



2023 – 2025 Strategic Plan

"OUR PATH FORWARD"



DECEMBER 2022



WE CARE

Table of Contents

Letter from Board President and Executive Director

Introduction	1
Mission, Vision, and Core Values	2
Strategic Focus Areas, Goals, and Strategies	3
Strategic Focus Area 1: Services, Programs, and Social Enterprise	4
Strategic Focus Area 2: Funding for Long-Term Sustainability	6
Strategic Focus Area 3: Land, Facilities, Space, and Garden Reimagined	8
Strategic Focus Area 4: Leadership/Workforce Stability and Employee Well-Being	10
Strategic Focus Area 5: Partnerships and Community Relations	12

APPENDICES

- A: Trends Analysis – Trends Data and Long-Term Implications
- B: Organizational Assessment – Summary of Survey Results



Dear Participants, Colleagues, Volunteers and Members of our Community,

For more than 26 years, EarthLinks has addressed our disconnection from one another based on economic and housing status along with our disconnection from our environment. Grounded, quite literally, in the values and experiences of EarthLinks' foundresses, Bette Ann Jaster, OP, and Cathy Mueller, SL, EarthLinks has stood witness to how all is connected – care for our planet and care for one another are inextricably intertwined.

Since 1996, our organization has made great strides with many notable accomplishments such as the purchase and development of our current property, growing our workshop program into a true social enterprise, expanding our retail operations and including the voices of our Participants throughout our organization. These successes have been guided by rigorous strategic planning. We believe that it is essential that we continue our disciplined and collaborative approach to planning for our future.

In 2022, EarthLinks' Board of Directors, staff, participants, and interns together engaged in a professionally facilitated strategic planning process over a period of more than six months to create a three-year plan informed by our mission, vision and core values. The plan identified goals and objectives in five strategic focus areas, that remain essentially the same focus areas that have guided us over the past dozen years. Our Commitments to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion as well as Sustainability remain. We are grateful to Brenda Wagenknecht-Ivey for her facilitation of this process.

The 2023-2025 Strategic Plan is the result of many hours of thoughtful engagement with this diverse group of members of our EarthLinks' community and it represents our vision of the best path forward for our organization over the next several years. We have learned over the last three years that flexibility is key, and we trust this plan will ensure that we remain true to our mission while adapting to the changing needs of our constituents. Above all else, we remain committed to being a welcoming community with people who are low income and who are experiencing homelessness, while educating and transforming lives by caring for Earth and each other. In addition, we will continue to develop and nurture local alliances to enhance our impact for the good of the community, all the while ensuring our operational and financial viability.

We are very grateful to the Denver Foundation for its support and being a key partner in our success over the last few years. We value this partnership and we look forward to sustaining our relationship into the future.

We are excited to partner with our Participants, Board, staff and the community to execute this plan to build an informed future for EarthLinks.

Sincerely,

Wendy Handler
Board President

Kathleen M. Cronan
Executive Director

Board Members and Strategic Planning Retreat Attendees

Board of Directors	
Wendy Handler, Chair	Merri Mattison, Vice Chair
Julia Mecklenburg, Secretary	Robert F. Hayes, Treasurer
Elizabeth Staton, Chair Elect	Luke Ilderton
Clayton Bartczak	Janet McIntyre
Deborah Bomyea, OP	Rachelle Macur
Maureen Cain	Trish Pacheco (and Participant)
Kristin Dean	Marisa Westbrook
Sean Oatmeal Harkin (and Participant)	
Participants	
Kathleen Grisby	Nebula Styraclua
Staff	
Kathleen Cronan, Executive Director	Gretchen Roberts, Deputy Director
Kaitlin Aaby	Jay Reszka
Atradees Futrell	Sara Schlabach
Madison Matheny	Michael Shube
Kevin Person	Dr. Brenda Wagenknecht-Ivey, Consultant

2023 - 2025 Strategic Plan

December 2022

Introduction

EarthLinks has a long history of thinking and planning strategically. For over a decade, every three years EarthLinks' Board of Directors, Participants, and staff have developed a Strategic Plan and executed many strategic initiatives. EarthLinks has made many changes and improvements as a result of these efforts.

In 2022, EarthLinks once again embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process. The process included a trends analysis, a strategic planning survey of board members and staff, and focus groups with and a survey of Participants. The information discussed and feedback received were used to help inform the future direction and priorities of EarthLinks. Additionally, the process included 4 virtual meetings (July, Aug, September, and November) and an in-person, off-site, all-day retreat in October 2022.

Dr. Brenda J. Wagenknecht-Ivey, CEO of PRAXIS Consulting, Inc. in Denver designed and facilitated the strategic planning process in collaboration with EarthLinks' leadership. The Denver Foundation provided grant funding to support this work.

This 2023 – 2025 Strategic Plan presents EarthLinks' *"Path Forward."* It lays out EarthLinks' strategic focus areas, long-range goals, and strategies for making improvements.

EarthLinks' strategic initiatives – or annual strategic priorities – can be found in the Annual Operational Plan. It is updated annually to reflect the important work and steady progress occurring in each of the strategic areas.

Mission, Vision, and Core Values

Below are the mission, vision, and core values of the EarthLinks. Also listed below are EarthLinks' commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion and sustainability.

Mission, Vision, and Core Values - EarthLinks

Mission:

EarthLinks cultivates transformation and self-worth with people experiencing homelessness and poverty. By creating opportunities through Earth-centered programs, individuals step out of isolation and into community – restoring each other and the planet.

Vision of the Future:

EarthLinks will be a leader in connecting people with Earth, and transforming lives through education, work programs, Earth-conscious products and services, and strong community partnerships.

Core Values: “WE CARE”

Welcoming Community
Earth-Centered

Connections and Collaboration
Awareness
Respect and Resilience
Education and Empowerment

Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

EarthLinks embraces and is committed to building and maintaining a welcoming and caring community for all, which includes being inclusive and expansive in all that we do. We will improve inclusivity throughout EarthLinks and be inclusive and rooted in social justice as we work on each of the strategic focus areas. The Inclusivity Blueprint developed and adopted by Participants, staff, and the Board in 2018 identifies a range of specific actions to ensure steady progress toward this goal.

Commitment to Sustainability

EarthLinks was founded on the essential value of caring for Earth as we care for one another. With this in mind, we again commit ourselves to embracing and implementing sustainability throughout our organization: in our events, in our operations, in our workshop, in our products, and in our gardens and grounds.

Strategic Focus Areas, Long Range Goals, and Strategies

Strategic focus areas (SFAs) are key areas that are vitally important for future success. They point the way forward, setting forth a direction and improvement priorities.

EarthLinks identified its SFAs following (1) an analysis of relevant external and internal trends¹ and (2) a discussion of survey results and Participant feedback that resulted in a summary of strengths, weaknesses, and potential future threats.² EarthLinks' 2023 – 2025 SFAs are below.



The sections below provide a brief description of each SFA as well as long range goals and strategies for making changes and improvements.

¹ See Appendix A for the trends analysis, which summarizes trends data, identifies trends most likely to impact EarthLinks in the future, and possible future long-term implications on EarthLinks.

² See Appendix B for the organizational assessment, which summarizes the strengths, areas for improvement, and potential threats facing EarthLinks in the future.



Services, Programs, & Social Enterprise

Description: EarthLinks’ services, programs, and social enterprise are at the heart of the organization. Through EarthLinks’ earth-centered services, programs, and social enterprise, people experiencing homelessness and poverty build community, acceptance, belonging, and self-transformation, ultimately learning to thrive by restoring each other and the planet.

EarthLinks’ services, programs, and social enterprise are more important now than ever. The need is high, the time is right, and the impacts are powerful. EarthLinks has an opportunity to be creative, innovative, and intentional about its path forward. It is an opportunity to evaluate and expand EarthLinks’ current services and programs, and explore new/different services to meet the changing needs of Participants and adapt to current times. It also is a time to evaluate and strengthen EarthLinks’ social enterprise ensuring all are achieving the desired results.

Long Range Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: EarthLinks’ programs, services, and partnerships will meet the basic needs of Participants (e.g., hunger, transportation, housing, healthcare, safe place, personal growth/ transformation, etc.).

Strategies:

- a. Evaluate and improve EarthLinks’ existing services and programs ensuring they achieve desired outcomes.
- b. Expand and diversify the use of evidence-based programs and practices.
- c. Develop partnerships to expand referral / resource options, ensuring other basic needs of Participants are met.

Goal 2: EarthLinks’ social enterprise will foster a sense of community and, at a minimum, break even.

Strategies:

- a. Evaluate and strengthen the production and social enterprise models.
- b. Expand marketing of EarthLinks’ social enterprise.
- c. Use innovative approaches to increase revenue from EarthLinks’ social enterprise.
- d. Expand community and skill building through social enterprise activities.

Goal 3: EarthLinks will have an optimal number of Participants based on funding levels and organizational capacity (e.g., staffing levels, space, etc.).

Strategies:

- a. Assess capacity and strengthen service / participant level model.
- b. Expand and use targeted recruitment practices.
- c. Maintain an optimal number of engaged volunteers.

See Earthlink's annual Operational Plan for a list of initiatives / projects that are being worked on in this SFA.

Description: EarthLinks continues to be financially stable. Grants, donations, and other fund-raising activities provide a solid financial foundation for EarthLinks. However, EarthLinks' donor base is aging, the donor base overall has remained flat in recent years, and the size of donations has decreased. Additionally, while grant opportunities are available, it is increasingly difficult to compete for grant funds.

EarthLinks' success depends on having stable and sufficient funding. Thus, EarthLinks must continue to increase, strengthen, and expand/refresh funding streams for long-term sustainability. This will require more robust, sustainable funding strategies including diversifying the donor base, finding new groups/making new friends, making it easier to donate, pursuing larger donations, engaging in new and different lucrative fund-raising activities, pursuing new grant opportunities, and increasing sales, to name a few.

Long Range Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: EarthLinks will increase the number of donors and/or funders by 10% each year (using 2022 as the base year. The percentage increase will be reassessed after 2 years).

Goal 2: EarthLinks will increase total revenue (e.g., from all sources including donors, funders, fund raising activities, sales/social enterprise) by 10% annually (using 2022 as the base year. The percentage increase will be reassessed after 2 years).

Strategies:

- a. Seek feedback and ideas from existing donors.
- b. Build and maintain personal connections/relationships with past and existing donors, funders, and customers.
- c. Strengthen and highlight EarthLinks' story/narrative emphasizing values, Participants, and outcomes/impact.
- d. Simplify and standardize system for collecting / receiving donations, grants, etc. (e.g., improve website).
- e. Increase internal capacity for, and amount of time devoted to, fundraising.
- f. Use proven, and develop new, methods for reaching and securing new donors and customers.
- g. Increase revenue from EarthLinks' social enterprise.

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- h. Pursue grants/funding from new, diverse, and targeted funding sources/funders.
 - i. Evaluate and contain and/or reduce costs by consolidating services and running leaner operations.

See Earthlink's annual Operational Plan for a list of initiatives / projects underway in this SFA.

Description: EarthLinks purchased its current home in 2013 and moved in 2014. Since then, the land and space have been developed including the workshop, garden, and offices. A great deal of resources has gone into improving the current space, making it a desirable space to build community and suitable for all of EarthLinks' services, programs, and social enterprise.

While significant changes have been made, EarthLinks is at cross-roads. Buildings need repair and there is new development and other significant changes occurring in the Sun Valley area. EarthLinks has an opportunity to leverage the changes in the neighborhood and pursue new and different options.

EarthLinks' property is a great asset, which can be leveraged going forward. EarthLinks will benefit from reimagining what its land, buildings and space could be, exploring options, and making strategic and intentional decisions that will best suit EarthLinks, Participants, and the community.

Long Range Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: EarthLinks will have a viable comprehensive long-term plan for utilizing and leveraging land, buildings, and space.

Strategies:

- a. Reimagine - think creatively about and explore innovative options for – EarthLinks' land, buildings, and space keeping mission and vision as top priorities.
- b. Consider new / innovative options that will help EarthLinks leverage its assets and meet Participants' needs (e.g., transitional housing options onsite and offsite, building onsite/other options, adding a commercial kitchen, event hosting, etc.).
- c. Develop a flexible, phased approach to long-term land, building, and space development.
- d. Raise funds to support capital improvements and EarthLinks' reimagined uses of land, buildings, and space.
- e. Build partnerships and community support to help realize EarthLinks' long-term land, buildings, and space plan.

Goal 2: EarthLinks' current space will be optimized.

Strategies:

- a. Assess current space for reasonable improvements that will make EarthLinks' space more desirable for Participants, the community, and staff.
- b. Solicit input from staff and Participants.
- c. Set priorities and raise funds to make short and long-term space improvements.

See Earthlink's annual Operational Plan for a list of initiatives / projects that are being worked on in this SFA.

Description: EarthLinks is committed to having strong and diverse leadership (executive level and board members) and retaining a diverse, qualified, and engaged workforce. EarthLinks needs to prepare in the next year or two for a smooth transition in executive (and board) leadership. It also must work to improve recruitment, retention, and improve employee well-being and engagement. This will require finding viable solutions to inadequate levels of pay, ensuring workloads are reasonable, addressing burnout, providing other financial and non-financial perks, and the like.

Long-Range Goals and Strategies:

Goal 1: EarthLinks' workforce and board will be diverse, satisfied, and engaged.

Strategies:

- a. Use innovative and targeted recruitment strategies.
- b. Provide competitive pay and other benefits to employees.
- c. Provide other financial and non-financial incentives to recruit and retain staff.
- d. Solicit input/feedback from employees to increase satisfaction.
- e. Develop community and build rapport – relationships, collegiality, team building – among staff, board, and Participants.
- f. Prioritize and institutionalize practices for self-care and employee well-being.
- g. Enhance internal communication and information sharing (e.g., strategic discussions).
- h. Involve employees and volunteers in making program and service improvements.
- i. Improve and expand training and development opportunities for all staff.
- j. Implement management and operational practices that are inclusive and equitable.

Goal 2: EarthLinks will experience planned, seamless transitions with executive leadership, staff, and Board.

Strategies:

- a. Develop, grow, and mentor staff and board members.
- b. Plan for and develop future successors.

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- c. Ensure knowledge continuity and transfer during transitions.
 - d. Develop effective communication strategies and approaches for informing staff and others about transitions in leadership.
 - e. Build and maintain partnerships and relationships during and following transitions.

Goal 3: Staff workloads will be manageable and aligned with EarthLinks' mission, values, and resources.

Strategies:

- a. Evaluate, eliminate, and align EarthLinks' programs and product lines with mission, values, and resources.
- b. Define and balance responsibilities and workloads.
- c. Evaluate and implement creative scheduling practices that benefit EarthLinks and staff.
- d. Provide opportunities for staff to step into evolving roles/jobs to meet the changing needs of the organization and Participants.

See Earthlink's annual Operational Plan for a list of initiatives / projects underway in this SFA.

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Partnerships and Community Relations

Description: EarthLinks is committed to building and maintaining strong partnerships and community relations. Partners help EarthLinks meet the needs of Participants and strengthen EarthLinks as an organization. Strong connections and relationships along with strong community relations and support also help EarthLinks succeed. EarthLinks will work to expand and strengthen partnerships and networks, reignite connections, and build community/neighborhood ties.

Long Range Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: EarthLinks will maintain and expand partnerships and networks.

Strategies:

- a. Enhance and expand partnerships with agency and community resource providers including organizations with a focus on historically underserved and/or marginalized populations (e.g., BIPOC organizations, LGBTQA+ populations, etc.).
- b. Expand voice and partnerships with governmental leaders, providers, and agencies to advance environmental sustainability, social justice and equity, and to end poverty, isolation, and homelessness.
- c. Evaluate, strengthen, and/or reignite EarthLinks' partnerships, broad network of supporters, and community relationships.
- d. Be a good partner to other organizations and neighbor in the community (reciprocity).
- e. Share information about and educate others about EarthLinks' partners and networks.

Goal 2: EarthLinks is visible in, and known and supported by, the community.

Strategies:

- a. Strengthen existing and build new relationships/connections in the community.
- b. Reinforce and demonstrate EarthLinks' values and commitment to DEI and sustainability.
- c. Be a strong voice for community, belonging, DEI, social and environmental justice, and policies that reduce poverty, isolation, and homelessness.

See Earthlink's annual Operational Plan for a list of initiatives / projects underway in this SFA.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Trends Analysis

A trends analysis is an important step in the strategic planning process. It helps to understand the external landscape and anticipate and prepare for the future including multiple plausible scenarios. A trends analysis also includes a review of internal trends. Internal information helps to build a common understanding of important internal data points and encourages making decisions about the future using data (rather than anecdote or hunches).

External trends (i.e., social/demographic, economic, technological, and policy/political) and internal trends were reviewed and discussed at the August Board meeting. A summary follows.

Summary/observations of External and Internal Trends.

The data show the following:

1. Denver's population is increasing, aging, and becoming more diverse.
2. Nearly a quarter of Denver's population speaks languages other than English in the home.
3. People report experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and/or isolation.
4. Global warming is increasing; climate change is significantly impacting the Earth.
5. The cost of living is high – food, gas, rent/housing.
6. More people are experiencing poverty and homelessness.
7. Denver's unemployment levels are lower than the national average.
8. Urban development is increasing in Denver and Sun Valley.
9. The economic outlook is uncertain; is a recession looming?
10. Median household income in Denver has increased 60% over a decade (nearly \$73,000 p/year); the average/mean household income in Denver is nearly \$103,000 /year.
11. Telecommunications and information technology are changing rapidly.
12. There is a growing digital divide.
13. Threats of cyber-attacks, identity theft, etc. remain high.
14. Politics remain divisive; polarization and gridlock are prevalent; there is ongoing debate over many controversial issues.
15. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted EarthLinks. The number of Participants and core programs/services are lower now than pre-pandemic levels.
16. EarthLinks' Participants tend to be older (50 years and up).
17. EarthLinks continues to do well financially.
18. EarthLinks is operating with fewer staff and volunteers post-pandemic (than pre-pandemic).
19. EarthLinks' donor base has remained stable/flat in recent years; the size of donations has decreased.
20. Staff turnover is high; turnover tends to be a challenge for all nonprofits.
21. EarthLinks' salaries/wages are low given the cost of living and mean and median income levels in Denver.
22. Climate change is impacting EarthLinks; it is more difficult to grow the garden and the warmer temperatures make it difficult for some people to work in the garden, etc.

Below is a summary of trends that will have the **most significant impact on EarthLinks in the next 3-5 years**, according to strategic planning survey respondents.

The list is not in priority order.

23. Development in Sun Valley
24. Lack of affordable housing / instability in housing – increasing homelessness; safe and secure housing; growing need for housing solutions
25. Climate change/global warming; climate crisis; environmental changes
26. Rising inflation/cost of living
27. Inability to pay a competitive wage or stay up with wage inflation; income inequality/wage gaps
28. Changes in donations – decline in large contributors; declining donor base; stagnation in charitable giving; competition for philanthropic dollars
29. Continuing technological innovations – access to internet, knowledge and skills to use technology, etc.
30. Commitment to / increasing DEI/social justice
31. Changing race, ethnic, and age demographics – aging population
32. Greater competition for limited resources/dollars – grants
33. Staff turnover / staff retention; difficulties hiring staff
34. Staff burnout
35. Need for succession planning/leadership development

Long-term Implications on EarthLinks

Below is a summary of possible long-term implications (of the many trends on EarthLinks) in the future, per discussions at the August Board meeting.

1. EarthLinks' mission will be more important than ever. It will be increasingly important to address inequality, end isolation, provide community, increase a sense of belonging, address climate change, etc. This is an opportunity for EarthLinks to be creative and innovative and move forward post-pandemic. It is an opportunity to evaluate EarthLinks' current services and expand programs/services and explore new/different services to meet the changing needs of Participants and adapt to current times (e.g., jobs? Housing? Help with technology? Mental health services? Target services for older or younger people, etc.).
2. The population in Denver is trending older; there will be more people for EarthLinks to serve. Older people are experiencing isolation and don't have a lot of support; many are not connected to services.
3. EarthLinks will need to find new places to meet/connect with potential donors, supporters, volunteers, and customers to achieve its long-range goals. EarthLinks will benefit from defining who EarthLinks will serve (e.g., younger people?).
4. Physical and behavioral health needs are high and will likely increase. There are fewer providers to provide care.
5. EarthLinks has an opportunity to look at current products, consider the market, and produce new items. Producing new items also will encourage repeat shoppers (help make social enterprise more viable).

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6. The changes / apt. building development in Sun Valley will affect EarthLinks. Is EarthLinks prepared to seize or make opportunities (e.g., new services? New communities? Access to populations? Increase in traffic? Sales? Volunteers? Staff?). The environment and market are changing; EarthLinks must adapt and change, too.
 7. EarthLinks' property is a great asset, which can be leveraged. EarthLinks will benefit from exploring options and making the best decisions for EarthLinks.
 8. Many nonprofits including EarthLinks have an aging donor base; there is a need to diversify the donor base. EarthLinks needs to find new groups and use new ways to do so.
 9. The political climate in Denver is polarized; the divisiveness is difficult. Things change quickly due to political uncertainty. EarthLinks will need to monitor and stay abreast of new and changing developments.
 10. Denver may have an enhanced growing season, which could impact programming and products. And, gardening and food production are being automated. EarthLinks may need to change what we grow and sell due to climate change. All may affect EarthLinks.
 11. Other groups want to collaborate with EarthLinks because EarthLinks provides green space in an urban environment. EarthLinks can/should leverage this going forward.

APPENDIX B: Organizational Assessment

Board members and staff were surveyed in August 2022. Staff also gathered input from Participants through workshops in early September 2022. All were discussed at the August Board meeting.

Below is an initial list of strengths and weaknesses/areas for improvement discussed at the August Board meeting.

Strengths	Weaknesses/Areas for Improvement
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Community and human connection</u> – everyone is welcomed; EarthLinks is a gathering place that facilitates strong relationships; EarthLinks provides the time and physical place for community. 2. <u>Supportive services/programs and effective case management</u> – the success rate is high in placing Participants into stable housing. 3. <u>Connection to Earth</u> – e.g., garden, flowers, bees, worms, etc.; natural beauty; provides community and continuous learning; products produced and sold (honey, etc.); and earth care – nature trips. 4. <u>Supportive/dedicated staff</u> – staff go above and beyond to assist / provide and secure needed services; the team truly cares; passionate and compassionate staff 5. <u>Build capacity and change/restore lives</u> – build self worth/self respect; enhance lives; make a long-term commitment to Participants. 6. <u>Social enterprise</u> – appreciated by the community; helps restore lives. 7. <u>Good neighbor</u> – EarthLinks has an internal and external community; it's important to be a good neighbor in the community. 8. <u>Commitment to DEI and sustainability.</u> 9. <u>Financial stability.</u> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Participant recruitment</u> – need to find new ways to find/recruit Participants. 2. <u>Funding</u> – it is difficult to compete with large organizations for funding (grants, etc.); need to expand donors/make new friends; need to develop more robust fundraising strategies; social enterprise is not profitable. 3. <u>Community outreach/public relations</u> – need to do a better job of reaching out to community/ public relations; need to market EarthLinks better. 4. <u>Staffing/volunteer levels</u> – Staffing and volunteer levels are down (from pre-pandemic levels); need to have adequate staff/volunteers to provide services/meet the needs of participants and EarthLinks. 5. <u>Turnover/Retention</u> – turnover is high; staff are getting burned out; wages/pay insufficient given cost of living in Denver. 6. <u>Board diversity</u> – need to increase diversity on the Board to reflect the diversity of the people EarthLinks serves. 7. <u>Physical space/land</u> – needs improvement and modernization; need to explore options and be prepared to make decisions.

Potential Threats include:

1. Gentrification
2. Lack of affordable housing
3. Climate change
4. Downturn in economy – recession? Inflation?
5. Politics – national, state, city
6. Staffing instability – high turnover; difficulty recruiting/retaining staff
7. Lack of funding
8. Failure or inability to repair/maintain physical space
9. Lack of leadership development/preparation – transition in leadership