



What Puts the Success in Succession? **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPLP**

Succession planning, if done well, will provide an endless stream of fresh and vital talent to help any organization have a continuity of excellent performance despite the vicissitudes of outward factors. Neglected succession planning will lead to spotty performance over time and frustration on many levels. Let's take a look at some key observations and concepts about succession planning.

The need for good succession planning increases at the higher levels in any organization. Shop floor people only need minimal training on functions to become effective. CEOs 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 as abruptly as a few hours depending on circumstances.

I remember one transition where my organization was doubled in size. The previous manager and I had exactly 5 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. Actually, the transition worked out pretty well because he did not have time to color my thinking about individuals or processes so I started out by building my own knowledge.

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. It often takes on a highly political feel since not everyone can be involved in many of the discussions. This can cause a lot of anxiety in organizations, so the best approaches are as transparent as possible.

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

- Most leaders are overburdened and have little time to think about long term development.
- 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 could imply a lack of commitment.
- Internal replacement versus external can be demoralizing for understudies.
- Succession is a highly emotional topic. People get nervous.

William Rothwell of Penn State 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:

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 gave us 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 his 2 week notice. I believe it is a fundamental leadership process because the highest calling for any leader is to grow other leaders.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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