

## Looking to the Future: The Case for Intentional Succession Planning

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### Abstract

*Succession planning is normally categorized by the identification and nurturing of internal personnel to fill leadership roles in an organization (Witt/Kieffer, 2008). This is most often achieved through training programs or career ladders (Hanover Research Council, 2010). Although seen by the corporate business world as a critical element in sustainability and efficiency, higher education environments have been slow to embrace formal succession planning and it has only recently become a topic of consideration (American Council on Education, 2018). Few institutions have a formalized process (Hanover Research Council, 2010). When institutions do have a system, such planning tends to be conducted at only the highest levels of leadership such as at the board or president levels (Witt/Kieffer, 2008). However, it is somewhat uncommon at other levels of leadership in colleges and universities, and especially at the academic officer, dean and chair levels. Succession plans need to have a degree of flexibility and, most importantly, be linked to strategic plans. Higher education institutions are faced with needing to successfully navigate a fast-paced and wide-ranging educational world that requires continuous change, in order to address the ever-increasing demand of managing large scale environments, being efficient and financially creative, and ensuring high quality educational experiences (Hickson, 2015). Therefore, the need for the development of effective leadership models has likely never been greater.*

### Introduction

Succession planning is normally categorized by the identification and nurturing of internal personnel to fill leadership roles in an organization (Witt/Kieffer, 2008). This is most often achieved through training programs or career ladders that assist in leading personnel through positions that incorporate increasingly higher levels of responsibility in anticipation of advancement to the upper levels of leadership (Hanover Research Council, 2014).

Although seen by the corporate business world as a critical element in sustainability and efficiency, higher education environments have been slow to embrace formal succession planning and it has only recently become a topic of consideration at colleges and universities (American Council on Education, 2018).

### The Issue

Some educational institutions have an informal system to replace leaders; however, few have a formalized process (Hanover Research Council, 2010). Also, when institutions do have a system, such planning tends to be conducted at only the highest levels of leadership such as at the board, president or chancellor levels (Witt/Kieffer, 2008). However, it is somewhat uncommon, and may even be suggested to be unheard of, at other levels of leadership in colleges and universities, and especially at the mid-level positions of academic officer, dean and chair. Interestingly, especially from a student and public perspective, the prestige and quality of an educational institution is often derived from its mid-level leadership personnel rather than its pinnacle leaders. This is due to overwhelming amount of planning, direction, and decision-making processes that occur at this level. This potential oversight creates a distinct problem that educational institutions must address.

Conversely, in the corporate world, effective succession plans are based upon well-developed competencies and objective assessment of candidates (Clunies, 2004). Similarly, Hartle (2004) stated that, unlike educational organizations, public and private sector organizations have adopted a systematic approach and long-term view toward succession planning. By undertaking such an approach, organizations have created a systematic process for not only tracking people but also preparing them for leadership roles. Hartle refers to this effective process as the *leadership pipeline*.

Today, higher education institutions are faced with needing to successfully navigate a fast-paced and wide-ranging educational world. Mid-level leadership personnel are required to understand the impacts of continuous change, address the ever-increasing demand of managing large scale work environments, be efficient and financially creative, and ensure high quality educational experiences and programming (Hickson, 2015).

Unfortunately, hesitant decision-making or a revolving door of ideas, plans, and implementation strategies from unsuited mid-level leadership personnel is likely not the most conducive way for educational institutions to ensure that educational excellence is maintained and expanded upon. Therefore, the need for the development of effective leadership models has likely never been greater. Institutions and institutional leaders can benefit when intentional succession planning experiences are created. The necessity to consider future pathways and who is *at the helm* is an important issue that should not be left to chance.

### **Effective Succession Planning**

Much of what is known about effective succession planning has come from research conducted on the practices that take place in the corporate world. Such researchers critically identify that the focus of succession planning should not only address competencies for the current situation and environment but must also consider the types of competencies that might be required to meet any potential future change or challenges. Therefore, succession plans need to have a degree of flexibility and, most importantly, be linked to strategic plans.

Mihm (2003) identified six common practices in succession planning. These are:

- Active support of top leadership where succession planning is anticipated, and potential individuals identified.
- Linking succession planning to strategic planning.
- The identification of potential individuals early in their careers.
- Emphasizing job assignments that provide developmental experiences in addition to formal training.
- Addressing diversity, leadership capacity, and retention.
- Selecting leaders to facilitate transformation efforts to foster change.

By adopting such practices, Mihm (2003) suggested that organizations can identify a pool of candidates from which succession plans can occur for key leadership positions. Such a systematic process enables potential candidates to be compared against organizational needs and leadership requirements rather than purely a supervisory report recommending advancement. Thereby, creating a body of *next generation* leaders before the present leadership personnel group leaves the work environment.

With regard to the world of education, the nature of the *promotion and tenure* work environment found at many institutions can result in a somewhat rapid turnover of leadership personnel. Although, this can allow for institutional transformation and an opportunity to implement organizational change, it can only be realized if the turnover of leadership is managed in a systematic manner. Therefore, succession planning initiatives need to be carefully considered and, when established, should address and be aligned to institutional vision planning.

Although a substantial amount of what is understood about effective succession planning has come from areas outside of education, Hartle (2004) considered the educational workplace environment and contended that there are five characteristics of an effective educational succession plan. These are:

- Integration...succession and leadership development need to be an integrated part of recruitment, retention, performance management, and organizational strategies.
- Definition...the identification of long-term leadership needs.
- Flexibility...plans need to be revisited and changes made where necessary.
- Fluidity...candidate pools need to be fluid and not restrictive.
- Personal Development...professional development is sought after in individuals through the recruitment process and encouraged for retention.

Hartle further contended that the education sector needs to learn from the corporate sector and adopt a combination of succession planning and leadership development approaches at various levels.

In a similar vein, when considering the issues of educational leadership, Hargreaves, et al. (2003) concluded that successful planning included intentional and systematic identification of leadership requirements, the identification of a pool of potential candidates, and the development of leadership competencies in candidates. Thereby, making succession planning thoughtful and ensuring that potential leaders are ready for takeover.

Although somewhat late in understanding the need for and establishing intentional, effective succession planning, educational institutions can learn from the vast amount of knowledge gained from the practices of others. In many ways, educational institutions need to fully adopt the notion of learning themselves!

### **Ideas for Implementing Effective Succession Planning**

The following series of ideas are put forward for consideration to create intentional and systematic succession plans that support effective leadership transition and create the best opportunities for success.

**Time, Effort, and Transparency.** It must be clearly understood that succession planning requires time and effort. The identification of potential mid-level leadership personnel requires thoughtful practice and a systematic approach. This process must also be viewed as fair and trustworthy by the academe. Therefore, transparency is of critical importance.

**Timeliness.** Research has clearly shown that the identification of leadership potential occurs early in careers. This allows for development and carefully selected exposure to leadership experiences to occur. For example, *Leadership Shadowing* can help potential leaders develop awareness and understanding through observation alongside a colleague both within department/faculty and across departments/faculties.

**Gaining Authentic Experience.** The use of floating responsibilities can assist in the gaining of leadership experience. For example, *Project Leadership* can provide authentic leadership responsibility and authority experience for a specific project that has a limited time frame with a specific outcome.

**Creating a Systematic Approach.** Leadership potential needs to be developed through annual performance processes. Discussion of leadership needs to take place alongside consideration of publishing records, teaching performance and grant acquisition. Further, the offering of or establishing a mentorship experience to provide informal advice and consultation between an experience leader and a potential leader has much merit. Similarly, the opportunity of working alongside a *coach* who can support identified areas of focus. This can specifically ensure that potential leadership personnel work in areas of possible weakness and develop a wide range of experiential leadership readiness.

**Research, Teaching...Administrative Streams.** It has started to be accepted in some institutions that personnel can present different but equally valuable qualities. This has resulted in the recognition of a particular staff member strengths through *Research or Teaching Stream* positions. Therefore, perhaps the consideration of an *Administrative Stream* is timely.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The literature on succession planning is most clear in stating that one of the most successful succession planning strategies is the early identification and training of potential leaders. Without this early start, organizational effectiveness can be impacted. It is also apparent that many organizations outside the education sector take a long term, strategic and comprehensive view of succession planning and consider it an integral part of overall strategic planning. Succession planning does not start with choosing the next candidate to fill a vacancy. Succession planning is anticipatory, it is based on strengths and needs.

This paper identifies the present lack of effective succession planning in educational institutions, the perceived benefits to be gained from effective succession planning, and ideas of how effective succession planning could be implemented in higher education environments. The unique challenges of a world that is increasingly demanding, complex, and diverse requires present day leaders, especially at the mid-levels, to organize systematic processes to identify, support and develop the leadership teams for tomorrow. The failure of not doing so will not only create a vacuum in the knowledge transfer but also potentially impact learning experiences for students. Educational institutions cannot continue to

ignore the necessity of effective succession planning, determining and achieving future success requires it.

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