

Leadership Transition: Leave Your Campsite Better Than You Found It



Here in Colorado we are an outdoorsy bunch, and even those of us who prefer a hot toddy to a hot campfire get dragged off to the Great Wilderness now and then. Part of this tradition is a far-sighted ethic that you must always leave your campsite better than you found it. This is a great rule. And despite the occasional knuckle-dragger, most campers follow this pay-it-forward tenet to some degree and the world is better for it.

More executives need to learn this simple morality. Leadership transition is fraught with folks who leave a mess behind. C-level/flag-level transition, especially, can have an aspect of political pragmatism that leaves a stinky mess. We'd estimate that this ethical departure sorts into a hierarchy along these lines:

1. (Heinous) **Close off the next leader's options.** The sin of hubris is at the root of this ethical break. Only outrageous pride would account for executives who use their policy, budget, and personnel decisions to explicitly cut off the strategic options of the person who follows them. Are they really so brilliant that the next guy shouldn't have a choice?
2. (Slimy) **Leave the next leader a mess.** This ethical break is essentially a con job. This is a transitioning leader who feigns good performance by pushing problems into the future. This person saddles the next person with deferred maintenance (literally and metaphorically): unattended staff problems, underinvestment in marketing & R&D, stupid staff cuts, and so on.
3. (Out to lunch) **Ignore the issue altogether.** Then there are those who simply aren't thinking about the next leader. Like near-sighted cartoon character, Mr. Magoo, their wake of chaos is completely unintentional.
4. (Good campers) **Give the next leader the ability to steer.** These are the folks who are thinking about their legacy – to their organization, to their employees, to their customers... and to the next leader. Kudos to these leaders with the long view.



This last group – the good campers – do the hard things that are also the right things: They fire the people who need firing, they fix the things that need fixing, they create both structure and processes for getting things done, and have provided more than a short-term focus. No one is perfect, and there’s always loads left to be done, but the good campers leave behind a more capable organization than they entered.

What else does a “good camper” do? You tell us.

