PLAN

The Executive Transition and Key-Person Risk Plan

What this is	Three kinds of succession kept separate, a key-person map that goes wider than the executive director, the single-point-of-knowledge audit, an emergency acting appointment with stated limits, and a ninety-day interim protocol.
It assumes	A board that can meet on short notice. You do not need a large staff — the smaller the organization, the more concentrated the dependency.
Change before use	Names, authorities, and notice periods. The licensed-role section must be checked against your license before it is adopted.

The problem this fixes

Succession is a duty the board holds and almost never discharges. It is deferred because it feels like a vote of no confidence in a person who is doing a good job, and because there is no obvious week in which to do it. So it waits — and then it is done in the four days after a resignation, by people who are upset, under time pressure, without a plan.

There is a second problem underneath it. **The dependency is almost never only the executive director.** In most organizations of this size there are three or four people whose absence for a month would stop something essential, and nobody has written down who they are. This plan handles both.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

This is not employment law advice, and it is not advice about any individual. Notice periods, contractual terms, and anything touching an actual person's employment are for your counsel.

It does not tell you who should succeed anyone. That is the board's decision and only the board's.

Where a role is held under a license or an approval, succession is constrained by that license. The relevant section says so, and you must check the actual requirement.

Three kinds of succession, kept separate

Most organizations conflate these, produce a document that serves none of them, and conclude that succession planning does not work.

Kind	The question	What it produces	How often
Emergency	The person is unavailable tomorrow, without warning	A named acting appointment, their authority, and its limits — adopted in advance	Reviewed annually; used rarely
Planned	Notice has been given, or a	A timeline, a search process, and a transition	When it

Kind	The question	What it produces	How often
departure	retirement is known	of relationships and knowledge	happens
Bench development	Who could do this in three years, and what would they need?	Development for named individuals, and an honest view of whether an internal successor exists	Annual, in the board's work plan

Only the first is urgent. **Do it first, and do it this quarter** — it takes one board meeting and it is the one that matters at the moment nobody is thinking clearly.

Step one — the key-person map

Go wider than the executive director. For every role, ask one question: **if this person were unavailable for one month starting tomorrow, what would stop?** Anything that stops belongs here.

Look for	Because
Sole holders of a license, credential, or approval	Their absence may suspend an activity outright, regardless of who else is capable
Sole administrators of a system	Nobody else can reset access, run the export, or authorize a change
Sole signatories	Payments stop, and the second signatory is often unaware they are one
Sole holders of a relationship	The county contact, the auditor, the major donor — relationships live with people, not letterheads
People who train everyone else	Their absence is invisible for a month and expensive for a year
Anyone who has not taken leave in a year	Almost always a sign of a single point of failure, and worth investigating for its own sake

The Accountability and Ownership Map on the Open Shelf gives you the function list to run this against, and the Turnover Cost Calculator will price what a departure in each role actually costs — which is usually the argument that gets this funded.

Step two — the single-point-of-knowledge audit

Distinct from the map above. The map asks who; this asks **what only they know**, which is where the real exposure sits.

1. **Ask each person directly:** "What do you do that nobody else here could do next week?" People answer this honestly and often with relief. It is not a threatening question when it is asked of everyone.
2. **Sort what comes back into three kinds.** *Documented* — written down and findable. *Documentable* — could be written down in an afternoon and has not been. *Tacit* — judgment built over years, which cannot be written down and must be transferred by working alongside someone.
3. **Fix the middle category now.** It is cheap, it is a known quantity, and it is the one that will be reached for in an emergency.

4. **Name the tacit items explicitly** and accept them as a risk with a treatment: shadowing, deliberate rotation, or a decision to accept the exposure. Pretending tacit knowledge is documentable is the most common failure here.

> **THE CREDENTIAL TRAP**
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> Ask specifically about credentials, licenses, and system administrator rights, because people rarely volunteer them — they do not feel like knowledge. An organization can be fully documented and still unable to operate on Monday because one person held the only administrator account, or the only approval that permits an activity to run.

Step three — emergency succession

This is the section that gets used. Adopt it by board resolution and keep it somewhere reachable when systems are not.

Element	What to write down
Who acts	Named individual, plus a second if the first is unavailable. By name and by role — roles change, and a document naming only a role is ambiguous at the worst moment.
What triggers it	A definition, not a feeling. "Unreachable for more than [x] hours having been tried by [these means]" or a written notice of incapacity.
Who declares it	Usually the board chair. Name the alternate for when the chair is the person unavailable.
What the acting appointee may decide	Spending limit, hiring and dismissal authority, contract signature, public statements. Be specific — vagueness produces either paralysis or an unauthorized commitment.
What they may not decide	Typically: entering or terminating major contracts, changes to staffing structure, anything requiring board approval in the ordinary course, and anything concerning the absent person’s own employment.
How long before review	A fixed period — commonly thirty days — after which the board reconsiders rather than letting a temporary arrangement drift into permanence.
Who is notified, and when	Staff, board, funders, licensing, auditor, bank. Note where notification is a requirement rather than a courtesy; that determination is for your counsel.
How it ends	The condition and who declares it, in writing, so the record is clean.

Licensed and approved roles

Where the role carries a license, an approval, or a regulatory designation — an Administrator, a clinical supervisor, a designated safety lead — **you may not simply appoint whoever is available.** The license usually specifies who may act, what qualifications they must hold, what notification the regulator requires, and how long a temporary arrangement may run before it must be resolved.

Write the actual requirement into this plan, cite the source, and have counsel confirm it. An emergency succession plan that would breach a license condition on the day it is used is worse than none, because it will be followed.

Step four — the ninety-day interim protocol

Period	Priorities
Days 1–7	Confirm and communicate the acting appointment. Meet every direct report individually. Confirm payroll, banking access, and signatory arrangements actually work — test them rather than assume. Notify whoever must be notified.
Days 8–30	Take stock rather than reform. Identify what is genuinely time-critical in the next quarter. Meet the auditor, the main funder contacts, and the licensing contact. Report to the board in writing.
Days 31–60	Stabilize. Fill the most acute gaps left by the departure. The board decides on the search and whether the acting appointee is a candidate — and decides it explicitly rather than by drift.
Days 61–90	Review the arrangement formally. Either extend it with a stated end, or conclude it. Capture what this transition revealed about the organization's dependencies and feed it back into the key-person map.

THE SINGLE MOST USEFUL RULE FOR AN INTERIM

Change nothing structural in the first thirty days that does not have to change. An interim leader who reorganizes early spends authority they have not yet earned, and the organization has already absorbed one shock. Stabilize first; the case for change will still be there in month two, and will be better evidenced.

Step five — planned departure

When notice is given, the pressure is different but the failure modes are well known.

- **Decide the board's role first, and in writing.** A search where the board's role is unclear produces a contested appointment.
- **Do not let the departing executive select their successor alone.** Their input is valuable and their judgment is often good; the decision is the board's, and blurring that is a governance failure that outlives the transition.
- **Decide the overlap question deliberately.** Overlap transfers relationships and knowledge; it can also make it impossible for a successor to lead. If there is overlap, define who decides what during it, in writing.
- **Transfer relationships explicitly.** A joint meeting with each major funder, the auditor, and the licensing contact. Not an email introduction.
- **Run the knowledge audit again,** now, with the departure date known. It is far more productive than the general version.
- **Do an exit interview the board sees.** A departing executive will say things they would not have said before, and it is frequently the most valuable governance information the board receives all year.

The founder question

Where the departing person founded the organization or has led it for a long time, two additional things are true and worth naming rather than tiptoeing around.

First, **the role has usually grown around the person.** The job description reflects one individual's particular combination of abilities and is often unfillable as written. Before recruiting, ask what the role should be rather than what it has been — and expect that answer to involve more than one person.

Second, **the relationship with the organization has to be defined explicitly**, including the possibility of no continuing relationship. A continuing board seat, an advisory role, or an ambiguous emeritus position each has consequences for the successor's authority. Whatever is decided, it should be written down and time-limited, and the successor should know what it is before they accept.

What the board sees

Cadence	What is presented
Annually	The key-person map, refreshed. The emergency succession plan, re-adopted or amended. An honest statement of whether an internal successor exists for the executive role — including "no", which is a legitimate and useful answer.
Annually	Progress on documenting the documentable, and which tacit items remain accepted as risk.
On any change	A new acting appointee, a departure in any mapped key role, or a change to a licensed-role requirement.

Limits

- **A plan does not produce a successor.** Bench development does, over years, and it costs money and attention.
- **It cannot resolve a governance problem.** A board that cannot make a hard decision will not make one faster because a document exists.
- **Licensed-role succession is not yours to design freely,** and this document does not tell you what your license requires.
- **Nothing here is employment law advice.** Every element that touches an actual person's employment goes past counsel before it is used.

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