SUCCESSION PLANNING

Building Organizational Resilience for Tribes

60-minute workshop • Tribal transportation, public works & program leadership

Continuity • Knowledge • People • Sovereignty

Today’s outcome

Leave with a practical way to reduce “single points of failure” in your organization.

IDENTIFY

Find the functions, knowledge, relationships, and authorities that cannot be allowed to disappear.

TRANSFER

Use documentation, cross-training, mentoring, and deliberate practice to spread critical capability.

DEVELOP

Create pathways for current and future staff to build technical, managerial, and leadership capacity.

SUSTAIN

Make continuity planning part of normal operations—not a binder created when someone announces retirement.

Opening question

Think about your organization tomorrow morning.

If one key person did not come to work tomorrow…

What stops?

What gets delayed?

What knowledge leaves?

PAIR SHARE • 2 minutes

Name the role or function—not the person.

01

Why succession planning matters

Organizational resilience starts before the vacancy.

Succession planning ≠ replacement planning

Replacement planning

“Who takes this job if Pat leaves?”

Useful for emergency coverage, but usually focused on a position and a person.

Succession planning

“What capability must continue, and how do we build enough depth to sustain it?”

Focuses on functions, knowledge, relationships, and development.

Resilience planning

“Can we keep serving the community through turnover, emergencies, leadership change, or rapid growth?”

Builds redundancy without unnecessary bureaucracy.

Why the stakes can be high for Tribal programs

- Small teams often mean broad roles and concentrated expertise.
- Transportation programs cross planning, funding, procurement, project delivery, maintenance, safety, reporting, and community relationships.
- Program continuity may depend on knowledge of Tribal priorities plus BIA, FHWA, State, county, consultant, and contractor processes.
- Leadership transitions should not require the organization to relearn its own history.
- Workforce development strengthens Tribal capacity and supports self-determined program delivery.

Resilience protects the Nation’s ability to make and carry out its own decisions.

Four transition risks

PLANNED

Retirement • promotion • elected/appointed leadership transition • known departure

UNPLANNED

Illness • emergency • sudden resignation • extended leave

GROWTH

New grant • new program • new technology • major capital program • added responsibilities

KNOWLEDGE LOSS

The person remains—but undocumented history, relationships, or processes are not transferred

02

Identify what is at risk

Start with critical functions, not an org chart.

What is a critical function?

A function is “critical” when its failure would materially affect...

SERVICE

Community access, safety, maintenance, emergency response, transit, or other essential service.

MONEY

Funding eligibility, reimbursement, grant compliance, procurement, payroll, or financial controls.

AUTHORITY

Required approvals, signatures, delegated authority, council actions, or government-to-government coordination.

DELIVERY

Project schedules, contracts, reporting, inspections, data systems, or recurring deadlines.

The knowledge iceberg

VISIBLE / DOCUMENTED

Policies • manuals • contracts • project files • calendars • SOPs • inventories

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TACIT / EXPERIENCE-BASED

Why we do it this way • who to call • what happened last time • community context
seasonal judgment • workarounds • warning signs • relationship history

The hardest knowledge to replace is often the least likely to be written down.

Transportation examples: what could walk out the door?

- TTP agreement/reporting history, TTIP/LRTP process knowledge, NTTFI inventory practices, and recurring deadlines.
- Project history: why alternatives were rejected, commitments made, ROW or utility issues, environmental decisions, and unresolved risks.
- Maintenance judgment: drainage trouble spots, winter routes, equipment quirks, flood response, bridge/culvert watch locations.
- Grant and procurement know-how: application calendars, reimbursement steps, documentation standards, consultant/contractor processes.
- Relationships: Tribal leadership and departments, community members, BIA/FHWA coordinators, State/local partners, consultants, utilities, emergency services.
- System access: shared drives, GIS/data systems, e-TTIP or other program tools, vendor portals, records retention, and account ownership.

Quick risk screen

Score each critical function using three questions.

IMPACT

If this function stops, how serious is the consequence?

CONCENTRATION

How many people can perform it independently today?

TRANSFERABILITY

How hard would the knowledge be to recreate or transfer?

HIGH RISK = high impact + one knowledge holder + difficult to recreate

Do not try to document everything. Start where risk is concentrated.

03

Transfer knowledge & build depth

Documentation is necessary. Experience transfer is better.

The continuity ladder

1 ACCESS Can another authorized person find the files, systems, contacts, and calendar?

2 DOCUMENT Are the critical steps, decisions, deadlines, and references captured?

3 OBSERVE Has someone watched the work being done and asked questions?

4 PRACTICE Has the backup performed the work with coaching?

5 OWN Can the backup perform it independently and improve the process?

Capture knowledge without creating a paperwork monster

ONE-PAGE SOP

Purpose • trigger • owner • steps • approvals • records • contacts • references

ANNUAL CALENDAR

Recurring reports • grants • inspections • meetings • renewals • seasonal operations • budget milestones

PROJECT DECISION LOG

Decision • why • who was involved • commitments • unresolved items • next checkpoint

CONTACT MAP

Who we work with • role • when to involve them • backup contact • relationship context

Cross-training that actually works

- Choose a specific function—not “learn Pat’s job.”
- Define the performance standard: what does “can cover this” mean?
- Use shadow → assisted practice → independent practice → feedback.
- Schedule cross-training during normal cycles: a real grant report, inspection, council packet, procurement, or seasonal operation.
- Rotate meeting attendance and external relationships where appropriate so more than one person understands the context.
- Respect role boundaries, delegated authority, confidentiality, and Tribal policies while creating operational depth.

Mentoring: transfer judgment, not just steps

Good mentoring questions

- What are the successes?
- What do you notice first?
- What usually goes wrong?
- What tells you this is becoming urgent?
- Who needs to be involved early?
- What would you never do—and why?
- What changed your mind the last time?

STORY PROMPT

“Tell me about a time when this process did not go as planned.

What happened?
What did you learn?
What would you do differently now?”

Developing future capacity

Succession planning asks two different questions:

BACKUP CAPACITY

Who can keep this function moving during an absence or transition?

Goal: operational continuity.

DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

Who could grow into greater responsibility with experience, training, coaching, and opportunity?

Goal: long-term capability.

A backup does not have to be the next job-holder. A high-potential employee should not be promised a position.

04

Build the plan

Simple enough to use. Specific enough to act on.

The Succession & Knowledge Continuity Matrix

Critical function	Current holder(s)	Risk	Backup / depth	Knowledge gap	Next action	By when
Example: annual TTP report	Director	HIGH	Planner observes	Reconciliation steps	Co-complete next report	Q1

Exercise: find your three single points of failure

5 minutes individually + 3 minutes with a partner

1. Write three critical functions where knowledge or authority is concentrated.
2. For each, identify the biggest gap: access, documentation, experience, relationship, or staffing depth.
3. Choose ONE action that would reduce risk in the next 30 days.

Partner question: “What would make that action actually happen?”

A practical 30 / 60 / 90-day start

FIRST 30 DAYS

Identify 3–5 critical functions.
Name concentrated knowledge.
Fix urgent access risks.
Choose one cross-training action.

BY 60 DAYS

Create/update the annual calendar.
Capture key contacts and decision history.
Run at least one shadow/practice cycle.
Identify development needs.

BY 90 DAYS

Test backup coverage.
Close obvious documentation gaps.
Discuss staffing/development priorities.
Set a review cadence and owner.

05

Make resilience routine

The plan works only if it survives the workshop.

Build succession into normal operations

- Quarterly: ask “Where are we one person deep?” during management or program review.
- At project closeout: capture decisions, lessons learned, contacts, and unresolved follow-up.
- Before leave or travel: confirm coverage, authorities, deadlines, and emergency contacts.
- During performance/development conversations: identify experiences that build future capability.
- When systems or programs change: update SOPs and cross-train before the old process disappears.
- Annually: review critical functions, backups, retirement/turnover exposure, and workforce priorities.

What succession planning should NOT become

NOT A SECRET LIST

Avoid opaque “chosen successor” assumptions that undermine trust or conflict with Tribal hiring and governance practices.

NOT A DATA DUMP

Do not capture passwords in unsafe places, unnecessary personal information, or culturally sensitive knowledge without appropriate stewardship.

NOT A ONE-TIME BINDER

Continuity information becomes dangerous when everyone assumes it is current but no one maintains it.

NOT JUST HR

Leaders, supervisors, technical staff, finance, IT/records, and program partners all hold pieces of organizational continuity.

Scenario: the longtime transportation director announces retirement

Retirement date: 6 months from now

The director currently owns:

- FHWA/BIA relationships
- project history
- annual reporting calendar
- consultant procurement process
- council briefing routine
- maintenance priority knowledge

DISCUSS • 4 minutes

What would you do in the first 30 days?

What must be transferred by experience—not just documented?

Who needs to be part of the transition?

Your one-page resilience commitment

Before you leave, complete these four statements:

The critical function I most need to protect is... _____

The knowledge or relationship most at risk is... _____

The person(s) I need to involve are... _____

Within 30 days, I will... _____

Small, specific actions create organizational depth.

Resources for continued capacity building

Federal Highway Administration

- Tribal Technical Assistance Program (TTAP): training, technical assistance, technology transfer, and workforce development.
- Office of Tribal Transportation: TTP training/resources and the Tribal Transportation Program Delivery Guide.
- Strategic Workforce Development Toolkit: Identify • Train • Place resources and Tribal workforce materials.

Useful continuity references

- Your Tribe’s personnel, records, IT/security, procurement, emergency management, and delegated-authority policies.
- Current program agreements, grant conditions, project files, annual calendars, and partner contact lists.

Key takeaways

1 • PROTECT FUNCTIONS

Start with what the Nation must continue to accomplish—not who might leave.

2 • TRANSFER EXPERIENCE

Access and documentation matter; shadowing and practice build real depth.

3 • DEVELOP PEOPLE

Use real work, mentoring, training, and stretch opportunities to build capability.

4 • REVIEW ROUTINELY

Succession planning becomes resilience when it is part of normal management.

The goal is not to make anyone replaceable. It is to make the organization resilient.

THANK YOU

What is one resilience action you will take back to your Tribe?

Questions • Discussion