Succession Readiness by Scenario

Eight business contexts to factor into successor readiness, and what to assess for each | *Developed by Brian Heger for Talent Edge Circle*

Succession planning typically starts with building a success profile: the skills and experiences required to perform a given role, used to guide successor assessment, selection, and development. This is important work. But the scenario a successor is likely to walk into at any given time can significantly influence who is best suited for that role, and that scenario can shift over time. This is why it is important to not only assess people against the general success profile, but to also factor in the scenario they are stepping into as an additional layer in selection and development discussions. Given this, here are a few scenarios you might consider.

Some of these scenarios can look similar on the surface, but the distinctions matter for how you select and prepare a successor. It is also worth noting that these scenarios are not mutually exclusive (meaning a successor could be stepping into a situation that reflects more than one scenario at the same time), so use judgment to determine which scenario, or combination of scenarios, is most relevant to your situation. With that in mind, read through the descriptions below to determine which scenario is most relevant to your situation, and use them, along with the questions at the end of this document, to guide your succession planning and selection conversations.

Scenario	What It Is	Examples	When It's Most Relevant	Examples of Candidate Selection Criteria Most Relevant to the Scenario
Major Strategy Shift	What the organization pursues is meaningfully changing, such as entering new markets, changing its business model, or repositioning competitively, rather than scaling what is already working, requiring teams and resources to realign around the new direction.	• Shifting from a product to a platform or subscription model • Moving from a domestic to a global go-to-market strategy • Pivoting from a growth-at-all-costs to a profitability-first strategy	Teams and resources need to be reprioritized and realigned quickly around a new strategic direction.	• Strategic thinking and comfort reprioritizing amid shifting direction • Ability to let go of prior strategic commitments without unnecessary delay • Skill translating new strategy into concrete operational plans • Influence skills to bring skeptical stakeholders along
Mergers & Acquisitions	The organization is combining with, acquiring, or being acquired by another company, requiring the successor to integrate two distinct cultures, systems, and teams rather than simply operating one existing organization.	• Multiple smaller acquisitions integrated in rapid succession • Acquiring a company in a different industry or with a very different culture • A cross-border deal requiring integration across different legal and regulatory environments	Success depends on blending two organizations without losing key talent, momentum, or trust during the transition period.	• Skill blending distinct cultures and ways of working • Ability to retain key talent from both organizations amid uncertainty • Experience harmonizing systems, processes, or reporting structures • Comfort managing dual reporting lines or interim organizational ambiguity

Scenario	What It Is	Examples	When It's Most Relevant	Examples of Candidate Selection Criteria Most Relevant to the Scenario
Founder-Led to Investor-Led / Private to Public	The organization is shifting from private, founder-led governance to public company or institutional investor-led governance, requiring new levels of rigor, transparency, and accountability to outside stakeholders.	• Preparing for or completing an IPO • Transitioning from founder-led to professionally managed leadership • Adding a board or investor group with significantly greater oversight and reporting expectations	Relevant when a successor must build the operating discipline, compliance rigor, and external stakeholder communication skills that private, founder-led environments often do not require.	• Experience operating within formal governance, reporting, or compliance requirements • Ability to manage board and investor relationships • Comfort with increased public scrutiny and transparency • Willingness to institutionalize decisions once made informally or by a single founder
Turnaround	The business is responding to a significant, often urgent, business or financial performance problem requiring rapid correction, whether from declining performance, financial distress, lost market position, or a sudden reputational or crisis event.	• Declining sales or market share • Missed financial targets or shrinking profit margins • Loss of a major customer or key account • Rising costs or operational inefficiencies eroding profitability	Success depends on stabilizing operations quickly, often amid low morale, crisis fatigue, or eroded stakeholder confidence.	• Decisive action under pressure and incomplete information • Composure and resilience in high-stress, high-scrutiny conditions • Experience stabilizing distressed teams or underperforming units • Willingness to make and own unpopular short-term calls

Scenario	What It Is	Examples	When It's Most Relevant	Examples of Candidate Selection Criteria Most Relevant to the Scenario
Culture Change	The organization is undergoing a meaningful and significant shift in its culture, whether repairing a breakdown in trust, or intentionally reshaping norms, values, and ways of working to support a new direction.	• Shifting from a command-and-control to a more empowered, collaborative culture • Shifting from a siloed culture to one built around cross-functional collaboration • Moving from a risk-averse culture to one that supports more innovation and experimentation	Relevant whenever a shift in culture, whether corrective or intentional, is significant enough to affect how people work together, trust each other, or engage with the organization.	• High self-awareness and emotional intelligence • Ability to define and model new norms and values, not only repair old ones • Transparent, consistent communication style • Genuine ability to listen to and act on employee feedback
Rapid Growth	The business is scaling quickly or entering genuinely new territory, whether by expanding existing markets, products, or headcount, or by building a new business line without an established playbook.	• Entering a new geographic market • Launching a new product or business line • Scaling headcount rapidly after funding or demand surge • Building a first-of-its-kind function	The organization must build capacity, structure, and talent faster than it can be formally planned.	• Comfort operating with ambiguity and undefined scope • Experience building and scaling teams or processes from limited infrastructure • Ability to attract, develop, and retain talent quickly • Bias toward action over perfecting process
Major Transformation	How the organization operates is fundamentally changing, meaning its systems, structure, or ways of working, including efforts to integrate, divest, or digitally reinvent, often in service of a strategy that has already been set.	• Large-scale technology or ERP modernization • Consolidating or redesigning the operating model across business units • Automating core processes previously done manually	Success requires reimagining how work gets done, not simply optimizing the current model.	• Track record leading change through genuine ambiguity • Experience integrating, separating, or restructuring organizations • Ability to build cross-functional coalitions and buy-in • Strong vision-casting and change communication skills

Scenario	What It Is	Examples	When It's Most Relevant	Examples of Candidate Selection Criteria Most Relevant to the Scenario
Stability / Sustained Performance	The business is performing well, and the priority is protecting momentum, consistency, and execution discipline rather than pursuing disruption.	• A mature, profitable business unit • A steady-state function following a prior turnaround • A market leader defending share rather than chasing growth	Continuity and consistency matter more than disruption, and the cost of unnecessary change is high.	• Operational discipline and consistency in execution • Ability to reinforce and scale what is already working • Low need to make a mark through visible change • Strong, trusted relationships with existing stakeholders and teams

Questions to Guide Succession Discussions

Once a scenario has been identified for a successor, consider bringing these questions into succession planning and talent review conversations.

1. Given the scenario this person is likely to step into, how does that change our assessment of their fit for the role?
2. What development would most improve this person's readiness for the scenario they are likely to inherit, as opposed to more general profile development?
3. If the business shifts to a different scenario than the one we are currently planning for, does this successor's fit change, and how?
4. Are there scenarios on this list this person would clearly struggle with? Are there scenarios the person would excel in?

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