

The 5S Succession Planning Framework

A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO
IDENTIFYING, DEVELOPING, AND
TRANSITIONING THE LEADERS WHO WILL
CARRY YOUR ORGANIZATION FORWARD.



STRATEGIZE



SPOT



STRENGTHEN



SUSTAIN



SUCCEED



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WHY THIS FRAMEWORK
EXISTS

Succession Turns Talent Into Leadership That's Ready.

Every organization has key people. Great organizations have a plan for when they leave.

The 5S Succession Planning Framework was created to close the gap between the roles that matter most and the people prepared to fill them — the handoff where most organizations get caught flat-footed.

Too often, succession planning is a document built once a year and quietly forgotten, revisited only after a critical departure turns into a crisis. The 5S Framework treats readiness as something to build continuously, not scramble for.

Whether preparing for a single critical role or building bench strength across an entire leadership team, lasting continuity begins with a clear, repeatable cadence — identifying what matters, developing who's ready, and reviewing progress every cycle.

*Strategize what matters. Spot who's ready.
Strengthen the gap. Sustain the bench.
Succeed at the handoff.*



THE 5S SUCCESSION PLANNING FRAMEWORK



The Importance of Succession Planning

To maintain a competitive advantage, knowledge transfer must occur between senior leaders and the next generation of professionals who will assume primary executive roles.

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Why Succession Planning Matters

Succession planning is the deliberate process of identifying critical roles, assessing the talent who could fill them, and preparing those individuals to step in — whether a transition happens on a planned timeline or without warning. Organizations that treat succession planning as an ongoing discipline, rather than a one-time exercise, protect institutional knowledge, reduce disruption, and build a visible path for their high performers.

86%

of organizations say succession planning is an urgent priority

24%

of companies have a formal plan in place for all key roles

3-5x

the cost of an external hire vs. promoting a developed successor

The 5S Succession Planning Framework gives HR and business leaders a repeatable structure for building bench strength — from identifying which roles matter most to sustaining a pipeline of ready-now and ready-future talent.

The 5S Framework At A Glance

S1

Strategize

Align succession planning to business strategy and identify the roles that matter most.

S2

Spot

Identify high-potential talent through structured, criteria-based assessment.

S3

Strengthen

Develop successors through IDPs, stretch assignments, and mentoring.

S4

Sustain

Monitor bench strength and readiness on a recurring cadence, not a one-time review.

S5

Succeed

Execute the transition with a documented handoff and knowledge transfer plan.



Focus on the Future

Anchor succession planning to where the business is headed, not just today's org chart.

Key Actions

- Review the organization's 1–3-year strategic priorities and identify which roles are most exposed to disruption if vacated.
- Define 'critical role' criteria: business impact, specialized knowledge, difficult to backfill, and flight risk.
- Secure executive sponsorship and align succession planning to the annual talent review cycle.
- Set the scope: which roles, levels, and business units are in scope for this planning cycle.

STAGE OUTPUT

A prioritized list of critical roles with documented rationale, approved by leadership.





Identify Strong Candidates for Leadership

Identify who has the potential to grow into critical roles, using consistent, criteria-based methods.

Key Actions

- Apply a 9-box grid (performance x potential) to evaluate candidates objectively.
- Combine manager nominations with performance data, competency assessments, and 360 feedback.
- Look beyond the obvious 'next in line' candidate – actively surface overlooked high performers.
- Document each candidate's readiness level: ready now, ready in 1-2 years, or ready in 3+ years.

STAGE OUTPUT

A talent pool mapped against each critical role, tagged by readiness level.



Draft a Plan of Action from Point A to B

Close the gap between where a successor is today and what the target role requires.

Key Actions

- Build an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for each successor tied to specific role requirements.
- Combine the 70-20-10 model: stretch assignments, mentoring/coaching, and formal training.
- Pair successors with a mentor or sponsor who has visibility into the target role.
- Review IDP progress on a set cadence (e.g., quarterly) with the successor and their manager.

STAGE OUTPUT

An active IDP for every identified successor, with milestones and a review schedule.





Succession Planning is Dynamic

Treat succession planning as a living process – bench strength changes as people, roles, and priorities do.

Key Actions

- Revisit the critical role list and talent pool at a fixed cadence (at minimum, annually).
- Track bench depth per role: how many ready-now and ready-future successors exist.
- Flag single points of failure – critical roles with zero identified successors.
- Fold succession data into broader workforce planning and headcount conversations.

STAGE OUTPUT

An updated succession slate and bench-strength report, refreshed on a recurring cycle.



Documentation is Key

When a transition occurs, execute it according to a documented plan rather than improvising.

Key Actions

- Activate a transition plan: timeline, communication plan, and interim coverage if needed.
- Run a structured knowledge-transfer process between the outgoing incumbent and successor.
- Onboard the successor into the new role with a 30-60-90-day plan and check-ins.
- Capture lessons learned to improve the next cycle of the framework.

STAGE OUTPUT

A completed transition with documented knowledge transfer and a supported new leader.



Roles & Responsibilities

Ensure the job descriptions are accurate, comprehensive, and reflect the exact responsibilities and expectations of the role.

Role	Primary Responsibility
Executive Sponsor	Champions the process, approves critical role list, removes organizational barriers.
HR / People Ops	Owns the framework, facilitates talent reviews, maintains succession data and reporting.
People Manager	Nominates and assesses candidates, builds IDPs, delivers ongoing coaching.
Successor	Drives their own development, seeks feedback, engages with stretch assignments.
Mentor / Sponsor	Provides visibility, guidance, and advocacy for the successor's growth.

Implementation Roadmap

Phase 1

Weeks 1-2

Foundation

Define critical roles, secure sponsorship, set scope and success criteria.

Phase 2

Weeks 3-5

Assessment

Run talent reviews, build the 9-box grid, tag readiness levels.

Phase 3

Weeks 6-9

Development

Launch IDPs, assign mentors, begin stretch assignments.

Phase 4

Ongoing

Sustain & Review

Quarterly IDP check-ins, annual bench-strength review, refresh critical role list.

Critical Role Identification

Use the criteria below to score each role from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Roles scoring 15+ should be treated as critical for succession planning.

Business Impact

How directly does this role drive strategic priorities or revenue?

Score: ____

Specialized Knowledge

How much institutional or technical knowledge is concentrated in this role?

Score: ____

Backfill Difficulty

How long and how hard would it be to hire externally for this role?

Score: ____

Flight Risk

How likely is the current incumbent to leave in the next 12-24 months?

Score: ____

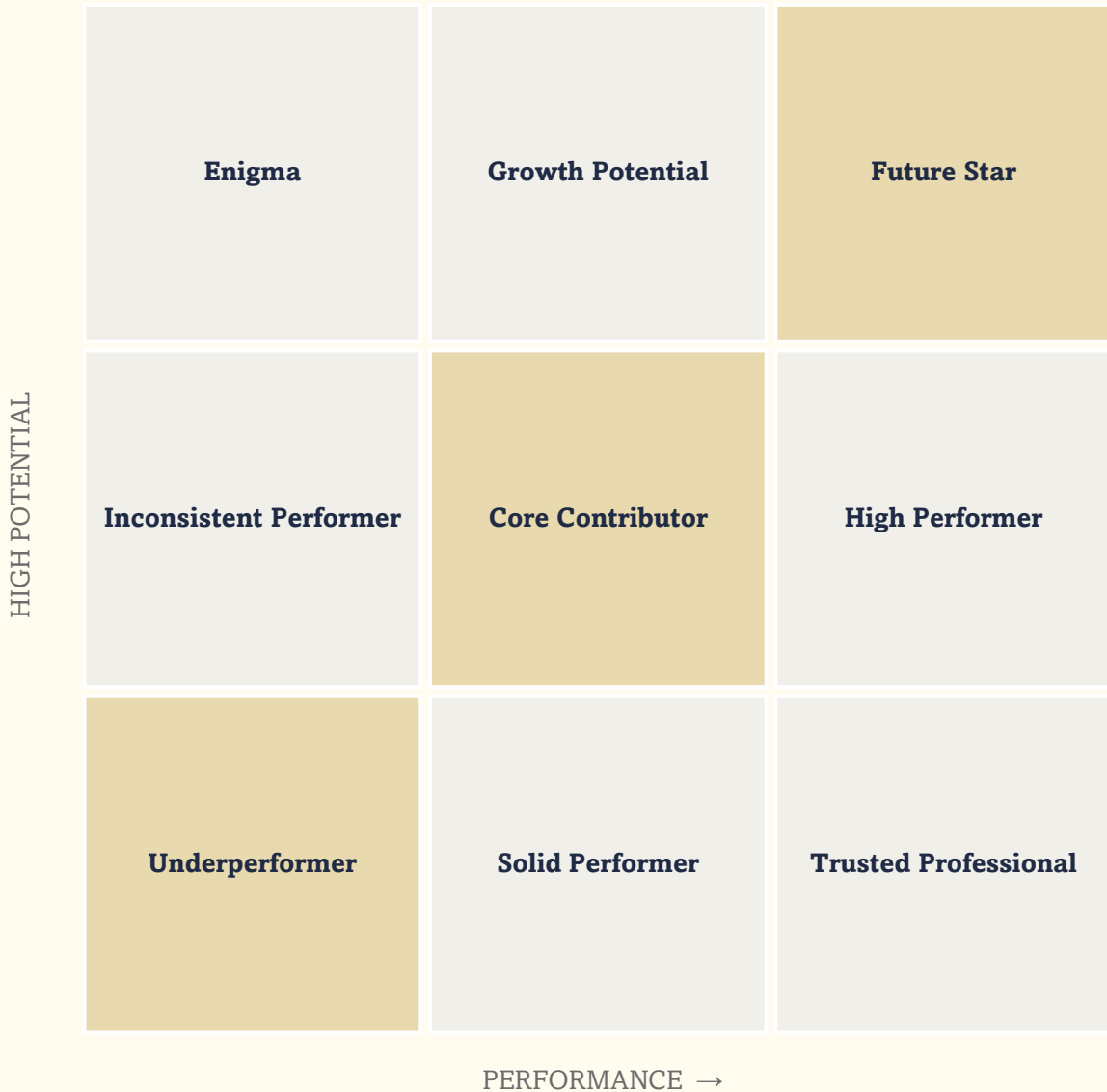
Bench Depth

How many ready-now or ready-soon successors currently exist for this role?

Score: ____

Mapping Talent: The 9-Box Grid

Plot each candidate by current performance (x-axis) and future potential (y-axis) to see where development investment will have the most impact.



The Individual Development Plan (IDP)

01**Target Role & Timeline**

The specific role the successor is developing toward and the realistic readiness window.

02**Gap Analysis**

The competencies, experience, or exposure the successor needs relative to the target role.

03**Development Actions**

Specific stretch assignments, projects, training, or certifications (the 70-20-10 mix).

04**Mentor/Sponsor**

Who is providing guidance, feedback, and visibility for this successor?

05**Review Cadence**

How often progress is reviewed, and by whom (recommended: quarterly).



Common Pitfalls & How to Avoid Them

PITFALL

Treating it as a once-a-year event

Fix: Build succession review into recurring talent and workforce planning cadences.

PITFALL

Only considering the 'obvious' successor

Fix: Use structured, criteria-based assessment to surface overlooked high performers.

PITFALL

No documented development plan

Fix: Require an active IDP for every identified successor, not just a name on a list.

PITFALL

Lack of transparency with successors

Fix: Where appropriate, let successors know they are part of a development pipeline.

PITFALL

No plan for unplanned departures

Fix: Maintain emergency/interim coverage plans for the most critical roles.

Metrics & KPIs to Track

Bench Strength Ratio

Number of ready-now successors per critical role.

Critical Role Coverage

Percentage of critical roles with at least one identified successor.

Internal Promotion Rate

Percentage of key roles filled internally vs. externally.

IDP Completion Rate

Percentage of successors with an active, on-track development plan.

Time-to-Productivity

Average time for a successor to reach full performance after transition.

Retention of High Potentials

Turnover rate among identified successors.

Sample Scenario

A mid-sized company applies the 5S Framework to its VP of Operations role after learning the incumbent plans to retire in 18 months.

STRATEGIZE

HR flags the VP of Operations as critical, given the role's scope and the incumbent's planned exit.

SPOT

Two directors are identified through a 9-box assessment as ready-in-2-years candidates.

STRENGTHEN

Both directors receive IDPs including a cross-functional project and executive mentoring.

SUSTAIN

Progress is reviewed quarterly; one director's timeline accelerates based on strong results.

SUCCEED

At the 18-month mark, the stronger-performing director transitions into the role with a 90-day handoff plan.

Key Takeaways

1

Succession planning protects the organization from disruption and signals a real growth path to your best people.

2

The 5S Framework — Strategize, Spot, Strengthen, Sustain, Succeed — turns succession planning into a repeatable process rather than a one-time event.

3

Bench strength should be reviewed on a recurring cadence, not rebuilt from scratch each time a role opens.

4

Every successor needs a documented development plan and a mentor — identification alone isn't preparation.



QUICK-REFERENCE CHECKLIST

The 5S Framework, One Page

- ☐ Critical roles identified and documented, with sponsorship secured
- ☐ Talent pool assessed using consistent, criteria-based methods (e.g., 9-box)
- ☐ Every successor has an active Individual Development Plan
- ☐ Mentors or sponsors are assigned to each successor
- ☐ Bench strength reviewed at least annually
- ☐ No critical role has zero identified successors
- ☐ Transition plan and knowledge-transfer process defined in advance
- ☐ Metrics tracked: bench strength ratio, coverage, internal promotion rate



Bring the 5S Succession Planning Framework to Your Team

Readiness isn't a document. It's a habit.

- **Strategize** – name the roles that would hurt most to lose
- **Spot** – assess successors on evidence, not gut feel
- **Strengthen** – pair every successor with a plan and a mentor
- **Sustain** – revisit the bench on a set schedule, not after a resignation letter

Most succession plans are built once, filed away, and rediscovered only when someone walks out the door. By then, it's too late to develop anyone — you're left hiring under pressure and hoping for the best.

The 5S Framework exists to break that pattern. It gives leaders a structured way to know, at any point in time, who's ready to step up and who still needs runway — before a departure forces the question.

A strong bench doesn't happen by accident. It's the result of asking the right questions on a regular rhythm: which roles matter most, who's prepared for them, and what's still missing to get there.



Sheila Mayoral

STRATEGIST • AUTHOR • DESIGNER

"I help organizations turn good intentions into structured, repeatable systems that drive clarity, alignment, and measurable results".

Bringing Structure to Complexity. Turning Strategy into Results.

Sheila Mayoral is a strategist, author, and designer who works at the intersection of HR, learning and development, and organizational operations. With more than 15 years of cross-functional experience, she partners with leaders to simplify complexity, strengthen performance, and build systems that scale.

Her work spans strategic operations, HR technology, project management, organizational effectiveness, process optimization, learning and development, and change enablement—across industries that include commercial real estate, healthcare, manufacturing, government, insurance, financial services, education, and professional services.

Sheila created the Cognitif Design Framework Series to share practical, results-driven resources that help leaders think clearly, make confident decisions, and create lasting impact.

WHAT I BRING TO THE TABLE



STRATEGIC THINKING

Aligning people, process, technology, and strategy to move organizations forward.



PRACTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Creating simple, repeatable models that leaders can apply immediately.



EXECUTION FOCUS

Bringing structure, accountability, and clarity to turn ideas into measurable results.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Helping teams learn, adapt, and build better systems over time.

“ Good intentions start the conversation. Structured systems create the change. ”



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