

## What Do Leaders Need to Know About Leadership Shelf Life?

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*Leadership scholars have studied the concept for over 150 years. They have generally focused on how prospective leaders can prepare, and later emerge into leadership roles. Others have focused on leadership practices that success in the role. Very few scholars have focused on the inevitable reality of leaving a leadership role. Leaders in all areas of endeavour have a shelf life and will eventually leave the role. The authors of this manuscript discuss the concept of leadership shelf life and provide current and aspiring leaders with 10 implications to help them recognize leadership shelf-life issues, facilitate leader renewal, and, when appropriate, help them effectively exit the leadership role with their dignity intact and the unit poised for sustained success.*

*Keywords: leadership shelf life, succession planning, effective exiting strategies*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership has been a popular research and water cooler topic for many years and across many professions. Throughout time, scholars have studied leaders, leader emergence, and leader effectiveness from several settings (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Tichy & Cohen, 2012; Weese, 2018; Welty-Peachey et al., 2015). Scholars typically focus on how leaders can successfully prepare, and later emerge, as leaders. Many mentors have used this research to develop future leaders (Goldsmith, 2009).

Scholars have also focused on how leaders can heighten their effectiveness in the role. These researchers typically study leadership and their commensurate impact on unit effectiveness (Ball et al., 2008; Tingle et al., 2013; Weese, 2010). Leadership coaches and consultants have typically used this line of research to heighten a leader's effectiveness. Minimal attention has been devoted to the latter stages of a leader's life cycle, and specifically, when or how a person should leave a leadership post, even though all leaders eventually depart.

The few who have studied this area have determined that leaders in all fields have a shelf life (Kerfoot, 2004; Henderson et al., 2006; Robinson, 2013; Redman, 2006; Zucco, 2015). There comes a time when leaders and their units need change, either in the leader, or by the leader. The landscape in which leaders operate is constantly evolving, and leaders must have both the energy and interest to stay current in their

respective fields and in the leadership area. The leader and the unit are best served when they create a culture that embraces fresh ideas, excitement, and renewed energy. Self-awareness is critical to leadership and leader effectiveness (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013) at all stages of a leadership lifecycle. Leaders must recognize the signals that they must adapt and renew if they are to maintain their edge and effectiveness. If they are unable, or unwilling to do so, they must have the self-awareness to know that it is time to depart. Unfortunately, there is little research literature to guide leaders at this critical stage. This manuscript is focused on that understudied and designed to help fill that gap. This is an inevitable, and often a challenging concept for leaders to grasp.

Readers of this article will better understand the concept of leadership shelf life as well as learn the strategies needed to extend their shelf life. Readers will also understand signals that they must pay attention to that may indicate that their impact is waning. The adoption of the recommendations outlined in this manuscript will help current and future leaders maintain their impact longer, and when it is time to go, help them do so strategically, effectively, and with grace and dignity.

### **Leadership Research Focus**

Leadership scholars followed a distinct path of theoretical development. Scholars have successfully defined leadership, determined the factors that support leadership emergence, and uncovered the keys to leadership effectiveness. Over 60 years ago, preeminent leadership scholar Warren Bennis clairvoyantly suggested that “of all the hazy confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. Probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than any other topic in the behavioral sciences” (Bennis, 1959, p. 259). Nearly twenty years later, Burns chronicled the struggles of leadership scholars and theorists when he noted that the area of leadership remains “...one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns, 1978, p. 2). A dozen years after the Burns book was published, Bass (1990) documented the vast array of research that had been conducted up to that point in his voluminous *Bass & Stogdill Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research* text, that thoroughly chronicles the study of leadership and includes over 7,500 entries in the reference list. In the end, these scholars, and others, have concluded that leadership distills into three key elements (Weese, 2018), namely, that it: (a) is a social process; (b) is synonymous with the process of influence, and; (c) is carried out to help individuals or groups attain a desired end or outcome. More recently, scholars like Goleman (2013), Goleman et al. (2013), Nadler (2010), and Weese (2018) highlight the critical role that emotional intelligence (EQ) contributes to leadership effectiveness. These writers and others suggest that emotional intelligence (i.e., understanding and managing one's emotions and the emotions of those that they are leading) is critical to success in a leadership role. According to Goleman (2013), emotionally intelligent leaders have high levels of self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and intrinsic motivation. They genuinely and consistently care for those they lead, and colleagues associated with this leader know it, feel it, and appreciate it. However, being an emotionally intelligent leader is hard work and takes a considerable investment of time, patience, and energy. Leaders may lose this edge over time (Tichy & Cohen, 2012).

According to Bass (1990), leadership researchers were primarily interested in a leader's efficacy in heightening member satisfaction or unit effectiveness. While still important, contemporary researchers tend to focus on a leader's role in advancing outcome variables member engagement, organizational culture, and organizational climate (Scott, 2021). Few researchers have studied the final stage of the leadership lifecycle. A 2018 PWC study from the top 2,500 worldwide public companies confirmed that only 19% of CEOs stay in their role for 10 years or more, and the median tenure for CEOs was five years. This final stage of the leadership life cycle clearly warrants more attention.

Current leadership writers (e.g., Lencioni, 2016; Scott, 2021; Weese, 2018; Welty-Peachey et al., 2015) give this critical area little or no attention, and they are not alone. However, there are some notable exceptions. For example, Manner (n.d.) studied church pastors, and based on the findings of this research, advised them to pay more attention to the concept of leadership shelf life to maintain their influence over their parishioners. Henderson and colleagues (2006) studied CEO longevity and firm performance and found that leaders often lost their effectiveness in eight to 10 years. Kefgen and Houran (2017) determined

a similar pattern for leaders in the hospitality industry. Kim (2012) uncovered comparable results for health care leaders, while Earley and Weindling (2007) set their research in the educational area and found an inverse relationship between headmaster longevity (i.e., over 11 years) and school performance.

Lipiner (2020) studied the concept with sports leaders and pointed to the case of Theo Epstein and his timely departures from the General Manager positions of the Boston Red Sox, and later, the Chicago Cubs in Major League Baseball. In both cases, Epstein left when he appeared to be at the height of his influence. He was self-aware of his diminishing impact and made the decision to depart early on his terms. The late Bill Walsh, former coach and later the General Manager of the San Francisco 49ers, once stated that a decade in any leadership role is sufficient, and it is time to move on at that point, if not earlier.

Leaders in all areas can burn out and/or lose their effectiveness (Zucco, 2015). However, there are alternative strategies to departing which require the leader to stay progressive and current in both their leadership practices and their industry if they are going to engage and inspire their members effectively. Unfortunately, many do not, and over time, their impact diminishes, and their organization suffers (Kerfoot, 2004; Robinson, 2013). Leaders should understand the leadership shelf life concept and why it is a critically important component of their success and legacy. They also need to know how they can extend their leadership shelf life in a manner that allows them to extend their time and influence. They need to know the signals that their influence may be waning, and it is time to make significant changes, or find other challenges.

Writers like Kahneman (2011) tangentially touched on the topic in his seminal book entitled *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Specifically, Kahneman (2011) referred to leaders falling into the trap of System 1 decision-making (i.e., snap judgments based on experience and instincts) when a slower, more deliberate decision-making process (i.e., System 2 decision-making style) is warranted. Weese's 5C model of leadership (2018) has a scale (i.e., C4 – Contagious Enthusiasm) that measures a leader's passion for their members, for their industry, and ongoing growth as a leader (2018). When passion significantly fades in any of these areas, Weese (2018) suggested that it is time for leaders to engage in significant renewal or seek new challenges and ready themselves for a timely departure. Leaders who find themselves in this position would benefit from recommitting to significant change and intensive learning or adopting the strategies outlined in Goldsmith's (2009) short but powerful book entitled *Succession: Are You Ready?* to help ensure a smooth and effective transition to the next leader. This book is a rare example of a leadership scholar focusing on this last segment of the leadership lifecycle. He also provides leaders at this stage of the lifecycle with helpful suggestions to facilitate change or, if a better option, guidance on how to exit gracefully and effectively.

Weese (2018) suggested that leaders need to periodically (e.g., one hour every two weeks) reflect on performance data that would indicate that the organization or unit is progressing as strategically envisioned, and that members of the leadership team are independently and collectively performing effectively. Pfeifer (2015) advocated for this process and encouraged leaders to focus on specific and measurable outcomes like unit performance, colleague engagement and satisfaction, and trust. Goldsmith (2009) has been a strong and consistent advocate for periodic reflection, and he suggested that leaders do it on a daily basis. While a daily review may be excessive, a periodic assessment like those described above will provide leaders with some measure of their impact. This information, along with regular reflection on the leader's energy levels, concern for staff members and their well-being, and the degree to which the leader wishes to continue to listen and learn, will provide them with valuable information on whether they are getting near the end of their leadership life cycle. If they are, they can also reflect on whether they have the desire and energy to engage in significant renewal or determine if it is the right time for a graceful and effective exit. Input and guidance from mentors can be especially helpful at this stage, and especially from those who have gone through the process in the past.

It is not surprising that researchers have focused their efforts on the emergence and effectiveness areas of leadership as readers and leaders/prospective leaders are naturally more interested in the leader emergence and effectiveness sides of the ledger. The authors of this manuscript address this relatively underexplored area from the perspective of leaders. In doing so, they assist current and aspiring leaders with understanding the concept and provide them with helpful suggestions so they can extend their

effectiveness and impact. Leaders will also understand the signals that they may be slipping into some dangerous leadership practices that will eventually impair their effectiveness and potentially damage their organization. Finally, the authors cover the concept of leadership succession planning and help leaders effectively and gracefully transition from leadership roles when they determine that it is time for them to depart the role.

### **Need for Succession Planning**

The best leaders ensure the sustainability of their organization by engaging in leadership succession planning (Goldsmith, 2009; Hall-Ellis, 2015). Goldsmith (2009) has coached many leaders who came to the end of their shelf life and needed to step aside. He suggested that this can often be a painful experience for some leaders and their organizations, but he also was quick to suggest that it does not have to be that way. One of the biggest obstacles to an effective transition is the ego of the departing leader. Some leaders are unwilling to let go of the power and prestige of the leadership role.

Although leadership is not tied to a position (Weese, 2018), those who hold the leadership title have every opportunity to lead. The position title holds esteemed value for many in society and often to those holding the title. Goldsmith went as far as to say that for many CEOs, the title is “not just *what you do*—it becomes a huge part of *who you are*” (Goldsmith, 2009, p. 14). One may attach their self-worth to their job title. It can be challenging for some to walk away from this power and prestige, even though every occupant will eventually need to step away. Goldsmith (2009) is a rare example of a writer who covers the departure stage in the leadership lifecycle despite its inevitability. He takes readers through a four-step process, namely: (a) preparing for the transition; (b) choosing a successor; (c) coaching your successor, and; finally, (d) passing the baton. Goldsmith offers some excellent advice to leaders to help them prepare for departing the role. He suggests that departing leaders work with a trusted mentor who has effectively gone through the process and can provide helpful strategies for a successful transition. The mentor will have gone through the process in the past and will understand the natural impacts on ego, pride, and self-interest that often impair a leader's effectiveness in leaving the role with grace and dignity.

### **Leadership Shelf Life**

Are leaders like medicine and loaves of bread? Do they have a “best before date”? If so, when does it occur, and does it vary by leader or industry? If leaders do have a shelf life, how long is it? Can leaders do anything to extend their shelf life if they perceive that their influence may be waning? Finally, if they are unable or unwilling to invest the time and energy needed to renew and revitalize themselves, how should they leave the role so their legacy is intact and their group or organization is well-positioned for future success? These are critical questions, but to date, they have been largely ignored in the leadership literature. Unfortunately, leaders may begin to rest on their laurels (Kerfoot, 2004; Zucco, 2015) and/or rely too extensively on experience (Kahneman, 2011). Their experience may contribute to them making snap judgments on opportunities, being close-minded to new ventures that warrant more extended study and potential implementation.

Leadership, by nature, has its ups and downs. Leaders in every field of endeavor are frequently praised for their leadership skills and performance in the role (Bennis & Ward Biederman, 2010). Leaders are also subject to criticism when things go wrong. Leadership has its challenges, and even the most influential leaders face times of challenge when their words or actions disappoint people. At times they may get too much credit for things that go well. At other times, they bear the brunt of criticism for things beyond their control. In many ways, both scenarios go with the role. Contemporary leadership writers have changed the narrative on the topic to one that is focused on a team approach (Collins & Hansen, 2011; Lencioni, 2016). In addition to being a more effective leadership style, the team approach may dissipate positive or negative feelings toward one individual. Effective leaders are team builders who ensure that the organization is focused by an inspiring vision. However, when leaders and/or team members lose their passion for the role and/or pursuing stretch goals, others will notice, and the performance of the organization will suffer. Leadership roles in all areas can be challenging and emotionally draining.

While leadership emergence and effectiveness will remain areas of interest for scholars, leaders, and aspiring leaders in all fields, it is also important for leaders to know when and how to leave a leadership position. What are the key factors that leaders should consider as they reflect on their leadership practices and outcomes? How can they accurately assess their impact (Goleman et al., 2013)? How might they know that they are not staying as current and progressive as they need to be or that are they not listening as attentively as they once did while in the role? Finally, how can they determine if they have fallen into the trap of System 1 decision-making when System 2 decision-making is required (Kahneman, 2011)? Unfortunately, many leaders do not pay attention to these issues, and they are either removed from the role or colleagues merely count the days to the end of the leader's term. This situation is unfortunate and completely avoidable.

Understanding the concept of leadership shelf life and having the courage and wisdom to recognize the signals that it is time to accelerate succession planning has often been described as a leader's "last gift." The implications and applications of leadership shelf life for leaders in all field are omnipresent. As noted earlier, effective leadership requires a high degree of EQ and a significant component of EQ is self-awareness. Are Campus Recreation leaders self-aware of their passion for ongoing learning, professional growth, their people, and their industry? Are they self-aware enough to recognize when they are close-minded to opportunities that break with tradition but would move their unit forward? Do they detect the signals that they need to address deficiencies and engage in sustained learning and development? Self-awareness is the "secret sauce" of the leadership shelf life concept.

### **Recognition and Awareness**

Sills (2004) introduced the concept of a "comfort trap" and the detrimental effects that often transpire for leaders, personally, professionally, and emotionally. She outlined a seven-step model to help leaders break free from this comfort trap and step through a process that she metaphorically termed the "electric fence of anxiety." According to Sills (2004), this anxiety frequently prevents individuals from moving into other roles that may be challenging or uncomfortable. The seven steps in the Sills (2004) model are: (1) facing what hurts; (2) creating a vision; (3) making a decision; (4) identifying your pattern; (5) letting go; (6) facing your fear, and; (7) taking action. While all of these steps are important for leaders to consider, the measure that aligns perfectly with the leadership shelf life area is step number five (i.e., letting go). In this step, Sills (2004) outlined three considerations that can guide leaders to step away from the leadership role.

The first consideration is for leaders to keep their "eye on the prize." Effective contemporary leaders call on all stakeholders to be selfless, to think of their teams and their organization above their self-interests. Have leaders lost their edge for remaining current and progressive and/or their motivation and energy to work tirelessly to advance their organization? Do they need to think more about the organization and less about themselves? Has their energy levels or passion for their field, their colleagues, and/or for sustained learning diminished?

According to Sills (2004), the second consideration in letting go is the need to "arm your inner voice" and avoid the tendency to overlook the reality of the situation. Leaders may need to challenge themselves to do better. However, is the commitment to change realistic, and do they have the motivation to do so over the longer term? Leaders have to be honest with themselves. Awareness and recognition of the "brutal facts" (Lencioni, 2016) are critical. All leaders will leave leadership roles at some point in time. Some will have difficulty with this reality (Goldsmith, 2009; Kerfoot, 2004; Robinson, 2013). Others will strategically manage the process.

Leaders need to understand the leadership shelf life concept and be honest with themselves in recognizing when it is time to exit. They will need heightened levels of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2013) and high levels of self-awareness to know when it is the right time to leave. Unfortunately, too many leaders regardless of fields do not pay attention to these cues and consequently over-extend their stay in the role. It is natural for those wishing to stay on to be in denial of their performance, make excuses, and/or blame others for their circumstances. However, it would be far better for them to focus on what they accomplished in the role and appreciate the fact that the organization needs to have a new leader. Colleagues

and other stakeholders will remember that their leader made a selfless decision and had the organization's best interest at heart.

The third consideration in this step, according to Sills (2004), is termed "welcoming anger." It is often disappointing for leaders to leave roles that they once aspired to fill. Some may become angry. However, according to Goldsmith (2009), this anger can and should be channeled in a positive direction. Departing leaders may be able to find other opportunities that will provide new challenges, be them subsequent employment opportunities or volunteer committee roles in their community. Either way, the departing leaders would be well served in having something else to look forward to once they depart the position. Perhaps it is a similar role at a different university. Maybe it is a transition into retirement and the pursuit of hobbies or volunteer roles. These leaders can exit gracefully and with dignity, and in doing so, look back on their accomplishments with a sense of pride. They will know in their hearts that they left because it was in the best interest of the organization. Furthermore, the leader may have time to effectively "onboard" their successor and provide appropriate support to that individual once he/she has assumed the leadership position. It all starts with leaders having a high degree of self-awareness, as well as having the courage and strength to leave on their terms, with class, dignity, and the interests of the organization as their highest priority.

Motivation is another factor that has been linked to a leader's sustained effectiveness, and ultimately, an extended shelf life (Percy & Rossiter, 1992). Motivation is a critical metric in the leadership shelf-life process, and Percy and Rossiter (1992) offer an intriguing explanation through the consumer psychology lens. For this metric, these researchers proposed "eight basic motives" that need to be considered as leaders accurately answer questions about their future in the leadership role (e.g., Do I need this? Do I want this? Do I have the energy to renew my skill set? Is the time right for me to depart? What else would I like to do that would bring me fulfillment and satisfaction?). Each motive requires a positive or negative response. Positive motivation relates to leadership shelf life. The three positive motives are sensory gratification, intellectual stimulation, and social approval. Sensory gratification refers to the motivating process of seeking extra physiological enjoyment from the product (i.e., the leadership position). Intellectual stimulation refers to seeking extra psychological inspiration from the product (i.e., the leadership position), while social approval refers to seeking the opportunity for social reward from the product (i.e., leadership position). Accurately assessing whether one's physical, psychological, and social needs are met is the way for leaders to determine if they should renew or step away from a leadership role. Ego, prestige, and power are often driving forces that cloud an accurate decision (Zucco, 2015). Leaders must be true to themselves. They would be well-served by talking with trusted mentors who have made the renewal and/or stepping down decision. These mentors could help the leaders at this decision point accurately assess their situation and future plans, and coach them in implementing the decision they eventually make (Goldsmith, 2009).

### **Cues of a Late Stage Leadership Shelf Life**

Leadership shelf life and the point at which a leader has reached his/her peak is a difficult stage to determine. The conversation as to when to leave a position or how to "quit" is one that is often avoided by many leaders (Kerfoot, 2004). It is, however, essential for leaders to consider the available research to assist them with this decision. Kerfoot (2004) highlighted the emotional components of the renewal versus departure decision. She noted that "you will probably find leaders who range from the passionate and inspired change agents to those whose passion and soul are stale and who are just trading water and holding to the status quo" (Kerfoot, 2004, p. 84). There is a range of passion within leaders. Leaders with passion are exuberant, and it shows in their attitudes and in their performance. They are excited about the future and prepared to invest the personal time and energy to make it a reality. There are also examples of leaders who have reached their "best before date," and they cling to the position for the wrong reasons (e.g., financial, ego, power, prestige). Their organization and their members generally suffer as a result (Goldsmith, 2009).

Kerfoot noted that leadership is "...the process of influence, literally meaning, 'to flow from.' It is spiritual and emotional, dramatic and passionate" (Kerfoot, 2004, p. 84)! How do leaders go from such exuberant and passionate individuals to those who do not inspire? Some who recognize that they are starting

to become disconnected and left behind can change. Ulrich and Smallwood (2013) suggested that leaders who continue to engage in professional development, ongoing coaching and mentorship, and continual learning can remain effective. However, researchers have determined that leaders do not always have this level of self-awareness (Goleman et al., 2013), and they may continue to rely on past strategies and leadership practices that impair their impact and result in decreased member satisfaction and diminished organizational performance (Henderson et al., 2006; Kim, 2012). Leaders lacking self-awareness may not be aware of their negative impact; however, those who report to these leaders know.

In his book entitled *The Big Bing: Black Holes of Time Management*, Bing described the five different stages of a leader's shelf life. In his analogy to the expiration of food, Bing (2003) noted that these stages are inevitable, and the rate at which a leader progresses through these stages varies from person to person. The five stages are: (a) fresh and neatly packaged, (b) mature and very tasty, (c) starting to turn, (d) ready for the platinum dumpster, and; (e) burial at sea.

The fresh and neatly packaged leader is a person who is early in their tenure. These leaders typically are hungry to learn, listen effectively, and they are usually quick to serve the needs of their stakeholders. They are anxious to get off to a good start. They are the type of leaders that others want to follow. However, without sustained effort and attention, things often change. According to Kerfoot (2004), with time and experience, leaders tend to listen less and rely too extensively on past practice. The participative leadership practices that served them well in the past often give way to autocratic decision-making practices. They do not suspend intuition and/or remain open to new ideas and perspectives (Kahneman, 2004). Leaders that do not change this behavior progress through the subsequent two stages quickly, and according to Bing (2003), enter the *starting to turn* phase.

According to Bing (2003), leaders who move too fast through the first two stages of his model quickly spiral into the devastating and destructive stages of the leadership lifecycle. This is the stage in the lifecycle where leaders often become victims of burnout, staleness, become disengaged, and lose their passion for the work they are doing (Kerfoot, 2004). Self-awareness is critical for leaders (Goleman et al., 2013) so they can identify the signals that indicate that they are losing their passion for the leadership role. These signals can be used as a form of "alert" to an individual that they need to find their passion for leadership again, or their influence and impact will be significantly compromised. Tichy and Cohen (2012) suggested that leaders must have an "edge." They must be excited about the future, about ongoing learning and leadership development. According to Tichy and Cohen (2012), when they lose this edge, they often begin to rest on their laurels, and they enter a comfort zone that is not conducive to sustained leadership effectiveness.

Sills (2004) expanded on the comfort zone concept and presented a model that has considerable applicability to the leadership shelf life concept and its impact on leader effectiveness in all fields. However, she cautions readers with a warning that leaders can often be in denial, and therefore not identify or accept the signals that their passion for the leadership role is waning. She warns readers that leaders can get too comfortable in the role, and she suggests that moving out of this comfort zone is like stepping from a platform and on to a tightrope (Sills, 2004). It is far easier to coast in a leadership role than tackle new challenges, consider new perspectives, or branch out in uncertain territories, regardless of the fact that some of these moves may be in the best interests of the organization. Sills (2004) accurately suggested that emotions significantly contribute to one's comfort level. Followers may be too emotionally attached to a leader to challenge them to think or act differently even when it is in the organization's best interest. However, as Lencioni (2016) poignantly asserts, high-performing leaders must be able to count on others to speak up when appropriate so the best decisions can be made for the organization. Leaders need that level of loyalty from members of their leadership team.

Leaders must face the "brutal facts" (Collins, 2001). This can be uncomfortable, but it is a necessary process for leaders who seek to heighten their effectiveness and, where necessary, lead change (Kotter, 1996). Leaders must also ensure that a clear path forward is created, effectively communicated to stakeholders, and strategically pursued (Weese, 2018). The vision does not necessarily need to be created by the leader, but the leader must ensure that one is in place. The best leaders embed a culture that encourages the full engagement of others who freely and openly share their ideas and perspectives. Leaders

and members of their leadership teams can then use their experience to distill these ideas into a clear and coherent strategic vision (Weese, 2018). The reflection processes outlined above will provide the leader with a level of awareness as to how the leader, the direct reports, and the unit is performing. It is a critical but often overlooked process for leaders, but one that often is neglected.

The remaining steps in the Sills (2004) process calls for action. Leaders may have to let go of their ideas and perspectives when they are convinced of better alternatives. They need to surround themselves with authentic leaders who will share their perspectives and challenge leaders where appropriate. These leaders must be brave, confident, and clairvoyant, and when action is required, they boldly enact it. However, to do so takes time and energy that leaders may not wish to invest after serving in the leadership role for an extended period of time. Leaders need to continually renew and reinvent themselves to maintain effectiveness (Henderson et al., 2006). They must stay current, maintain high levels of energy, and display a passion for their field, their people, and the leadership role (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2013; Weese, 2018). When passion wanes, leadership effectiveness is usually not too far behind (Goldsmith, 2009; Kim, 2012; Sills, 2004). Hargreaves and Fink (2012) examined the leadership practices that supported sustainable leadership in educational settings. Specifically, they examined school principals, their leadership practices, and their school performance over three decades. Their research was set in Canada and the United States and involved more than 200 teachers and administrators. They concluded that the academic leaders who were effective over a long period of time: (a) modeled and supported continued learning; (b) built on small wins that others recognized and respected; (c) developed leadership skills in others; (d) were inclusive and quickly addressed issues of social justice; (e) were efficient and effective in maximizing human and material resources; (f) built synergies, and; (g) respected the environment and other social causes.

### **The Renewal Decision**

The shelf life of a leader can vary in duration. Whether by their own doing or by some external decision, a leader will undoubtedly reach the end of their shelf life at some point. However, a leader's shelf life can be extended. Ulrich and Smallwood (2013) offered several suggestions to help leaders with this process. Specifically, they suggested that leaders who continue to learn, stay current in their field, engage in ongoing professional development, and continue to engage with mentors and coaches can extend their effectiveness over time and extend their shelf-life beyond the typical eight- to 10-year window identified by Henderson et al. (2006).

Knowing when to step away from a position requires a higher level of self-awareness. Aspiring leaders typically spend their time building the skills and experience profiles needed to emerge and excel in a leadership role. In all likelihood, they have a high degree of ambition and self-awareness to develop the areas that would effectively position them for success in earning a leadership position. However, researchers like Kerfoot (2004) suggested that this ambition and skill set might wane with time and experience in the leadership role. Leaders often rely too much on past experiences, and this cue could signal that a leader is reaching the end of their leadership shelf life.

Unfortunately, some leaders overstay their welcome. This extended stay could result from not wanting to step away (i.e., due to ego, prestige, power, money, or uncertainty of their next step) or not knowing how to step away effectively. Goldsmith (2009) agreed that the decision to step away could be emotionally difficult for some leaders. He offered leaders a series of recommendations that can help leaders come to terms with this decision and engage in productive actions that help ensure a dignified exit and implement an effective succession plan. These recommendations are outlined in the following section.

### **The Decision to Depart**

Knowing when to step away from a leadership role requires self-awareness and confidence. The best leaders have high levels of emotional intelligence, and especially self-awareness (Goleman et al., 2013). Leaders wishing to retain the role for various selfish reasons may consciously or unconsciously choose to ignore the cues that signal a pending leadership shelf-life issue. Leaders need to think clearly about their decisions to renew or depart from a leadership role, and this decision is often based on separating and addressing their "needs" and "wants". "Needs" are things that we cannot live without. "Wants" are things



we desire. Our “needs” and “wants” may be financial, emotional, or physical. It may be best to fulfill them in another venture. Influential leaders put the “needs” of the organization ahead of their own “needs”.

Leaders must be honest with themselves and decide based on what is best for all parties. Perhaps one of the reasons for an extended stay is a leader not knowing how to step away from a leadership post effectively. The insights presented in Goldsmith’s (2009) book can assist leaders with addressing this frequently difficult process. However, a leader staying beyond their shelf life can be costly to an organization in a number of ways (e.g., decision making, organizational performance). The cost to the leader could be legacy-related. Ending a leadership role on a sour note or resulting from poor performance could permanently tarnish a leader’s reputation and damage their legacy. It is better to leave on a high note, with the leader’s legacy, reputation, and dignity intact. Leaders can, and should, exert more control of this situation. When a leader has the self-awareness to know that they have reached the end of their shelf life, they must “let go” and prepare to leave their position with grace and a proud sense of accomplishment. Goldsmith (2009) believed that this is a strategic imperative for departing leaders.

### **Onboarding and Supporting the Successor**

While the outgoing leader often has little or no input on naming their successor, the leader can ensure that several colleagues are prepared to compete for the position effectively. The team approach to leadership that contemporary leadership writers promote (Weese, 2018), coupled with the ongoing learning and development activities promoted later in this article, will help prepare many different leaders for the role. Hall-Ellis (2015) referred to this process as “building the pipeline,” and it is a critical process that effective leaders need to implement. Getting the next generation of leaders ready for leadership roles will help ensure a fuller pipeline of potential successors who are prepared for the challenges of the role, even if they do not subsequently move into the leadership position. In fact, preparing a number of people will help build a solid network of leadership, regardless of who eventually assumes the role. However, irrespective of who is appointed, once named, the outgoing leader can be beneficial in acclimatizing the successor. The outgoing leader should outline the successes and challenges they have experienced, but it is imperative that this information be shared without judgment only to inform the incoming leader. The incoming leader will need to have full authority to lead. Outgoing leaders who do this effectively present information with the caveat that they fully appreciate, if not expect, the incoming leader to lead as they see fit, and the information provided is only presented for historical context. This information should help the incoming leader better understand the organization and facilitate a smoother transition.

Consistent with Goldsmith’s (2009) advice, outgoing leaders should try to ensure that they have other challenges to pursue after leaving the role. This plan generally facilitates a smoother transition. For example, Richard Peddie, the former President and CEO of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, arguably Canada’s most prestigious and expansive leadership position, left the role after 14 years and followed his passion for owning and operating a bookstore. “I believe that small communities need great libraries and great bookstores in this day and age,” Peddie said. “I’m investing in the community, and if that costs me a little bit of money, that’s fine” (Addison, 2020). After his tenure at Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, Peddie decided to work on a project that he was personally committed to advancing. He had something else to do that challenged him and filled a void. Other departing leaders assume different leadership roles, and some choose to serve in volunteer capacities on a variety of Boards. Having new challenges helps ease the transition (Goldsmith, 2009) and helps leaders focus their energy on something they like to do following the transition.

That said, the outgoing leader should be available for phone calls or visits that would help the incoming leader transition into the leadership role. However, according to Goldsmith (2009), it is also vital that outgoing leaders make a clean break, give their successor needed “space,” and always speak favorably to colleagues about their successor. Goldsmith (2009) cautioned outgoing leaders to avoid reflecting on the “good old days” with colleagues who need to support the incoming leader.

In a relay race, batons are exchanged, and the smoothness of the exchange is necessary for the team to perform at an optimal level. The same scenario holds for organizational leadership transitions. Like the relay race, the baton needs to be exchanged while the unit is moving forward. The difference in the

administrative situation is that an outgoing leader may have been in the role (and holding the baton) for an extended period and may not be so willing to pass the baton on to the next leader (Goldsmith, 2009). The outgoing leader is primarily responsible for the effective exchange of this baton. A smooth transition will allow the organization to continue its progress. The outgoing leader would be well-served in ensuring that the needs of the organization are considered and do everything in their power to ensure a smooth and effective transition (Goldsmith, 2009).

Once the successor is named, leaders are often worried about becoming a “lame duck.” According to Goldsmith (2009), this scenario is inevitable. The focus will naturally shift abruptly to the new leader. Those who understand that this is a natural phenomenon and are proud of their accomplishments will not be impacted by this shift.

Leaders at stage four of Goldsmith’s model (2009) are “passing the baton.” Goldsmith (2009) offered three suggestions to make this a dignified and effective process. Leaders who do this successfully focus on: (a) embracing happiness; (b) finding meaning, and; (c) adding value. The best leaders are those who find happiness in what they do. Otherwise, why be a leader at all? When leaders see a crucial part of their journey coming to an end, it can be difficult for some to realize that they are not the leader anymore. “As you face transition, you will need to look for new ways to find the happiness that came with being a chief executive” (Goldsmith, 2009, p. 23-24). Goldsmith (2009) encourages outgoing leaders at this time in the lifecycle to reflect on the collective accomplishments of the organization. He suggested that the transition can be easier for leaders if they consider the tangible progress that was made while they were in office as well as the next generation of leaders who were developed during this time frame. Outgoing leaders can generally point to the fact that they added value to the organization and the people that they led.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS**

This article sheds considerable light on an underexplored area of leadership shelf life in sport management and the generic leadership literature bases. Most of the research and popular press books and articles on leadership focus on strategies to emerge and/or excel in the role. Very little research can be found on effectively departing the leadership role, in spite of the fact that everyone will eventually exit.

The authors offer the following 10 implications that current and aspiring leaders should consider to effectively navigate the final stage of the leadership lifecycle:

1. Recognize that a shelf life exists for every leader, and the time will come to exit gracefully and effectively. Staying current in the field, maintaining a high degree of passion for your industry and the latest developments, staying close to your staff members, and ensuring their ongoing development will allow you to extend your efficacy and shelf life.
2. Emotional intelligence is critical to leadership success. A significant component of emotional intelligence is leader-self-awareness. Sharpen your skills in this crucial area so you know when your impact is starting to wane. Take seminars and webinars on the topic of emotional intelligence. Make a conscientious effort to stay open to the ideas of others, remain a leader in development, and maximize your influence for as long as possible.
3. Collins (2011) encouraged leaders to confront the “brutal facts” Goldsmith (2009) urged leaders to address critical performance questions on daily basis. Weese (2018) suggested that leaders set aside one hour every two weeks to self-reflect on a leader’s priorities, the performance of the unit and the various departments, and the performance and developmental needs of the leader’s direct reports. This exercise is critically important for all leaders, and may help them decide if renewal or departure is their best course of action.
4. A leader’s shelf life is real, but it can be extended through ongoing professional development, effective coaching and mentoring from trusted sources, and having a genuine commitment and plan to stay current in leadership and your industry. Continue to network with colleagues in the profession and on your campus. Tap into the vast array of campus resources that are offered to help colleagues maximize their impact.

5. Avoid the tendency to engage in Level 1 decision making (i.e., catch yourself thinking that this will never work, or that we have tried that before and it didn't work) and engage in more Level 2 decision-making behaviors (i.e., being open to alternatives and perspectives). Leaders in all fields have a tendency to default to a Level 1 decision-making strategy when they are in the leadership role for an extended period of time. Be aware of this trend, and do not succumb to the practice.
6. Ensure a “learning culture” in your unit and with you direct report by providing current leadership books and other resources that can be reviewed, summarized, and applied to heighten leadership effectiveness and promote learning throughout the organization. Create and teach a leader development program for your members. Have them read current books in the field and meet at mini-retreats to discuss the content and the application to their area. This will help ensure a plentiful pipeline of talent and potential successors when a leadership transition becomes necessary.
7. Send high potential leaders to conferences and other professional development programs. Influential leaders create growth opportunities that bolster the leadership skills of their team members, raise their profile, and open doors for their colleagues. At the end of your career, your greatest satisfaction will undoubtedly come from seeing the progress and accomplishment of current and former members of your leadership team who are demonstrating leadership in the field and perhaps leading a program. Invest in these colleagues today to help ensure that this situation becomes a reality.
8. Know that you will eventually leave the leadership role, and when you do, help your successor get off to a good start through an effective onboarding program (and a plan to stay out of their way once they are installed). It is usually best to have a clean break and to get out of your successor’s way.
9. Find a trusted mentor who has transitioned through the end of a leadership life cycle. This person can provide a wealth of information on what to expect and offer strategies that help mentees effectively and smoothly transition from the role. Spend time with them and discuss the realities of not having access to resources, support services, or professional networks. Ask them to share their strategies and offer suggestions that can help you at this critical point. Finally, tell them that you will pay them back by doing the same for others when that need arises.
10. Have another opportunity or passion to pursue so the transition is both easier and smoother. Departing leaders usually have a wealth of talent to share with volunteer boards and community organizations. In addition, some departing leaders may be interested in pursuing challenging roles at other schools. Still, others will have passions they wish to pursue, but if this is the case, develop them while still in the role. We all need challenges. Find things to do that you will find to be rewarding and intellectually stimulating. Don’t dwell on the past. Be proud of what you collectively accomplished but always look ahead.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bookstores and leadership journals are filled with sources designed to help prospective leaders emerge into leadership roles and/or maximize their effectiveness in the role once it is assumed. However, little attention is paid to exiting the position. All leaders will eventually leave the role regardless of their stature or effectiveness. This article addresses that underexplored but inevitable leadership area. Readers were introduced to the topic of leadership shelf life and the importance of accurate awareness and recognition of the cues that suggest that it is time for a leader to renew or gracefully exit. The section closed with a discussion on leadership succession planning and why it is critically important to outgoing leaders, incoming leaders, and the organization.

Effective leadership requires time, energy, and a never-ending quest for improvement. New developments unfold in the field, and the best leaders stay current in the profession and the leadership area.

However, sometimes leaders reach a critical point where they need to reinvest in themselves or potentially leave the role. Although all leaders will eventually leave their position, the concept of leadership shelf life remains an underexplored and underreported area in many fields. This article attempts to fill that gap and provide guidance to current and aspiring leaders as they navigate through the entirety of their leadership life cycle.

Researchers have suggested that without awareness and conscious intervention, a leader's impact will soon wane. Studies of CEOs (Henderson et al., 2006), health care professionals (Kim 2012), academic leaders (Earley & Weindling, 2007), and nurses (Kerfoot, 2004) all point to the fact that the concept of leadership shelf life exists. Pfeiffer (2015) highlighted the fact that CEO tenure was declining in business and industry throughout the world. Leaders must continue to evolve. The leadership practices that facilitated leadership success in the early stages of their tenure must be updated and refreshed. Leaders must remain a work in progress (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2013) and stay active in professional development, ongoing coaching programs, and engagement with trusted mentors to remain current in the field and on the topic of leadership. Tichy and Cohen (2012) and Weese (2018) stated that leaders must maintain their passion for the role and always be open to listening and learning from others. When their passion for learning subsides, and leaders start to rely too extensively on their experience, it is time for them to leave the leadership role (Kerfoot, 2004). Leaders at this point in the lifecycle would benefit from following the advice presented by Goldsmith (2009).

Leaders with heightened levels of self-awareness to recognize the trap of resting on their laurels can extend their shelf life through a recommitment to professional development, ongoing learning, being open to new ideas and perspectives from colleagues. This helps ensure a renewed passion for the leader's industry, their people, and for a deeper understanding and better leadership practices.

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