

Life after Public Safety: A Personal Succession Process for Your “Next Chapter”



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Introduction

What comes to mind when you hear the term *succession planning*? Most people think immediately of its most common workplace application - i.e., replacing top leaders when they leave their organizations. But did you know that an effective succession process can be adapted for personal use? In fact, it can be very helpful in facilitating a variety of transitions, such as from your current position to other employment, to self-employment, to partial retirement, and to full retirement.

Before we get into the details of engaging in a personal succession process, let's talk about what makes doing so more important for public safety professionals than for people in other professions:

- Typically you are eligible for retirement at an earlier age. Barring injury, illness, or disability, you have many productive years left and more options than those who retire at a later age. Thus planning for that time takes on greater importance.
- The timing of your exit is not always your choice. Although ideally you will start planning your next chapter at least 3-5 years before you anticipate a transition, the fact that you work in a politicized environment means that time frame may be cut short. A succession process that includes a contingency plan can help you adapt more readily to the new scenario.
- Those who have spent their entire careers in public safety may not be aware of the myriad of opportunities outside the industry - or even inside it. A succession process provides a methodical way to identify resources to assist in educating you about your options.
- If you decide to work outside the public safety arena, you may find yourself in the unfamiliar position of not being the expert. A succession process will help you identify any gaps and create a plan to fill them.

A personal succession process includes five phases:

1. **Decide:** What does your next chapter look like? Does it include continued involvement in public safety (e.g., as a mentor) or would you prefer a clean break? Are you working for yourself, for others, or not working at all? How and where are you spending your time, and with whom? The objective is to create as clear a "big picture" as possible for your ideal next chapter.



2. **Prepare:** Your mindset or attitude toward your next chapter provides the framework within which you will be making decisions. Are you dreading your transition or are you excited about the possibilities that lie ahead? Choices made from a sense of anticipation about the future are very different than those made from a feeling of dismay, resentment, or anxiety.
3. **Create:** Your succession plan is a document that spells out the steps necessary for you to transition easily and smoothly to your desired next chapter. An effective implementation plan is very detailed and includes specific milestones, measures, and accountability mechanisms.
4. **Implement:** Once developed, your plan must be put into action. Its accountability mechanisms will enable you to stay on track.
5. **Transition:** Allow adequate time to say your farewells. Begin the next stage in your life's journey without second-guessing yourself. Enjoy what lies ahead!

Let's examine each step of the personal succession process to identify what specific actions you must take to ensure a smooth transition to your next chapter.

Phase1: Decide

Ideally you begin the succession process three to five years before your planned transition. This time frame will allow you to create a clear picture of what you want to do, then work backwards to determine the steps needed to get there.

1. Begin with the end in mind: decide what you want your life to look like after you leave your current position.

Before you can develop an effective plan of action for your next chapter, you must have a specific outcome in mind. Initially, contemplate that outcome WITHOUT considering real or perceived constraints; we will address them later. For now, paint your ideal picture of your next chapter. Here are some questions to get you started:

- What do you want your life to include once you leave your current position? What elements do you want to leave behind?
- Does your picture include continued involvement with public safety? If so, what form(s) would you like that involvement to take?



- If you want to continue to work, will it be in public safety or in some other arena? How many hours a week do you wish to work? Do you want to work for someone else, or go out on your own? (If the latter, you will be spending MANY hours each week at work!)
- If you want to stop working, how would you like to re-allocate the [fill in the number of hours] per month that you previously spent on the job?
- Do you want to take a break before taking on other work?
- How active will you be?
- Do you wish to start a new adventure, re-connect with a previous hobby or spend more time on a current one, undertake volunteer work, or engage in some combination of these possibilities?
- Where will you live?
- Who will be part of your next chapter?
- Is there a goal you'd like to achieve, or a legacy you would like to leave?
- What is one thing that, even if not possible today, you would love to do right now? Think about what specific actions you can take TODAY to make it a reality as you move forward.

2. Once you have a clear picture of your desired future, assess where you are now, relative to that picture.

In this step you identify what you must do to set yourself up for success, both in your transition and in your next chapter. Using your desired future as your touchstone, work backwards to determine the steps necessary to get you from where you are right now to there. This is the point at which to consider how to address possible constraints.

Here are some questions to consider during this step:

- What is your level of readiness - mentally, physically, financially, and emotionally - to achieve your desired outcome?
- How will you address the mindset issues that could hold you back from achieving your ideal next chapter?



- Where can you find help in identifying the options out there that might interest you?
- What knowledge, skills, and/or experience gaps must you address?
- Your lifestyle changes will affect your family. What is *their* level of readiness for your next chapter? How will you support each other in making the upcoming change?
- Which tasks, behaviors, and outcomes can you begin to address now?

Phase 2: Prepare

The preparation stage is critical to your successful transition. Human beings in general are resistant to change; given their high regard for tradition, public safety leaders may find that they are particularly adverse to change. However, that legacy may not serve you well in your next chapter. Without acknowledging and addressing this aspect of human nature, your transition will be much more difficult than it needs to be.

This stage addresses how you prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for the transition to your next chapter. Just as is the case with a size-up in the field, jumping into action without taking the time to assess the situation and create a plan to ensure a smooth transition to your next chapter does a disservice to yourself and others.

3. Make yourself your first priority.

Most public safety professionals are not used to making themselves their first priority. Because you have spent your career putting others' needs and interests ahead of your own, making yourself your top priority represents a profound change that will require practice. It may make you feel uncomfortable at first. It definitely will require you to re-educate others so they change their expectations going forward. This is the time to break the habit of putting others' needs first, and to focus on your own. The emphasis should be on *your* personal satisfaction, worth, and well-being.

By "first priority" I mean your TOP priority. There is no such thing as "one of the first" or "one of the top" priorities. There can be only one #1 priority, and that is YOU. Transitioning to the next chapter allows you to create new priorities. A personal succession process can help you do that.



You might find it helpful to work with an expert who can assist you in shifting your priorities to put yourself first AND in holding you accountable for honoring that new order. This person might be a career counselor, a colleague who has made the transition out of his/her public safety position successfully, or a knowledgeable consultant or coach. Do NOT rely on a family member as your major advisor: you want someone who can address your situation as objectively as possible, and whose job it is to ask you the questions that will guide your decisions and choices so that you stay on the path to your desired future. Think of it this way: you now are planning a new business – i.e., the business of your life. Why would you not take the creation of this new business as seriously as you do the running of your agency?

4. Engage in self-care.

Part of putting yourself first means actively engaging in self-care. Would you charge headlong into an unknown situation without first checking to make sure you have the proper equipment and/or backup to keep you and the public safe? Why not do the same in non-emergency situations? Here are eight suggestions to help you get started in taking care of yourself as you transition to your next chapter:

- View your life as a whole rather than as pieces compartmentalized into artificial categories such as “work” and “family.” This point is particularly important as you prepare to leave your “work life” behind.
- Attend to all aspects of your being – i.e., body, mind, emotions, spirit.
- Starting now, regularly block out on your calendar some “quiet” time by scheduling appointments with yourself. Keep these appointments religiously.
- Release people and things that no longer serve you well. Thank them for their service, then send them on their way. Be ruthless in your assessments!
- Make decisions that are consistent with your personal values.
- Delegate relentlessly. Ask yourself, “Am I the only person in the world who can do [X]?” When the answer is “No” (which it is 99% of the time if you are being truthful with yourself), delegate the task or outcome; otherwise do it yourself.
- Zealously guard your time. Make your quiet time sacrosanct.



- Take time out every day to enjoy the simple pleasures in life.

5. Ask for and receive help in making the transition to your next chapter.

Consulting an expert who can guide you through the transition process would be a wise investment – for you and for those who are dependent on your choices. Leaving a profession and a career to which you have devoted your life is very challenging, even when you are looking forward to your next chapter. A knowledgeable, objective third party could be a tremendous asset.

6. Manage your stress.

As you are going through the personal succession process, be mindful of your stress level. Human beings generally have a hard time dealing with change, especially change that is as personal as winding down one's public safety career. Even when you have planned a future that you are looking forward to with great anticipation, the fact is that you will experience conflicting thoughts and feelings that can create stressful situations. By actively engaging in good stress management practices, you increase the likelihood that the transition to your next chapter is as smooth as possible.

7. Choose your mindset or attitude about the upcoming transition to your next chapter.

For many public safety professionals, discussions about leaving their life's work stir up deep emotions: you are leaving a profession to which you have dedicated your life, AND despite the best of plans, you cannot say with certainty what the future holds. Practically speaking, you will be going from a familiar, somewhat structured environment to one that is unknown and likely more unstructured. That change alone is enough to send those who are unprepared into a tailspin.

To prepare most effectively, it helps to acknowledge and reconcile these often-conflicting emotions. Recognizing and accepting that it is human nature to cling to the familiar when faced with the unknown would be a good first step. Next, consider this fact: you get to choose how you experience this transition, as well as whatever happens going forward. In fact, you are the ONLY person who gets to make that choice. So what will it be? Will you experience the transition to your next chapter as a time of dread, fear, resistance, and negativity, or will you choose to experience it as a time of curiosity, excitement, opportunity, and positivity?



To help make your choice, compare these two different perspectives:

Negative view of the transition and future	Positive view of the transition and future
Feeling of dread	Feeling of excitement
Reluctance to address your transition	Commitment to a positive transition
Expect the worst	Expect the best
Paint a dark picture of life without public safety	Paint yourself into a bright new picture of your choosing
Engage in negative self-talk	Engage in positive self-talk
"My profession is my identity; I won't know who I am without my rank or position"	"I have an opportunity to discover aspects of myself that were overshadowed by my work"
No need to plan for my transition, it will be like flipping a light switch to off: only darkness will remain	Plan for my transition by exploring possibilities ahead of time: it will be like a rheostat that adjusts slowly from darkness to light as exciting opportunities emerge
Refuse to ask for or receive help	Ask for help and receive it graciously

With which of these two mindsets would you prefer to approach your transition and your next chapter? You have the opportunity to make your transition a time to honor your career and achievements, to bring closure to this chapter of your life, and to prepare for a future that you select. What's *your* choice?

8. Identify effective methods to increase your willingness and ability to move into your next chapter.

Making the decision to move on, or having someone make it for you, is one thing. Being ready to take the actions necessary to *implement* your transition to a new chapter is an entirely different matter. Here are three suggestions to help you move from planning to action:

- Identify objective criteria that will enable you to tell that you are making progress with your transition. Ask an accountability partner to help you stay on track.
- Conduct a realistic inventory of your existing knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies, and experiences. Many of them are applicable in other arenas. Consider where they fit in your ideal big picture. You might be



surprised to see there are fewer gaps than you had imagined!

- Make sure you include stress management techniques in your transition toolkit. If you allow stress to cloud your judgment, you will be less able to see the opportunities inherent in the change process. Be kind to yourself.

Instead of spending your transition time frantically trying to check off all the items on your bottomless “to do” list, resolve to make time to savor your accomplishments and allow others to acknowledge your achievements. After all, you want your successor to have something to do when he/she takes over, don’t you?

Phase 3: Create

The purpose of this step is to build on your preparation work and create your personal succession plan - i.e., the document that will guide you through the transition to your next chapter. The information from steps 1 and 2 (above) establishes the foundation for this phase of your personal succession process. Now it’s time to build the structure.

9. Develop a very detailed personal succession plan that includes the transition and the next chapter.

First, review the “big picture” of your next chapter that you created in phase 1 and your responses to the questions posed in phase 2. Then ask yourself, “What must happen in order for me to get from here to there?” (Notice the question does not ask what YOU need to do! Part of self-care involves delegating relentlessly. So unless the answer to the question, “Am I the only person in the world you can do [task]?” is “yes,” delegate the work.)

By “very detailed” plan I mean one that is more like a recipe than an action plan. Whereas the latter generally consists only of a list of “to do” items, the former specifies the ingredients needed; how much, when and how to add them; and what the outcome must look like. In this case, each task should include a deadline, measures of progress and achievement, necessary resources, and the name of the person who is accountable for ensuring it is completed. Your name should not be the only one on this list!

Although creating a document with this level of detail takes time, the benefit is that you are exponentially more likely to achieve your desired outcome than if you didn’t make this investment of time and effort. In addition to ending up with a very clear recipe for achieving your envisioned future, having to think through the



tasks helps clarify what you want or need to do, how to get the tasks done most effectively, and perhaps what options may be available that you hadn't considered before.

10. Include in your implementation plan both personal and professional opportunities that support your preparation for your next chapter.

To ensure your smooth transition from the structure that characterizes your current position to a more unstructured environment, and to better enjoy your next chapter, spend some time exploring a variety of options. For example, try out new activities that seem interesting; re-visit old hobbies to see if they still excite you; or take some classes to brush up on existing skills or try out new ones. Once you have decided which options you would like to pursue further, add them to your individual development plan. Be sure to include measures of progress and achievement as well as specific deadlines.

11. Set and follow priorities for ensuring a smooth transition to your next chapter.

Before you finalize your implementation plan, you must set priorities. Your touchstone for doing this is the big picture you created in phase 1 (and most likely have refined since then).

Here are two questions that can help you determine your priorities for your implementation plan:

- "Does this [decision/action/task] help me get closer to my goal?"
If the answer is "no," why are you doing it?
- "Is this [task/action/decision] critical, very important, or important?"
Critical means the absence of the task will make it impossible for you to achieve the desired outcome. *Very important* means you can achieve the outcome, but there will be significant negative repercussions. *Important* means the quality of the outcome will suffer. If the task, action, or decision doesn't fall in one of these three categories, don't spend your time on it.

Once you have prioritized your list, fill in or adjust the deadlines in your implementation plan. THEN FOLLOW THOSE PRIORITIES. An accountability partner will do wonders to help keep you focused.

12. Develop a contingency plan in case your Plan A hits a snag.

Because public safety professionals work in a politicized environment, you often have little or no control over the time or circumstances related to your departure.



Thus even when you plan for your exit, the fact is that others' decisions may turn your intentions on their head. Especially if your political environment is particularly volatile, make sure you create a contingency plan as part of your personal succession process. Although you hope you don't need to implement it, you're better off being prepared than sticking your head in the sand.

Phase 4: Implement

No process can be successful unless the plans that describe it are implemented. The implementation phase is the one that usually trips up people and organizations: somehow they believe their work is done once the plans are committed to paper. If your objective is to reach your transition date on time and as planned, you must take the implementation step very seriously.

Note: the fact that we haven't addressed your transition as it relates to the workplace doesn't mean that I am suggesting that you ignore your job as you wrap up your career; it means that we're focusing on your personal needs. (Remember I said earlier that YOU must be your #1 priority?) Do what you must - including delegating tasks and outcomes to others - to continue to lead your agency effectively. Help set up your successor for success by developing a transition process with him/her to the extent possible. However, keep your own needs on the front burner by aggressively and consistently working through your personal succession implementation plan.

Phase 5: Transition

For many public safety leaders, the actual departure from their agencies may be the most challenging of the five phases in the personal succession process. The long-anticipated end of your public safety career has arrived, and it's time to move on. If you have chosen to experience the transition period from a positive perspective, you are likely to be so excited that you can't wait to leave! Here are some suggestions for making a graceful transition from your agency into your next chapter.

13. Plan for the logistics.

Don't let last-minute details trip you up on your way out the door. Set others' expectations by clarifying your post-exit accessibility, if any, well in advance. For example, will you be available to answer questions that may come up? From whom will you take calls? Are you willing to mentor others? How do you prefer that people contact you, if at all? Clearly communicate your boundaries, then stick to them.



14. Have a closure ritual.

Throughout this report we have emphasized that your personal succession process is all about YOU. And it is. Yet because other people have been involved in your career and were instrumental in your success, you might want to consider how *they* experience your departure. So even if it's not what you want or would choose, you think about honoring your staff by engaging in some sort of ceremony or event that will bring closure for everyone. It might be as informal as an office party, or as formal as a dinner at a nice restaurant. Whatever form it takes, the event ought to be something that acknowledges and celebrates the wonderful outcomes and valuable services that together you have provided for your community over the years.

15. Walk out the door of your public safety agency and step into your next chapter.

Once you walk out the door, do not second guess yourself. You have planned for this moment, and your future is whatever you choose to make of it. Celebrate! The rest of your life lies before you. What are you waiting for? Jump in and enjoy!

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