

Essential Guides to Sustainability, Succession and Transition Planning

PART 1

Organizational Sustainability Planning Guide

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August, 2013

This guide is intended to provide training and technical assistance to all health centers on the importance of leadership succession planning.

National Association of Community Health Centers

Health centers depend in large part on public financial help and need a unified voice and common source for research, information, training and advocacy.

To address these needs, the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) organized in 1971. NACHC works with a network of state health center and primary care organizations to serve health centers in a variety of ways:

- Provide research-based advocacy for health centers and their clients.
- Educate the public about the mission and value of health centers.
- Train and provide technical assistance to health center staff and boards.
- Develop alliances with private partners and key stakeholders to foster the delivery of primary health care services to communities in need.

TransitionGuides

TransitionGuides is a national consulting company specializing in sustainability and succession planning and executive search services for health centers and other nonprofit organizations. Our services are tailored to the unique needs of each organization. We value every organization's essential need for talented leaders, positioned to enable the nonprofit to survive and succeed. We add value to the organizations we serve through partnering with executives and boards to prepare for succession, to initiate action plans that advance organizational sustainability and to recruit and successfully onboard chief executive officers and other senior managers when transition occurs. Our consultants are all former nonprofit leaders who specialize in working with board and executive leaders. Since 1995, our TransitionGuides team has led over 400 nonprofit leadership search, transition, and succession and sustainability planning projects for organizations across the country. Our extensive nonprofit experience and knowledge offers guidance and processes that deliver proven results.

For more information on TransitionGuides, contact our office: 1751 Elton Road, Suite 204, Silver Spring, MD 20903; (301) 439-6635; or www.transitionguides.com.

Acknowledgement

The National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) initiated the production of the three-part *Essential Guides* series. The Guides, written by TransitionGuides, builds on prior educational materials developed by Don Tebbe, co-founder and thought-leader of TransitionGuides. Thanks to the TransitionGuides team which included Melody Thomas, Tom Adams, and Megan Lewis for their dedication and commitment to the accuracy and precision of each guide. A special thanks to the NACHC team, led by Julie Schmidt and included Sherry Giles, Program Associate, and Jaime Hirschfeld, who made this opportunity possible for TransitionGuides and those with an affiliation with NACHC.

This publication was made possible by grant number U30CS16089 from the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Primary Health Care. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the HRSA.

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Background about the series

The three guides were written specifically with health centers in mind. The guides were designed to help health center strengthen the capacity of their organizations, especially those organizations that may be facing a chief executive or other leadership transition in the near future. As a companion to the guides, the Organizational Sustainability and Leadership Succession Mini-Tool Kit, provide organizations a jump start, in deciding where to best begin with Organizational Sustainability Planning, Executive Succession Planning and Executive Transition Management with step-by-step instructions and tools to get started.

The first guide, Part 1 *Organizational Sustainability Planning*, is a tool for assessing and strengthening the four areas critical to the organization's long-term sustainability by conducting an organizational sustainability assessment and using the results of the assessment to develop an organizational sustainability action plan.

The second guide, Part 2 *Executive Succession Planning*, provides an overview of three approaches to succession planning: The first is a detailed approach to "Succession Essentials" by developing a board-adopted Succession Policy and Emergency Backup Plan. The second is a list of important considerations for selecting an internal successor, and the third is an illustrative summary on combining sustainability and succession planning for maximum organizational benefit.

The third guide, Part 3 *Executive Transition Management*, presents a three-phase approach for managing turnover in a leadership position, especially the chief executive position. This Guide provides an opportunity to address transition issues, strategic direction, and an outstanding search when there is a change in executive.

While each of the guides can be used individually, together they are designed to help leaders strengthen their organizations and manage leadership turnover, adapt to changes in the environment and competition, and to increase the odds of remaining effective and true to core values over the long-term. This series aims at organizations with long-tenured executives and founders, relatively new executives and those seeking to address leadership succession and organizational sustainability.

The timing of the chief executive's departure can be a guiding factor in the choice of which tool to use. In health centers where the executive has no intention of leaving soon, or where retirement may be three or more years off, the *Organizational Sustainability Guide* can be an excellent tool for strengthening the organization, ensuring that when the transition occurs, there is a strong team in place with a clear plan for the future, solid systems and resources, and a resilient culture.

In agencies where the transition is two or more years away, the "Succession Essentials" in the *Executive Succession Planning Guide* can help the leadership understand more deeply the role of the chief executive and develop the tools, principles and understanding for how to best manage that transition when it does occur. Moreover, development of the Emergency Backup Plan ensures that the organization has a plan in place if something unforeseen were to happen to the incumbent executive. More importantly, the development of that backup plan provides a deep exploration of the

chief executive role, and the sense of bench depth in the organization to back him or her up. These organizations are often best served by combining sustainability and succession planning.

In situations where the transition is imminent – within the next 18 months or less – the *Executive Transition Management Guide* provides a well-tested framework for managing the entire transition process, including the search.

What is sustainability?

An essential question for any nonprofit leader is, “How do I build a sustainable organization?” Typically, these discussions have focused on financial sustainability, but the roots of financial sustainability are much more complicated than just how much money you have in the bank or what your recent financial statement says. This guide goes beyond finances and looks at four areas critical to organizational sustainability.

This guide has three purposes:

1. Unpack the sustainability question and review what factors drive organizational sustainability.
2. Provide health centers with an easy to use assessment tool – a sustainability mini assessment – that will help you identify which of four key elements are ripe for action in your organization. Actions that will help you increase your organizations sustainability.
3. Guide you through the process of developing an organizational sustainability action plan.

The first part of the guide discusses some terms and concepts that are used to develop the action plan and provide a frame of reference for the work that lies ahead.

Many leaders use the words “stability,” “sustainability,” and “vitality” interchangeably. While these terms are closely related each of them means something quite distinct:

- Stability – This is a basic level of health or firmness in an organization or an entity. It means that you have enough resources to carry out short- to mid-term activities. In the current environment, “stability” has almost become synonymous with the concept of financial stability. In that regard, financial stability typically means having enough money in the short- to mid-term to carry out an organization’s planned activities. There are other forms of stability other than financial. For example, emotional and political stability are often impacted during transitions involving a long term executive. The announcement of the executive’s pending departure can affect the emotional climate in an organization. In some cases it may even lead to some political instability, particularly in fractious environments where the executive has been the “political glue.”
- Sustainability – This involves having strong organization or “business” fundamentals in place that enable the agency to become or continue to be a high-value community asset over the long-term. Like a good sports team, the agency has a solid roster in place that understands the fundamentals of the agency’s “business” and carries out those fundamentals on a consistent basis. There are good systems in place. The organization is a humming machine.

- Vitality – The typical dictionary definition of vitality includes terms like exuberant strength or vigor; the capacity to live, grow and develop; powerful. In the organizational context, vitality pertains to the energy level and forward momentum of the organization. People within the agency are engaged, aligned and energized. When an organization is humming, you can feel it and everyone involved is engaged and excited to be part of the mission.

There is a hierarchy at play here – stability is a prerequisite for sustainability and sustainability is a prerequisite for true vitality. In other words, the organization must be stable in order to be sustainable. An organization’s immediate vital signs must be healthy before you can begin to plan for sustainability or take on any sort of long-term planning. In short, stability is the platform upon which sustainability occurs.

Similarly, sustainability precedes true vitality. Good systems and a well-oiled team are necessary conditions that precede the power, exuberant strength, and long-term vigor that comes with true vitality.

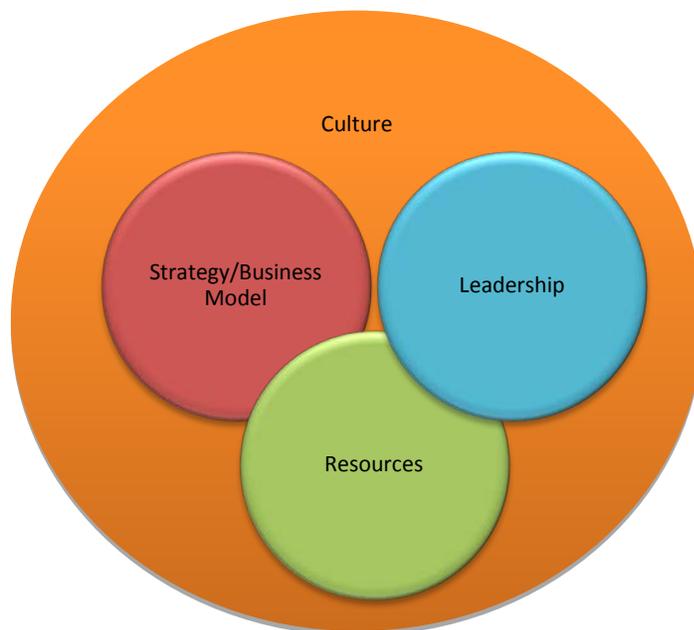
If you conducted a quick review of nonprofit management literature, you would see a wide variety of notions about what constitutes organizational sustainability and many different “mental maps.” Some of these maps emphasize program sustainability and pay little attention to other organizational factors. Other maps focus on finances and fundraising and are silent on other important factors, such as leadership. Still others focus on the business model. The vast majority of these ignore organizational culture. With that in mind, there are four points to consider as you begin to think about organizational sustainability:

1. The reality is that true organizational sustainability involves all these factors and more. But there are four areas that are critical: *organizational strategy/business model, leadership, resources and culture.*
2. There are probably one or more areas where your organization excels and one or at most two areas where your key sustainability “presenting issue” is located. Most likely, there’s an area that is riper for action than others.
3. These four areas are therefore interrelated. Organizations are systems, so as you focus on addressing your “presenting issue,” understand that there may be implications in other areas.
4. Beware of locking in on finances; your financial situation is only an indicator. It is easy to be naturally drawn towards the financial resource area in discussions about sustainability. Your health center’s financial situation is a marker of strength, action, and attention in other areas, such as strength of your business model, soundness of your organizational strategy, attention paid by leadership and the strength of their skill sets, and strength of your health center’s soft assets – all influenced, if not dictated, by organizational culture.

Four Elements of Organizational Sustainability & Top Level Criteria

There are four areas of sustainability and accompanying criteria that will be used in the action planning section and the Organizational Sustainability Mini-Assessment (see [Appendix 1, also included as Tool 1 in the Organizational Sustainability and Leadership Succession Mini-Toolkit](#)). The criteria presented here are not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive. In some areas, they may just scratch the surface. The idea is to get your team in conversation about these areas, particularly how they are interrelated, and then encourage you to name and build upon your assets and strengths, and to dig as deep as you need in order to address your health center’s critical sustainability issues.

Figure 1: The Four Elements of Organizational Sustainability



Organizational Strategy/Business Model

- A solid business model (your business “rationale”) built on quality services/products that are needed by clients and valued by donors/funders
- A written plan outlining strategic direction; the plan is recent and relevant to the current market conditions
- A high degree of board, executive and management alignment about the direction and strategy; progress against the plan is frequently reviewed and is the subject of priority-setting discussions. For more information on strategic alignment and review please see [“Improving Performance, Scoring Success: Using Balanced Scorecards for Organizational Excellence”](#)

Leadership

- Staff and board leadership are in place to meet present and future leadership needs. For more information on developing future leadership please see “[Batter Up! Building Your Leadership Bench](#)”
- Clear roles and expectations for board, executive and staff; touch points and overlaps in the board and executive roles are clear and based on complementing strengths and not covering for deficiencies
- A strategy to recruit, develop and deploy new leaders, both staff and board leaders; processes in place and followed for new board member orientation and officer succession
- Emergency backup succession plans for all executives and key employees that include cross-training plans and a Board-adopted succession policy to guide planned executive transitions.

Resources

- Sufficient financial resources to meet the organization’s commitments in the short- to mid-term
- Favorable trends in revenue, expense and margin over the past five years, i.e., surplus or breakeven budgets; good financial ratios
- Good stewardship of the organization’s assets – financial assets as well as other assets, such as organizational reputation, intellectual property, etc.
- The organization’s funding or revenue streams have longevity – the majority are likely to continue beyond the current year’s budget or current grant cycle. There’s an appropriate degree of diversification among the revenue streams
- A proactive resource development strategy is in place that is tuned to the organization’s particular market – the present market as well as its future market
- A revenue development strategy that has a sound logical link to the business model and overall organization strategy

Culture

- A resilient organizational culture that is forward-focused, results-oriented and action-based
- The value and worth of the organization is widely understood throughout the board, staff and volunteers; virtually anyone on the team could make a compelling case for supporting the organization
- There is a defined and desired organizational climate. New employees as well as tenured ones have a shared understanding of desired, acceptable and unacceptable actions and behaviors.

The Sustainability Planning Process

The remainder of this guide is a step-by-step action plan for the organization and implementation of a sustainability planning project. For organizations with long-tenured executives considering departure in next 2-5 years and organizations with new executives within past two years, sustainability planning is most powerful when combined with succession planning. When done together, the organization takes a deeper look at its strengths and challenges in terms of both leadership continuity and how to best increase long-term sustainability and vitality. (See *Executive Succession Planning Guide*, p. 19 for more details on how to combine sustainability and succession planning.)

How you approach sustainability planning will be influenced by where you are in your strategic planning cycle. If you are beginning a new strategic planning process, you simply incorporate some of the concepts outlined under the four elements & criteria section above. If you do not want to revisit your strategic plan and want to address sustainability, this section lays out a sustainability planning process.

Organize a small task force

In most cases its best to have a small team (3 to 5 members) working on this project. Typically, the task force should include the chief executive, plus one or two members of the senior management team, and one or two board members. Board members might include the board chair and another officer, or the chair of your personnel committee, if you have one. Staff members might include the chief operating office and/or your human resources director if you have one. In larger organizations, this work is typically led by the executive or senior management team and either the Executive Committee or an ad hoc Committee of the Board.

Orient the task force, organize the project and make assignments

Review this guide with the task force or teams, particularly this step-by-step action plan and [Appendix 1](#). As for the assignments, someone needs to be assigned to the role of “author,” taking responsibility for the writing and rewriting of the action plan. The role of the other team members is to contribute to the strategic thinking that goes into the plan, and to review the documents before they are submitted to the board for their review and approval. Some organizations may choose to work with a consultant experienced with this process to facilitate the process and discussions and draft the Action Plan for management and Board review.

Gather and update the supporting documents

The supporting documents that you will want to have on hand include your current strategic and/or business plan, your resource development plan, if applicable, as well as any other documents that you think will support the planning process.

Conduct the sustainability mini assessment

[Appendix 1](#) includes the simple, one-page Organizational Sustainability Mini-Assessment. Your board and senior management should complete the assessment and then discuss the results with each other to gain a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences in their assessment of each of the criteria.

Review the mini assessment results with the task force or teams

The task force should digest the results of the mini assessment. Some questions to consider are:

- a. What do the collective results say about our health center's key sustainability issue or issues?
- b. Where were the similarities and differences between the board's collective assessments versus the senior management team's assessment? How do those similarities and differences further inform the sustainability planning process?
- c. As we think about our sustainability issue or issues, are there places where we need to dig deeper? Do we need additional information to inform the action planning process?

Drill down on your sustainability issue(s), if needed

Consider whether additional information or research is needed on your key sustainability issue(s). In some cases, the issue or issues are obvious and the action plan readily apparent. In other cases, your presenting issue may not really be the core issue, but a pointer to some underlying factors. Sometimes, the need to drill down does not become obvious until you get into the action planning process. Do not get paralyzed with analysis, but you will certainly want to drill down to the real issue or issues. Good questions to ask are:

- Why is this so?
- Are there organizational strategy/business model implications?
- Are there leadership implications? Resource implications?
- Are there organizational culture implications?

Develop your action plan & secure commitments

Now that you have clarified your critical sustainability issue(s), you are ready to develop your action plan. As you begin your planning process, consider whether your sustainability issue points you to actions in one or more of the other areas. While it's impossible to consider all of the possible combinations of issues, here are some examples from TransitionGuides' base of experience:

Case #1

"Health Center #1" enjoys a great relationship with the key agencies in which it works. Several years ago, they developed a foundation with plans to build an endowment that would help secure the agency's future. They were disappointed with the results over the past five years. They concluded that they did not have the appropriate level of staff leadership heading the foundation, nor the appropriate board composition. While the obvious presenting issue appeared to be in the area of leadership, by asking "why is this so?" they

concluded that there were implications in other areas, most notably culture. While a robust fundraising program requires a certain level of entrepreneurship, the success of the agency was built on their adherence to state rules and regulations. They needed to enlarge their sense of organizational culture to embrace success in both areas. To do that, they spent time developing a “both/and” picture of success - how would Organization A look if it were wildly successful in fundraising and maintained its extraordinary success in state-funded client services. This picture of success continued to be a conversation throughout the organization, from board meetings to staff meetings. Returning to the leadership area, when they hired a new foundation director, they chose someone who had experience in supporting that kind of organizational culture change.

Case #2

Until four years ago, “Health Center #2” generated a small financial deficit each year over the previous 10 years. They had dismissed this as an artifact of the recession and “would be back in the black” after the recession. Fortunately, they had enough reserves to cover the deficits. As the economy improved, the organization’s financial picture did not. The immediate candidate was their business model. They did a drill down and concluded that was not the issue. Asking “why this is so?” the conclusion was that the situation was a result of a combination of issues, each of which had revenue implications. They found that they had weak execution on their organizational strategy, particularly the recruitment of new program participants. Moreover, a change in senior staff had led to less than optimal cost controls because of the loss of institutional history and relatively weak systems. A change in those two areas has put them back on track towards balanced budgets.

Case #3

Two years ago, “Health Center #3” experienced a change in CEOs. Two years into the job, the new CEO was frustrated and the board disappointed. The new CEO had a dramatically different profile than her predecessor. As part of the transition process, the board said they wanted someone who would shake things up and take the organization in new directions. The new course she charted certainly had that effect. Some long-term staff left the organization and the CEO felt stymied in carrying out the new strategy she had developed. Digging into the issue, there were implications in a number of areas. First, in culture, the strategy she developed rubbed against the organization’s relatively conservative culture, resulting in some staff departures and a sense of concern on the part of the board. In the area of leadership, the board did not consider how its role might change as a result of new leadership, new directions and new strategy. They had a cultural norm of deferring to the executive’s leadership and they had weak evaluation mechanisms. The organization had peaked a few years ago and really needed a new strategy. Securing board and executive alignment on the new strategy was a good first step. The second step was getting the board to break out of a “business as usual” mindset and look at its role, contribution, and composition, in light of the new strategy. Finally, they had many robust discussions about mutually held expectations and put some new evaluation mechanisms in place that gave the board a better sense of being “on track”, and gave the executive the feedback and support

that she finds valuable.

Case #4

“Health Center #4” is headed by the founding CEO who has 36 years’ tenure with the Center. In his own mind, he knew that he wanted to retire in two years, but had not discussed it with the board. For its part, the board collectively knew that he was at an age where retirement was certainly an option, but did not want to bring the topic up for fear of sending the wrong signals. The sustainability planning process opened up that conversation and gave them the freedom to really look at “what was the best and highest use of the CEO’s time” over the next several years and what preparations were needed for a successful succession. While they focused their action planning on leadership by strengthening the senior management team ahead of the transition, they also looked at implications for their business model and were mindful of the implications that organizational culture would have on the transition. Given the planned retirement, this organization chose to combine sustainability and succession planning. (See *Part 2 Executive Succession Planning Guide*)

Most likely, none of these cases mirrors exactly what is going on in your health center, but the point is that, in organizational sustainability planning, the presenting issue is often a pointer to actions that may involve several, or all, of the four core areas discussed. The key is to not rush to judgment, taking action on an issue that may or may not be a “root” issue, while not getting sucked into “paralysis through analysis.”

Moreover, as we see in Case #4, the combination of sustainability planning, coupled with succession planning (*see Part 2 Executive Succession Planning Guide*), can be an especially powerful combination, particularly for organizations where the CEO plans to retire in the next 2 to 5 years or a new executive was hired in past 1-2 years.

Implement your plan

Responsibility for implementation of a sustainability plan can vary widely based on organization size, culture, and life stage. Typically, this responsibility falls on the shoulders of the management team, supported by the board and its committees. In some cases, the board committees may be more involved than in others, depending on the issue, structure of the board, expectations, etc. For example, if your key area for sustainability is resource development, and your resource development committee is a key factor in carrying out the resource plan, then they would certainly have some responsibility for implementation.

Review & adjust

The results, accomplishments, learnings, and adjustments on your sustainability plan should be a frequent topic on board meeting agendas, as well as meetings of the senior staff. It should be included on every board agenda, creating an opening for the board and executive to have not only a robust discussion about “how is it going”, but also what’s needed to move the plan forward, and how the next iteration of the plan should look.

Conclusion

Organizational sustainability is the responsibility of the top-level leadership. The commitment to sustainability, the planning, plan oversight and periodic progress review must involve the CEO and top board leadership. Much like leadership succession, it's one of those core responsibilities that cannot be delegated. That said, involvement in sustainability planning should be broad-based. Your plan will be much stronger, and implementation will be much easier, with broader involvement from your team and their buy-in.

Finally, the process presented here offers a balanced approach to organizational planning. Quite often, organizations take on strategic planning and end up exhausting themselves in the process, failing to get to the leadership and cultural implications of its implementation. The approach offered in this guide provides a simple, but powerful, framework for keeping organizational sustainability and capacity building front and center in the minds and actions of the board and executive leadership. For many organizations, combining sustainability and succession planning yields the best results. For all organizations, attention to succession planning and leadership continuity is essential to future capacity to serve community. See *Part 2 Executive Succession Planning Guide* for both an introduction to succession planning and how to combine with sustainability planning.

Additional Reading

Bell, J., J. Masaoka, et al. (2010). Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. *Provides an excellent overview of organization-wide business plans and includes step-by-step tools to develop, modify, and adopt plans. Includes analyses of various earned income types, fundraising income types, and quantitative tools for analysis. Identifies five archetypal business strategies for organizations.*

Center for Civic Partnerships. (2001). Sustainability Toolkit: 10 Steps to Maintaining Your Community Improvements. Sacramento, CA, Center for Civic Partnerships. *A comprehensive tool for sustaining programs, but does not address overall organizational sustainability.*

Community Action Partnership. (2012) Batter Up! Building Your Leadership Bench. Washington, DC. Community Action Partnership. *A toolkit providing guidelines for implementing a systematic approach to meet short-term leadership needs while developing long-term strategies to cultivate the next generation of leaders.*

Community Action Partnership. (2012). Improving Performance, Scoring Success: Using Balanced Scorecards for Organizational Excellence. Washington, DC, Community Action Partnership. *A “do-it-yourself” planning toolkit, based on the “Nine Steps to Success™” balanced scorecard framework, to understand the overall planning and outcome measurement process to build internal capacity, a strategic plan and a strategy management system.*

The Finance Project. (2003). Sustainability Planning Workbook. New York, NY, The Finance Project. *A set of six workbooks with five planning modules: Plan to Plan, (1) Building a Sustainability Initiative, (2) Developing a Vision, (3) Creating a Strategic Finance Plan, (4) Building Organizational Capacity and Community Support, and (5) Developing and Writing the Plan.*

La Piana, D. (2012). The Nonprofit Business Plan: a Leader's Guide to Creating a Successful Business Model. Nashville, TN, Turner Publishing. *An excellent guide to developing a business plan including chapters on assessing your current business model and financial projections. Offers many examples through a number of case studies.*

Appendix 1 - Organizational Sustainability

Mini-Assessment

Please read the following questions and note your response. As it applies to your organization, is this statement completely true (yes), partially true (part), not at all true (no), or you don't know (DK)?

Strategy	Our organization has a solid business model (what we do and how we pay for it) that has at least 5-7 years of life in front of it and is built on quality services/products that are needed by clients and valued by donors/funders.	Yes Part No DK
	Our strategic or long-range plan (or business/organization strategy) is current and relevant to today's and tomorrow's market conditions. Progress toward the plan is frequently reviewed and is the subject of priority-setting discussions.	Yes Part No DK
	Among the board, executive and management team there's a high degree of alignment about the direction and strategy.	Yes Part No DK
Leadership	We have the staff and board leadership in place who meets our present and near-term future leadership needs.	Yes Part No DK
	We have written succession plans in place for all key employees that include cross training plans. We have a strategy in place to recruit, develop and deploy new leaders, both staff and board.	Yes Part No DK
	Our chief executive could go on a six-month sabbatical tomorrow and the organization would not miss a beat.	Yes Part No DK
	Our board is a high-value asset to the organization. Processes are in place and followed for orientation of new board members and we have a pipeline of leaders and a process for board officer succession.	Yes Part No DK
Resources	Our organization has sufficient financial resources to meet its commitments in the short to mid-term.	Yes Part No DK
	Our organization's funding or revenue streams have longevity – the majority are likely to continue beyond the current year's budget or current grant cycle. We have an appropriate degree of diversification of revenue streams.	Yes Part No DK
	A proactive resource development strategy is in place that is tuned to our organization's particular market – the present market as well as future market. There is a clear logical link between our revenue development strategy and our overall business/organization strategy.	Yes Part No DK
Culture	Our organization's culture could be described as resilient, forward-focused, results-oriented and action-based.	Yes Part No DK
	The value and worth of the organization is widely understood throughout the board, staff and volunteers. Virtually anyone on the team could make a compelling case for supporting the organization.	Yes Part No DK

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