Even if your family foundation or fund is very new, chances are you have already experienced at least one transition in the lifecycle of your giving program. What have been the key turning points in the life of your fund from the founders’ initial concept to the present? Which transitions can you see in the years ahead? How do you remember those past experiences? Did you plan for them or were they thrust upon you? Were the outcomes more positive and promising or tense and tumultuous?
“Foundations change, like it or not. The fundamental issue is whether they will change by chance or for significant reasons. The latter comes about only through conscious effort.”

Frederick deWolfe Bolman, Jr.

In the quote at left, Dr. Bolman encourages us to be the architects of our philanthropic futures rather than the victims. This Passages explores the circumstances and dynamics of transitions and shares the experiences of practitioners in dealing with them.

All families, charitable or not, experience transitions. They can be joyful: births; marriages; graduations; and retirements. Of course, there are unhappy transitions as well: divorce and death are significant periods of sorrow and grief. No matter the intensity of the emotions they generate, all transitions have the potential to affect the course of family life.

Similarly, all formal organizations, including family enterprises, go through changes in their institutional lifecycles. Start-up, changes in staff or board leadership, periods of great financial gain or loss, mergers and acquisitions, a new business strategy, and many others all alter the evolution and direction of the enterprise.

Family foundations and funds experience both—often at the same time. Family giving programs are subject to changes both in family composition and the lifecycles of organizations. Further, the unique circumstances of family in business together (including philanthropic business) create a whole set of key transitional moments in the evolution of the enterprise.

Special Note: Many of the transitions explored in this Passages apply to philanthropic families regardless of the giving vehicle(s) they employ. Evidently, the governance structure of the private family foundation ensures the substantial impact of transitions on boards of directors. Consequently, the critical responsibility of trustees to sustain effective governance—particularly in turbulent times—will be covered. Those of you who do not have a board will likely find something of interest or applicability in those discussions; family leadership and nurturing a new generation of charitable children, to name two examples.