

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Succession Reimagined

A NEW ERA IN LEADERSHIP:  
THE SUCCESSION-CENTRIC ERA



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## THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP'S 2025 EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH FEATURE

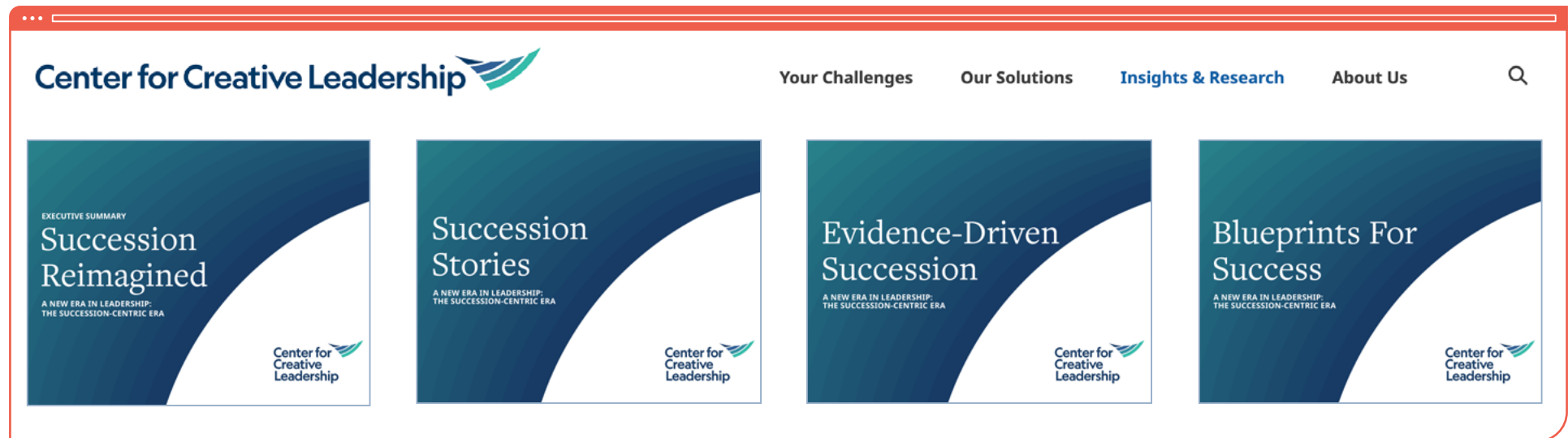
Welcome to the Center for Creative Leadership's first Experiential Research Feature. Experiential Research Features are built around rigorous cross-disciplinary research methods and delivered with a user-centric focus. The features we provide allow you to choose your own adventure among modules of interest, which include storytelling and interviews, data visualizations, immersive scenarios, bibliographies, and themed companion reading lists and playlists. The topics covered are of strategic importance to leaders and organizations today, featuring a range of methodologies and approaches that drive leadership development.

You can use these specific reports to understand the history of succession planning, spotlight emerging leadership trends, and get sharp, actionable insights. Whether you're mapping out the

next steps on your own leadership journey, identifying the next generation of leaders, or rethinking your organization's approach to talent management, this is your tool for staying ahead of the curve.

Our Experiential Research Feature includes 125 pages, with comprehensive analysis of succession planning spanning 161 Emmy- and Golden Globe-nominated television shows, 190 case studies across 19 industries, and 1,000 peer-reviewed articles. Our research is presented across 4 reports designed to help leaders and their teams develop the unique capabilities to anticipate what is coming and decide who will lead next.

Download all sections of our Experiential Research Feature on succession planning at [www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org).



### SUCCESSION REIMAGINED: NAVIGATING THE WINDS OF CHANGE

We visually represented the succession-centric era through design elements that embody movement, momentum, and leadership development. The CCL sail logo and its derived shapes, prominently featured, are symbols of leadership in motion. The sail captures the essence of agility, direction, and the ability to harness shifting forces, a fitting metaphor for organizations navigating leadership transitions right now. The shapes represent differing levels of impact needed to ignite lasting and positive change, reinforcing our belief that leadership is continuously evolving.

Flowing across the pages, the waves in the background reflect the continuous nature of leadership development. Just as waves are shaped by unseen currents, succession planning is

influenced by cultural narratives, industry transformations, scientific discoveries, and global forces. Each current and wave creates ripples that extend far beyond any single leadership transition. The waves illustrate that succession is not an endpoint but a continuum, where every transition carries forward the lessons, legacies, and leadership capacities of those who came before.

The layout's structure, with deliberate vertical and horizontal alignments, reinforces this sense of movement while maintaining clarity and cohesion. This communicates that leadership succession demands an authentic and collaborative approach, much like our mission to advance the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. This alignment

mirrors how succession planning must seamlessly integrate into the fabric of every organization, ensuring continuity while adapting to the realities of a world experiencing rapid change.

The design choices in this report serve as visual representations of the winds of change, capturing the momentum and inevitability of evolution in leadership development. Those who embrace the winds, who recognize succession planning not as a reactive measure but as a strategic imperative and mindset, will find themselves best positioned for the future. In an era where leadership transitions define the success or failure of organizations, navigating these currents will be the difference between drifting aimlessly and sailing forward with purpose.

## 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.

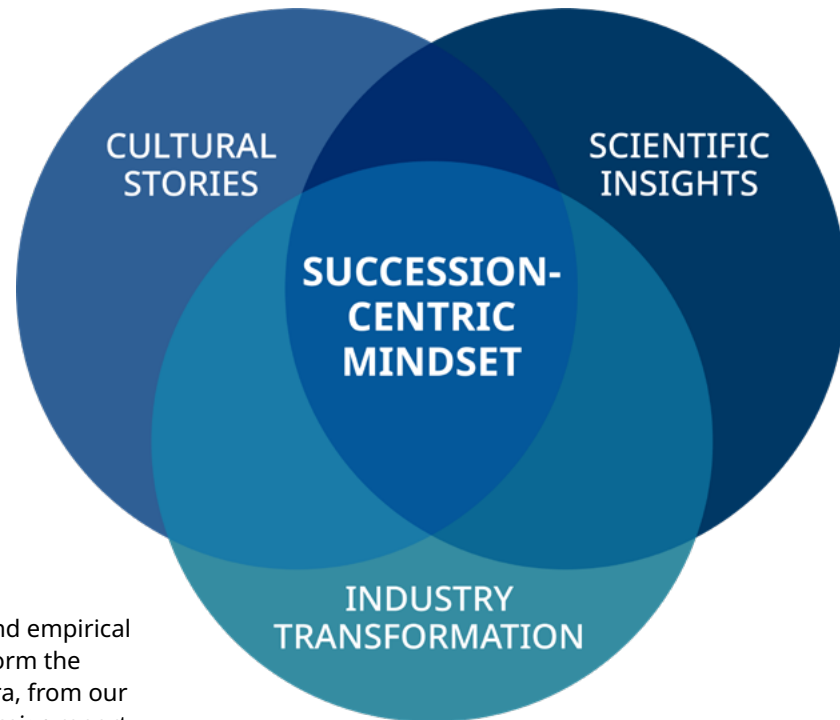
The succession-centric era is here. Leaders must transform succession planning from a reactive necessity into their greatest competitive advantage. The future of leadership begins now.

## 10 KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1** For over 50 years, stories have framed leadership succession as a ruthless, masculine power struggle happening in a vacuum. These stories have shaped public perception and leader mindsets alike. But this frame is now shifting.
- 2** Poor succession planning hands power to competitors. Since 2004, \$56 billion in mergers and acquisitions has reshaped leadership pipelines across industries, contributing to \$1 trillion in lost market value annually.
- 3** The crisis isn't just at the top. It's a silent talent drain happening everywhere. Most organizations have plans for executives, yet few address other critical leadership roles, creating gaps that weaken resilience.
- 4** Continued technological advancements are turning succession planning into a predictive science. Your next leader might be chosen by an algorithm before the board even meets.
- 5** Succession plans that ignore demographic shifts aren't serious. Instead, they react to leadership vacuums and fail to address declining trust, workforce evolution, and the shrinking pool of future-ready talent.
- 6** The most effective leadership transitions happen when predecessors actively endorse and collaborate with successors, creating a critical new dimension in leadership development: the intentional, accessible transfer of lived wisdom.
- 7** Every organization's succession story is written with relational, political, and cultural factors. These elements shape what works, reveal hidden gaps, and determine how leaders can level up.
- 8** Leadership transitions mirror ecological succession. The next generations will inherit boardrooms, navigate "glocal" economies, drive sustainable innovation, and redefine leadership on a planetary scale.
- 9** Today's cohort of leaders may be the last to lead all-human workforces. Succession efforts must emphasize relational and social factors and technological literacy, ensuring leaders are ready to manage enhanced, hybrid teams of humans and technology.
- 10** Choosing the right leader is important but telling the right story is essential. Leaders who communicate succession with urgency, clarity, data, and emotional resonance create more stable transitions — and a future worth leading.

## OUR APPROACH

True understanding of a topic rarely emerges from a single method of inquiry. It comes from the combination of multiple methods across different fields. By tracking the emergence of succession planning across different domains over time, our research uncovers hidden patterns, highlights emerging challenges, and identifies opportunities for more effective leadership transitions. Our approach is designed to help you anticipate disruptions, align leadership pipelines with strategic goals, and implement succession plans that are adaptive, high-impact, and sustainable.



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

## OUR APPROACH

### MEDIA STORIES

We highlight the taken-for-granted assumptions about leadership transitions that shape mindsets and are reflected in 161 Emmy and Golden Globe-nominated television shows (1970–2024). By using agenda-setting theory and content analysis, we explain how succession stories are told, illustrate what is emphasized and omitted, and reveal the implicit norms and blind spots influencing leadership decisions.

### INDUSTRY STORIES

We conducted an external environmental analysis of succession planning based on 400 industry signals across 19 sectors. By analyzing which signals are emphasized and de-emphasized and how succession is framed within different industries, we filtered our dataset down to the 190 most relevant signals to reveal the implicit drivers and strategic opportunities shaping leadership pipelines.

### SCIENCE STORIES

We used bibliometric techniques to transform 5,063 peer-reviewed articles published between 1970 and 2024 into a detailed, data-driven map of 1,000 articles. By conducting a cluster analysis of the map results, we amplified patterns and narratives that are often overlooked, connecting the dots between existing research and emerging real-world trends.

### SUCCESSION-CENTRIC ERA FRAMEWORK

We used our results and findings to develop strategic recommendations and frameworks that help leaders move from insight to execution. By translating research findings into practical tools, we help leaders ask better questions, start critical conversations, tell impactful stories, and design sustainable leadership transitions.



### 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.

Our research identifies 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.

## SUCCESSION-CENTRIC LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

To thrive in the succession-centric era, organizations must build leadership pipelines that are anti-fragile, adaptable, and future-ready.

### We recommend that succession-centric leaders do the following now:

- Leverage development relationships, ensuring adaptability and preparedness for future experiences through continuous training and cross-functional development.
- Integrate emotional intelligence, technological literacy, and intercultural communication training into leadership development to ensure informed decision-making in pluralistic contexts and advance global operational priorities.
- Evaluate how well wisdom transfer, mentoring, and role handoffs are executed. Map out leadership moves for 0–2, 2–5, and 5+ years and determine if any transition points create performance gaps.
- Audit how quickly you can identify internal talent and how prepared successors are to step in. Stress-test your leadership pipeline by running real-world crisis simulations.
- Monitor signals and track emerging succession stories told by news, entertainment, and social media to map relationship patterns, identify opportunities, and anticipate disruptions early.
- Embed responsible technology principles into succession plans by identifying protocols, practices, and areas for operational improvement.
- Incorporate nature-positive strategies to align with multigenerational priorities, equipping future leaders to manage environmental shifts while fostering long-term organizational health.
- Align succession strategies with sector-specific challenges to facilitate quicker responses to rapidly shifting leadership demands, competitor product offerings, and internal goals.
- Use economic downturns, industry disruptions, and geopolitical turbulence as succession planning stress tests, fostering a culture of rapid evaluation and execution.
- Embed foresight and scenario-based planning into talent development, hiring, and leadership development to identify new types of talent and teams, drive long-term results, and ensure the transfer of lived wisdom.

## AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS



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At the Center for Creative Leadership, our drive to create a ripple effect of positive change underpins everything we do. For 50+ years, we've pioneered leadership development solutions for leaders at every level, from community leaders to CEOs. Consistently ranked among the world's top providers of executive education, our research-based programs and solutions inspire individuals in organizations across the world — including  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the Fortune 1000 — to ignite remarkable transformations.

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