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Could Your Business Survive 90 Days Without Its Founder?

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The three-month test reveals whether your company could survive a founder's sudden absence—and what you need to do now to prepare.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: On Wednesday morning, October 21, 2026, I left my California home before sunrise for a quick 48-hour business trip to the Boston area. On my way to the airport I had a serious car accident. The seat belt held, but my sternum broke and my heart slammed into the back of it. A few minutes later I was hugging the center median of the freeway, asking God if today was the day I was coming to see Him.

I had submitted the first version of this article nine days earlier. It asks founders to imagine being suddenly unable to work for three months. I never pictured myself taking the test, and I am not a founder. But as I personally would find out, the exercise works for almost anyone a business depends on.

Nobody at the office knew it yet, but my three-month test had just started. I was the only embedded engineer who fully understood the details of several of our projects and where we stood with at least eight different vendors. My boss, who was already carrying more projects than one person should, suddenly had mine too.

In my first article, Founder Succession: Six Lessons From 15 CEOs Who Actually Lived It (https://familybusiness.org/content/founder-succession-six-lessons-from-15-ceos-who-actually-lived-i) , I drew on interviews with 15 successor CEOs at small and medium companies to identify six recurring challenges in founder succession. The findings revealed that ownership control, inadequate planning, complex relationships, and the founder's personal identity often complicate the transition to new leadership. The article emphasized that successful succession requires preparing not only the successor and the business, but also the founder for life after leadership.

Of the 15 successor CEOs, only 6 knew of a succession plan for their organization. Even then, most described the plan as minimal. In 9 of the 15 cases, founders did not plan for succession until illness, old age, or family pressure forced the issue.

The founder may intend to step aside someday, and then it gets pushed to the back of the stove. Company leaders may assume that a key employee, longtime manager, or family member (in the case of a family business) will take over; however, assumption is not formal authority. The test that follows gives founders and top managers a blueprint for developing an emergency plan before the unthinkable happens.

The Three-Month Test

Imagine that the founder is suddenly unable to work for three months. Could the business operate? This exercise forces the founder, presumed successor, key team members, and advisors to identify what the founder actually does and what the organization has never learned to do on its own.

This test can be used as the first step of a continuity plan and then as a way to start the ball rolling for succession planning. After all, you have to survive the next three months before you can plan the next 10 years.

PART 1: Taking the Test

Step 1: What does the founder actually do?

The founder's list of duties should include visible responsibilities, such as signing checks, approving large purchases, negotiating with banks, meeting key customers, managing vendor relationships, or making pricing decisions.

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It should also include invisible responsibilities. Many founders carry decades of unwritten knowledge in their heads. They know which customer must be called immediately and which one can wait. They know which vendor will extend terms in a pinch. They remember the handshake agreements, the old promises, the pricing exceptions, the family tensions, and the history behind decisions that look irrational to everyone else.

Psychologist Daniel Wegner's research on transactive memory helps explain why this danger is easy to miss. People who work closely together for years divide up what they remember: Each knows certain things and relies on the other for the rest. Successors who have worked beside founders for decades know they can lean on the founder for answers -- as long as the founder is down the hall. But if the founder disappeared tomorrow, who would know enough to act?

Step 2: Which relationships can't wait?

The next step is to list the company's most important clients, customers, lenders, suppliers, advisors, and outside relationships.

Founders often underestimate how much of the company's stability rests on personal trust. A key customer may remain loyal because the founder has always answered the phone. A supplier may continue favorable terms because of a relationship built over decades. A family member may stay calm because the founder knows how to manage the emotional temperature. The successor will inherit the office but the relationships that come with it will have to be re-earned.

Step 3: What changes, what stays, and what can wait?

If the founder is not available, what changes, what stays the same, and why? Start with triage. What needs to be done today? By the end of the week? By the end of the month? What visits can be canceled or moved for the next two weeks?

Communication comes first. I was about to get on a plane to go somewhere people were expecting me to be. I tried to text my boss that I would miss my flight and had been in an accident, but the ambulance hadn't shown up yet and my message lacked clarity. My wife filled him in, and he contacted the vendor before I was due to arrive. A lot of people in the company knew by Friday. Six days later, I found out that several others still hadn't heard.

Employees, customers, and vendors need to be notified immediately. That message should project a sense that everything is under control. The founder is indisposed, but they have built a company that can function in their absence.

Some decisions cannot wait. I was expecting highly technical, time-sensitive results from an outside testing agency. They came back mixed and needed interpretation. My boss had to learn on the spot what they meant for our ability to ship product. He also had to approve a purchase order for something he knew nothing about. He had to trust what I had set in motion rather than understand what I was attempting to do. He has also had to cancel or delay several of his own projects to take on my high-priority ones.

The day-to-day operations kept running without me. We often overvalue our need to be involved in things that will run just fine without us. Crises have a way of sorting that out, as we are forced to refocus our efforts in a different direction. When we finally get back to what we were doing, we discover we weren't really that necessary to keep those projects running.

Step 4: Who leads, and with what authority?

The three-month test should also produce an ordered list of the people the founder would trust to run the organization temporarily.

It is easy for a founder to say, "Someone would step in." It is much harder to name that person. It is harder still to decide whether that person can make payroll decisions, borrow money, sign contracts, approve major expenses, negotiate with customers, resolve family disputes, and speak for the company.

In many founder-led businesses, the first attempt to make this list exposes how unprepared the organization really is. It is better to discover the problem during an exercise than during a hospitalization, lawsuit, accident, or death.

The founder should not only name the temporary leader but also define the temporary leader's authority. What can this person approve? Who has access to bank accounts, payroll systems, insurance information, customer contracts, passwords, leases, and legal documents?

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PART 2: What the Results Will Tell You

Continuity now: Write the emergency plan.

In my earlier article, “Founder Succession: Six Lessons From 15 CEOs Who Actually Lived It,” I argued that founders should create a separate emergency plan for sudden illness, death, or incapacity (https://familybusiness.org/content/your-family-needs-an-emergency-succession-plan) .

Researchers Richard Beckhard and W. Gibb Dyer found that when a founder passes control to a second-generation family member (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/0090261683900220) , only 3 out of 10 businesses survive that transition. Other research has found that among organizations without a plan, fewer than 25% survive after the founder’s death.

Without an emergency plan (https://www.familybusiness.org/content/family-businesses-must-prepare-for-the-unthinkable) , the company may not know who owns what. Employees may not know who leads. A probate court may become involved. The person most familiar with the business may also be the person least legally authorized to act.

This plan should be written, reviewed, and accessible. An emergency plan locked in the founder’s desk is not much help if no one can open the drawer.

Succession later

An emergency plan does not address the future direction of the company. It is a survival guide to maintain the status quo. Founders have a unique role in casting a vision for the company and building a coherent team of believers to reach it. Many times that future exists only in the founder’s head. The founder needs to write it out and talk about it, so that the next leader follows the path the founder has been blazing. The founders of the United States cast that vision in the Constitution and then debated its worth in the Federalist Papers. The handover to the next leader can be done on the founder’s own terms or on someone else’s.

Put a date on the calendar.

Founders of privately held businesses often have a controlling equity position. That means they may not have to leave until they choose to leave. A founder who says, “I’ll leave when the company reaches this number,” may find reasons to keep changing the number. But a date allows the business to work backward.

Hand over like a relay.

In a well-run relay (https://familybusiness.org/content/how-the-founders-can-stay-relevant-when-the-next-gen-takes-over) , the outgoing runner and incoming runner move together. The successor should not be handed the title before learning the work. Many founder-led businesses reverse that order. They announce a title change while the founder still holds the authority. The transfer of title should follow the transfer of authority, or at least move in close rhythm with it.

Move ownership along with authority.

Among the 15 successors, only 3 of the 15 founders held less than a majority equity position in the firm. Several described founder behavior that undercut successor authority, suspended the succession process, restarted it, or even reversed it. In one case, the succession process took 20 years. If possible, the founder should reduce ownership to a minority position before the actual date of succession.

Plan the founder’s next chapter.

The founder must be able to imagine a meaningful life after leaving the CEO role (https://www.familybusiness.org/content/why-family-business-founders-struggle-to-step-back-during-succes) . Some may genuinely want to play golf four days a week.

Coach the successor.

Many of the firms we studied had no formal leadership development programs. Successors were often left to learn by observation, experience, or necessity. At the same time, founders should recognize that the successor may not lead with the same skills that built the business. Founders sometimes limit organizational growth so the company remains manageable to them.

Not for founders only

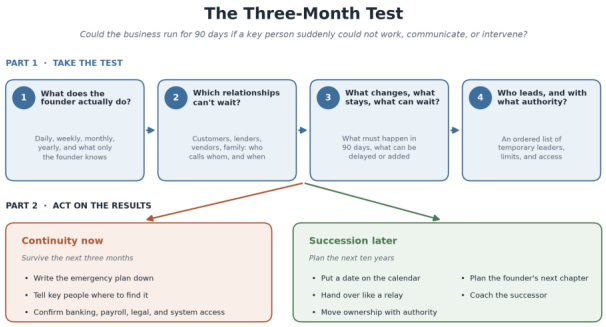
The three-month test is simple: could the company operate for 90 days if the founder suddenly could not work, communicate, or intervene? My accident proved these lessons apply to any key person in the organization, from the CFO to the sole mechanic or machinist who holds valuable information in their head rather than sharing it with others. That person might see

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holding key information and relationships as job security. In effect, it is a threat to the organization as a whole. Consider writing a “how to” for the person who will have your job someday.

The three-month test at a glance



Take the test

- Write down what the founder actually does, daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly, including what only the founder knows.
- List the relationships that depend on the founder personally, and who would call each one in the first week.
- Sort the work: what must happen in the next 90 days, what can wait, and what has to be added.
- Name an ordered list of temporary leaders and define their authority in writing.
- Confirm that banking, payroll, legal, and system access are in place.

Act on the results

- Write the emergency plan down and tell key people where to find it.
- Put a leadership-transfer date on the calendar and work backward from it.
- Transfer duties gradually, and let the title follow the authority.
- Consider reducing the founder’s ownership before the handover.
- Define the founder’s next role in writing, and create a coaching plan for the successor.

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