

HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

The Leadership Transition Playbook

Combining interim leadership and executive search to navigate change with confidence

A practical framework
for complex leadership
challenges

Real-world use
cases and executive
considerations



Rethinking leadership transitions

There is no such thing as a convenient time for a leadership transition. In fact, gaps tend to emerge at the very moment stability matters most—periods of growth, transformation, or widespread uncertainty. While these moments are inevitable, the response need not be reactive. Too often, organizations feel forced to choose between speed and precision: fill the role quickly and risk a poor fit, or take the time to find the right leader and accept the disruption of waiting. Neither option fully addresses the challenge.

Leading organizations are discovering a different approach, treating interim leadership and executive search as interconnected parts of a single strategy—one designed to balance continuity, long-term success, and risk.

Leadership transitions are not purely operational events—they are human ones. How they are managed shapes not only outcomes, but also confidence, trust, and organizational cohesion.



When leadership needs are urgent, companies often face a difficult choice: solve today's challenge or focus on tomorrow's needs. Combining interim leadership with executive search allows organizations to do both—stabilizing the business while securing the right long-term leader.

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The hidden cost of a leadership gap

When a critical leadership role remains unfilled, the impact quickly cascades across the organization. Decision-making slows; accountability becomes unclear; teams lose direction; momentum stalls on strategic initiatives. In many cases, high-performing employees disengage or look elsewhere.

Leadership transitions can be highly visible moments. The presence—or absence—of leadership sends a signal to the market, to employees, and to stakeholders about the organization's stability and direction. The longer a leadership gap persists, the more difficult and costly it becomes to recover from.

And yet, the stakes of a new hire are high as well. A mis-hire at an executive level can have multi-year consequences. These are not isolated hiring decisions—they are enterprise-level risks.

Are you experiencing leadership gap drag?

- ☐ Decisions are delayed or escalated unnecessarily.
- ☐ Teams are waiting for direction.
- ☐ Priorities shift frequently or lack ownership.
- ☐ Key initiatives are slowed or stalled.
- ☐ You're holding off on important moves until a hire is made.

A false tradeoff: Speed vs. the right hire

In periods of disruption, organizations often need a leader with highly specific expertise—someone who can step in quickly, make confident decisions, and stabilize the business. Increasingly, organizations are calling on leaders who have chosen to specialize in interim and project-based work, building careers around guiding companies through moments of change. They are selected for immediate impact, bringing experience from similar situations with less emphasis on long-term organizational fit.

A permanent hire, by contrast, must meet a broader set of requirements. Beyond capability, this leader must align with the organization's culture, leadership style, and strategic direction. Long-term leadership is not just about performance—it is about shaping the organization's future.

Attempting to find one person who can satisfy both immediate execution needs and long-term strategic alignment often leads to compromise. Organizations either prioritize urgency and make a rushed decision or prioritize fit and leave the business without leadership for too long. **The most effective approach recognizes these as distinct needs and addresses each with the right solution at the right time.**

A framework for blending interim and search

Every transition is different. Some require immediate stabilization; others demand specialized expertise, careful succession planning, or a longer search for a leader who can shape the next phase of growth. In many cases, the immediate leadership need and the long-term hiring profile overlap. In others, they differ significantly. By integrating executive search with interim talent, organizations gain both confidence and agility: the ability to respond quickly to the moment while continuing to make a thoughtful, well-informed decision about permanent leadership.

The interim track provides immediate relief and impact. Experienced leaders and experts can be deployed quickly to maintain continuity, address urgent priorities, and provide leadership capacity when the organization cannot afford to wait. Their value lies not only in their ability to step in quickly, but in the depth of experience gained from leading similar moments time and again for other organizations.

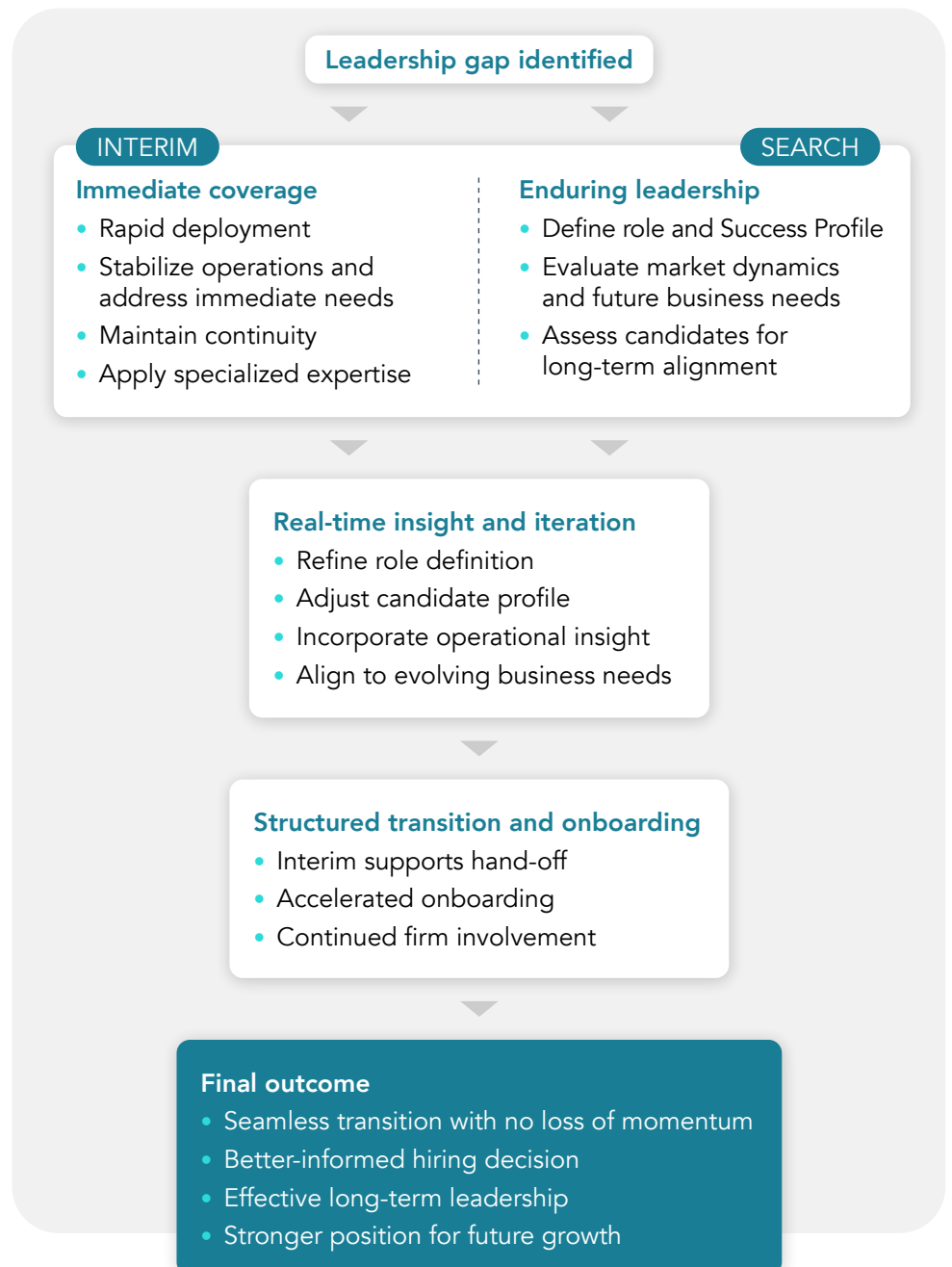
The search track runs alongside that work, focused on identifying the right permanent executive. Rather than operating from a static view of the role, the process can evolve as the organization learns more about what the business truly needs. Insights from the interim engagement can help refine the permanent hire profile, sharpen the job description, and clarify the capabilities required for long-term success. In some cases, candidates can be dual-tracked for interim and permanent consideration, creating more optionality and a more informed decision-making process.

Executing a combined approach effectively requires access to a broad, global talent network and the ability to coordinate interim and search processes in parallel—capabilities most organizations do not maintain internally.

A combined model gives companies access to:

- Best-in-class in-seat and independent executives
- Immediate leadership support when timing matters
- Pragmatic, market-driven guidance on the right solution
- A more adaptive search process that reflects real-time business needs

The result is faster relief, stronger decision-making, smoother handoffs, and greater confidence that the right leader is in place for what comes next.



How to bring a **layered search process** to life

A coordinated approach enables organizations to respond quickly, learn in real time, and make more informed leadership decisions as circumstances evolve. While every transition is different, the process typically unfolds across a series of overlapping stages.

1 Clarify the immediate need

Begin with a focused assessment of the situation. What must be stabilized, accelerated, or delivered in the near term? Where is leadership most urgently required? This stage defines the mandate for interim support and establishes clear priorities. Heidrick & Struggles' interim team helps assess the situation, refine requirements, and identify precisely matched talent.

2 Deploy interim leadership or expertise

Experienced interim leaders or specialized experts are deployed quickly—often within days—to provide continuity, lead critical decisions, and address pressing challenges. Selected for their experience in similar situations, they can integrate rapidly and begin creating impact immediately.

3 Generate real-time insight

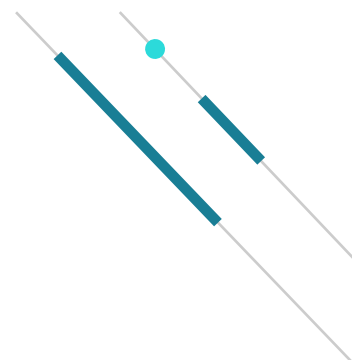
As interim talent engages with the business, a clearer picture of the role, team, and organizational needs emerges. Initial assumptions can be tested, priorities refined, and new opportunities or constraints identified. Rather than defining leadership requirements in theory, organizations gain insight grounded in current operating realities.

4 Run and refine the search in parallel

While interim leaders are driving progress, the search process advances in parallel. As new insights emerge, the role specification and candidate profile can be refined to reflect evolving needs. In some cases, organizations may also assess talent for both interim and permanent opportunities, creating additional flexibility and optionality.

5 Transition with structure and support

Once a permanent leader is selected, the transition is managed deliberately. Interim talent can support knowledge transfer, maintain momentum, and help accelerate onboarding, while the broader team provides additional support to position the new executive for success.



This process is rarely linear. Stages often overlap, and the approach adapts as new information emerges. That flexibility is one of its greatest strengths. What remains constant is the outcome: organizations maintain momentum today while making stronger, more confident decisions for the future—without being forced into unnecessary tradeoffs.

High-risk, high-reward transition situations

An integrated approach is particularly valuable in moments where both speed and precision matter—and where the cost of getting either wrong is high. These are typically periods of change, uncertainty, or acceleration, when leadership continuity is critical but the long-term requirements of the role may not yet be fully defined.



Key moments for a combined search and interim approach

Sudden departure

Prioritize stabilization and speed

Transformation

Prioritize experience and adaptability

Growth

Prioritize flexibility and evolving needs

New role

Prioritize iteration and clarity

Restructuring / M&A

Prioritize continuity and adaptability

One of the most common scenarios is an **unexpected executive departure**. When a key leader exits suddenly, organizations must act quickly to stabilize operations and maintain direction. At the same time, rushing to fill the role permanently can introduce significant risk. A layered approach allows the business to regain control immediately while creating the space to make a more nuanced long-term decision.

This model is equally effective during **periods of transformation or turnaround**. The leadership needed to run a business frequently differs from that needed to change the business. In these situations, the organization may need an immediate leader with highly specific experience—someone who has navigated similar challenges before and can drive change quickly. That expertise may not perfectly align with the profile required to lead the organization once the transformation is complete. A combined approach allows both needs to be addressed in tandem, without compromise.

In **high-growth or scaling environments**, leadership requirements often evolve rapidly. What the business needs today may look very different in six to twelve months. Deploying interim leadership can help manage immediate demands while allowing time to define the permanent role with greater clarity and foresight.

This approach is also well suited to **newly created or evolving roles**, where the scope and expectations are not yet fully established. Rather than locking into a fixed job description too early, organizations can use interim leadership to shape the role in practice—informing a more accurate and effective search process.

Finally, during **mergers, acquisitions, or broader organizational restructuring**, leadership needs can shift quickly and unpredictably. An integrated model provides the flexibility to respond to changing conditions while ensuring continuity across the business.

While this approach introduces additional flexibility, it also reframes the economics of leadership transitions. The cost of interim leadership is often outweighed by the cost of delay, mis-hire, or lost momentum—making it a practical investment in both performance and risk mitigation.

What to look for in an interim vs. permanent leader

While interim and permanent leaders may occupy the same role, they are not interchangeable. Many interim leaders intentionally choose this path as a long-term career, specializing in high-impact, time-bound leadership assignments. Each type of leader is selected for a different purpose and evaluated against different criteria, and the distinction is the key to getting both decisions right.

INTERIM EXECUTIVES

Built for immediate impact

Interim leaders are chosen for their ability to step into complex situations quickly and deliver results with minimal ramp-up time. Look for:

- **Speed to effectiveness**—able to assess, decide, and act quickly
- **Relevant, repeatable experience**—have navigated similar challenges before
- **Comfort with ambiguity**—operate effectively in evolving or uncertain environments
- **Execution focus**—prioritize outcomes, stabilization, and momentum
- **Independence and objectivity**—bring a fresh perspective without internal bias



Their role is to stabilize, lead, and create traction from day one.

PERMANENT LEADERS

Built for long-term impact

Permanent leaders are selected for their ability to lead the organization over time—shaping strategy, culture, and performance. Look for:

- **Strategic alignment**—closely matched to the organization's long-term direction
- **Cultural fit and leadership style**—able to build trust and lead within the organization
- **Scalability and agility**—capacity to grow with the business and evolve the function dynamically
- **Sustained performance**—track record of delivering results over time
- **Leadership durability**—ability to build teams, systems, and long-term value



Their role is to own the function, lead the organization forward, and deliver sustained impact.

Trying to find one individual who perfectly meets both sets of criteria—immediate, situation-specific execution and long-term leadership alignment—can lead to compromise. A layered approach allows organizations to optimize for each need separately, resulting in stronger outcomes in both the short and long term.

Common missteps during leadership transitions

Even with the best intent, organizations can undermine the effectiveness of a leadership transition by falling into a few common—and often avoidable—traps. These pitfalls typically stem from acting under pressure, relying on incomplete information, or treating leadership transitions as more straightforward than they actually are.



Waiting too long

Organizations often delay action in the hope that the situation will resolve itself or that the right permanent hire can be found quickly. In reality, leadership gaps tend to compound over time. The longer a role remains unfilled, the greater the impact on decision-making, team performance, and overall momentum.



Treating interim as a stopgap

Interims are sometimes viewed as placeholders rather than strategic assets, which can limit their effectiveness. When thoughtfully engaged, interim leaders can do far more than “hold the seat”—they can stabilize the business, drive progress, and generate insights that materially improve the eventual hiring decision.



Locking the role definition too early

Organizations often feel pressure to define the role and candidate profile upfront and proceed quickly into search. But in periods of change, those initial assumptions may not hold. Committing too early can result in a misaligned search and, ultimately, a weaker hire.



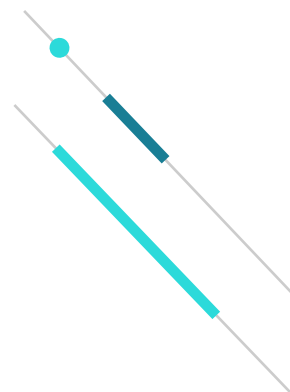
Rushing the permanent hire

When leadership is missing, the urgency to “solve the problem” can lead to a compressed hiring timeline. This can result in compromise—either on fit, capability, or long-term alignment. Having interim leadership in place reduces this pressure and allows the organization to make a more deliberate decision.



Failing to plan the handoff

The transition from interim to permanent leadership is sometimes treated as a simple handoff. In practice, it requires structure and support. Without a deliberate transition plan, organizations risk losing continuity, delaying onboarding, or creating confusion around priorities and expectations.



An integrated model helps organizations avoid these risks by introducing flexibility, real-time insight, and the ability to respond thoughtfully—without sacrificing speed or momentum.

Workbook: Leadership transition planning

1 ASSESS THE SITUATION

Diagnose the leadership need before determining the solution.

What triggered this transition?

- ☐ Unexpected departure
- ☐ Planned succession
- ☐ Transformation / turnaround
- ☐ Growth / scaling
- ☐ New role creation
- ☐ Other: _____

What is at risk if this role remains unfilled for 60–90 days?

- ☐ Decision-making
- ☐ Progress on key initiatives
- ☐ Team performance
- ☐ Strategic priorities
- ☐ Revenue / performance
- ☐ Other: _____

How urgent is the need for leadership?

- ☐ Immediate (days)
- ☐ Near-term (weeks)
- ☐ Flexible (months)

2 IDENTIFY IMMEDIATE NEEDS

Define what success looks like in the next 30–90 days.

What must be stabilized immediately?

- _____
- _____
- _____

What decisions cannot wait?

- _____
- _____
- _____

What outcomes must be achieved in the next 90 days?

- _____
- _____
- _____

What type of expertise is required immediately?

- ☐ Turnaround / restructuring
- ☐ Operational execution
- ☐ Transformation leadership
- ☐ Crisis management
- ☐ Functional expertise (specify): _____
- ☐ Other: _____

How important is speed to impact?

- ☐ Critical
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Moderate

Workbook: Leadership transition planning

3 IDENTIFY LONG-TERM NEEDS

Define what success looks like over time.

What will this role own long-term?

- _____
- _____
- _____

What capabilities will be critical for sustained success?

- _____
- _____
- _____

What leadership qualities are essential?

- _____
- _____
- _____

How important is cultural fit and leadership style alignment?

- ☐ Critical
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Moderate

What will success look like in 2–3 years?

- _____
- _____
- _____

4 SURFACE POTENTIAL GAPS

Determine any differences between what the business needs now and what it will likely need in the future.

Are the immediate and long-term needs the same?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Partially
- ☐ No

If different, how do they differ?

(e.g., operational executor now vs. strategic builder long-term)

- _____

What risks exist if one leader is expected to meet both needs?

- _____
- _____

5 EVALUATE READINESS

Identify constraints and decision risks.

How clearly defined is the long-term role today?

- ☐ Very clear
- ☐ Somewhat clear
- ☐ Still evolving

What is still unknown about the role or context?

- _____
- _____

Workbook: Leadership transition planning

6 DECIDE A COURSE OF ACTION

Move toward action, based on your responses.

You may need interim leadership if:

- Urgency is high
- Immediate expertise is required
- Role definition is still evolving

You may prioritize search if:

- Role is clearly defined
- Urgency is low
- Long-term alignment is the primary concern

You may benefit from a combined approach if:

- You need leadership immediately
- The long-term role is still evolving
- The cost of delay and the cost of a wrong hire are both high

7 CREATE INITIAL PLAN

Start making progress on closing your leadership gap.

Immediate next step (next 1–2 weeks):

- _____
- _____
- _____

Key stakeholders involved:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Success criteria for the next phase:

- _____
- _____
- _____

BOARD / CEO REFLECTION PROMPTS

- What would happen if we waited 90 days to act?
- What would happen if we made the wrong hire?
- Where do we need certainty—and where do we need flexibility?
- Are we optimizing for speed, quality, or both?
- If we decide to wait, what will be our signal that we need to reconsider immediate action?

Client stories: Proven results in complex moments

The most effective leadership transitions address both the immediate challenge and the long-term solution. These case studies demonstrate how organizations used interim leadership and executive search in tandem to maintain momentum, reduce risk, and strengthen outcomes.

IMMEDIATE AND
LONG-TERM NEEDS **ALIGN**

INVESTOR-BACKED AUTO SERVICES COMPANY

Fractional finance leadership during a CFO search

A multi-site auto services company had experienced a lot of leadership turnover and lacked a CFO. Pressure from the board was mounting due to limited financial insight, a junior team, and a lack of FP&A leadership. The CEO and board were in desperate need of keen financial reporting and decision-making.

For immediate leadership in parallel to the ongoing search process, we deployed an experienced **fractional CFO**, who quickly brought structure to monthly close, improved forecasting and cash flow visibility, and established clear processes. Our search team identified an experienced multi-industry **permanent CFO**, who was then able to step into the role with clarity, taking over a more mature, stable, and well-equipped finance department.

IMMEDIATE AND
LONG-TERM NEEDS **DIVERGE**

GLOBAL FOOD AND BEVERAGE MANUFACTURER

Stabilizing plant operations during a COO search

A multi-site food and beverage manufacturer lacked a COO during a major plant reorganization and risked failing on customer commitments. With key facilities struggling to execute multiple line deployments and no clear strategy, the company couldn't wait for a new leader to stabilize operations.

During the permanent search, we placed an **interim VP of Engineering** who quickly implemented clear project plans, improved execution across critical processes, and brought hands-on, collaborative leadership to a complex environment. Our search team then placed a **permanent COO** with deep operations experience for major consumer brands. With manufacturing stabilized, the new leader benefited from a smoother transition and could take a more strategic, forward-looking approach to the role.

Emerging stronger on the other side

When a leadership transition is managed well, it is often invisible from the outside. The business continues to move forward. Decisions are made with clarity. Teams remain aligned and focused. Momentum is preserved.

But beneath that continuity is a deliberate approach—one that balances immediate action with long-term thinking. Interim expertise ensures that critical priorities are advanced without interruption, while the organization gains the time and perspective needed to define the role properly and evaluate permanent candidates with confidence.

The result is not just continuity, but better positioning for the future.

Organizations are able to make informed, intentional choices about their long-term leadership. The permanent executive who steps into the role is not only capable, but aligned—equipped to lead the organization through its next phase with clarity and purpose.

Equally important, the transition itself is smooth. Knowledge is transferred, context is preserved, and the incoming leader is supported in a way that accelerates impact rather than delaying it.

Ultimately, the goal is to navigate the transition in a way that leaves the organization stronger—more aligned, more informed, and better positioned for what comes next. The most effective organizations don't just respond well to leadership transitions—they use them to strengthen how they plan for leadership over time.



A leadership transition that creates momentum and leaves a lasting impact

- **No loss of momentum** during periods of change
- **Clear, consistent leadership** from start to finish
- A more **precise and confident hiring** decision
- **Stronger alignment** between the role and the leader

Ready to move forward with confidence?

Explore resources or reach out to our team about your interim and permanent leadership needs.

[Learn more](#)

Tap experienced interim leaders and experts on a flexible, as-needed basis. Heidrick & Struggles delivers on-demand access to top independent talent to solve significant business problems, drive major transformations, and fill urgent leadership and capability gaps.

Whether you're facing market volatility, fending off competition, or leveling up your technology and operational capabilities, strong leadership and in-demand skills are essential. Gaps at any level can sap momentum, throw organizations into disarray, and stall progress on important initiatives. When you're short a key player, undergoing an extended search, or building out new capabilities, even temporary solutions can be transformative.

We offer critical talent for critical moments, including:

- Interim executives spanning C-suite to director
- Management consultants and subject matter experts and advisors
- Special project leaders for moments of innovation, transformation, and change

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