

# Blueprints For Success

A NEW ERA IN LEADERSHIP:  
THE SUCCESSION-CENTRIC ERA



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welcome to the succession-centric era of leadership. Where leadership transitions take center stage as 3 powerful narratives converge:



### CULTURAL STORYTELLING



### INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION



### SCIENTIFIC INSIGHT

Entertainment juggernauts like *Succession* and *Shōgun* depict leadership transitions as deeply engaging human dramas, while \$56 trillion in mergers and acquisitions over the last 2 decades demonstrate the staggering real-world stakes.

The Center for Creative Leadership's comprehensive analysis of succession planning spans 161 Emmy and Golden Globe-nominated television shows, 190 case studies across 19 industries, and 1,000 peer-reviewed articles on succession planning. The evidence is unmistakable. As the number of

companies from the original *Fortune 500* list continues to shrink, organizations face record-high CEO turnover and hemorrhage \$1 trillion annually through poor transitions. Yet 70% still operate without formal succession plans, navigating tomorrow's challenges with yesterday's ad hoc tools.

Global forces drive this era. Leaders must navigate through societal polarization, adapt to shifting regulatory landscapes and demographics, and prepare for extreme weather events. They must harness artificial intelligence, leverage social media, and manage geopolitical tensions. Each new challenge reminds us that the old playbook for leadership transitions is closed.

We believe an important opportunity lies within these challenges. Organizations that understand the succession-centric era as a convergence of 3 narratives — cultural storytelling, industry transformation, and scientific insight — will write the next chapter of leadership. The future belongs to those who recognize that succession

planning is more than a process or a system. Succession planning is a mindset. One that understands and leverages the powers of culture, experience, and science to get it right, right now; keep getting it right; and reimagine what's right for the future. Those who don't get it right risk becoming cautionary tales.

In our research, we've connected the stories and data we've collected to megatrends and real-world outcomes. Our research is presented across 4 reports that provide the leadership pulse and lists of leaders to watch, along with playlists, frameworks, strategic recommendations, and scenarios designed to help leaders and their teams provide continuity for the entire business and develop the unique capabilities to anticipate what's coming next.

The succession-centric era is here. Leaders must transform succession planning from a reactive necessity into their greatest competitive advantage. The future of leadership begins now.

Succession plans face their most urgent rewrite. Demographics shift, education changes, AI rises, and new mindsets emerge.

1

### DEMOGRAPHICS DISRUPT THE PIPELINE

By 2050, 22% of the world's population will be aged 60+ and 35% of the world's population aged 15 to 24 will be African. Leaders cannot ignore this seismic shift.

2

### EDUCATION SHIFTS CHART NEW PATHWAYS

Declining college enrollment and fewer graduates are reshaping talent pools. Organizations must scout talent through new signals and pipelines.

3

### WORKWEEK REBOOTS REDEFINE LEADERSHIP EXPECTATIONS

As 4-day workweeks rise globally and 5-day mandates return in the U.S., succession plans must bridge competing models to sustain performance.

4

### AI AGENTS ARE HERE, AND MANY LEADERS ARE PLAYING CATCH-UP

Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff says all-human teams are fading and leaders must evolve. Succession plans must ready leaders for human-AI collaboration.

5

### SUCCESSION-CENTRIC MINDSETS EMERGE: IMMEDIACY, CONTINUITY, GENERATIVITY

The Center for Creative Leadership's new "ICG" framework highlights 3 mindsets to encourage a shift from reactive decision-making to intentional, strategic planning.

## KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

A look at how the story of succession planning has been told over time and with various frameworks is a valuable starting point. For over half a century, CCL has investigated how leaders develop and thrive at the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels.

### Lessons of Experience

(1988)

Lesson: Leadership can be learned through stretch roles, development relationships, and coursework/training.

### Leader Competencies

(2006)

Lesson: Leadership is a set of competencies that can be mastered. Learn to lead yourself, lead others, and lead the organization.

### Rapid - Unpredictable - Paradoxical - Tangled

(2019)

Lesson: Leadership demands agility, curiosity, comfort with ambiguity, and systems savvy.

### Team Effectiveness

(2023)

Lesson: Strong teams create strong leaders and deliver superior results. Build shared purpose, connection, and cohesion.

### Direction-Alignment-Commitment

(2001)

Lesson: Leadership thrives on shared direction, aligned work, and mutual commitment.

### Boundary Spanning

(2010)

Lesson: Leadership unites groups across vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic boundaries to shape the future.

### Leadership Development Impact

(2020)

Lesson: Leadership growth must be measured. Mindsets, behaviors, attitudes, outcomes, and contexts all matter.

“We all want to get it exactly right.”

— Jamie Dimon, CEO JP Morgan

As organizations navigate increasing complexity, getting succession planning exactly right is no longer aspirational. It's existential. Historically, succession planning at the executive level evolved through distinct phases: from an apprenticeship model to an ad hoc informal process, and now to a structured, strategy-driven discipline (Berke, 2005; Fayol, 1918; Kesner & Sebora, 1994; Umans et al., 2024).

### UNTIL NOW, SUCCESSION PLANNING HAS FOCUSED ON 3 PRIMARY FUNCTIONS:



#### ANTICIPATION

Mapping future talent needs to ensure the right skills and experiences align with key organizational objectives (Tosh, 2024).



#### REGENERATION

Preventing talent gaps, strengthening leadership resilience, and aligning resources with long-term vision (Tosh, 2024).

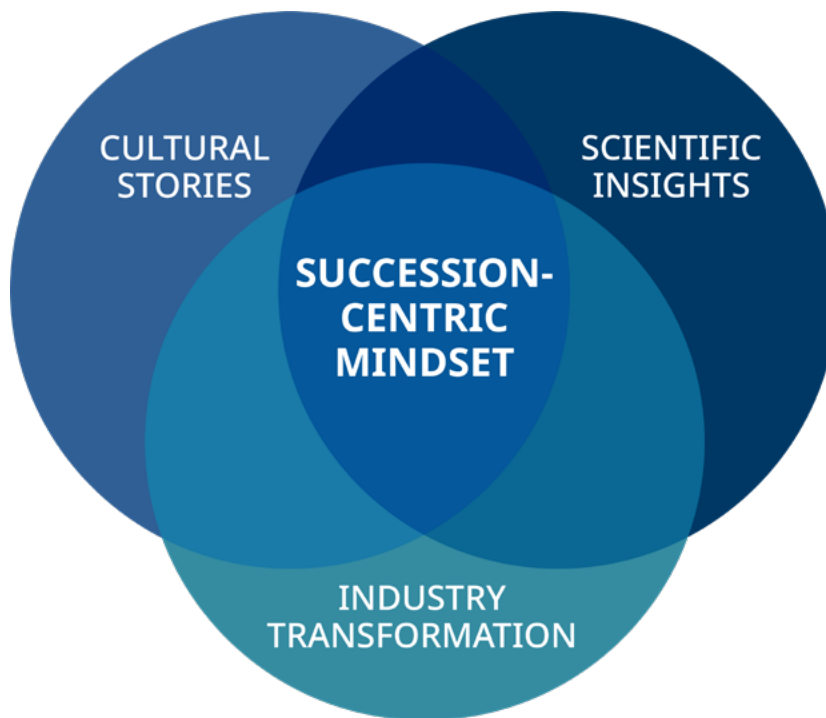


#### COMMUNICATION

Engaging employees in the organization's future and signaling leadership strength to external stakeholders.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE: SUCCESSION-CENTRIC MINDSET

As we shared in our *Succession Stories* and *Evidence-Driven Succession* reports, organizations now recognize succession planning as more than an HR process. It is a strategic and cultural imperative that shapes how organizations think, operate, and evolve.



*Figure 1.* Narrative and empirical perspectives that inform the Succession-Centric Era, from our *Evidence-Driven Succession* report.

The converging focus on succession planning in media, industry, and research signals a major shift: succession planning is now central to how leaders, industries, institutions, and the public prepare for the future. Organizations that fail to institutionalize succession planning will find themselves reacting to crises instead of shaping what comes next.

# The ICG Framework

“Succession planning is guided by 3 mindsets: Immediacy, Continuity, and Generativity. The future follows.”

- Marcia A. Dawkins, Ph.D. & Daniel J. Smith, Ph.D.

### SUCCESSION PLANNING NEEDS AN UPGRADE

Our research proposes 3 succession-centric mindsets that form the essential core of effective succession planning:

- 1. IMMEDIACY:**  
rapid responsiveness to leadership shifts and emerging talent opportunities.
- 2. CONTINUITY:**  
sustained organizational performance.
- 3. GENERATIVITY:**  
future-building through long-term knowledge and leadership pipeline creation.

Together, these elements comprise a holistic framework to ensure that succession planning efforts keep leadership development always on, always focused, and always evolving.

### ICG SUCCESSION PLANNING FRAMEWORK



Figure 2. The ICG Framework, which comprises 3 succession-centric mindsets — Immediacy, Continuity, and Generativity — that form the core of effective succession planning.

### IMMEDIACY: YOUR LEADERSHIP PIPELINE'S REAL-TIME SENSOR SYSTEM

**Immediacy** involves responding immediately to current needs, unexpected events, constraints, or disruptions in leadership transitions. Organizations that neglect immediacy often stall, react too late, and fade into irrelevance.

An immediacy mindset allows leaders to:

- Detect and send signals and recalibrate in real time.
- Embed succession planning into strategy, keeping leadership readiness always on.
- Respond to talent gaps, emerging threats, and leadership opportunities before they become crises.

With immediacy, companies “get it right, right now” to handle leadership transitions without disrupting massive operations. They develop multiple pathways to absorb shocks rather than rely on one rigid plan. Developing multiple pathways for response requires succession-centric leaders to insist on realism, understand instability, force critical conversations, and begin to decentralize leadership responsibilities to foster greater organizational resilience.

Immediacy planning enables quick responses to crisis management while minimizing operational disruption. In this sense, immediacy is essential to maintaining strategic flexibility and ensuring leadership

stability even amid unforeseen challenges. However, overreliance on immediacy planning risks prioritizing current routines and being resistant to change.

Organizations can actively stress-test their leadership pipelines instead of waiting for disruption. We call this a “pre-immediacy” mindset. Pre-immediacy situations involve disruptions to organizational systems and leadership pipelines, irrespective of whether the disruptions are foreseen. These instances represent an opportunity for succession-centric leaders to lay the groundwork for responding to succession needs by understanding the organization’s vulnerability in rare, high-impact events.

### CONTINUITY: YOUR LEADERSHIP ARCHITECTURE

**Continuity** ensures that current, thriving business operations are preserved and sustained in a manner consistent with organizational values to drive continued functioning. A focus on continuity directs knowledge transfer, leadership transitions, and long-term stability. Leaders who prioritize continuity don't scramble to replace key roles; they build a leadership pipeline that ensures seamless handoffs. Organizations that lack continuity lose institutional knowledge, weaken their leadership core, and fall apart under pressure.

#### Continuity requires:

- Coordinating multiple succession processes simultaneously.
- Balancing current performance demands with future capability needs.
- Strengthening leadership pathways through intentional practice.
- Sequencing complex development actions over time.
- Maintaining organizational coherence.

To be clear, continuity is not about maintaining the status quo but about ensuring the organization can survive and evolve amid disruptions. A continuity mindset is skeptical of top-down succession plans that assume predictability. Organizations must ensure that those making succession decisions bear real consequences for their choices. If succession planning is handled by disconnected committees or external consultants with no risk exposure, it becomes brittle. Leaders involved in succession planning must have direct accountability for the success or failure of transitions.

Consequently, continuity ensures leadership transitions sustain core values while keeping the business on course. Done right, continuity prevents chaos. Done wrong, continuity breeds complacency. The presence or absence of continuity illustrates whether leadership handovers tend to reinforce or disrupt an institution's identity, respectively. Structured succession — with internal talent pipelines, long-term skill assessments, and clear accountability metrics — ensures leaders are ready before they're needed. But continuity without immediacy and generativity is a trap. It can entrench outdated leadership models and let toxic cultures fester.

### GENERATIVITY: YOUR LEADERSHIP PATH TO RESOURCES, EXECUTION, AND FUTURE VISION

**Generativity** advances succession planning beyond simple reactions and processes into opportunistic, self-sustaining systems. A generativity mindset allows leaders to link past lessons, present capabilities, and future needs; architect the future; and make succession a core business element of how the organization thinks and works at every level. A generativity mindset transforms succession planning into a system for continuous innovation and long-term impact.

Generativity encourages leaders to think beyond the here-and-now to create innovative legacies, new systems, and cultures that set up future generations for success.

Those with a generativity mindset have the capacity to:

- Create space for breakthrough insights.
- Connect surface knowledge with deeper understanding.
- Spot meaningful patterns across time.
- Bridge past and current experiences with future possibilities.
- Turn scattered and distally related ideas into coherent stories.

Succession will no longer be about who leads next. It is about how the next generations of leaders

are chosen, when they step in, and whether they are prepared for what lies ahead. A generative mindset ensures that leadership evolves alongside technological shifts, societal change, and environmental realities. Our research reveals that succession-centric organizations invest in knowledge capital, multigenerational stewardship, and leadership pipelines that outlast any single transition. From AI and digitalization to sustainability and global talent strategy, generative succession ensures leaders shape change rather than react to it. Without generativity, your organization may stave off today's threats but miss the leaders who will create tomorrow's opportunities.

## WHY OUR ICG FRAMEWORK MATTERS TO YOUR ORGANIZATION

### DISTINGUISH WHO FROM HOW AND WHEN

Many organizations focus on the *who* (identifying the right successor) while ignoring the *how* (broader impact of the transition) and letting the *when* (timing) overtake them. Our ICG framework enables decision-making for critical time-sensitive issues, unlocks understanding of obstacles to growth, and builds organizational capacity to execute into the future.

### ADDRESS SHIFTING LEADERSHIP PROFILES

Emerging leaders are challenging traditional models, expecting development around human-AI collaboration, agility, emotional control, and “glocal” experience. ICG asks, “Are we sufficiently developing leaders who will shape our future?” The ICG framework helps align leadership development with real-world shifts and elevates organizational capabilities for who and what is next.

### FIND GAPS BEFORE THEY BECOME FAILURES

Organizations fail at succession because they simply lack plans. ICG mindsets help identify key succession failure points — such as over relying on a single leader, failing to anticipate industry shifts, dismissing popular culture narratives, and transferring knowledge poorly — to ultimately mitigate transition risks and build resilient succession ecosystems.

### THRIVE AS UNEXPECTED SHOCKS ABOUND

Technological upheavals, geopolitical instability, economic turbulence, and environmental precarity create unpredictable environments. ICG asks, “How do patterns of external change impact my organization’s landscape, competition, and business?” And “Why did we fail to see the changes that overtook us last time?” The ICG framework ensures that organizations are capable of thriving in all conditions.

### SHAPE SUCCESSION WITH STORIES

The narratives you tell define the leaders you attract and organizations you build. Influenced by media, industry, and science, leaders should assess the stories being told. ICG asks, “Are leaders translating succession stories into plans and execution that stakeholders can trust?” Without the right story, leaders miss key opportunities to strengthen trust — and consequently lose their influence.

### BRILLIANT IDEAS ARE WORTHLESS WITHOUT EXECUTION

The perfect succession plan that is forgotten is as bad as having no plan at all. Execution is everything. ICG asks, “How can the organization execute the succession plan, and not just design it?” ICG will guide leaders to invest in the right tools, milestone metrics, and leadership practices to ensure succession is an active process rather than a last-minute emergency response.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

### THREATS

**Romance of Leadership.** Research on CEO transitions across 19 industries shows that companies lose billions from clinging to the outsider-as-savior model that leads to poor performance and leadership instability, instead of focusing equally on internal candidates.

**Knowledge Crisis.** Our research shows that succession failures are due not to leadership gaps, but rather to organizations' failure to embed institutional memory through development relationships and knowledge transfer for cross-generational collaboration.

**Cybersecurity Risks.** AI algorithms can influence executive choices or steal sensitive data. To avoid such disasters, firms must fortify their digital defenses with advanced encryption, constant AI system audits, and employee cyber-awareness training.

**M&A Leadership Issues.** \$56 trillion in M&A deals were made over the last 2 decades, yet many leadership transitions are handled poorly. Companies need integrated succession strategies through M&As or risk cultural collapse, executive churn, and ultimately, lost deal value.

**Workweek Revolution.** Organizations that fail to rethink how leadership is cultivated in shorter, hybrid, and AI-augmented work environments will struggle to retain top talent and prepare successors for the realities of modern work.

### OPPORTUNITIES

**Middle Management Power.** Leaders just *below* the top experience rising pressure along with more isolation and less support. Integrating them into succession planning prevents power vacuums and execution gaps.

**Second-in-Command Potential.** Focusing only on CEOs is shortsighted. Firms that develop strong COOs, CFOs, and business unit leaders create smoother transitions and avoid costly executive misfires.

**Crisis as Opportunity.** Use economic downturns, industry disruptions, and geopolitical turbulence as succession planning stress tests. Disruption reveals true leadership readiness.

**Big Data Utilization.** Historical data is one of the greatest, underutilized assets in succession planning. Leveraging AI and predictive analytics to extract leadership signals from their own histories gives legacy organizations a major leg up.

**Generativity in Action.** Succession-centric organizations can make leadership transitions part of their brand. Making generativity a core business principle turns succession planning into a tool for attracting top talent.

## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

*Based on our research, we offer 5 key recommendations for organizations seeking to develop a succession planning strategy that fosters long-term strategic thinking and optimizes leadership for the future. Together, these recommendations provide a blueprint for organizations to develop a succession planning process that is anticipatory, anti-fragile, adaptable, and responsive to both internal development needs and the external environment.*

### 1. ASSESS THE EXTERNAL LANDSCAPE

Media narratives, scientific research, and industry trends shape how succession is perceived, measured, and executed.

Organizations that fail to track external signals risk making leadership decisions based on outdated and misguided assumptions.

Here are 3 signals succession-centric leaders should start tracking now:

**MEDIA PULSE:** Tracking the trends in news and entertainment can help an organization understand and respond to the ways their stakeholders are being encouraged to think about succession planning. What do succession stories from television shows and real-world cases reveal about public expectations for leadership transitions? Is succession framed negatively? Does it favor some demographics over others? Is it seen in a vacuum?

**SCIENTIFIC INSIGHT:** What do research studies say about the psychology of leadership readiness and performance? Can you measure the degree to which your stakeholders communicate through conflict? Do they demonstrate the agility required to drive short- and long-term results? Do they exercise emotional control?

**INDUSTRY SIGNALS:** How are competitors structuring their pipelines, and where are the gaps in your organization's strategy? How are competitors equipping emerging leaders to thrive in a brittle, anxious, and non-linear world? How are they leveraging technology and creating roadmaps for how it will evolve over time?

Leaders, regardless of industry or role, must track these signals, build validation frameworks, run real-world simulations, and correlate assessment results with actual business performance. In doing so, leaders can frame leadership transitions in ways that resonate with stakeholders, build trust, reinforce organizational values, and serve the best interests of the company and its employees.

### 2. CONDUCT SUCCESSION DEPTH AND RETENTION RISK ANALYSIS

Can your organization seamlessly replace any leader within 24 hours? If not, your pipeline is broken. Succession depth and retention risk analysis can answer several important questions. Does the organization have the right high-potential talent to fill key roles? Are the best people stuck in the wrong jobs? Are future leaders walking out the door because there's nowhere to grow? Succession depth and retention risk analysis identifies talent gaps, pressure-tests your leadership pipeline, and ensures succession is always active.

Organizations master this process by evaluating talent frequently, ensuring no leader is irreplaceable, and forcing candid conversations about underperformance. Leaders are required to identify who should move up in 0-2, 2-5, and 5+ years as well as those who are stalled or struggling, with solutions for promptly addressing the latter. Reviews must expose skill gaps, and every leader must have backup talent.

Succession-centric leaders utilize agreed-upon quantitative and qualitative metrics, such as the following, for assessing candidates:

**CULTURE FLUENCY** — Do they relate to others in a manner that energizes a future-focused pursuit of the company mission?

**BUSINESS ACUMEN** — Do they understand the financial engine, strategy, and competitive landscape?

**EXECUTION POWER** — Can they build teams, drive performance, and make things happen at the highest level?

**LEADERSHIP EDGE** — Can they inspire, adapt, and make high-stakes decisions under pressure?

Succession needs to be a real-time system for protecting and advancing the business that promotes those ready for what comes next rather than who has been around the longest. Only then is succession planning a leadership development opportunity.

## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### 3. APPLY FORESIGHT AND SCENARIO-BASED PLANNING

Organizations that only plan for a single scenario risk being blindsided by unforeseen disruptions. Succession planning requires strategic foresight and scenario-based planning beyond simply identifying possible future scenarios. To get leaders future-ready, organizations must embed foresight into talent development, hiring, and leadership practices. Leaders trained in foresight thinking can better anticipate change because they can track emerging research, industry trends, and media narratives to build third, fourth, and fifth iterations of strategy while others are still stuck on version one. By creating and testing various leadership scenarios against emerging trends, organizations can proactively shape talent pipelines that will thrive in tech-driven economies and volatile markets.

Our research suggests 3 ways to enhance succession plans using foresight and scenario-based planning: First, scenario simulation software, such as quantitative foresight tools, dynamic modeling, and decision-tree simulations, allows organizations to run real-time leadership stress tests, revealing gaps before they become failures. Second, immersive leadership development experiences, such as virtual reality simulations, prepare leaders for the unknown through crisis response drills, high-stakes negotiation training, and global challenges. Third, crowdsourced intelligence and predictive markets tap into collective intelligence to ensure leaders are equipped for realities beyond their own blind spots.

### 4. PRIORITIZE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

A robust succession plan should include human-centered developmental relationships and experiential learning, even as organizations flatten structures and integrate AI tools. These elements are crucial for developing future leaders with emotional intelligence, cultural alignment, and result-driven competencies. Developmental relationships like mentorship, coaching, and action learning provide connections AI cannot replicate. Experiential learning, such as CCL's *Leadership at the Peak* program, develops senior executives' resilience, adaptability, and strategic foresight, enhancing their understanding of

organizational dynamics and capacity for nuanced solutions that span immediacy, continuity, and generativity. Embedding these relationship-based learning opportunities into succession planning helps leaders think strategically, act with agility, and drive long-term results. This approach, which can be supported by AI tools or virtual reality simulations, ensures succession planning addresses immediate concerns while fostering continuity and generativity, preparing organizations for sustained success.

### 5. CULTIVATE MULTIGENERATIONAL STEWARDSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY

Leaders who embrace ICG mindsets recognize that success hinges on generational thinking, stewardship, and the transfer of lived wisdom, not just institutional knowledge. By looking beyond quarterly gains, these succession-centric leaders become guardians of core values, ethical responsibility, and sustainability, striving to “leave the organization better than they found it.” Crucially, this transfer of lived wisdom is the new frontier in leadership development for the succession-centric era. It ensures that hard-earned lessons about resilience, empathy, creativity, and institutional memory are passed on, bridging generational divides and fortifying cultural bedrock.

Accordingly, socioemotional wealth, non-economic elements like values and trust, must be integral to any succession plan or

stakeholder confidence will suffer. Sustainability also becomes a leadership competency, propelling organizations to adopt bio-positive business models and remain ahead of evolving ESG mandates. In parallel, succession-centric leaders leverage artificial intelligence alongside emotional intelligence to detect algorithmic harm, uncover hidden talent, and correct blind spots; for instance, social network analysis can illuminate overlooked successors and map spheres of influence, ensuring fair, data-driven, and future-proof leadership pipelines (Buolamwini, 2023; Marshall & Gebru, 2022). By embedding these principles into their missions and visions, organizations preserve operational expertise and the cultural foundation essential for a truly resilient legacy.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis, frameworks and recommendations reveal that leaders today have access to a wealth of tools and insights to shape succession planning strategies that are future-ready. These resources — ranging from data-driven frameworks to experiential learning programs and immersive scenario building — do not exist in silos. They intersect, reinforce, and amplify each other's impact, blending data-driven decision-making with cultural storytelling and industry best practices.

But insight without execution is irrelevant. The organizations that apply immediacy, continuity, and generativity mindsets will build resilient, future-proof leadership pipelines. Those that treat succession planning as a check-the-box HR function will

face leadership crises, talent drains, and market irrelevance. The next 5–10 years will shape who leads, how they lead, and whether companies survive or thrive.

At the heart of this evolution lies a critical distinction between knowledge transfer and wisdom transfer. While knowledge transfer is essential for sharing playbooks, models, and frameworks, it primarily prepares leaders for what *should* happen. In contrast, wisdom transfer — through lived experience, mentorship, storytelling, and emotional intelligence — prepares leaders for what *actually happens* in moments of uncertainty, volatility, and non-linearity. The figure on the following page outlines this vital difference.

## CONCLUSION

### KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

VS

### WISDOM TRANSFER

Sharing playbooks, models, best practices

Data, research, frameworks

Training programs, strategy models,  
simulations

What *should* happen

Standard role replacement based on skills,  
experience

Passing on lived experience through  
uncertainty

Reflection, emotion, storytelling, embodied  
practice

Mentorship, narrative, shadowing, story-as-  
strategy

What *actually* happens

Preparing future leaders for ambiguity, non-  
linear challenges

This distinction reframes succession as a strategic mindset and a leadership opportunity, which aligns directly with the ICG framework's emphasis on *continuity* and *generativity*. Leaders, both current and emerging, are encouraged to view the “big problems” facing succession as transformative opportunities, where strategic foresight and innovation can lead to lasting positive impact. By coupling rigorous research insights with real-world cases and the powerful storytelling of industry and cultural narratives, leaders can now start setting the agenda for succession planning that truly “gets it right” for the future.

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