

A COMPLIMENTARY RESOURCE

What's Your Organization's Continuity Risk?

A 15-minute self-assessment to identify the structural pattern that will determine what happens to your organization when you're no longer the one running it

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Before You Start

Most organizations diagnose leadership problems by looking at people. This tool starts somewhere else: your organization's structure.

Every organization is built around a dominant way of concentrating power, coordinating work, and making decisions. That structure isn't neutral, it creates a specific, predictable pattern of risk. Specifically: a predictable way your organization becomes fragile if you, or any other key leader, step away, retire, or are simply unavailable when a critical decision has to be made.

The question isn't whether you have a succession plan on paper. It's whether your organization's structure could survive without you, starting tomorrow.

This self-assessment takes about 15 minutes. Answer honestly, based on how your organization actually operates today, not how it appears on paper or in a strategic plan.

Step 1: Find Your Dominant Pattern

Rate each statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Group A

1. Most consequential decisions still run through one individual, regardless of what the organizational chart says.
2. The organization's direction, tone, and priorities are widely understood to reflect one person's vision.
3. There is no meaningful process for delegating final decision authority away from the top.
4. If this person left tomorrow, people would describe the resulting gap as irreplaceable, not manageable.

Group A Total: ____ / 20

Group B

5. Work is governed primarily by standardized policies and procedures rather than judgment calls.
6. The people who make strategic decisions are several layers removed from the people doing the frontline work.
7. Leadership departures have historically caused little operational disruption, things keep running.
8. Problems tend to get pushed upward through the hierarchy rather than resolved where they occur.

Group B Total: ____ / 20

Group C

9. The core work requires extensive credentialing, licensure, or specialized expertise that took years to acquire.
10. The experts in this organization operate with significant day-to-day autonomy over how they do their work.
11. Administrators and executives primarily support the experts rather than direct or supervise them.
12. Experts' loyalty runs at least as much to their profession or craft as it does to the organization itself.

Group C Total: ____ / 20

Group D

13. Work is organized around cross-functional teams that form, evolve, and dissolve as needs change.
14. Leadership on any given initiative shifts to whoever is best positioned to solve the problem, not a fixed chain of command.
15. Coordination happens through ongoing collaboration rather than fixed rules or hierarchy.
16. The organization thrives on customization and novelty rather than repeatable, standardized output.

Group D Total: ____ / 20

The group with your highest total is your organization's dominant pattern. If two groups are within 3 points of each other, you're likely a blend of both, read both profiles below.

Step 2: Read Your Risk Profile

Group A: The Founder-Centered Organization

The Pattern: Everything runs through one person. It's often the most vibrant and responsive way to run an organization, and the riskiest.

The Risk: Institutional knowledge, key relationships, and decision-making authority are concentrated in one individual. Often there's no real delegation mechanism, not because no one is capable, but because it's never been structurally necessary.

Ask yourself: Could you name, right now, who would make each category of decision if you were unreachable for 60 days?

Group B: The Standardized Organization

The Pattern: Coordination happens through rules, procedures, and hierarchy. Leaders can be swapped out with little visible disruption.

The Risk: This looks continuity-safe on the surface, but the real risk is quieter: decisions get made by people disconnected from the daily work, so leadership changes rarely fix the actual gap between strategy and frontline reality.

Ask yourself: When strategy fails here, who gets blamed, and does that ever include the people who set the strategy?

Group C: The Expertise-Driven Organization

The Pattern: Highly trained professionals operate with significant autonomy. Administration supports rather than directs.

The Risk: Risk here isn't concentrated in one person, it's diffuse. Because loyalty often runs to the profession more than the institution, the organization can be resistant to change and vulnerable to losing key people to peer organizations with little warning.

Ask yourself: If your three most senior experts left within the same year, what would actually break?

Group D: The Team-Driven Organization

The Pattern: Leadership is fluid, shifting to whoever is best positioned to solve the problem at hand.

The Risk: There's no single point of failure, which is itself the risk. Institutional memory and decision rights rarely get documented anywhere, so when key connectors leave, no one may notice the gap until something quietly stalls.

Ask yourself: Is there anyone who could tell a newcomer, in five minutes, who really owns any given decision here?

Step 3: One More Question

Regardless of which pattern you identified, ask one more question:

Every organizational pattern carries the seeds of its own risk. The question is whether anything holds that risk in check, or whether it runs unchecked.

17. Is there any person, group, or process in your organization with genuine authority to check your dominant pattern, not merely advise against it?
18. In the last three years, has that check actually altered a major decision, or has it only ever been overridden?

If the honest answer to either question gives you pause, that's worth paying attention to, it's usually the clearest signal available about how prepared your organization really is for what comes next.

What This Tells You, and What Comes Next

This self-assessment gives you a directional read on your organization's dominant pattern and the risk that comes with it. It's a starting point, not a complete diagnosis, real organizations are messier and more layered than any single self-assessment can capture.

If what you found here raised questions you'd like to think through with someone outside your organization, that's exactly the conversation I have with CEOs and boards every week.

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