leader had taken over and ignored the context in which the organization operated, especially its audience base and the dynamics that informed its programming.

The initial reaction of many Board members to Alma Lee's intended retirement can be summed up by the following comments from Board members: "There was a small sense of panic. Oh my goodness, she is the Festival. Who could possibly take over?" "Everyone was a bit in denial." After letting the notion of her departure sink in, Alma reinforced her intention to retire with a formal letter. She and a Board member familiar with succession issues also sensitized the Board to what could happen when a founder left.

In January 1999, the Board approved a one-page succession planning policy stating that "there be a well considered approach to preparing for the departure of the founding Artistic Director of the Festival." Once the Board took on the responsibility for planning the succession and overseeing the transition, members embraced the work. "Because we had previously gone through organizational change processes, we had faith in the process itself and confidence that we could initiate and implement a process of succession," explains Succession Planning Committee member Pat Crowe. Board members saw the plan as an opportunity to ensure Alma's legacy and establish a vision for the future.

## **4. SUCCESSION PLANNING**

### **4.1 Getting Started**

*"We felt we were creating something. There wasn't much information about such a process available."* – Pat Crowe, Succession Planning Committee member

Early in the succession planning process the Board made two key decisions. One was to distinguish between the planning and the search phases of the process and to set up different committees for each phase. This decision not only distributed the workload, but also ensured that the Succession Planning and Search committees consisted of people with relevant skills. The other significant decision was to allow for a transition phase, during which the retiring director and her successor would work together, allowing for the systematic transfer of the founder's knowledge, skills and contacts. The three-part approach not only reflected a useful conceptualization of the whole process, but also, as the process unfolded, facilitated decisions about the extent of the retiring director's involvement in each phase.

Members of the Succession Planning Committee, appointed in 2001, were selected because of their previous work on the Festival, their knowledge of its history, policies and mandate, and their varying perspectives. The eight-person committee included the past chair; the General Manager, who would be key in providing continuity during the transition and following up when necessary; and the founding Artistic Director, who knew the Festival's history and current vision better than anyone, and was able to clarify details and raise issues.

## **4.2 Identifying the Issues**

When the Succession Planning Committee members began to consider the timelines, budget and detailed steps required for the succession process, they realized that they would pretty well have to start from scratch, because research revealed a lack of detailed information about the steps involved. According to committee members, the succession planning phase in particular seemed hard to define and unwieldy. They decided to bring in a consultant to work with them to develop the plan. They were able to obtain funds for this work through an inter-governmental funding program.

Although the committee drew up a list of consultants with experience in succession planning, in the end their choice was based on other factors. Graham Kelsey was chosen because he was familiar with the organization, had worked effectively with it several years before and had the founding Artistic Director's confidence. He proved a skilled and committed facilitator who led focused, thorough and productive discussions of issues during a planning workshop and a board retreat; produced reports that offered clear directions for subsequent stages of the process; and provided ongoing advice.

In a preliminary meeting with Alma Lee and then in a workshop with the Succession Planning Committee, the facilitator helped the organization develop a timeframe for the succession plan. Working backwards from the retirement date, and determining what steps had to be taken before that date, they developed a succession timeline that would provide a structure for the plan. The workshop, in September 2002, helped the Succession Planning Committee members identify key issues for an orderly transition, define actions to address them and consider budget requirements for all three phases. At later stages of the process, when certain decisions were made, the time lines and budget would be revised.

The key issues were:

- Defining the essence of the Festival. The organization needed to reach consensus about the essential aspects of the VIWF, identifying the values, aspirations and features of the organization that were at its core and needed to be preserved. The

point was not to freeze the Festival in time, but to clarify the scope for change under a new artistic leader. It would enable applicants to understand what had been built and what could be made of it, and help the Search Committee ensure an appropriate “fit”. (Resulting document: *Declaration of Values*.)

- Outlining the role of the Artistic Director. A document detailing the artistic director’s job was required, since the job description that existed was for internal use and not very detailed. The description would give prospective candidates a sense of the multifaceted activities the Artistic Director engaged in, the skills required and the relationships she needed to maintain. (Resulting document: *AD Role Description*.)
- Describing the ideal candidate. A document describing the attributes of the successful candidate was also needed. This would identify the qualities, skills and experience of the person who could lead the organization into the future. (Resulting document: *Candidate Profile*.)
- Arranging the search. This work would begin when the Succession Planning Committee completed its task and the Search Committee assumed responsibility for the succession process.
- Development of a compensation package for the new Artistic Director. This, too, would be the responsibility of the Search Committee, working with the Human Resources and Finance committees.

Following the workshop, the facilitator worked with the Board and the Artistic Director on the development of the three key documents that would later inform the search process: the *Declaration of Values*, *AD Role Description* and *Candidate Profile*.

### **4.3 Defining the Essence**

The entire Board was involved in defining the essence of the Festival. Directors provided written answers to questions that were posed at two points during the succession planning process:

- What are some of the visions of the Festival?
- What issues are key to the future of the Festival?
- What makes the VIWF what it is? What is important about the Festival?

The written responses reflected the issues that Board directors had been discussing in formal and informal meetings as they sought to find the balance between retaining a

legacy and opening the door to new ideas under new leadership. According to facilitator Graham Kelsey, defining the essence of the Festival included defining the key aspects of the Festival as an *organization*, not just the event itself.

Kelsey's synthesis of Board members' responses in a report became the basis for the *Declaration of Values*, a key succession planning document that the Board approved at a retreat in June 2003. This document articulated the following aspects of the Festival:

- role and stature in the local community and elsewhere
- distinctive characteristics of its programming
- importance of its location on Granville island
- quality and efficiency of board and staff
- organization's efficiency and attention to detail
- its spirit of co-operation and inclusiveness

In creating the *Declaration of Values*, the VIWF sought to define the key components of its success to ensure they would not be lost. Because the Festival was functioning well, it did not see a need to consider possible changes in its vision, mandate or structure. Other organizations trying to define their organization may have a somewhat different focus and agenda. For example, an organization in difficulty may want to analyse where the problems lie and consider the changes required to resolve them. The nature and scope of these changes would be crucial information in the search for a new leader.

#### **4.4 AD Role Description and Candidate Profile**

Assisted by the facilitator and a former Board director with human resource experience, Alma Lee developed a detailed role description of her position, describing the dual leadership and accountability, specific responsibilities and the spirit with which the work was done. The importance of the information in this document becomes apparent in considering the conflict that could arise if a new artistic director came into the VIWF unclear that the leadership was shared with the General Manager.

The *Candidate Profile* built on the first two documents, which defined the Festival and the Artistic Director's role in it. This third document detailed the personal characteristics, skills, background and experience needed for the job. The Artistic Director, the two advisors who helped with the role description and Board directors all contributed to the final draft of this.

The Board approved all three documents at its June 2003 retreat, which was facilitated by Graham Kelsey. Later, when the call for applications was made, the documents were posted on the VIWF website and included in the information package given to all short-

listed candidates. The agenda for the retreat also included a progress report on the succession process, ensuring that all Board members, including three new arrivals, were up to date. And it was at this retreat that the Succession Planning Committee was dissolved and the responsibility for the process was passed to the Search Committee.

#### **4.5 Keys to Success: Planning Phase**

Alma Lee's ability to let go and to make a clear decision about her retirement plans well in advance of the actual date gave the VIWF Board the impetus and time to plan for a smooth succession. This first step can be one of the most difficult aspects of a succession process. Experience shows that founders often find it hard to let go, or they think about it but are reluctant to raise the matter. Board members may not want to presume, or find it hard to imagine their organization without its long-time leader.

The fact that Alma Lee had confidence in the staff and Board, and trusted that they would honour and respect her legacy, made her decision to leave easier. So did the steps the Board took to contribute to her financial security in the years before her retirement, providing for an annual salary increase and paying an additional amount into her RRSP. The inability of some cultural organizations to provide for the financial security of their leaders can certainly affect the timing of their departure.

The early notice that the VIWF's founder gave her organization contributed significantly to the ultimate effectiveness of the succession process. Since the organization was entering into unknown territory, with few models to follow, it was useful for the Board and its committees to have the time to proceed thoughtfully and to learn as they went along. The lead time also enabled the Festival to seek and secure funding for the succession planning phase.

Participants in the succession planning phase underscore that there was a culture in the organization that facilitated its effective development and execution. Board members were committed to the Festival and there were good relationships among the Board and staff. Throughout the succession process, the founder's input and involvement were valued and her needs were considered.

Committee members gave the process their ongoing attention and worked hard, even meeting informally to discuss issues. People understood their roles. The chair made sure that everyone was heard, which helped to develop a consensus about the essence of the Festival and how to proceed. The Artistic Director and the General Manager ensured that there was follow-through. And the committee made the astute decision to seek outside expertise. It hired a skilled facilitator who helped it create a framework for the plan and who synthesized discussions and written comments into useful reports.

## **5.0 SEARCH PROCESS**

*“Search is about process, but there are all the human elements to it.”* – Don Prior, Search Committee Member

### **5.1 Search Committee Membership**

The Search Committee consisted of six people, a number that allowed for a range of perspectives, but was not unwieldy. Because the committee’s role was quite different from that of the Succession Planning Committee, it required different expertise and experience.

The Committee included a chair person who had project management experience and was process-oriented; two people with HR skills, including Don Prior, a former Board member who worked for The Caldwell Partners, a national executive recruitment firm that donated his services and a meeting space during the process; the Festival’s longest-serving Board member; and two members of the Succession Planning Committee whose presence would help to ensure that the intentions and insights of the committee were not lost during the search phase: the chair of the Succession Planning Committee and the Festival’s General Manager.

It was important for the General Manager to be on the Search Committee because she would be an equal partner with the new Artistic Director. She was also connected to the other staff members and could represent their perspectives during the search. The founding Artistic Director, however, was not on the committee, and the fact that there was a two-committee approach to the overall succession process facilitated this decision.

The founding Artistic Director had been an active and important member of Succession Planning Committee, but she and the Board decided that her presence on the Search Committee would not be appropriate and might be perceived as a conflict of interest. The committee wanted the autonomy to make the best decision and the founder, recognizing the need to distance herself, trusted its members. This trust was made easier by the fact that her input and advice were welcomed all along, and that she was briefed at different stages of the search process.

### **5.2 Process and Principles**

The Search Committee got down to business in late 2003. A flow chart relating to the overall hiring process, provided by Caldwell Partners, enabled people to see the critical steps. Committee members established the rules of engagement for the process: confidentiality, transparency and objectivity. They reviewed and revised the budget,

identifying ways to keep search costs down and shortening the timeline for the transition process that had been set up by the Succession Planning Committee.

The length of time that the founder and the new Artistic Director would overlap was reduced from its original one-year to a four-month period before, during and after the 2005 Festival. The decision was made primarily because of budgetary considerations. In the end, the four-month time period would prove to be adequate.

The committee developed a search strategy that was efficient and cost-effective, while making the opportunity widely known. Early on, the Board had considered and rejected as too expensive the idea of using a headhunting firm. Committee members had networks and found ways to target the advertising appropriately, instead of advertising in vehicles like *The Globe and Mail*, which would have been expensive and could have resulted in hundreds of irrelevant applications.

In November 2004, the Artistic Director's retirement was announced in the VIWF member newsletter, *INK*. In December and January, the recruitment advertisement was published in *Quill and Quire* and *Publishers Weekly*, and posted on the VIWF, Alliance for Arts and Culture, Caldwell Partners, Charity Village and other appropriate websites. The advertisement was created using information from the candidate profile and artistic director role description documents developed by the Succession Planning Committee. The wording varied according to placement. To ensure good intake, there was no deadline.

The committee wanted to cast its net wide. When results from the initial round of advertising were reviewed in terms of numbers of people responding and geographical reach, the committee saw that qualified candidates from across North America were applying and did not do a second round. In the end about 80 applications were received from Canada, the United States and Australia.

### **5.3 Screening Applications**

In keeping with the principle of confidentiality established by the Search Committee, applications were sent to The Caldwell Partner's offices rather than the VIWF office. Meetings and interviews were also held there. This is an important consideration for organizations involved in this type of search: they need to find a neutral and private location for receiving and processing applications.

The job description and candidate profile documents produced by the Succession Planning Committee were useful reference tools during various stages of the candidate selection process. The committee considered the "fit" of candidates with the organization

and explored how they might be perceived by stakeholders. It also discussed where candidates might take the Festival. At the same time, committee members did not want to pre-judge who might be appropriate and were open to various possibilities.

The whole committee was involved in assessing the applications. After a thorough screening and follow-up telephone conversations with several applicants, a shortlist of five candidates was agreed upon. Each of these received a package containing information that would enable the candidates to understand the programs, operations, finances, values and priorities of the Festival. The package included:

- the Festival's operating budget and audited statement
- the three succession planning documents: *Declaration of Values, AD Role Description, Candidate Profile*
- an organization chart
- *INK* newsletter and Festival brochures
- a CBC Television-produced DVD about *Spreading the Word*, the Festival's important school program

#### **5.4 Interviews**

Interviews are a crucial stage in the hiring process, and the VIWF, thanks in part to the HR expertise on its Search Committee, was able to give it careful attention. To encourage consistency and provide focus, a *Candidate Comparison Chart* using a 1-5 rating system (from average to superior) was created as a guide for the interviews. In addition to standard evaluation categories such as education, experience and range of skills, the chart included attributes that participants in the succession process had identified as important: programming creativity, commitment to cultural diversity, passion for the Festival, style and "fit" with the Festival and ability to travel.

The interview process was divided into three stages:

- Preliminary Interview

The committee member who was a recruiter, Don Prior, did a preliminary interview with each of the short-listed candidates, by telephone in the case of the non-residents. These interviews gave candidates an opportunity to present themselves outside the pressures of the formal interview with its set questions. And it enabled Prior to brief them about the process and framework for the formal interview.

- Formal Interview

So that everyone could participate in the decision-making on an equal footing, all committee members were involved in the formal interviews, dividing the prepared set of questions among them. Three candidates were interviewed in person, and two were interviewed using face-to-face video conferencing. The access to a video conferencing facility saved the Festival the costs of flying people in, and by all accounts worked very well.

- Follow-up Meetings

After some deliberation and review of criteria, the committee identified the most appropriate candidate. To explore this candidate's ideas in greater depth and to address questions that arose in the formal interview, the Search Committee split into two smaller groups, which met with him in an informal setting. "Interviews are artificial situations; there isn't enough time in the interview," says Don Prior.

After references were taken care of, the Search Committee brought its recommendation for a new artistic director to the entire Board, which was walked through the process that had led to the committee's choice. The recommendation was approved unanimously and was subsequently well received by staff, stakeholders and the retiring Artistic Director.

## **5.5 Compensation**

The compensation package for the incoming Artistic Director was developed by the Search Committee, working with the Festival's Finance and Human Resources committees. But early in the succession process, the Board of Directors also considered how the incoming Artistic Director's compensation might affect the morale—and finances—of experienced staff members who would carry on after the founder left.

In the years leading up to the retirement, once the Festival became financially healthy, the highest priority had been to compensate the founder for her low salary in earlier years when the dream was becoming a reality. The founder's upcoming departure was an opportunity to review compensation for the General Manager, not just the Artistic Director. This was especially important given the joint leadership model that the Board wanted to retain.

Research documents from the Cultural Human Resources Council and the Canadian Conference of the Arts provided useful information about compensation and human resources issues and practices in the cultural sector as the Board considered the question

of staff compensation. Based on its research, budget considerations and performance reviews, the Board approved a significant increase to the General Manager in July 2004. That same year it also introduced a benefit package for all four of its permanent employees.

## **5.6 Keys to Success: Search Phase**

The Search Committee, chaired by a professional project manager, established a thorough and effective process with a realistic timeline, stayed on track and carefully documented its decisions. The committee even had perfect attendance. But its success can also be attributed to the ways that those involved in the process paid attention to the human relations factor, not just to logistics.

Above all, the search was characterized by good communication, inclusiveness and trust. Everyone who needed to be was kept up to date on the process, within the bounds of confidentiality:

- Recognizing the retiring Artistic Director's inevitable interest in the process that would determine the future of the Festival, the committee designated Don Prior to meet with Alma Lee every three months on its behalf. This kept open the lines of communication between the founder and the committee.
- The General Manager, who sat on the committee, communicated with staff and sent a progress report to stakeholders. This included funding agencies, which need to know during transition periods that an organization is stable and their investment is safe.
- The Search Committee chair provided regular progress reports to the Board. This meant that the Board understood the integrity of the process, and when the time came for it to consider the Search Committee's recommendation, there was no resistance or criticism.

In arriving at decisions, the Search Committee was open to vigorous debate and the sharing of ideas. Participants note that people kept the interests of the organization rather than any personal agendas first and foremost. The work done in defining the Festival and the Artistic Director's role during the succession planning phase meant that, in general, there was agreement about desirable attributes in a candidate.

The committee benefited greatly from the presence of Don Prior, who played the role of search consultant. He followed up with candidates before and after the interview stage. He helped and advised the committee about good practice: avoiding conflicts of interest

and maintaining transparency, confidentiality and impartiality. When a person who had formerly been on the Festival Board (in effect, an “internal candidate”) applied for the position, he recommended that the committee “meet the candidate for the first time, dropping previous assumptions.”

Clearly, the expertise and facilities donated by Prior’s company were important elements of the search. Many organizations, especially smaller ones, will not have access to a comparable level of assistance. Those involved in the search suggest that, at the very least, organizations that lack access to volunteer HR help and can’t afford to hire a search consultant, should take the time to research best hiring practices, including ethics, job postings, candidate screening and interview questions. One committee member pointed out that funding agencies have hiring systems in place and would be a good place to start.

## **6.0 TRANSITION PHASE**

*“You need to pass on a lot of information.”* – Strachan Birnie, Succession Planning Committee member

### **6.1 An Important Stage**

The transition phase was designed to facilitate a smooth and systematic hand-over between the founder and her successor. These two worked together for the critical period before, during and after the Festival: from the beginning of September to the end of December 2005, when the founding Artistic Director passed all her responsibilities over to her successor. The original plan had been for a longer overlap, but it had been a challenge to obtain funding assistance for the transition phase, which involved an extra salary. In the end, government funders came through, recognizing that the transition was an important capacity-building opportunity whose one-time costs could not be entirely covered by the Festival’s operating budget. A publisher interested in the long-term health of the Festival also provided support for the transition.

Staff and Board members concluded that four months would be the minimum length of time in which to manage a comprehensive transfer of skills, contacts, practices, procedures and knowledge related to the artistic direction and programming of the VIWF. This transition period would also enable the outgoing Artistic Director to phase out her involvement and to hand over the reins with some confidence. The arrangement was that the retiring Artistic Director, Alma Lee, would retain her role for the pre-event phase and the event itself. After the 2005 Festival, she would focus on wrapping up the just-completed event, while her successor, Hal Wake, took over all the other responsibilities of an artistic director.

Because the transition period included the Festival itself, the newly hired Artistic Director was able to meet with seasonal staff and clearly understand what they did. The timing also enabled the retiring Artistic Director to introduce her successor to and facilitate meetings with supporters and stakeholders, providing insights into key relationships and signalling her support for the incoming Artistic Director. A new artistic director does not automatically inherit the relationships and networks of his predecessor, which can be vital for an organization's health.

## **6.2 Transition Workplan**

Alma Lee and Hal Wake say that four months turned out to be a sufficient period for the transition. It gave the incoming Artistic Director opportunities for hands-on experience and observation. And it allowed for a systematic transfer of information during regular one-and-a-half hour meetings between the two directors. The agenda for these meetings was based on a checklist of tasks and outcomes that the General Manager had developed in applying for funding to support the transition process. Topics covered in the checklist were:

- Organizational history and development:
  - Co-management model
  - Organizational structure
  - Board development and responsibilities
  - Staff and volunteer relations
- Revenues and Finances:
  - Artistic Director's role in revenue generation
  - Artistic Director's role in fulfilling obligation to funders and sponsors
  - Artistic Director's role in developing and adhering to annual budget
- Festival operations:
  - Timelines
  - Planning requirements
  - Procedures
  - Practices and policies
- Programming as it relates to:
  - Artistic vision

- Public sector funding
  - Practical realities (venues, budgets, etc)
  - Writers and publishers
  - Diversity
  - Support for educational program
- Relationships with stakeholders:
    - Audiences
    - Writers and publishers
    - Funders, donors and sponsors
    - Local and national cultural organizations
    - Volunteers and staff.

### **6.3 Keys to Success: Transition Phase**

The transition period was a valuable component of the succession process. It allowed the retiring Artistic Director to leave with the confidence that the organization she had established and guided would continue to evolve and serve the community. It gave the incoming Artistic Director a firm grasp of the role he was assuming. And because the transition included the last festival that the founder would organize, it gave the organization and the community an opportunity to thank and honour her publicly.

Many of the factors in the success of the transition phase were similar to those that applied to the other phases: a framework for action; clear expectations and role definition; trust and respect between those involved; open communication; and participants' commitment to the process. Scheduling the transition to include the festival itself was important. And obtaining funding assistance for the four-month period was essential. Finally, as before, there was the founder's ability to step back. In the last stage of the transition, when she was wrapping up the completed 2005 event, but no longer responsible for current and future aspects of the festival, Alma Lee understood her role. "Alma was very good about this: people would call her about future plans, and she would pass them on to me," says her successor, Hal Wake.

## **7. KEY RESOURCES: TIME, MONEY AND PEOPLE**

*"It seemed like a long time, but actually we needed most of it."* – Leslie Hurtig, chair, Succession Planning Committee

From 2001, when the Succession Planning Committee was set up, to the end of 2005, when the founding director retired, the VIWF was actively engaged in some aspect of its succession process for about five years. That is longer than many organizations have—or perhaps need—but the Festival used it well.

The time available for the planning phase enabled the organization, led by the Succession Planning Committee, to explore the uncertainties created by the founder's intended departure, to articulate the Festival's essence and aspirations and to ensure that everyone in the organization was on the same page. The search phase took a year and a half, which allowed for engagement, debate and a thorough process. The important transition period of four months was shorter than originally planned, but it still presented a financial challenge. It's worth noting that the VIWF was able to secure funding or in-kind support for all three phases of the succession partly because it gave itself enough time and could demonstrate to sponsors and funders that a credible process was in place.

Among the most valuable resources that the VIWF had access to were the abilities of its senior staff and the volunteer time of its capable and dedicated Board members, who collectively spent hundreds of hours on the work. The Festival augmented its internal capacity by hiring a facilitator during the planning phase and obtaining the *pro bono* assistance of a former Board member who acted as a search consultant.

The budget for the entire process was \$39,930, much of it covered by government funding and private sector donations, including the in-kind donation during the search. A breakdown of expenses is provided on page 3 of **Appendix A**. These expenses were lower than the Festival had originally anticipated, since it found ways to reduce costs as it proceeded: using the Internet and trade publications to advertise, using video teleconferencing to interview candidates from outside Vancouver and reducing the length of the transition period.

## **8. USEFULNESS OF THE MODEL**

Even before the VIWF had completed the last phase of its succession process, government funders and other cultural organizations were expressing interest in the model it had developed. The present document will be a useful reference tool, but it must be recognized that it is not a template that most cultural organizations will be able to copy without adjustments. Its usefulness will depend on the nature of an organization and its leadership, the resources available to it and the circumstances in which it finds itself.

The components and lessons of the succession process model outlined here will be most directly applicable to organizations led by a founder or by a long-time leader. Other types of organizations may find that only some aspects of the model apply. For example,

collectively led organizations may not need to include a transition period in their succession process if the change in leadership is gradual. Large institutions may well be able to hire an executive recruitment firm to manage the search for a new Artistic Director. Festival organizations may want to emulate this model in scheduling the transition phase to coincide with their festival period, but organizations with programming seasons will need to develop their own approach to identifying the optimum timing of a transition.

Nevertheless, in contemplating a change in leadership, most organizations need to assess where they are, where they want to go and how to get there; to consider and review the role of their leader or leaders; and to identify the skills and experience required for the role. These issues are at the core of succession planning, whether an organization is large or small, stable or in transition, healthy or struggling. Even if there is an apparent successor in the wings, it is worth taking the time to address them.

It is also important to consider that few organizations are likely to have as much time as the VIWF had for its succession process. They probably do not need it. The Festival was breaking new ground and those involved learned as they proceeded. Other organizations, which can take advantage of this document and other successful models, should be able to go through a succession process in somewhat less time.

Moreover, regardless of the current intentions or status of its leadership, an organization can undertake the first phase—developing the succession plan itself -- as part of its ongoing strategic planning, updating as necessary. With key elements of a succession plan in place, an organization has a head start if it needs to replace its leader with relatively little or no lead time. And this situation can arise for any number of reasons, including retirement, illness, accident, or a new opportunity that lures the leader to another job.

**Summary of Process, Keys to Success & Budget**

*Succession Planning Phase (January - June 2003)*

| <b>Process</b>  | <b>Keys to Success</b>  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Steps:</b></p> <p>AD announces retirement plans; need for succession plan is identified</p> <p>Board assumes responsibility for succession; nominates Succession Planning Committee members</p> <p>Committee holds facilitated workshop to identify budget, timeline, issues &amp; actions</p> <p>Key succession planning documents are developed</p> <p>Board is briefed &amp; approves key succession planning documents</p> <p>Succession Planning Committee is dissolved</p> <p><b>Main Documents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AD's letter of notice</li> <li>• Board policy #7: Succession Planning for Artistic Director</li> <li>• Succession Time Line</li> <li>• Declaration of Values</li> <li>• AD Role Description</li> <li>• Candidate Profile</li> </ul> | <p><b>Conditions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founder able to let go</li> <li>• Committed &amp; effective board: result of previous board development</li> <li>• Good relationships within organization: trust &amp; respect</li> <li>• Financial health</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ample notice from founder</li> <li>• Process divided into three phases: planning, search &amp; transition</li> <li>• Appropriate committee members appointed, including GM &amp; AD</li> <li>• Grant secured for succession planning process</li> <li>• Effective outside expertise obtained</li> <li>• Good communication within the committee, &amp; with the Board &amp; other interested parties</li> <li>• Careful documentation</li> </ul> |

Summary of Process, Keys to Success and Budget

*Search Phase (June 2003 - May 2005)*

| Process   | Keys to Success  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Steps:</b></p> <p>Board appoints Search Committee</p> <p>Committee revises timetable &amp; budget; establishes process &amp; rules of engagement</p> <p>Compensation package approved by Board</p> <p>Cost-effective advertising strategy is developed</p> <p>Applications are processed by third party (recruitment firm) in a neutral location</p> <p>Committee screens applications &amp; shortlists five candidates</p> <p>Candidates are briefed &amp; interviewed</p> <p>Further interviews with number one candidate</p> <p>Board approves the recommended candidate &amp; new AD is announced</p> <p><b>Main Documents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process Flow Chart</li> <li>• Recruitment Advertisement</li> <li>• Candidate Comparison Chart</li> <li>• Information Package for short-listed candidates</li> <li>• Interview Questions</li> </ul> | <p><b>Conditions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groundwork laid during Planning Phase (discussions &amp; documents)</li> <li>• Relationships: trust &amp; respect; staff are valued</li> <li>• Access to HR expertise</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate committee membership, including overlap with Succession Planning Committee for continuity</li> <li>• Clear, thorough &amp; flexible process</li> <li>• Guiding principles: confidentiality, impartiality &amp; transparency</li> <li>• Efficient process management</li> <li>• Ongoing communication with founder, staff &amp; all stakeholders</li> </ul> |

**Summary of Process and Keys to Success**

*Transition Phase (September - December 2005)*

| Process  | Keys to Success   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Steps:</b></p> <p>Founder mentors successor over four-month period that includes the festival</p> <p>Founder’s achievements are celebrated during the Festival</p> <p>Founding Artistic Director retires</p> <p><b>Main Document:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workplan Checklist</li> </ul> | <p><b>Conditions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual respect between founder &amp; successor</li> <li>• Community appreciation for founder</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing of the transition to include the festival</li> <li>• Funding secured for transition period</li> <li>• Systematic approach to mentoring</li> <li>• Role clarity during transition</li> <li>• Founder is able to say goodbye</li> </ul> |

*Expense Budget Summary*

| Phase                      | Expenses   | \$  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Succession Planning</b> | Consultant’s fees & expenses; board & administration expenses  | 5,000   |
| <b>Search</b>              | Miscellaneous expenses<br>Advertising<br>Video conferences (2 candidates)<br>Recruitment services; meeting venues<br>Total | 390<br>2, 195<br>1,095<br><u>13,250</u><br>16,930 |
| <b>Transition</b>          | Additional AD salary   | 18,000  |
| <b>Overall Process</b>     | <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>\$39,930</b>                                   |

## **Data and Sources**

Research for this report is based on three sources of data: (a) interviews with key players in the process, (b) documents produced by the VIWF during its succession process, and (c) relevant literature on succession planning and human resources issues in cultural organizations.

### ***Interviews***

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Strachan Birnie | member of the Succession Planning Committee<br>former Treasurer, VIWF Board of Directors |
| Pat Crowe       | member of Succession Planning Committee<br>former Chair, VIWF Board of Directors         |
| Jane Davidson   | member of Succession Planning and Search Committees<br>General Manager, VIWF             |
| Leslie Hurtig   | chair of Succession Planning, member of Search Committee<br>current Chair, VIWF          |
| Graham Kelsey   | facilitator and advisor to Succession Planning Committee                                 |
| Alma Lee        | member of Succession Planning Committee<br>founding Artistic Director, VIWF              |
| Don Prior       | member of Search Committee<br>former member, VIWF Board of Directors                     |
| Melanie Rupp    | chair of Search Committee<br>former Vice-chair, VIWF Board of Directors                  |
| Hal Wake        | current Artistic Director, VIWF  |

## **Data and Sources**

### ***VIWF Documents***

Board Policy #7: *Succession Planning for Artistic Director* (approved January 26, 1999, revised June 27, 2000 and February 18, 2003).

*Issues in Succession Planning for the Artistic Director.* A Report from the Workshop of the Succession Planning Committee (Graham Kelsey, Facilitator, September 2002).

*Defining “the Box.”* A synthesis of board members’ responses to questions about the essence of the VIWF (Graham Kelsey, November 2002).

Succession Planning Documents: *Succession Time Line, Declaration of Values, AD Role Description and AD Candidate Profile.*

Record of a Board and Management Retreat, June 21 and 23, 2003.

Minutes of Search Committee meetings, 2003-05.

Search Committee Documents: process flow chart, *Artistic Director Search Advertising Plan*, recruitment advertisements, *Ad Response List*, *VIWF Salaries and Benefit Structure*, *Candidate Comparison Chart*, *Interview Guide.*

*Transition Workplan Checklist.*

Applications to funding agencies: Arts Partners in Organizational Development, 2001; Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2003; Arts Now Catalyst Program, 2004.

Progress reports to funders and stakeholders on Artistic Director Succession Planning: 2001-2005.

## Data and Sources

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*Coaching, Mentoring and Succession Planning*. Cultural Human Resources Council (NetGain Partners Inc.)

*Creative Management in the Arts and Heritage: Sustaining and Renewing Professional Management for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Final Report on Phase 1, Canadian Conference of the Arts, with Cultural Human Resources Council (Jocelyn Harvey, July 2002).

*Face of the Future: A Study of Human Resources Issues in Canada's Cultural Sector*. Cultural Human Resources Council (December 2002).

"Helping Founders Succeed." *Grantmakers in the Arts Newsletter* (Susan Kenny Stevens, Autumn 1999).

*Legacy, Transition, Succession: Supporting the Past and Future of Canada's Arts Organizations*. Canada Council for the Arts (Roy MacSkimming with Francine D'Entremont, March 2005).

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*Succession Planning for Book Publishers. An Overview*. Department of Canadian Heritage (2005).

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**Documentation Phase:** Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage (Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program) and Arts Now.