

Designing Succession with Intention: A Case Study in Leadership Continuity

Executive Summary

SparkEffect's CEO transition was not driven by urgency or disruption. It was the result of a deliberate, multi-year succession strategy designed to ensure continuity, strengthen leadership readiness, and position the organization for its next phase of growth.

On April 1, 2026, Kim Bohr was named President and Chief Executive Officer of SparkEffect, succeeding Mike Humphries, who continues in his role as Chair of the Board. This transition did not happen overnight. It was the culmination of a journey that began nearly a decade earlier — one shaped by personal loss, organizational transformation, a global pandemic, a major merger, and an unwavering commitment to intentional leadership development.

What makes SparkEffect's story instructive is not just that it went well. It is that it went well by design — and that design required years of deliberate effort, honest conversation, and organizational patience. In a landscape where most firms, particularly smaller ones, either avoid succession planning altogether or treat it as a last-minute exercise, SparkEffect's experience offers a model worth examining closely. And perhaps most compellingly, this is a firm that does this work for clients every day. Living the practice they preach gave the transition credibility and discipline that is rare.

“This has been the succession plan from the beginning. Kim joined the business as the intended future CEO, and over time, she has gained the requisite knowledge, earned the necessary trust, followership, and confidence to step fully into this role.”
— Mike Humphries, Chair of the Board

The Landscape: Why Succession Planning Fails — and Why It Matters More in Smaller Firms

Before examining what SparkEffect did, it is worth understanding the environment in which it was done. The data on succession planning are striking in their consistency: organizations know it matters, yet most remain underprepared. According to research from the Association for Talent Development, just 35% of organizations have a formalized succession planning process, while 53% admit to having none.¹ A survey of 2,000 hiring managers by Robert Half found that while 87% of organizations have some form of succession planning in place, only 50% have a comprehensive, documented strategy.²

The gap is even more pronounced in smaller organizations. Among companies with fewer than 100 employees, only 33% have plans that are comprehensive, versus 56% of larger ones.³ And nearly two-thirds of family-owned small businesses lack a documented and communicated succession plan entirely.⁴ Of the more than 200,000 small businesses listed for sale each year, only 30% ever find a buyer, with the rest often forced to close their doors.⁵

This is the reality smaller professional services firms face. Unlike large enterprises that can absorb leadership turnover through scale and structure, smaller firms carry an outsized dependence on key individuals. Client relationships, institutional knowledge, and cultural continuity are frequently bound to specific leaders. The departure of a founding or long-tenured CEO does not simply create a structural vacancy — it can unsettle the very relationships and trust that drive revenue and retention.

The consequences of unprepared transitions are well documented: nearly all leadership transitions fall within 18 months due to poor planning. Outlook estimates that poorly managed leadership transitions have erased nearly \$1 billion in market value across S&P 500 firms.⁶ Perhaps most telling: 88% of leaders believe succession planning is of utmost importance, yet only 14% think their organization does it well.⁷ SparkEffect understood this — not as an abstraction, but through direct and painful experience.

The Context: Where the Journey Began

The succession story at SparkEffect — then known as Waldron — began not with a strategic planning session, but with tragedy. In 2017, Founder and co-owner, Tom Waldron passed away with only a few months' advance warning suddenly, resulting in Mike Humphries becoming the sole owner of the firm Mike had helped Tom build since 2001.

"It was a real jolt to the business," Humphries reflected. "Tom was a friend and longtime business partner, and the emotional aspect of it was, as you can imagine, very difficult, not only for me, but also for our entire, closely-knit leadership team and employees."

Tom's loss became a catalyst, perhaps even a "wake-up call." Humphries responded by focusing on three immediate priorities: stabilizing the business, retaining the team, and resetting the firm's strategic plan. He broadened the voice of executive and practice-area leaders in the firm's strategy, empowered their responsibilities more fully, revisited the organization's shared purpose and values together, and began seriously considering succession.

"There's a tremendous amount of risk to the business of a sole owner having something happen to them," Humphries said. "It would have been existentially tragic for the firm to lose its sole-owner without a shared strategic vision, operating plan, and an empowered leadership team where everybody knew where we were going — and having someone that could step in and do the whole job as the company's leader. As an interim risk mitigation move, I even sought out a trusted professional advisor with strong operating and leadership skills to step in should I suddenly leave the field."

This is the risk profile that defines medium-sized professional services firms: the loss of a single key leader can trigger client attrition, team uncertainty, and strategic drift simultaneously. With that recognition, the search for a successor began in earnest.

The Journey: A Timeline

- 2001** Mike Humphries and Tom Waldron build Waldron together over 16 years.
- 2017** Tom Waldron passes away suddenly. Humphries focuses on stability, retention, and strategic planning — and begins the search for a successor.
- 2018 – 2019** Humphries meets Kim Bohr through a mutual contact. Bohr declines a formal role but partners with Waldron as an outside consultant — working on CEO evaluations, succession engagements, and board governance work.
- Early 2020** Bohr joins as COO with a clear, shared succession path. Weeks later, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts business operations globally.
- 2021 – 2022** Merger discussions with San Francisco-based Torchiana reopen. Bohr becomes an equity owner in September 2022.
- April 1, 2023** Merger closes, forming SparkEffect. Humphries holds Chair & CEO. Bohr appointed COO, becoming President & COO shortly thereafter. Integration, rebranding, and strategic planning begins.
- 2024 – 2025** Humphries gradually transfers authority and visibility. Bohr builds authentic followership across the full organization.
- April 1, 2026** Kim Bohr named President & CEO. Mike Humphries transitions to Chair of the Board.

The Candidate: A Relationship Built Over Time

Mike Humphries did not find his successor through a formal executive search. He was introduced to Kim Bohr through a mutual business acquaintance at a moment when both were navigating significant professional transitions.

Bohr had recently departed Fierce, Inc., a leadership development firm, where she had spent years helping build the business as COO. She had written a book, launched her own consulting and leadership development practice, and was actively building a client base. She was not looking to join another organization.

"I wasn't easily convinced to come over into the organization," Bohr recalled. "I was really wanting to build something that felt like it was truly mine." Humphries initially reached out seeking to fill a Pacific Northwest business development role. Bohr declined — but the relationship continued. She referred a colleague for the open role and, over several lunches, Bohr and Humphries began to recognize a deeper alignment. "What I really appreciated about that time together was not only learning about the business, but learning about Mike," Bohr said, "and seeing that he and I shared so much in how we think about business, how we think about our commitment to community, how we think about the pillars of what makes a healthy organization."

Given Bohr's intent to build her own firm, rather than pursuing a traditional recruitment, Humphries invited Bohr to partner with Waldron as an outside consultant. This gave both parties something more valuable than an interview process: time and observation. Over approximately two years, Bohr worked alongside the Waldron team on CEO evaluations, succession planning engagements, board governance work, and executive coaching — the very services at the heart of the firm's mission. "It gave us some time to get to know each other," Bohr noted, "which was quite lovely." This period of informal collaboration served a function that formal processes rarely replicate: it allowed both leaders to observe each other under real conditions, build authentic trust, and assess alignment before making a long-term commitment. Research reinforces the value of this approach — organizations with formalized succession planning processes are 67% more likely to identify future leaders than those without.⁸

The Framework: What Humphries Was Looking For

Before the search began, Humphries had developed a formal list of successor criteria — a practice rooted in SparkEffect's consulting experience and methodology. This specificity proved essential. Rather than evaluating candidates against an intuitive or shifting standard, he could assess candidates against a defined, proven set of characteristics and professional capabilities he knew were key to an individual's success in this specific entrepreneurial endeavor and culture.

<p>Entrepreneurial experience and an ownership orientation</p> <p>Bohr had launched her own business, served as COO of an entrepreneurial venture, and had previously attempted to acquire an entrepreneur's business. Each of these experiences signaled that she was oriented toward ownership rather than employment — a critical distinction for long-term leadership continuity. Mike calls this "entrepreneurial genetics, adaptability, flexibility and a healthy appetite for risk and continuous change."</p>	<p>Operational depth and business development capability</p> <p>The firm needed a leader who could run a complex, multi-practice operation while also driving growth. Bohr's background encompassed both.</p>
<p>A transparent and humble leadership style</p> <p>Humphries believed this was what the organization culturally needed — a leader who would earn followership through openness and demonstrated competence rather than a positional authority.</p>	<p>Shared values and purpose</p> <p>"Most importantly, probably, is how we see eye to eye in terms of shared values and shared purpose," Humphries said. In a values-driven professional services firm, this alignment was not a nice-to-have; it was a must-have — a prerequisite.</p>

The discipline of defining criteria before beginning the search — rather than retrofitting criteria around a preferred candidate — is one of the most replicable elements of SparkEffect's approach and one of the most commonly overlooked in practice.

The Decision: Clarity of Expectations from the Start

By late 2018, with strong growth straining the firm, Humphries began a more direct conversation about Bohr joining the firm in a formal leadership capacity. For Bohr, the decision hinged on one non-negotiable: clarity about the future. "So much of it was around being really clear on what I wanted and setting those boundaries so that I didn't feel like I was compromising," she said. "My path was to be a CEO, not a CEO of my own organization, but I wanted to be a CEO of a larger organization."

Bohr agreed to join as COO — with an explicit, shared understanding that this was the beginning of a succession path, not only an operating role.

This mutual transparency and shared vision about destination and timeline is precisely what SparkEffect's own Trust Research identifies as a driver of strategic clarity: employees and leaders who understand an organization's direction and rationale for change report significantly higher trust and engagement.⁹ Both parties entered the agreement with informed confidence. Bohr joined the organization in early 2020, weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted business as usual.

The Challenge: Navigating Complexity Without Losing Sight of The Plan

What followed was anything but a straightforward transition. In her first weeks, Bohr was simultaneously learning the organization's culture and people, managing the urgency of pandemic response, and beginning to take on dual leadership responsibilities — serving as COO of the full business while also stepping in to lead the firm's Executive Organizations consulting practice. "It was really quite a learning curve," Bohr reflected. "That was a really interesting challenge — to try to figure out how to have one-on-ones and get to know people and at the same time manage the urgency we were experiencing... remotely."

"It's a matter of creating the space for them to fill as much as it is what the formal plan looks like. As I was leaving space, you were filling it, people were following. At this point, they're much better than I am in the CEO role. And I think that's a huge success."
— Mike Humphries

SparkEffect's Trust Research speaks directly to this challenge. Leadership turnover ranked among the most personally and professionally disruptive events employees experience — with 44% of respondents rating it highly significant on a personal level, and 68% noting direct work impact.¹⁰ The research also found that trust in local leaders takes the biggest hit during disruption, dropping 4.1 points on average. Bohr was, in effect, navigating an extended period of organizational disruption while simultaneously being the leader whose trustworthiness mattered most to the people around her.

Layered on top of this was a major strategic development: the potential merger with San Francisco-based Torchiana, a firm Humphries had known for many years as a collaborative industry partner. Those conversations had begun before Bohr joined, been sidelined during the pandemic, and were reopened in 2021.

The merger added significant complexity to the succession plan. Bohr was not yet an owner. The incoming partners had deep familiarity with Humphries but were still building their relationships with Bohr. Ensuring the succession plan remained intact through the merger required Humphries to be explicit and unwavering in his advocacy. "I remember distinctly laying out the things that I really respected about Kim with our incoming partners among the significant experience and talents each and all were bringing to the table," Humphries said, and saying further, "This is the direction we're going at Waldron. Kim is our COO; I feel she's the right choice for that role in the combined company, and I strongly encourage you to get to know her — we'll decide together, but I don't intend to depart from my perspective on this one."

Kim became an equity owner in the business in September 2022. The merger was completed on April 1, 2023, forming SparkEffect. The combined organization expanded from two owners to five and embarked on a rigorous process of integration, values alignment, rebranding, and strategic planning. Humphries held the Chair & CEO role following the merger, and Bohr was appointed COO, becoming President & COO shortly thereafter. "As much as we had those shared values and did so much of the same type of business, how we got work done was very different," Bohr acknowledged. "We had to integrate operationally, revisit our purpose and values together, find tighter alignment in our mission, and rebrand, all at the same time."

The integration year was demanding. But it produced something essential: a stronger, more unified organization with clearly defined leadership, shared operating practices built from the best practices of both legacy firms, and exceptional team retention throughout the process. Critically, the succession plan not only survived the merger — it was strengthened by it, as the incoming partners came to know and trust Bohr's leadership through direct experience rather than proxy.

TRUST RESEARCH INSIGHT
When disruptions are handled with transparency, fairness, and clarity, they don't just preserve trust — they can generate what SparkEffect's Trust Research calls a "trust dividend," with organizations reporting trust scores that exceed even pre-disruption baselines.¹¹ SparkEffect lived that finding during some of its most complex years.

The Transition: Creating Space for New Leadership

Beginning in 2024 and continuing into 2025, Humphries began to intentionally step back from the day to day — not in a single moment, but through a gradual, organic transfer of authority and visibility. "I began a process of pulling away," he said. "I was more organic than formalized. But if you asked anybody on our teams, they would experience more and more space going to Kim on a graduated basis — just pulling away from my visibility in day-to-day operations and decision-making, pulling away from even my presence in the region sometimes, allowing Kim the space to step into."

This approach reflects a core philosophy Humphries had developed through years of leadership planning consulting: that the most effective transitions are not about replacing one leader with another, but about creating space for the next leader to emerge authentically. "It's a matter of creating the space for them to fill as much as it is what the formal plan looks like," he said.

For Bohr, this graduated empowerment allowed her to build authentic followership — not borrowed from Humphries' relationships, but earned through her own leadership presence across the full organization. SparkEffect's Trust Research identifies this dynamic precisely: employees tend to place their trust in the people they interact with regularly — those who answer their questions, advocate for their needs, and interpret organizational direction in the context of daily work.¹² Trust, in this sense, is relational. It cannot be transferred. It must be built. "As I was leaving space, you were filling it, people were following," Humphries observed. "At this point, they'd much rather follow you than me in the CEO role. And I think that is a huge success." The research supports the long-term value of this investment. Organizations with effective succession planning report 10% higher year-over-year revenue improvement compared to those without.¹³ And 78% of employees stay longer with clear career paths — a dynamic that applies not just to the successor, but to the team that rallies around them.¹⁴

The Incoming Leader: Kim Bohr's Vision and Qualifications

Kim Bohr brings to the CEO role a rare combination of practitioner expertise, operating leadership, and growth experience. Her background spans executive coaching, leadership development, organizational transformation, and the operational complexity of scaling a professional services firm through a merger and pandemic. She has founded her own leadership development firm, and she has worked for SparkEffect does for clients, not just studied it, giving her both credibility and empathy in every engagement.

Her strategic vision for SparkEffect is anchored in a clear-eyed recognition that growth requires evolution. Under her leadership, SparkEffect is investing in three interconnected priorities: deepening its impact with existing clients through coordinated service delivery; expanding its reach through a digital-first acquisition model grounded in thought leadership and content; and building proprietary product offerings that establish SparkEffect as a firm known not only for what it delivers, but for the intellectual frameworks it has created.

Central to that vision is leadership development as a scalable entry point — engaging organizations earlier in their growth and readiness cycles, before disruption forces the conversation. This strategic expansion is not about replacing the firm's core coaching and advisory work. It is about broadening the front door through which organizations encounter SparkEffect's expertise.

Underlying all of it is a commitment to culture. Bohr has been explicit that SparkEffect's people are both its differentiator and its foundation. The organization's ability to attract, retain, and develop talent is not a byproduct of its strategy — it is the strategy. One of her first acts as incoming CEO has been to launch a company-wide listening tour, ensuring every voice across the organization is heard as the next chapter begins.

"We are at an important point in SparkEffect's evolution. We have spent the last several years expanding and perfecting our impact as a company, strengthening our talent, refining our processes, and building the foundation for further scale. We are accelerating. Our focus is on expanding SparkEffect's reach, deepening the impact and importance of our expertise in our human-centered way."
— Kim Bohr, President & CEO

<p>WHAT STAYED CONSISTENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SparkEffect's purpose and values The client experience, impact and delivery commitment Leadership philosophy and cultural tone Organizational stability, team retention and investment Working with compassion and empathy-forward Commitment to engage positively in improving the communities we serve 	<p>WHAT ACCELERATED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global growth strategy and market expansion Thought leadership and proprietary intellectual property Digital presence, demand generation, and brand evolution End-to-end service innovation for HR leaders, executive teams, boards, and workforce transformation
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Lessons for Leaders: A Framework for Intentional Succession

SparkEffect's experience is not simply a success story — it is a replicable model. The following principles emerge directly from their journey and are grounded in both organizational expertise and broader research. They are especially relevant for smaller and mid-sized firms, where the stakes of getting this wrong are highest, and the margin for error is smallest.

1. Start early — before urgency or fear sets in
Humphries' most direct advice: "Start as early as you can. Don't let it be a tragedy that brings to the front of your mind the risk that the business faces." The data support this urgency: 78% of companies without succession plans face leadership disruptions.¹⁵ Planning early creates options; waiting eliminates them.

2. Define your criteria before you begin your search
Develop a formal, written list of successor criteria, characteristics and capabilities before evaluating candidates. Include not only skills and experience but leadership style, cultural fit, ownership orientation, and values alignment. This discipline prevents retrofitting criteria around a preferred candidate and creates an objective basis for assessments. "Seek until you find," Humphries says. It also provides a shared language for evaluating readiness over time.

3. Allow relationships to develop before roles are formalized
The 18-month co-creating partnership between Bohr and Humphries created a foundation of mutual trust and demonstrated opportunities that no interview process could replicate. Where possible, build structured opportunities for potential successors to demonstrate leadership in real conditions before a formal commitment is made. In smaller firms, where fit matters at every level, this investment is particularly valuable.

4. Be transparent — even when it feels risky
"Transparency is often used as a concern for not planning," Bohr noted. "But bringing people along in the process is a really valuable trust-building exercise." The fear that transparency will cause instability is rarely borne out in practice. More than 90% of younger workers say that working at a company with a clear succession plan would increase their engagement.¹⁶ Transparency about succession direction, paired with honest development conversations, tends to strengthen retention rather than threaten it.

5. Recognize that trust is relational — and must be earned, not transferred
SparkEffect's own Trust Research shows that employees extend that trust where they feel seen, supported, and understood — most often with their direct leaders, not with the broader institution.¹⁷ A successor who earns followership through genuine presence and demonstrated leadership will take hold for more fully than one who inherits authority through announcement alone. Trust only scales when leadership does.

6. Treat disruption as a trust-building opportunity
Every significant organizational change — a pandemic, a merger, an integration, a leadership transition — is a moment when trust is either deposited or withdrawn. SparkEffect's research found that organizations that handle disruption with transparency, empathy, and clarity generate a measurable trust dividend: average trust scores that exceed even pre-disruption baselines.¹⁸ For leaders navigating succession, this means that how the transition is communicated and managed is consequential as the transition itself.

7. Align the transition with organizational readiness — not just individual readiness
SparkEffect moved forward with the formal CEO transition when the organization was stable, the culture was strengthened, and the leadership team was aligned — not simply when the individual successor was ready. Timing a transition to organizational maturity rather than a personal calendar is one of the most consequential and least discussed decisions in succession planning.

8. Design continuity for ongoing leadership
In relationship-driven firms, an abrupt departure of a founder or long-tenured CEO carries real risk. Structuring the outgoing leader's ongoing role — with clear scope, genuine contribution, and defined boundaries — supports stakeholder confidence during the transition while enabling new leadership to take hold. "It's not about slowing the transition; it is about protecting what has been built while the new leader earns their ground."

9. Succession is a strategy, not a moment
Perhaps the most important lesson: leadership transitions are not events to be managed — they are outcomes to be designed. Preparing a successor is a deliberate, multi-year process that combines skill development, exposure, observation, and performance validation. Readiness cannot be created reactively when a vacancy arises. The organizations that navigate leadership transitions most successfully do so as an ongoing leadership discipline embedded in strategy — not a reaction to circumstances.

SPARK EFFECT SUCCESSION PLANNING SERVICE
SparkEffect works with organizations to design and implement intentional succession strategies — from defining successor criteria and building leadership pipelines to facilitating the transitions themselves. To learn more, visit sparkeffect.com or contact us at success@sparkeffect.com.

ABOUT SPARK EFFECT
SparkEffect is a human-centered, research-driven firm that assists organizations in developing leadership readiness and managing disruptive transitions in our Trust Study and over forty years of experience, our comprehensive approach encompasses coaching, leadership development, career transitions and development, organization transformation, and governance assessment & advisory services. We focus on strengthening trust and fostering meaningful change, ultimately delivering measurable impacts on culture, revenue, reputation, and top-talent retention. To learn more about SparkEffect's succession planning and leadership advisory services, visit sparkeffect.com.

Lighting Brilliance. Inspiring Results.

¹ For Human Capital | ATD | SHRM, "Succession Planning: Data and Insights for Companies," October 2025.

² Robert Half, "Succession Planning: New Data Reveals Why It Matters More Than Ever," January 2025.

³ Torchiana, "Succession Plans: Successes, Risks & Legacies," June 2025.

⁴ Gallup, as cited in Human Capital, October 2025.

⁵ LLC Buddy, "Succession Planning Software Statistics," January 2025.

⁶ SparkEffect, "Trust in Turbulence: The 2025 State of Organizational Trust," 2025.

⁷ SparkEffect's own Trust Research. Trust scores are significantly higher when employees feel seen, supported, and understood — most often with their direct leaders, not with the broader institution.¹⁷

⁸ SparkEffect's own Trust Research. Organizations with formalized succession planning processes are 67% more likely to identify future leaders than those without.⁸

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