How to Plan and Execute an Emergency Succession

by Julia Burns on May 20, 2021

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COVID-19 has had most of us asking generative questions at some point. What is the real purpose of our organization? If we can only do one thing, what should it be? If our leaders become caregivers, sick themselves, or even die, how will the organization run?

Overall, **succession plan**ning gets a bad rap. But in a pandemic, especially in the early days when no one knew what to expect or how to manage, an emergency **succession plan** becomes essential.

As COVID-19 first struck, we shortened and pivoted our existing emergency **succession** templates for executive directors and staff leadership, and added a shortened operational checklist from our **succession** development work. This article takes you through the main components of a **succession plan** — temporary or permanent.

We Hope to Never Use It

An emergency **succession plan** is a **plan** we hope never to use but which can be useful if someone is suddenly unable to work. Emergency absences might be the result of an illness, accident, or when someone becomes an emergency caregiver. (We like to say it's when someone wins the lottery and moves to an island paradise. We know many nonprofit leaders, though, who might donate the winnings and come back to work!) An un**plan**ned absence can also be short- or long-term — and you may not initially know which it will be or the expected timing of a return.

An emergency **succession plan** appoints a specific acting successor or successors by role, defines their scope, designates their reporting lines, and identifies back-filled support. These **plan**s are meant to be temporary, typically spanning one to three months. They provide a way to continue delivering mission during an emergency absence. The **plan**s also provide a cushion of time to make more thoughtful decisions on how to handle longer-term implications.

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A Template Provides Choices for Your Organization

Our template, The Clarity Transitions Guide to Emergency **Succession Plan**ning, lays out the basic decisions in an editable format. We included line numbers to make easier discussion when **plan**ning. Common decision points specific to both the position and your organization are highlighted. This template is short enough that it can be completed in under two hours with board participation for the designation of an acting executive director, and staff participation for the designation of other acting positions.

This template is just a starting point; each organization is unique. If you have more of a traditional hierarchical structure, your **plan** may focus more on how to cover the position. If you have distributed leadership, your focus may be more on covering roles.

When designating an acting successor, you have some choices. Do you designate the full role to another person or do you split the responsibilities? There is no single right answer as it varies by organization and by the individuals involved.

If designating an individual:

- Name a first and second acting successor, in case the first is not available. You may identify this either by name (e.g. Sonia Ortiz) or by position title (e.g. Director of Programs).
- Identify to whom the acting successor will report. It need not be necessarily the supervisor for the full-time position.
- Identify any limitations that an acting successor will have in their role. Often, we state this as "The Acting CFO will have the full responsibilities of the CFO position with the exceptions noted below. Exceptions noted here will require approval from …" and provide a bulleted list of exceptions. Exceptions might be lower limits on spending approval, an inability to change a budget, inability to fire staff, etc. If you do have limits on a position, identify who can override those limits.
- Identify if any backup staffing or contingency actions will be implemented for the acting successor's current position. This could be something like the hiring of a temporary administrator to help with mailings, or the postponement of mailings for the acting period.
- Identify if an acting successor will receive any compensation. We often see organizations commit to the potential for bonuses being given upon satisfactory completion. Do not expect staff members to carry two full-time jobs without compensation.

Another option is to split the functions of the position among other staff members. We have used a table similar to the one offered below.

Function	**Who**	**Reporting To**	**Limitations**
ABC Program oversight	Name/Title	CEO	
Check signing & budgeting	Name/Title	CFO	CFO to sign checks over $5000

Control Communications During a Transition

A communications **plan** can help identify who needs to be notified of changes and in what priority order. With a smart phone in every hand, communication is very fast. If there are gaps in a narrative, people tend to fill them in with their best guesses. Poor communication can quickly undermine the best **plan**, so having identified priority audiences is a great way to tackle this proactively. We have used tables like the example below for communications **plan**s.

Tier	Entity (e.g. Staff, partners, funder)	Communication Method	Person Responsible
1	Supervisor	Phone preferable	Person taking emergency leave or first person to notice the absence.
	Designated acting successor	Phone or in person	Supervisor
	Immediate reporting staff	Phone or in person, email follow up	Supervisor & acting successor together
2	Key partners such as: · After school partners · Enrichment teachers	Phone	Acting successor
	Tutors	Email	Acting successor
3	Funders such as: · Government · Foundations	Email	Acting successor & Supervisor together

Who's Our Internet Provider? and Other Questions You Don't Want to Ask Last Minute

The final piece of the COVID-19 emergency **succession plan** is an operational checklist. The checklist documents key operating information needed to successfully pass responsibilities and roles to another person. Operating checklists will vary according to each organization and to the role. Larger organizations, due to their more formal structures and split responsibilities, are less at risk than smaller organizations in which leaders have been known to carry this information only in their heads. A checklist may include information such as:

- Key contact information for vendors, partners, funders, or others with whom you regularly work
- Staff, volunteer, or board rosters
- Access to critical accounts with a link to separate and secured password storage
- Calendar of key dates such as grant reporting and renewal, contract renewal, event preparation, board dates, and communication dates

We recommend a more complete checklist for **succession** development, and this can be a way to start that effort. Checklists do require regular update as the pieces change.

Anyone designated to be an acting successor needs to know that they have been so designated and, ideally, prepared to take over the most important things.

These acting designations can spur discussions on staff readiness and help identify skill and diversity gaps for development **plan**ning. In the long run, we hope that this emergency **succession plan** can help you think about how thoughtful **succession** development can support your ongoing mission delivery. In the short run, we hope it helps you be prepared and that you never have to use it.

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