

Amenable

Resource

&

A Brand Playbook for First-Year Executive Directors

October 2026

How to lead a brand transition without stepping on the people, history, and relationships that came before you

As a new executive director, you're leading your organization into its next chapter while inheriting the closing of someone else's. The first few months of your tenure can be boiled down to one word: navigation.

You've been tasked with delicately handling relationships, juggling responsibilities, oh, and also charting a course for the organization as a whole. Even simple questions start to feel complicated.

Your job is to steward what you inherited and decide what it needs to become next. Sometimes that means changing things, and sometimes it means leaving them alone. A change in leadership is never just a change in who sits in the office, which is exactly why this feels so complicated.

Research on nonprofit leadership transitions has found that new leaders, and the changes they introduce, can expose long-standing disagreements about organizational identity that were buried just under the surface (Balser & Carmin, 2009). Employees and other stakeholders might unknowingly hold contradictory ideas about what the organization fundamentally is, and a transition creates optimal circumstances for those differences to surface. Lucky you.

This guide is here to help you navigate the murky waters of your organization's brand. Chances are you have questions you're not even sure how to ask, so we went ahead and answered them for you. Consider this your brand playbook—read it from front to back, or keep it on hand to refer to as situations come up.

Here are some tips on how to navigate this transitional period, sent with love and prayers from a branding agency who has guided organizations through these waters many times before.

Can I change the brand? Is that disrespectful?

Believe it or not, changing the brand can happen alongside deeply held respect for the people who came before you. Leadership transitions are often a natural moment to take a fresh look at organizational identity. You bring a valuable new perspective to the table, but you've also inherited an organization with its own history, relationships, and sense of self. The question is not *if* you should change things, because you necessarily will—what matters most is *how* you make the change.

Your brand is far more than just your logo—it's the collection of experiences, memories, and impressions people associate with your organization. You can shape those impressions, but you can never fully control them.

Because brands are relational, they're inherently subjective. Your logo might mean something completely different to you than it does to the volunteer who has shown up every week since before you started high school, and neither of you is wrong. That's exactly why you need an objective framework to evaluate the brand from. Otherwise, you'll be forced to negotiate with people's preferences, memories, and individual priorities.

Use this framework to sort your brand elements into three categories:

1 PROTECT

Elements that still communicate who you are and carry meaningful recognition or history. What does the current brand mean to the people who've been involved longer than you have?

2 QUESTION

Elements that have stuck around simply because "that's how we've always done it." Are you reacting to an actual problem, or to something that just doesn't align with your taste?

3 CHANGE

Elements that actively confuse people, no longer represent the organization, or make clear communication harder. What barriers or inefficiencies is the current brand causing?

Now that you know what matters, start listening.





Before you make a change, talk to the people who care.

Nonprofit rebranding tends to flounder for two reasons: a brand vision too timid to be worth the effort, or a lack of buy-in from staff and other stakeholders because leadership imposed the change from the top down ([Miller & Merrilees, 2013](#)). Similarly, a 2016 study of a major rebrand found that managers identified more closely with the organization when its rebranding stayed connected to the established mission and invited stakeholder involvement ([Gilstrap & Smith](#)).

So, before you consider any brand changes, you need to talk to the people who've been around: staff, board members, long-time donors, volunteers, program leaders, and community partners. Ask them about what feels essential to who your organization is, what they hope never changes, and what they think it's outgrown.

To be clear, stakeholder input is not a design-by-committee process. Listening to a variety of perspectives doesn't mean you're putting the brand up for a vote. These conversations simply tell you what the brand already means to the people who carry its history—that's valuable data to inform your path forward.

A FEW PHRASES TO KEEP IN YOUR BACK POCKET

Brand conversations can get surprisingly emotional. It helps to have language ready that moves the discussion back toward the organization instead of toward anyone's feelings about a particular typeface.



"But we've always used this logo!"

→ "That history matters to me, too. I'm trying to change it because it's old; I'm interested in whether it's still serving us well."



"Let's throw it all out the window!"

→ "Before we change anything, let's make sure we understand what we don't want to lose."



"I like our logo."

→ "The question at hand is whether it communicates what we need it to communicate. Our own taste is a smaller question."



"The founder would never have liked this."

→ "I want to respect what the founder built. I also want to make sure we're caring for the organization they built, not freezing it in time."

What if the founder just left?

A founder's name, personality, and story often become intertwined with an organization's identity. When that person leaves, it's natural to wonder whether the organization needs a new look to establish a new era.

Research backs that instinct, at least in part. Organizations replacing a founder or long-serving leader tend to face five common areas of risk, and brand equity is one of them: the organization's image is so tethered to that one person that it struggles to define itself to the public once they're gone ([Hechinger, 2020](#)). The Annie E. Casey Foundation's work specifically names identity, loyalty, uncertainty, and disagreement over how to change as key issues that crowd in when a founder departs ([Adams, 2005](#)).

Preserving a founder's contributions while making room for a new chapter can happen at the same time. A founder's departure doesn't mean the brand has to disappear with them. Instead, ask whether a given brand element represents the founder or the organization they built; those aren't always the same thing. Your brand's job is to communicate who the organization is today, and a healthy brand can and should exist beyond the identity of whoever happens to be in charge.

Don't change it just because you're new.

As a new executive director, you'll notice things long-time staff have stopped seeing long ago. That fresh perspective is valuable. Long-time staff also see things you don't have context for yet. Not everything that first catches your eye is broken—some things are simply unfamiliar.

A brand change can certainly be part of your leadership, but it shouldn't have to prove your leadership. You don't have to treat every legacy decision as sacred (most of them are distinctly mundane), but you should make sure you're solving an organizational problem rather than trying to establish your leadership through visible change.

What if we don't like our logo, but the board loves it?

Much to everyone's chagrin, "I don't like it," is not, technically, a compelling governance argument. As we discussed earlier, personal preference is not the right terrain for a brand battle. If you already know that your board members are emotionally invested in your organization's brand, you should be prepared to argue from a place of logic & strategy to make yourself heard. Here's what that might sound like:

7



DONOR PERCEPTION

"A dated brand is costing us credibility with donors by causing them to question our organizational health."



ORGANIZATIONAL CONSEQUENCE

"Our materials don't clearly communicate who we are."



PEER DIFFERENTIATION

"It's become difficult for people to tell us apart from other organizations doing similar work."



IMPLEMENTATION INEFFICIENCIES

"Our visual identity doesn't work well across the places we use it, and our staff aren't using it consistently."

The board exists to protect your organization's mission and money; they are ultimately concerned with stewardship. Even your best board members might be out of touch with the day-to-day impracticalities of an outdated brand, so come prepared with tangible examples (materials, statistics, quotes) to support your case.

But if the board still resists changing the logo, you still have options.

You don't need a new logo to improve your brand.

“Brand” and “logo” are often used interchangeably, but they’re not the same thing. Your logo is one piece of your visual identity; your visual identity is one piece of your brand. Your brand is the much larger collection of experiences people have with your organization. So, even if the logo stays, the rest of the experience is still yours to improve. (And sometimes the logo is the least important thing that needs fixing.)

8



PAUSE BEFORE CHANGING

You don't need to start with the logo. Look at the everyday places your brand gets stuck, then fix the things that make communication harder, inconsistent, or frustrating for your team.



Make it easier to use.

Establish clear rules for logo placement, colors, typefaces, and templates so staff members aren't reinventing your brand every Tuesday. Put every typeface file, logo file, color code, and branded template in one place everyone can find.

Clarify your message & positioning.

A well-worn logo can be much more effective when the words accompanying it are clear and direct. Confident, winsome copy goes a long way toward improving your audience's brand experience.

Make everything around the logo feel intentional.

Thoughtful typography, photography, supporting graphics, and layout can dramatically change how an existing logo feels, even when the mark itself has gone a little vintage. If you simply cannot change your logo, embrace it—retro is in, baby.

Create consistency.

If your website, social media, annual report, and event materials look like they came from four different organizations, your logo probably isn't the problem.

Improve the digital experience.

Your website shapes a first impression more than a homely logo ever will. Even small details, like a properly cropped profile picture or a high-resolution logo file, sharpen your digital credibility.

A study of internal branding across 301 nonprofits found that employees' relationship with the organization's brand tracks closely with how the brand was experienced internally ([Liu et al., 2013](#)). Essentially, a brand that is easy to implement is easy to love. Your employees shape how the brand becomes real to everyone outside your organization, so creating a seamless internal system for brand implementation positively impacts external brand perception, all without glancing twice at your logo.

10

WORK IN PROGRESS

A brand can get better one piece at a time. Small improvements to the systems, messaging, and experiences around your existing identity can create meaningful change without rebuilding everything from scratch.



How do you refresh a brand without making huge changes?

Say that, even with the changes discussed above, there's still a pretty big disconnect between the current brand and the direction your organization is headed. The level of appropriate intervention depends largely on exactly how wide that gap has grown. You don't have to choose the most drastic option simply because you're looking for a change, and you don't have to keep everything exactly as you found it simply because you're afraid of change.

That's the idea behind brand restoration at Amenable. It's a lot like restoring an old painting: we scale the work to the wear your brand has actually picked up over the years, so every restoration looks different. Some brands need a sturdier system built around a logo people already recognize, while others need a reimagined logo that stays grounded in the organization's history.

If you're curious what a project with us looks like in real life, [check out our work with Love Chapel](#). We began a brand and website project with them shortly after a leadership transition, and their updated brand remains one of our favorite brand restoration projects to date.



LOVE CHAPEL UPDATED LOGO
[Read the Case Study](#)

Not sure whether your brand needs a refresh, a redo, or nothing at all? We can help you figure that out. Amenable helps nonprofits understand what's working, what's been lost along the way, and what their brand needs for its next chapter. [Reach out today](#) to start a conversation!

Amenable

Resource

&

WEAREAMENABLE.COM

amenable