

The gifts of change

Three top gay rights leaders step down, bringing new opportunities.

- JOAN GARRY

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I KNOW, YOU saw that word “change” in the headline and immediately assumed I’d be talking about primary season — a natural assumption given that everyone in the whole universe is talking about the election and about change.

But no, I’m talking about something else for a change.

I am instead referring to the LGBT movement organizations and the current leadership changes we are seeing. We all know it will take strong conviction and leadership in the Democratic Party to move the “gay agenda” forward. But it will also demand strong leadership in our movement. And in that context, turnover at the top is not inconsequential.

In the past three weeks, three movement leaders have announced their resignations. They represent more than 50 years of service to the movement as executive directors. And while there is natural turnover in these roles, the rapid-fire succession of these changes gives me pause.

Kevin Jennings will step down from the helm at the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network after 13 years in August. He’d have been executive director there longer but he was busy founding the organization.

Matt Foreman leaves the Task Force after five years but he’s been an executive director at three other organizations, bringing his total years of service to 18. And Ann DeGroot, with 21 years of service at OutFront Minnesota, set the standard for statewide organizing and reminded all of us that running a state organization is national service.

So, with all the national debate about the need for change, the hunger for change, what do these changes mean?

These changes mean opportunity for the organizations, for those moving on and for the movement.

Identifying a leader is perhaps the most significant decision a board of directors makes. No decision will require as much thought, bring a board together or demand as much. Leadership transition forces consideration of the big questions. What does this organization need going forward? How do we define leadership? How do we define the word “experience” (a timely topic to consider given the national debate).

PERHAPS THE HARDEST thing to do is what I call “zero-based recruiting.” Don’t think about who you want relative to the strong and capable leader you had. Think about your organization and what it needs. As a person who has run an organization and as a person who sits on a national LGBT board, I can tell you that these thoughtful and strategic conversations don’t happen often enough and are a gift of change.

For those leaving, change is also opportunity. In the case of Matt Foreman, he takes yet another important role as he moves to the foundation side of the movement. For others who

leave, like Kevin and Ann, the path is less clear. Again, this is not a challenge but an opportunity. The chance to catch your breath, pack away your roller board and consider how you want your voice heard.

And for the movement, leadership transition enables us to think differently, to incorporate new voices, to further our commitment to diversity and to look in our own organizations for those ready to step up. It also enables us to define what “experience” really is and what it really means. To define experience broadly enough to incorporate fundamental leadership skills these roles demand. To look closely at the private sector for those who can enrich and be enriched by a non-profit gig. To look at allied movements, draw on their successes and identify like-minded folks (gay and straight) who can add their expertise to our work.

AND LET’S NOT forget something else. We now have a stable of men and women with significant tenure as executive directors who choose to move on. Remember that as our movement was getting its bearings and creating momentum, many of our leaders were lost to AIDS. The growing size and caliber of our executive director alumni group is new for our movement. Engaging them in propelling our movement forward represents another kind of leadership development — and yet another opportunity that comes with change.

I am grateful beyond measure to Matt, Kevin and Anne for their years of service. We should all be. I am also excited about all the opportunities ahead — for them, for their organizations and for the movement — that will follow them as they exit.

The country is hungry for change and for our movement, change is our end goal. But it will require leadership and not just in the White House. We’ll need all hands on deck, ready, willing and able to unwrap the gifts that come with change.