

While non-profits are encouraged to create executive succession plans, the first and arguably most important step is to have an emergency ED/CEO succession plan, or in this example, a policy. This one addresses any unplanned situation where the ED/CEO is suddenly unable to fulfill his/her duties.

*Appropriate action on the sudden loss of the services of an ED/CEO must take into account whether the situation **involves a temporary short-term absence** (say up to 3 months), a **longer-term temporary absence**, or a **permanent loss or departure**. In all these situations it is essential that the board is able to name specific people and roles to manage the organization.*

In this example it is the responsibility of the existing ED/CEO to have some “emergency” contingencies in place and it is the responsibility of the board to keep the organization functioning without undue uncertainty and disruption. The first half of this sample policy alone will be of value.

Emergency Executive Director Succession

Executive Director Responsibilities

Given the importance to clients and staff of continuity of operations of the organization, the Executive Director will have the following measures in place in the event that an emergency, such as illness, injury or death, unexpectedly makes it impossible for her to effectively provide executive leadership for a period of five or more working days.

1. An up-to-date file whose location is known to and immediately accessible by a designated staff person or board member containing passwords and other security codes required for the Executive Director’s computer files. This should include e-mail, telephone message systems, and social media accounts. The location of keys to desks, cabinets and work-related security storage will also be included in the file.
2. A list of critical functions that rely on the Executive Director including those that could affect client safety, payment of staff salaries, submission of payroll and other government remittances, and other time sensitive tasks on which the organization’s functioning depends. The items on the list shall be in order of importance.
3. The designation one person who would be able to serve as “Acting Executive Director” for a period of at least 10 as many as 20 working days and who, with help if necessary, can take over, or direct, the accomplishment of the critical functions.
4. A set of protocols or rules with respect to whom, including board members, needs to and will have, access to confidential employee and client records in place of the current Executive Director.
5. A written set of steps to affect the immediate transfer of signing authority for financial operations where the Executive Director’s signature is required.

Board Responsibilities

It is important to clients and staff that there be continuity in the operation of the organization. In the event that an emergency, such as illness, injury or death, or other sudden departure, makes it impossible for the Executive Director to effectively provide executive leadership, the Board, with the help of a special meeting, will take the following measures.

Where absence of the existing executive director is **temporary** but likely to negatively impact on the continuity of operations, the board will:

1. Appoint an acting executive director or executive team
2. Communicate with those most affected by the situation

Where the sudden departure of the executive director is a **permanent one**, the board will:

1. Appoint an acting executive director or executive team
2. Initiate a process for recruiting and hiring a new or interim executive director
3. Communicate with those most affected by the situation

For the purposes of this policy an **acting executive director** will be someone familiar with the organization, likely a senior staff member or a person recently retired from it.

An **executive team** will be one made up of two or three senior staff members. Such a team would be expected to divide up and prioritize the leadership responsibilities involved.

An **interim executive director** will be an external person with executive leadership experience, likely a retired ED or consultant. The usual term of an interim executive director is one year and in most cases the person hired for the post is not eligible for the permanent ED position.

The board will review the remuneration and work responsibilities of staff members who take on an executive role or roles in the situation with the intent of being fair and supportive.

The board may also consider:

- Assigning to the executive committee of the board, if there is one, the role of supporting the acting executive staff leadership. If there is no existing executive committee the board may wish to establish one to respond to the situation.
- Where there is no management staff to take on an executive role, or even part of an executive role, and board members have some capacity to step into such a role on a part time basis, a volunteer management committee of the board may be established with the support and participation of staff.

- Appointing a board member **as acting executive director**, with pay, where that member has the necessary skills and capacity. In such a situation, even if it is part time, the person must immediately step down from the board. This acting executive director shall be remunerated at a rate similar to that of the absent executive director.

The Board will maintain a **high level of communication to staff throughout the period** of the loss of the services of the existing executive director and at least until the appointment of an Interim Executive Director. The board must communicate with staff within 48 hours of the situation arising and keep staff informed over the longer term

Similarly the board will also assess the value of timely communication with clients and stakeholders regarding the situation and respond accordingly.

Note: This sample policy may be freely used and adapted by a non-profit organizations without attribution