



## **Successful Succession by Bob Whipple, MBA CPLP**

Succession planning ought to be a natural progression of training and grooming for the next generation of leaders in an organization. Often the process is flawed either out of neglect, or missteps. This article outlines some of the issues with succession planning for key leadership positions and offers some ideas to make the process more robust.

The need for good succession planning increases at the higher levels in any organization. Individual contributors do need training before assuming a new job, but they can be replaced rather easily. With higher level managers, the skills are more critical and selection as well as preparation is much more demanding. Top leaders should be well groomed on all the policies and nuances of running the organization before taking over.

There should be a specific succession planning process for all key jobs in any organization, which includes who is ready to step in immediately and who is being groomed for future roles. The obvious reason is that we never know when someone is going to leave for one reason or another. The transition may take place over a period of years or abruptly in a few hours depending on circumstances.

I remember one extremely short transition where my organization was doubled in size. The previous manager and I had only a few minutes for him to cross train me, and then he was gone. He showed me where the personnel files were kept, wished me luck, gave me the keys to the office, and left. One thing I appreciated was the ability to start fresh without being colored by his paradigms and biases, and yet there were a lot of gaps in my knowledge of the operation. I did survive the transition, but it would have been easier if there had been more time to understand his job.

The activities of succession planning are much broader than most people realize. They encompass everything from general cross training for bench strength to identifying high potential people for future roles, to mentoring, and even job rotation. In fact, if you think about it, at the higher levels of leadership, the majority of daily activities could be slotted in some part of the succession process.

Good succession planning takes a lot of time and energy. It is something that should be going on at a conscious level nearly every day, yet it is often a hidden

process that the rank and file do not understand. They only see the result. When Jack leaves, Ann is discovered to be fully capable of replacing him. The process sometimes takes on a highly political feel, since only certain people are involved in many of the discussions. This lack of full information can cause people to become anxious because they do not know what is going to happen. The best approach is to be as transparent as possible.

It is too bad that succession planning takes a back burner in some organizations. This is true for several reasons:

- Most leaders are overburdened and have little time to think about long term development. This is a huge mistake. Leaders must make the time.
- There is a fear of setting up an implied competition and tension between contenders.
- People may interpret succession discussions as meaning the incumbent is trying to leave early. This incorrect signal could imply a lack of commitment.
- External replacement versus internal can be demoralizing for understudies.
- Succession is a highly emotional topic. People get nervous because the change involves their job and future.

William Rothwell of Penn State University is one of the recognized experts in Succession Planning. He suggested there are at least 10 key steps that need to be included in any succession planning process: (Rothwell, W.J. 2001, *Effective Succession Planning* 2nd edition. New York: AMACOM.)

1. Clarify expectations for Succession.
2. Establish competency models.
3. Conduct individual assessments.
4. Create performance management system.
5. Assess individual potential.
6. Create development process.
7. Institute Individual development plans.
8. Establish a talent inventory.
9. Establish accountability for making the system work.
10. Evaluate the results.

Rothwell also shared a list of 6 of the biggest mistakes in succession planning:

1. Assuming success at one level will guarantee success at a higher level
2. Assuming bosses are the best judge of who should be promoted
3. Assuming that promotions are entitlements
4. Trying to do too much too fast
5. Giving no thought to what to call it
6. Assuming that everyone wants a promotion

The best approach is to have a formal succession process for all professional jobs in an organization and let people know what it is. It should be part of the routine work on a daily basis instead of something managers think about only when someone is getting ready to retire or gives the customary two-week notice. I believe succession is a fundamental leadership process, because the highest calling for any leader is to grow the next generation of leaders.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, contact him at [www.Leadergrow.com](http://www.Leadergrow.com), [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585.392.7763

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