

Redundancy to Reduce Rattle



By Whitney Thomey

Lead Consultant & Risk Ethnologist

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Being faced with our own personal mortality or the inevitability of losing a valued team member can feel paralyzing. Although uncertainty often inspires worry, there is one ‘risk’ about which you can be absolutely certain; everyone leaves eventually. I remember the day my grandfather walked in and proudly announced that he had planned his own funeral in its entirety: the plots were secured, the details selected, the trust created, and the expenses were financed in full. The announcement and ensuing conversation were uncomfortable and depressing. I could not comprehend why he had so willingly and *cheerfully* planned the end of his life. Having just laid him to rest, I now realize that his advanced planning was not only practical, but it was also *caring*.

Who is the first person that comes to mind when someone mentions succession plans? The Board Chair? The Founder? The CEO? Your indispensable Chief Development Officer? True, these all need succession plans for the safety and health of your nonprofit. But what about the rest of your organization? Would daily functions come to a screeching halt if a key team member left? Would mission-critical processes stop if someone in the trenches was injured on the job? Succession planning should extend beyond C-suite personnel.

Does the example of my grandfather’s estate planning seem simple compared to the process in a complex nonprofit? At NRMC we often see parallels between the preparations we make as individuals and organizational processes such as enterprise succession planning. Preparing for inevitable departures should be part of the ‘care and feeding’ of your organization. Emery Roe and Paul R. Schulman make an excellent point in their book *Reliability and Risk: The Challenge of Managing Interconnected Infrastructures*. They say “...since surprises are inevitable, disruptions must be treated as a possible state of operations for which operators require resources to be resilient.”

The authors are speaking specifically about *physical infrastructure*; however, we can correlate this concept figuratively to the personnel infrastructure of your organization. Your frontline staff, mid-level managers, executives, board and other key volunteers are the pipelines that feed life into your nonprofit’s mission. Establishing a routine redundancy for essential operations and personnel will ensure that when Plan A goes offline, your projects and community impact won’t be derailed.

Consider these three methods of redundancy to reduce the risk of operational failures in the event of an exit:

1. **Plan for inevitable turnover by developing and documenting succession strategies.** First, start by having the hard conversations. When your organization is staffed by excellent, competent individuals,

planning for their departure may feel like an affront to their service. However, like my grandfather's advanced planning for his own mortality, succession planning not only prepares but cares for your nonprofit's mission and service to the community. Capture succession strategies and succession plans in writing and take comfort that these resources and roadmaps are available for the preservation of your mission and strategic priorities.

2. **Cross-train teams.** Key personnel can be unavailable for many reasons: leaving for other opportunities, extended illness or injury, and family obligations. Cross-training teams ensures not only that daily operational tasks can continue in the wake of someone's departure, but it can also spread out work as your organization grows and expands its geographical or operational footprint. Intentional, thoughtful transparency across teams not only fuels operational resilience it also fosters an atmosphere of ownership and connection among employees. Cross-training can also prepare employees for promotion, creating a pool of potential individuals for you to draw from when openings occur.
3. **Encourage and invest in career development training.** Employees who experience tangible evidence that an employer is invested in their personal growth will experience more satisfaction at work. This can lead to reduced turnover. However, more importantly, investing in your team's continued learning may aid in identifying internal opportunities for advancement when inevitable exits occur. By encouraging your employees to seek out continuing education opportunities—and supporting the cost—you are strengthening your organization's adaptability and resilience when position openings arise.

The overarching goal of these three approaches is to create a redundancy safety-net within your own organization to ensure that your essential operations will still continue seamlessly. Succession plans and cross-training establish routine redundancy, which, in turn, leads to organizational resilience. And resilience is the most important capability in an organization destined to face both welcome and disruptive surprises in the future.

Succession Planning Resources

For more on the topics addressed in this article, see these resources:

- [“Planning for \[NOT\] the CEO,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Avoid Transition Trauma with a CEO Succession Plan,”](#) *Risk Management Essentials*, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Belt and Suspenders: Redundancy in Risk Practice,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Why Cross-Training Programs are Crucial to Your Succession Planning,”](#) HR Technologist
- [Succession Planning Infographic](#), Nonprofit Risk Management Center

Whitney Thomey is Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Whitney welcomes your comments and questions about succession or transition planning risk and reward, at 703.777.3504 or Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org.