

By Toni C. Talbot, SPHR

Succession Planning— The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly



The importance of leadership cannot be underestimated in any organization, large or small. A good leader can carry his/her team to success where an ineffective leader can pull a good team down to ruin. This we know and we see this everyday in business, in government, and, in the most visible venue, sports.

Unfortunately, losing a leader occurs and this loss can significantly impact the success of an organization. The best option is to anticipate the potential loss of members of leadership by developing and maintaining a succession plan.

Succession planning is the examination of the skills and abilities of your staff and the development of these skills for future leadership roles. As in all things, this can be done well or it can be done poorly and have some “ugly” results.

The good is the development of staff. This will always be to your advantage, whether the employees stay with your organization or head in a different direction. You want to be a company that makes the effort to improve your staff’s skills. Succession planning is an opportunity for you to first examine the skills, abilities, and personality types that will succeed in a job and then identify the individuals that would best fit the mode. After you have identified these individuals, you should set up a plan to teach and groom them for the potential of leadership.

This type of planning allows you to handle the many unpredictable events that occur in business. It provides you an opportunity to take a skills inventory, possibly opening your eyes to areas of

your organization’s strengths and weaknesses and making sure you have the right staff to accomplish your company’s goals. Succession planning also provides senior management an opportunity to sit back and think about and plan for the future of the organization. This is time that is rarely taken, especially in smaller companies.

Don’t focus on one successor

As you may have noticed, I have indicated the plural of individuals when I discussed the need to identify a successor. Avoid limiting yourself to one person for succession. You are examining the skills and abilities at this point rather than identifying the replacements. The ugly could really start if an individual knew or expected that he or she were in line for the top spot. This could have an impact on the entire organization including how co-workers perceive each other. Succession planning may send the message that certain employees are “shoe-ins” for promotions, telling others there are limited opportunities for growth. It can also increase the internal politics of the organization and diminish teamwork when employees begin vying for future promotions.

Don’t select the person most like you to succeed you

Another area that you need to be careful of when doing succession planning is the tendency to identify the person most like you to succeed you. Although this may result in potential discrimination problems, it also is not smart business. Look at the skills and the knowledge needed for the job. This would include your skills and knowledge, identifying your areas of weakness that a person could supplement. Look at individuals of all races and genders for succession opportunities. Give everyone an equal opportunity to be part of your company’s growth.

Consider hiring a consultant for help

If your organization is going to take up the task of succession planning, consider hiring a consultant to help. Depending upon the size of your

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company, succession planning could be a formidable task. There is also software available to help you keep the process organized and under control.

Succession planning isn't just for big companies

Succession planning should not be limited to large companies. I truly feel the smaller the company the more important succession planning becomes. The impact of the loss of one key individual is significantly greater on a small organization. This is especially true for family owned businesses. If the son or daughter will be taking over the business, he/she needs to be groomed, which means the relationship of parent and child may need to be changed to an adult-adult relationship. This is a difficult transition for a family to make but it is one that is important for effective succes-

sion; this is, after all, a business that impacts employees who are not part of the family.

Whatever type of company you work in, succession planning is an activity that provides value. Understand the potential problems that may arise and weigh the advantages of succession planning to determine if it is the right thing for you. Keep in mind that even with all of the "bad and ugly" aspects, succession planning may be well worth the time and effort to help ensure the continuity of leadership for your organization. **MF**

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