

Leadership Transition Survival Guide

The first 30 days after your CDO leaves: what to do, when, and who does it

6-9 months

Average time to hire a new CDO

10-30%

Revenue decline during an unmanaged leadership vacancy

The 30-Day Action Plan

Days 1-3: Contain

Action	Owner	■
Inventory all active campaigns and pending decisions	ED or senior dev staff	■
Identify donor relationships held exclusively by departing CDO	ED	■
Secure access to all systems, passwords, vendor contacts	Operations	■
All-staff communication: acknowledge transition, signal stability	ED	■
Board chair notification with initial plan outline	ED	■

Days 4-7: Communicate

Action	Owner	■
Personal calls to top 20 donors from ED	ED	■
Written communication to next 50 donors from senior staff	Dev team	■
Vendor and partner notification	Operations	■

Team meeting: roles clarified, interim leadership named	ED / Interim	■
Board briefing with 30-day stabilization plan	ED	■

Days 8-14: Stabilize

Action	Owner	■
Interim or fractional CDO engaged and onboarded	ED / Board	■
Campaign calendar confirmed or adjusted	Interim CDO	■
Gift processing and stewardship continuity verified	Operations	■
Team 1:1s completed — listen, reassure, set expectations	Interim CDO	■
Weekly reporting cadence established	Interim CDO	■

Days 15-30: Build

Action	Owner	■
Pipeline review and donor strategy updated	Interim CDO	■
Search committee formed with clear timeline and scope	Board	■
Operational improvements identified and initiated	Interim CDO	■
Board engagement plan for transition period defined	ED + Board chair	■
30-day scorecard: what's stable, what needs work, what's next	Interim CDO	■

Donor Communication Templates

Template 1: Top Donor Personal Call Script

"Hi [Name], this is [ED Name] from [Org]. I wanted you to hear directly from me that [CDO Name] has moved on. I want you to know three things: your support matters deeply to us, our mission hasn't changed, and we have a strong plan in place. I'd love to schedule a time to talk more about our work and how your partnership continues to make an impact."

Template 2: Broader Donor Email

Subject: A note from our Executive Director

"Dear [Name], I'm writing to share that [CDO Name] has transitioned from [Org]. While leadership changes are part of organizational life, our commitment to [mission] is unwavering. We have [interim plan] in place and our team continues to deliver on the work your generosity makes possible. Thank you for being part of this community. I welcome your questions anytime."

Get interim leadership in the chair within 2 weeks

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