



Passing the Baton at Compassion International: A Model for CEO Transitions

Bill Peterson, Partner
CarterBaldwin Executive Search



Passing the Baton: Step by Step

Part 1

Pre-Handoff Preparation	Step 1	Start Early with CEO-Led Planning
	Step 2	Build Ownership Through Collaboration
	Step 3	Be Open to External Options

Part 2

Selection Process	Step 4	Engage a Qualified Search Partner

Part 3

Onboarding the Incoming CEO	Step 5	Ensure the Outgoing Leader Embraces a Diminished Role
	Step 6	Create a Thoughtful Onboarding Plan
	Step 7	Publicly Celebrate the Transition
	Step 8	Emphasize Humility in Leadership
	Step 9	Plan for Donor Confidence

Part 4

Relational Dynamics and Legacy	Step 10	Prioritize Trust in the Transition
	Step 11	Define Roles for Outgoing Leaders
	Step 12	Protect Organizational Stability During the Transition
	Step 13	Regularly Evaluate Leadership Performance
	Step 14	Prepare for the Next Transition

Introduction

The transition of a Chief Executive Officer in nonprofit organizations should ideally resemble the precision and coordination of a relay race. Just as runners synchronize their movements for a seamless baton handoff, nonprofit boards, outgoing leaders, and incoming CEOs must work in tandem to ensure a smooth transition. **A successful handoff requires timing, trust, and preparation – otherwise, momentum can be lost, and the organization risks stumbling in its mission.** The relay is not about the individual runner but about advancing the team toward the goal. In the same way, nonprofit leadership transitions are not about any single leader but about sustaining and advancing the organization's mission. The strategies outlined in Compassion International's CEO transition case study provide a roadmap for boards and executives to execute this crucial exchange with agility and purpose.

In 2024, we had the privilege of interviewing Judy Golz and Karen Wesolowski, current and former board chairs, respectively, alongside Wess Stafford and Jimmy Mellado, former and current CEOs, respectively, to uncover the principles and practices that guided Compassion International's successful transition. Their collective insights provide a practical roadmap for nonprofit boards navigating leadership changes. These principles hold true no matter the scale of your organization, be it \$10 million or \$100 million, or Compassion, one of the largest nonprofits in the world. This case uncovers the principles behind their transition through anecdotes and personal reflections, providing actionable guidance for organizations.



The strategies outlined in this case study provide a **roadmap for boards and executives to execute this crucial exchange with agility and purpose.**

Part One:

Pre-Handoff Preparation

Wess Stafford's long-term approach to succession planning exemplifies how preparation builds trust, reduces uncertainty, and sets the stage for a successful transition.



Part One:

Pre-Handoff Preparation

1. Start Early with CEO-Led Planning

Compassion International's board and leadership took a long-term approach to succession planning, which continues to this day. This posture ensured the process was gradual and collaborative. Succession discussions with Wess Stafford began years in advance, enabling the board to identify key attributes for the next CEO and explore the possibility of both internal and external candidates.

When Wess approached the board three years before his planned departure, some on the board were surprised. "Why would you leave when everything is going so well?" they asked. Wess replied, "Because I want to make sure that five years from now, it's still going well." His decision to initiate the process proactively while the organization was thriving gave Compassion time to transition from a position of strength. Wess shared, "I wanted to leave while I still had gas in the tank." His deliberate planning honored the organization's legacy and ensured that his eventual exit was seen as a step forward, not a sign of decline.

His deliberate planning honored the organization's legacy and ensured that his eventual exit was seen as a step forward, not a sign of decline.

BEST PRACTICE

Begin formal succession planning early. Develop a structured framework that includes leadership development, organizational needs analysis, sector evaluation and readiness assessment for potential successors. Leaders should start succession planning while they are at their peak, allowing for a calm, deliberate process rather than a reactive, crisis-driven transition.

Part One:

Pre-Handoff Preparation



“For the first time, we weren’t scared about what would happen when Wess left. He gave us the space to dream about the kind of leader we needed.”

2. Build Ownership Through Collaboration

Wess and the board took an inclusive approach to transition planning, surveying the board, executive team, and international staff about the characteristics they envisioned in the next CEO. The responses emphasized qualities like humility, global experience, and deep spiritual grounding. **These conversations helped the organization collectively envision the future, giving stakeholders a sense of ownership and confidence in the process.**

One staff member remarked, “For the first time, we weren’t scared about what would happen when Wess left. He gave us the space to dream about the kind of leader we needed.”

BEST PRACTICE

Engaging the entire organization in envisioning the next leader reduces fear and builds collective ownership of the process.

Part One:

Pre-Handoff Preparation

3. Be Open to External Options

Initially, Wess believed an internal candidate would be the best fit. Research validates that this increases the probability of success. However, as Compassion was experiencing unprecedented growth and scale, the board recognized the need to also consider external candidates with significant relevant CEO experience. Participant count was 729,867 by the end of 2005 and nearly 1.4M by the end of 2013. When the board asked Wess for recommendations, he immediately thought of Santiago “Jimmy” Mellado.

Wess and Jimmy’s connection spanned decades. In 1993, both became CEOs of their respective organizations—Wess at Compassion, Jimmy at the Willow Creek Association. At an executive retreat, they stayed up all night sharing their visions. “Jimmy talked about building leaders in the church, and I told him, ‘We’re doing the same thing, except we start with children in the womb,’” Wess recalled. This bond, forged over a shared calling, laid the foundation for the eventual transition.

This bond, forged over a shared calling, laid the foundation for the eventual transition.

BEST PRACTICE

Conduct a rigorous evaluation of both internal and external candidates to prioritize mission alignment, leadership skills, and the ability to navigate the organization’s strategic needs and unique culture. Consider external candidates who align deeply with the mission. Preexisting relationships and trust can be invaluable during transitions.

Part Two:

Selection Process

Compassion's board created a CEO Succession Task Force that included representation from the most vested constituents (board, leadership, program staff, fundraising staff, etc.) to guide the selection process.



This worthwhile investment is very strategic, since the consequences of hiring the wrong CEO could be disastrous to the organization.

4. Engage a Qualified Search Partner

The CEO Succession Task Force interviewed and selected a qualified executive search consultant. It's rare that any nonprofit would have all the relational networks, competence and experience to produce a short list of **qualified** CEO candidates on their own. This worthwhile investment is very strategic, since the consequences of hiring the wrong CEO could be disastrous to the organization. In the search process, look for a consultant that brings significant experience in the sector, proven assessments, and a successful track record.



BEST PRACTICE

Partnering with an experienced executive search consultant ensures access to broader networks, proven assessment methodologies, and sector-specific expertise, reducing the risk of a poor CEO hire.

Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

Compassion's intentional onboarding process ensured Jimmy Mellado was equipped to lead from day one while honoring the organization's legacy.



Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

5. Ensure the Outgoing Leader Embraces a Diminished Role

The board credited Wess's graceful transition and embrace of a diminished role as President Emeritus as a key factor in the successful transition. To ensure clarity, the board required that he step back from daily operations entirely for the first three months of Jimmy's tenure and gave full authority to Jimmy to define any future role for Wess and its duration. Jimmy and Wess together defined a valuable role that included engaging outside advocacy opportunities, connecting with donors/pastors, and encouraging staff as requested.



BEST PRACTICE

Establish clear protocols for outgoing leaders to minimize ambiguity. Ensure their role is well-defined and subordinate to the new CEO, with no direct reporting relationship to the board.

Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

6. Create a Thoughtful Onboarding Plan

Compassion designed an intentional five-month onboarding period where Jimmy worked alongside Wess while he wound down his responsibilities at Willow Creek. The board was deeply involved in every transition stage, from succession planning to providing ongoing support for Jimmy during his first year. Monthly check-ins and an annual review process created a mechanism for continuous feedback and support.

The board was deeply involved in every stage of the transition, from succession planning to providing ongoing support for Jimmy during his first year.



BEST PRACTICE

Create a structured onboarding plan that includes overlapping leadership periods, formal endorsement from the outgoing leader, and time for the new leader to observe and assess the organization. Boards should take an active role in transition planning and execution. Designate a liaison or committee to manage the transition, provide oversight, and serve as a resource for outgoing and incoming CEOs.

Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

“In this moment, the president of Compassion just became younger, smarter, and better-looking.” The humor and warmth of the ceremony resonated deeply with staff.

7. Publicly Celebrate the Transition

Wess and Compassion’s board kept their global workforce well informed at each step of the selection and transition process to maintain the momentum of day-to-day operations, build optimism for the future, and introduce Jimmy to the organization. Wess also went out of his way to prepare Jimmy’s workspace. “My team and I worked with Jimmy and his wife, Leanne, to redesign the office to fit his style. When Jimmy walked in for his first day, it said, ‘Santiago “Jimmy” Mellado’ on the door,” Wess recounted. “I wanted him to feel like this was already his place.” Wess moved into a smaller office nearby, ready to answer questions but careful not to hover.

To mark the handoff, Compassion hosted a global event celebrating Wess’s legacy and welcoming Jimmy. The event included a ceremonial baton-passing, with Wess declaring, “In this moment, the president of Compassion just became younger, smarter, and better-looking.” The humor and warmth of the ceremony resonated deeply with staff. “We saw two leaders who genuinely respected and loved each other,” said one attendee. “It gave us confidence that Compassion’s future was in good hands.”

BEST PRACTICE

Hold a public handoff ceremony to reinforce unity and signal continuity to stakeholders, staff, and donors. The outgoing CEO should visibly prioritize the incoming leader’s success. Symbolic gestures, like vacating key spaces, reinforce commitment to the transition.

Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

8. Emphasize Humility in Leadership

Both Wess and Jimmy modeled humility throughout the process. Wess made it clear that nothing from his tenure was sacred. “There’s not a single program or decision that’s untouchable,” he told Jimmy. He also very clearly told Jimmy, “I really only have one job ... to do all I can to make you successful.” Similarly, Jimmy adopted a “Four L’s” approach—Listen, Learn, Love, Lead—ensuring he understood Compassion’s culture before making significant changes. Jimmy recognized that his outsider status presented potential cultural challenges. His focus on listening, learning, and understanding the organizational context before leading it helped mitigate this risk.

During their onboarding period, Jimmy asked Wess countless questions about the organization’s history and decisions. “I wanted to honor the foundation Wess had built while discerning where God was leading Compassion next,” Jimmy explained. **This humility laid the groundwork for trust between the two leaders.** Wess positioned himself as a resource rather than a shadow. He made himself available for historical and strategic context while maintaining clear boundaries to empower Jimmy as the decision-maker.

Jimmy adopted a “Four L’s” approach—Listen, Learn, Love, Lead—ensuring he understood Compassion’s **culture before making significant changes.**

BEST PRACTICE

Foster humility in both outgoing and incoming leaders. The outgoing CEO should release control, while the new CEO should approach their role with great curiosity as a servant-leader.

Part Three:

Onboarding the Incoming CEO

Given that reality, both Wess and Jimmy committed themselves to providing steady connection and consistent communication with key donors throughout the transition process to the present.

9. Plan for Donor Confidence

Poorly executed leadership transitions can be very destabilizing for donor-funded organizations. Given that reality, both Wess and Jimmy committed themselves to providing steady connection and consistent communication with key donors throughout the transition process to the present. As a result, Compassion has continued to experience growth each year for more than a decade since the transition. Wess and Jimmy's visible mutual support reassured donors, preserving trust and financial stability.



BEST PRACTICE

Prioritize donor communications during leadership transitions. Ensure consistent messaging and provide opportunities for outgoing leaders to affirm their successors publicly.

Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

The relationship between Wess and Jimmy became the cornerstone of the transition's success, modeling a mutual commitment to the mission above all else.



Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

10. Prioritize Trust in the Transition

Wess fully **endorsed** Jimmy, even supporting decisions he might not have made. Jimmy prioritized honoring Wess's legacy while making thoughtful, incremental changes. Their 20-year friendship was rooted in mutual respect and shared values. This trust reassured Compassion's staff and donors, who saw their unity as a reflection of God's blessing on the transition. During the transition, Wess promised Jimmy, "I will never speak ill of you behind your back, and I will use my influence to support your leadership." For Jimmy, these words provided reassurance and the courage to lead authentically.

This trust reassured Compassion's staff and donors, who saw their **unity as a reflection of God's blessing on the transition.**



BEST PRACTICE

Outgoing leaders should affirm their successors publicly and privately, using their influence to build trust in the new leader.

Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

Wess humorously described his emeritus title as “just meaning old guy,” but his continued presence brought immense value.

11. Define Roles for Outgoing Leaders

A trusted board member served as a liaison to Wess, facilitating his exit package and emeritus role. This ensured a smooth departure and minimized potential challenges arising from identity loss or unclear expectations. The board gave Jimmy the authority and freedom to jointly create the president emeritus role with Wess. **The emerging emeritus role focused on Wess’s strength as one of the most effective and anointed child advocates in the world.** This critical contribution was a great value to Compassion’s mission and was very complimentary to Jimmy’s CEO role, internally and externally.

Wess humorously described his emeritus title as “just meaning old guy,” but his continued presence brought immense value. “Seeing Wess and Jimmy together always warms our hearts,” one board member said. “It reminds us that Compassion’s mission is bigger than any one person.”

BEST PRACTICE

Clearly define emeritus roles to complement, not compete with, the new CEO’s responsibilities. Offer outgoing leaders support mechanisms, such as transition coaching, severance packages, and even emeritus roles if fully supported by the incoming CEO. Ensure these arrangements are clearly defined and approved by the board in close collaboration with the new CEO.

Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

12. Protect Organizational Stability During the Transition

Understanding the context of the organization is critical to the leadership transition process. If the organization needs a major turnaround or reinvention, the incoming leader, with the board, should have a clearly defined plan to implement even significant changes as appropriate to the need. If the organization is in a strong and stable position, it provides valuable time for the new leader to build relational trust, understand the culture, and evaluate the greater context before making any significant personnel, strategic or structural changes. Given the healthy position Compassion was in, Jimmy delayed making any major structural or personnel changes during his first year.



If the organization needs a major turnaround or reinvention, the incoming leader, with the board, should have a clearly defined plan to implement even significant changes as appropriate to the need.

BEST PRACTICE

Encourage new leaders to avoid immediate, sweeping changes unless the context demands it. Provide opportunities for them to listen, build trust, and establish a shared vision with staff and stakeholders. Provide new leaders with tools to understand organizational culture, strategic landscape, and external context. Offer in-depth briefings, mentorship, or immersion programs to bridge gaps in familiarity while preserving objectivity.

Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

13. Regularly Evaluate Leadership Performance

After ensuring the development of a strategic plan, Compassion's board conducts a comprehensive annual review of the CEO, which includes board evaluations, 360 input, KPI assessments, and open discussions. This process ensures alignment and accountability while offering a forum for feedback.



BEST PRACTICE

Ensure the development of a strategic plan with robust performance evaluation process for CEOs. Include regular reviews to assess leadership effectiveness, progress toward goals, and relationship dynamics with the board.

Part Four:

Relational Dynamics and Legacy

14. Prepare for the Next Transition

Compassion's approach to succession planning goes beyond immediate leadership transitions, embedding leadership development into its long-term strategy. **This ensures a steady pipeline of future leaders aligned with its mission, values, and growth goals.** By proactively preparing successors, Compassion strengthens organizational stability and reinforces the culture of servant leadership that defines the ministry.

Key elements of this strategy include:

- Institutionalizing Leadership Development – Identifying high-potential leaders early and providing structured mentorship and training.
- Encouraging Cross-Functional Experience – Offering rotational programs and cross-training to deepen leaders' understanding of operations.
- Balancing Internal & External Talent – Prioritizing internal development while incorporating external expertise for fresh perspectives.
- Regularly Updating Succession Plans – Adapting strategies to align with evolving organizational goals and market conditions.
- Embedding Succession in Governance – Making leadership development a structured, ongoing priority rather than a reactive process.



BEST PRACTICE

Organizations that integrate leadership development and succession planning into their long-term strategy are best positioned to navigate executive transitions successfully. Treating succession as a continuous process rather than a one-time event ensures leadership readiness, maintains organizational momentum, and preserves the mission-driven culture essential to long-term impact.



Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations can confidently navigate leadership changes by adopting these best practices, ensuring continuity and sustained impact. With an intentional focus on culture, context, collaboration, and long-term planning, organizations can ensure continuity and sustained impact. Adapting these principles to the unique circumstances of your organization, informed by Compassion's approach, provides a valuable template for success.

About CarterBaldwin Executive Search

CarterBaldwin Executive Search serves organizations that are serious about mission and performance. Originally founded with a focus on corporate clients spanning private, public, and private-equity-backed companies, CarterBaldwin has built a complementary nonprofit practice leveraging best practices learned and developed in their corporate work. A highly experienced staff, an unrivaled search process that delivers excellent results for clients, and an exceptional candidate experience all contribute to Search Done Better for our nonprofit, higher education, K-12, association, and foundation clients. For more information, please visit www.carterbaldwin.com.

**BEST
PRACTICE**

If you would like to know more about how CarterBaldwin can assist in your succession planning or pending executive search, email us at bpeterson@carterbaldwin.com.

About the Author



Bill Peterson is a partner with CarterBaldwin, serving at the helm of the nonprofit and higher education practice, specializing in recruiting chief executive officers, presidents, and senior leaders for universities and nonprofit entities. With over 25 years of experience in executive search, Bill has overseen hundreds of searches for key leadership positions, including chief executive officers, presidents, provosts, and associated roles within these organizations.