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The Empty Seat Playbook

A leadership role that stays open doesn't sit still. The work keeps moving, just without an owner. This is a five-step playbook for keeping momentum while you search, whoever you end up hiring. Use it in a 30-minute working session with the hiring manager and the person covering the seat today.

1. Put a number on the gap

An empty seat feels free because no salary is going out. It isn't. Fill in your own numbers; it takes five minutes and changes the conversation with Finance.

Cost of the open seat	How to estimate it	Your number
Stalled decisions and projects	Value of the 2–3 initiatives waiting on this role × months delayed	
Stretch tax on the people covering	Hours per week others spend covering × their loaded hourly rate	
Flight risk on the team	Number of direct reports at risk × cost to replace one (often 0.5–2× salary)	
Search cost so far	Recruiter fees, job boards, interview hours	
Total cost per month open		

If the monthly total is higher than the cost of interim coverage, waiting is the expensive option.

2. Triage what's stalling

Not everything in the role needs covering. Sort the work into three buckets, and only the first one needs a named owner this week.

Bucket	What goes here	Who owns it during the gap
Cover now	Decisions with a deadline, team members who need a manager, commitments to customers, board or investors	A named person, with authority to decide
Hold safely	Strategy refresh, process redesign, longer-term hiring plans	Parked on a list the new leader inherits on day one
Let go	Recurring meetings and reports nobody will miss	No one; cancel them

The test for "Cover now": what breaks, or who leaves, if nobody touches it for 90 days?

3. Pick how you'll cover the seat

There are four honest options. Each one works in the right situation, and each one has a cost.

Option	Works best when	Watch out for
Stretch an internal leader	You have a strong #2 who could grow into the role	Burnout, and their own job quietly slipping. Name it a development opportunity and back it with coaching.
Split across peers	The role is mostly operational and peers know the work	No one owns the whole picture; decisions slow down
Bring in a fractional or interim leader	The gap is 3+ months, the work needs senior judgment, or the team needs a manager now	Pick someone who wants to hand off well, not stay forever. Set a clear end date and scope.
Hold and hire	The seat can genuinely wait and the search is close	Holding often stretches 2–3 months past plan

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A fractional leader can also do double duty: keep the work moving *and* tell you what the role really needs before you hire for it.

4. Protect the team in the meantime

The people under an empty seat are the ones most likely to leave during a long search. Three moves keep them steady:

☐ **Tell them the plan.** Who they go to for decisions, roughly when a new leader starts, and what won't change.

☐ **Give the acting leader real authority.** Write down which decisions they can make without escalating, and say so publicly.

☐ **Check in every two weeks.** A 15-minute skip-level with each direct report catches problems before they become resignations.

A starter message to the team:

> *"While we search for our next [role], [name] is your go-to for day-to-day decisions, and I'm here for anything bigger. We expect to have someone in the seat by [month]. Your priorities stay the same: [top 2]. My door is open."*

5. Sharpen the search before you repost

If a role has been open 60+ days, the market is usually telling you something about the role, not the candidates. Five questions to ask before the next repost:

1. **Is this one job or two?** Long-open roles often bundle a strategist and an operator into one description.
2. **Do we need a full-time hire, or the outcome?** If the real need is a 12-month project, a permanent seat may be the wrong vehicle.
3. **What does success look like at 6 and 12 months?** If the hiring team can't agree, candidates can't either.
4. **Is the level right?** Compare the title, scope and pay against 3 similar postings this week.
5. **What's the fit, not just the skill set?** Name the 2–3 traits that made past leaders in this seat succeed or stall, and screen for those.

Want a hand closing the gap?

Coherence Group embeds seasoned fractional leaders across HR, Finance, Marketing, Operations, Sales, Tech/Data/AI, Strategy and Learning. We cover the seat, keep the team moving, and hand off cleanly to your permanent hire. We can also help you find that hire.

Book a 20-minute Fit & Focus call · **coherence.work** · hello@coherence.work · 412.397.7330

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