



BY **KIM JERNIGAN**, Outgoing Editor, *The New Quarterly*

# SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR SMALL MAGS

**PLANNING FOR A SUCCESSION** is challenging at the best of times, and harder still for a small magazine. Small mags are generally underfunded and understaffed. Often succession is forced when the incumbent editor succumbs to burn-out, the worst of times to be managing a transition. And because small mags are a labour of love, the emotional stakes in a succession are unusually high. Long-term planning and broad participation is the key to making it work.

## START EARLY

How early will depend on the resources you'll need to have in place. Three years is not a bad window if you are having to build an editorial stipend before the succession can go forward, but even with a stipend in place, you'll want to have funding for a transitional period when the departing and incoming editor are both at work. Capacity-building grants, like those available through the Ontario Trillium Foundation, can be a useful resource. An early start also gives you a chance to survey the field of possible successors and to work the timing around other changes on the horizon (a turnover in your office staff or governing board, a special issue). It's best to manage the transition when you have a stable infrastructure in place and time to devote to training.

## BUILD YOUR BENCH

The more institutional knowledge and particular skill sets are concentrated in one individual, the harder it will be to replace that person. Long before you think about succession, provide other members of the team with opportunities for professional development, job sharing, and broad engagement in both business and editorial decision making, as well as in both the responsibilities and the fun that go along with making a magazine. Procedural manuals and a good filing system are also huge assets.

## DECIDE ON YOUR OBJECTIVES

Sometimes a succession is about continuity, sometimes about change. Often it's an opportunity for both, a chance to look closely at the magazine – its focus and tone, the way it does business, the division of labour, new directions it wants to explore. It's good to hire with these things in mind. At the same time, you'll want to defer any major changes (a redesign, a new business model, a change in the editorial mix) until the new editor is in place.

## DO YOUR RESEARCH

It's helpful to survey magazines of a kind that have been through a recent succession. What worked for them and how? What would they do differently? Did they recruit from within or without? Why? Where did they advertise? What did they offer by way of enticement or compensation?

## ENGAGE ALL STAKEHOLDERS

How well the succession works depends on the positive energy brought to bear by the organization as a whole and by sensitivity towards the concerns of the magazine's readers, writers, granters, partners and patrons. A succession committee should include representatives from the governing board, the editorial board and the office staff. This committee will survey all stakeholders, attending to both their practical and emotional concerns, advise about the process, and ultimately interview and make the hiring decision. The outgoing editor should be consulted along the way as he or she knows the challenges and rewards of the job better than anyone, but it is those who are going to be a part of the magazine going forward whose feelings, ambitions, and goals are paramount. On the other hand, the committee will want to represent the magazine's culture to prospective candidates to make sure there's a good fit: Is it collaborative or top down? Celebratory or feisty? Open or doctrinaire?

## TRAIN YOUR SUCCESSOR AND PROVIDE SUPPORT AS NEEDED

But know when to butt out. Editing is a skill long to learn, so you will want to provide sufficient overlap to allow the incoming editor to feel at home in the job. You'll also want to hand over the reins. That means giving over decision-making, something that can be difficult, especially for a founder or someone with longevity in the job. Your expertise and support may be welcome on-going, but once someone else has taken the job in hand, it's best to follow the wise mother-in-law's dictum: offer advice only when asked!

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