

Succession Planning

Succession planning is essential for every organization. One might say that succession planning is leadership. But surprisingly few approach this important responsibility with the focus and commitment that gives board members and CEOs real peace of mind.

Far too many directors and CEOs will admit that succession planning remains one of their largest concerns – a constant source of leadership angst, driven by the same predictable questions:

Am I doing everything I should to provide for an unbroken line of effective organizational leadership? Am I somehow overlooking something in developing or finding the talent my organization needs to maintain consistent performance?

Those same leaders would say, “Where do we start?” The most important objective in succession planning is continuity – a consistency in the quality of leadership needed to drive top organizational performance, and just as important, a continuity in the organizational brand that sustains equally strong support from all the stakeholders critical to any leading organization’s vitality and relevancy.

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Succession planning is essential to both elements of this consistency. Conducted as an element of strategic level discussions and planning, then updated regularly, succession planning assures a steady pipeline of the leadership talent for the future.

The most effective succession plans are based on a recognition that continuity in leadership, performance, and organizational culture depends upon having a carefully managed strategy and process in place. Succession is less an event than the culmination of an ongoing effort

by the board and the CEO to assure stability and sustainability.

The best succession plans have four distinct characteristics:

Rigorous thinking and clear understanding

A succession plan isn't so much a job description as a reaffirmation of organizational purpose and objectives – and the specific leadership required to attain them on a continuing basis.

It begins with an honest discussion and expression of the organization's goals and objectives, and its challenges and potential threats. It then moves to an equally analytical cataloguing of the skills, capabilities, and experience needed by potential succession candidates to achieve in the envisioned future.

A development plan

Rarely if ever do organizations find a perfect candidate – an individual capable of stepping in immediately to perform at the desired level. In most cases, that kind of capability exists only after a carefully structured process of developing the candidate – preparing the individual for success, rather than waiting and hoping for it.

This element starts with a candid, honest assessment of potential internal candidates. Who has the potential for success? Where are the gaps – in experience, personal

attributes, leadership skills, organizational understanding, or other critical factors? How do we fill them? What is the thoughtful and deliberate roadmap for bringing candidates along? What are the specific goals and milestones that we can use to measure growth and development?

Maturation and choice

The development of the required level of leadership talent won't be achieved overnight. It will take time – and constant effort to nurture, coach, and assess the leadership candidates. Progress may not always be linear. Some candidates will stumble, some will progress faster than others, and some may fall by the wayside.

The best succession plans allow for this ebb and flow in talent development – and build in a recognition of the need to step in with the help and guidance needed to give true talent the opportunity to develop full potential. The ability to deal with difficulty and overcome challenges may prove to be one of the most significant considerations in winnowing the field of candidates and making a final selection.

Board search committees also must be disciplined and honest enough to deal with the possibility that the best candidates may come from outside rather than within. Sometimes the evaluative process indicates internal candidates simply aren't capable of

meeting the true leadership needs of the organization for the future. Such a conclusion may not be easy to accept or politically popular. But responsible search committees — and boards — recognize that the overriding priority is finding the required caliber of leadership for the job, regardless of where it is to be found.

A realistic transition

Once the candidate selection has been made, a reasonable transition must be structured to 'on board' the new leader. Even the best candidate will have much to learn and can benefit from a united effort to position the new leader for success through a period of continuing support and coaching from not just the outgoing leader but the leadership team. "Flash cuts" in leadership rarely deliver the same high probability of success for the new leader.

Effective transitions also focus on providing a clear set of goals and milestones for the on-boarding period. They provide clear, unambiguous performance expectations, backed by a steady support system, with timely, honest communication from both the board and fellow organizational leaders.

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Simply stated, succession planning isn't something to be feared, but

rather embraced for what it is — a critical responsibility for the board and CEO. Succession planning isn't so much a project or a task, but rather a strategic priority and an ongoing process of assuring that the organization remains on track to deliver the results that the board and all stakeholders expect.

In future articles of our *Insights* series, we will dive more deeply into some of the issues critical to building a succession planning process. We will look beyond the cornerstone components and the best practices common to all effective succession plans. We also will examine the more detailed and nuanced considerations that help craft the plan exactly right for each individual organization.

- What is the **right time frame** for effective succession planning? How long will our key leaders remain on post? How long do we need to affirm our organization goals and objectives for the future, and the implications they have for the kind of leadership we need? How long do we need to develop talent, or to find the required talent?
- How do we evaluate **the kind of leadership we will need** for the future? What role do our culture and employer brand play in shaping the kind of leaders we need, and the right approach to talent development and identification?
- How do we best evaluate our ability to **develop internal candidates** and our need to **consider external candidates**? What special challenges does this critical consideration pose — for maintaining leadership

team performance and organizational morale, for preserving stakeholder relations and loyalty, and for other elements of organizational continuity?

- What are the **unique demands placed on the CEO** in effective succession planning? What are the competing needs and demands the CEO must balance in this process? How is the CEO's role critical to crafting effective succession planning for the entire leadership group, not just a new CEO?

If you have thoughts or questions about succession planning you'd like to see added to this list, contact us by email or by telephone. Our clients rely on Vetted Solutions for help in all aspects of leadership, and we welcome the opportunity to share our experience and insights whenever we can.



About the author



James Zaniello, founder and president of Vetted Solutions in Washington, D.C., specializes in serving leading

associations and nonprofits with executive recruiting and leadership development counsel. He and his Vetted Solutions colleagues can be reached through www.vettedolutions.com, or by telephone at +1.202.544.4749 for the Washington, DC, office, or at +1.312.577.7606 for the Chicago office.

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