

Emergency Executive Director Succession and Contingency Planning

AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR EMERGENCY SUCCESSION PLAN IS A CRUCIAL PART OF YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE PLAN. It lays out the course of action in case of a sudden, unexpected absence of your Executive Director (ED). While you never hope to have to use it, creating it before any disruption occurs will give you peace of mind to know that you are prepared, just in case. The COVID-19 virus has shone a spotlight on the need for organizations to create emergency succession plans.

The ED Emergency Succession Plan typically lays out the conditions and process for naming a temporary interim director and often specifies the position of the person who will step into the role. The plans usually do not address the focus or role of an interim leader; that determination would need to be an immediate next step for an interim leader. Typically, interim leaders avoid making major changes or decisions unless required, and then likely only after appropriate internal consulting with others.

Another essential complement to an emergency succession plan is organizational systems and documentation that allow a successor to easily access (and adequately secure) key, timely, and accurate information that they will need to have to be effective in a temporary role.

COVID-19 may also be an appropriate catalyst for the Executive Director to think about what they would do if key leadership roles in the organization were disrupted, e.g., Development Director, Finance Director, Program Director, etc. At least to start, your Executive Director Succession Plan will likely only cover the essential role of the ED. You may also want to accompany it with other documents, including identifying backup staffers and other contingency plans for sudden or temporary absences in other primary functions such as fundraising, finance, administration, and program management.

A good-enough plan is better than no plan or a too-late plan. You can always tweak your plan later.

COMPASSPOINT NONPROFIT SERVICES HAS DEVELOPED AN [EXCELLENT TEMPLATE](#) to help you fast-track developing an emergency succession plan for an unplanned, sudden absence of the Executive Director.

HERE IS A REAL (REDACTED AND SHARED WITH PERMISSION) SAMPLE of how one Wilburforce grantee has adapted this template. Each organization will have unique structures, resources, and circumstances. You may or may not be able to have the robustness or flexibility reflected in this template or sample plan. Do what you can with what you have, knowing it is the right plan for your organization and will save precious time and energy if you ever need it.

Sample XXX Executive Director Succession Plan - Unplanned Absence

April 2020

Rationale

In the event of an *unplanned absence* of the XXX Executive Director, the Board of Directors is adopting policies and procedures to appoint an Acting Director to ensure the continuous coverage of executive duties critical to the organization's ongoing operations.

It is expected that this plan will ensure continuity in external relationships and staff and organizational functioning.

1. **Succession plan in the event of an unplanned, sudden absence of the XXX Executive Director.**
 - a) **Unplanned absence**
 - i) One that arises unexpectedly, in contrast to a planned leave, such as a vacation or a sabbatical.
 - b) **Temporary absence**
 - ii) The Executive Director is expected to return to the position once the events precipitating the absence are resolved.
 - (1) Temporary Short-term absence. An absence with an expected duration less than four (4) weeks
 - (2) Temporary Medium-term absence. An absence with an expected duration of more than four (4) weeks and up to three (3) months
 - (3) Temporary Long-term absence. An absence longer than three (3) months.
 - c) **Permanent absence**
 - iii) The Executive Director is not expected to return to the position

2. The Board of Directors authorizes the Executive Committee to implement the terms of this emergency plan in the event of the unplanned absence of the Executive Director. The Board also authorizes the Executive Committee to modify this plan as needed. The plan covers the following three scenarios.

a) Temporary short term absence

- i) Short term absence is defined as less than four (4) weeks
- ii) Chair of the XXX Board will step in to provide a steady hand and leadership/continuity support role for the organization. (If the Board Chair is unavailable, then the Vice Chair would step in).
- iii) Given the temporary nature of this situation, there will be no need for an external communication plan. Internal communications should assure staff that the organization has the resources and leadership it needs during the interim.

b) Temporary mid/long term absence

- i) If it becomes apparent that the Executive Director will not be returning within four (4) weeks but is expected to return, then the Executive Committee will name the Director of Finance and Administration as the Acting Executive Director.
- ii) If the Director of Finance and Administration is unable to fulfill these duties, then the Executive Committee shall name an existing senior XXX staff person as Acting Executive Director. If in the Executive Committee's determination, appointing a senior staff member is not feasible, the Executive Committee will name an existing or previous XXX board member as Acting Director. This must be done within five (5) days from the notification that the Director of Finance and Administration is unable to fulfill the Acting ED duties.
- iii) XXX will proactively develop and implement a communications plan to assure key stakeholders that the organization and its key mission are in stable hands.
 - (1) Within 24 hours of an Acting Executive Director's appointment, XXX will communicate with key foundations, major donors, and XXX board members. The primary means of communication will be via email with follow up personal phone calls as needed. Within 48 hours of an Acting Executive Director being appointed, a communication will be sent to additional key stakeholders (partner nonprofits and key governmental/legislative personnel).
 - (2) Within 48-72 hours, XXX will proactively communicate with members, supporters, and the public.
 - (3) A list of key stakeholders will be maintained and updated semiannually. The Communications Associate has overall responsibility for ensuring these lists

are updated and easily located as well as for coordinating the external communications.

- iv) The Executive Committee will support the Acting Executive Director, to temporarily backfill the key responsibilities of the position left vacant by the Executive Director. It is understood that the backfill needs will increase over time.
- v) The Executive Committee will periodically evaluate the situation to determine whether the Executive Director's absence is no longer temporary.

c) **Permanent unplanned absence**

- i) A permanent absence is one in which the Executive Committee has firmly determined that the Executive Director will not be returning to the position.
- ii) The procedures and conditions shall be the same as for a long-term temporary absence (b. i-iv above) with the following modifications/additions:
 - (1) The Board of Directors shall appoint a Transition and Search Committee to plan and carry out a transition to a new permanent Executive Director.
 - (2) A more robust and strategic external communications will be executed to provide continuity, stability, and reassurance to staff, foundations, major donors, members, and the public. This plan will be developed in collaboration with the Executive Committee, key XXX staff members, as well as external stakeholders and consultants.