

Transition of Agency Personnel
During Important Planning Processes

The “Handover Memo”

Purpose: Today, communities of place, local governments, Tribes, external agencies, and other groups are increasingly convening and facilitating collaborative efforts that directly involve our agency. In turn, our agency is recognizing the need for improved transitions between outgoing leaders and incoming leaders who will assume the responsibility for working directly with the public and partners. Good transition management between the agency leader these groups have been working with, and the leader they will now rely on, is especially important. Our ability to solve natural resource related problems over the long run depends on the quality of long-term relationships between agencies, other organizations, and the public. Often, what makes collaboration work is a combination of formal and informal working agreements and commitments between various participants.

Collaboration and enhanced public engagement is also a central focus of the Forest Service’s 2012 National Forest Management Act Planning Rule, as well as other large planning efforts such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. Consequently, we will be expected more often on more landscapes to have closer relationships with many of our partners.

Change, the essence of a transition, can leave people unsure of their future and create undue stress. While this may sound obvious, we have learned over time that some actions and behaviors work better than others during transitions, which involve more than just outgoing and incoming leaders: employees, partners, stakeholders, families, and communities are also affected. It makes a lot of sense then, that everyone involved in the transition be included in the transition process.

The purpose of this “Handover Memo” is to help communicate agreements and commitments not only between the departing leader and the new leader, agency staff and superiors, and involved stakeholders who will continue to support such cooperative efforts in the interim and into the future. This Memo also provides some tips for how to engage partners and stakeholders during leadership transitions. The very act of writing or finalizing this memo will emphasize the importance of, and pass along a better understanding of the relationships and cooperative efforts you have helped develop, so they can continue to grow and evolve.

This memo is intended to focus on establishing and maintaining community relationships associated with ongoing partnerships and collaborative work. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of activities and/or projects.

Template

To: Address memo to the new agency unit leader and any interim leaders.

From: Completed by you as the outgoing leader prior to your departure. At a minimum, memo should be developed with the participation of your primary staff. At your discretion, you may find it useful to also have others, including your external partners, review it prior to finalization.

cc: At a minimum, the letter should be copied to your primary staff and supervisor. You should also copy your collaborative partners to better meet the purposes of this memo. You may want to consider posting your letter to the Forest's website, if there is significant public interest in the leadership transition.

The memorandum should cover the following five areas:

- **Describe the current partnership and collaborative efforts underway on your unit**

Briefly describe any specific projects or programs that each partnership or collaborative effort is currently engaged in. This memorandum should largely focus on describing key aspects of ongoing partnerships and collaborative relationships that may not have any formal, written agreements that are readily available for your successor to review. Partnerships and collaborative efforts that do have formal agreements (e.g. Resource Advisory Groups, Memorandum's of Understanding, Cooperative Agreements, etc.) can simply be referenced with a description of the activities, projects or goals that are currently underway. Some basic information about the length of time a partner or collaborative effort has been underway may also be useful. Some relationships will be in their infancy while others may have evolved over a period of time. When appropriate, consider having your key partners assist with crafting this section and include their signatures on the memo.

- **Commitments or schedules associated with current partnership, collaborative, and planning efforts**

For each of the above relationships, describe any formal or informal commitments you have made to key partners or groups leading or engaged in collaborative efforts with you or your unit. Be sure to include any shared understandings about specific schedules for accomplishing joint projects or implementing shared programs. Commitments may include but are not limited to time agreements, financial arrangements, accomplishments or personnel commitments. These commitments may or may not need to be renegotiated with your departure. However, the current state of any agreement is key information to pass on to your successor, supervisor and staff.

It may be helpful to also develop a "Key Roles and Responsibilities" document that outlines which Forest Service staff is responsible for specific planning and other tasks, so that internal and external stakeholders are aware who will be stepping up during the transition period. This is especially important if agency staff not typically associated with a particular issue (a fuels planner stepping in to cover planning work involving botanical resources, for example) will be in an "acting" role during the transition.

Again, when appropriate, consider having your key partners jointly craft this section and include their signatures.

- **Current working agreements or procedures**

Describe any local communication norms or procedural agreements that help keep relationships active and well-functioning. This may include information about regular meetings, formal and informal expectations or working agreements that partners and the agency have developed during your tenure. This may include but are not limited to information about communication frequency, timing, particular subjects or issues of interest and key contacts etc.

Because this memo will function in concert with other transition activities and an on-site visit with your successor, this memorandum can be reasonably brief and focused on factual information about current partnerships and collaborative efforts that are active and underway during the transition period.

- **Develop, maintain, and share your contacts**

The outgoing leader should identify and maintain a list of contacts, as well as short description about each contact, and share that list with incoming leaders (a virtual or actual Rolodex). These contacts may be close partners, or they may be individuals and organizations with which you only rarely communicate (but are important to know who they are, their interest in National Forest management, and how to get ahold

- **Strategy for meeting and getting to know your community**

Describe a potential outreach and engagement strategy for incoming staff to foster and maintain relationships within the surrounding community. Include information on potential venues, regularly scheduled events (if there are any), community social gatherings, and contacts for each. Where possible, engage your key partners in development of this section. To help incoming and outgoing leaders help the community and your stakeholders during the transition, we have developed the following guiding principles:

Incoming Leaders

- Meet as many people as you can: it lets them know *they're* important.
- Learn the issues and the programs: it shows you care.
- Let your employees and stakeholders see you for who you are, figuratively and literally: you'll build trust faster.
- Maintain your enthusiasm and make a few friends in the process: people want to hang around others with a positive, upbeat attitude.
- Build a solid relationship with your staff because without it, collaboration with our stakeholders or customers isn't possible.
- Let your employees' help you get up to speed, especially those who've been in place a long-time: they'll feel appreciated.
- Build on your predecessor's successes: those involved will feel valued for their past contributions.

- Don't assume your employees are on the same page: they span generations, experience, and knowledge. The same goes for your partners and stakeholders.
- Every group has informal brokers, central connectors and peripheral players. Learn the difference and figure out who they are: this will improve the group's communication and your overall effectiveness.¹
- Pay attention to the budget process, it's linked to employee and community morale: for employees it's about respect and empowerment, for the community it's about trust.
- Take time to learn a little about the history and culture of the new place before arriving: people take pride in their history.
- Think of some good questions (Appreciative Inquiry²): they help make a connection with both stakeholders and staff.
- Direct communication is better than indirect in a transition process: there's less room for rumor and misunderstanding.

Outgoing Leaders

- Don't forget where you've been: it helped you get where you're going.
- Include the community in outreach efforts for your replacement (this includes "acting" positions): it improves the chances they'll continue to communicate with the Forest Service.
- Have your leadership team develop a "30/60/90 day" list of priority actions in advance of your departure: the change will be less stressful for those you leave behind.
- Direct communication is better than indirect in a transition process: there's less room for rumor and misunderstanding.

Forest Service Staff and Communities of Place, Interest, and Culture

- Make time to introduce yourself to the new leader: they'll remember you faster.
- Volunteer: you'll broaden your perspective and gain valuable insight into how your expertise contributes to your unit's and/or your community's success.
- Leverage people in your existing network to establish new contacts: you'll be more efficient and expand your knowledge base.
- When interacting, ask questions to find commonalities: common ground is more likely to exist in *why* someone wants something, less so in *what* they want.
- Treat network building as integral part of your day: you'll have a better sense of what's going on.
- Attend "meet and greet" activities: putting a face with a name is always helpful.
- Engage in activities that promote trust and collaboration: you'll be viewed as more collaborative and trustworthy yourself.
- Direct communication is better than indirect in a transition process: there's less room for rumor and misunderstanding.

¹ These terms reflect the informal linkages among group members and can, for example: eliminate information bottlenecks, bridge disconnected individuals or groups, recognize and support key stakeholders, and pull in people with untapped expertise. Cross, R. & Parker, A. (2004). *The hidden power of social networks: Understanding how work really gets done in organizations*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

² Appreciative Inquiry starts with the belief that every organization, and every person in that organization, has positive aspects that can be built upon. It asks questions like "What's working well?", "What's good about what you are currently doing?"