

The Deblieux Report

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IS IT SUCCESSION OR SUCCESS?

SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

Succession management is the process of developing leadership talent to keep a business in business.

Succession management is more than an HR project. It is risk management. It is protecting and growing a market niche. It is a way of thinking about leadership and leadership development. It is an integral part of a corporate culture.

FOCUS ON FUTURE

Succession management is about developing leaders who understand and embrace millennials (or more importantly iGen), artificial intelligence, chatbot, and other emerging and yet to emerge workplace realities. It is about developing leaders with the ability to adapt and adjust to constantly changing circumstances. It is about preparing leaders to lead in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-continent (Search: Chinese factories in Africa) business environment. Simply put, succession management is about business continuity. It is not about cloning. It is about preparing leaders to lead into an undefined, unpredictable future.

THE FIRST RUNG

Succession management starts at the first rung of the leadership ladder. Think about it this way. You have an opening for a first line supervisor. You look across the workforce for candidates. You select one person out of many. The moment you tap that person on the shoulder they are thought of as a “leader.” They move from the general employee population to the “leadership” population. Down the road, they are considered for promotion for higher level leadership positions. Those who were not

tapped are not considered. The pool of candidates gets smaller with each step up the leadership ladder. From this perspective, the selection of a first-line leader, is about nurturing the development of a future executive.

NEXT RUNG, NEXT DUTIES

Every HR Professional can regale their peers with a tantalizing story about an “A” individual contributor who failed miserably as a first line supervisor. Every failure is the result of a rising star not being prepared to do the “different” about their new job.

The stories are always about a first level promotion. The fact is the phenomenon continues up each rung of the ladder. People are promoted because they are “good” in their current job. The problem is, the next job requires new skills, new relationships, new duties, and new time demands not required by the job before it.

Successful succession management starts with identifying what is different about each rung on the leadership career ladder. You must know and understand what is different about each leadership level before you consider anyone as a potential leader.

Ask yourself, “What is different about being a manager than being a first-line supervisor?” Your answer will include things like, working with other managers, budgets, delegating work through supervisors rather than directly to individual contributors, and more. Now add to your list those things expected to be different in the future. Things like international transactions, robots, and more. These are the things your succession management process needs to develop people to manage.

E + P + P = P

Experience, plus, Performance, plus, Preparation, equals, Potential, is the formula for successful succession management. Again, succession management is not about writing a plan (although a plan is important). It is about an on-going commitment to develop leaders. Let's look at each coefficient of the equation.

EXPERIENCE

Experience is what you get when you do a job for a period of time. Some people get one year of experience out doing a job for five years. Others get five years of experience from doing a job for one year. Potential leaders are too often evaluated on the basis of their job titles or the time they spend in a job, not the quality of their work experience.

If succession management is a way of thinking about developing leaders, the thinking starts with how people get experience. When succession management is part of the corporate culture, managers at all levels work to provide a quality work experience for each employee. They start with a well-planned job (as opposed to HR) orientation program. They do not pawn the new employee off to a reluctant co-worker for training. They plan an effective program to introduce the new employee to the policies, systems, and practices of the organization and their work unit. They coach for success and provide honest, objective feedback to ground the new person in doing things the right way for the right reasons.

Leaders with a development perspective find innovative ways to provide a breadth of experience to each member of their team. They resist having people do the same things the same way for an extended period. They create cross training opportunities to expand knowledge and build skills. They look for opportunities to leave different people in charge when they are out for an hour, an afternoon, or a day to begin developing leadership skills. They introduce people to each other and talk about the value of effective working relationships. In short, when succession management is part of the culture, every manager sees every employee

as a potential leader. They constantly create opportunities for each employee to experiment with leadership and watch closely to see if they are developing the future potential to lead.

PERFORMANCE

At some point in a successful succession management program, a Talent Review Committee meets to evaluate leadership potential. They look at the breadth of each candidate's experience. They consider the quality of the candidate's job performance. They look to see if the candidate has remained relevant (up to date) in their chosen profession. Developing potential requires all three.

The Talent Review Committee depends on managers at all levels providing, honest, objective, job-related feedback throughout the career of each employee. They must be confident the information they have about job performance is reliable (consistently yields the same result) and valid (measures actual job performance). When succession management is an integral part of the corporate culture, managers at all levels understand and accept their responsibility to create an opportunity for people to grow. They coach in every interaction. (Some top-level succession management programs require managers be certified as coaches through a reputable coaching process.) They challenge people to think. They teach people to figure things out on their own. They make honest performance feedback a normal part of their on-going dialogue with every member of their team.

Rising stars come with a built-in liability. The better they do, the less their manager wants to risk offending them with honest feedback. In fact, the better they are, the more they value feedback. (If you listen to some of the greatest athletes, you often hear them talk about how they are trying to get better at some aspect of their game.) The best future leaders thrive on feedback and constructive criticism. They see it as a helping hand.

Feedback must include honest information on relationships and emotional intelligence. As people

get better at their technical skills, their ability to know themselves and get along with a wide spectrum of others becomes increasingly important. The corporate culture aspect of succession management depends on 360° feedback, feedback from skip-level interviews, self-assessments like Myers-Briggs. A successful talent review process requires a succession management culture built around these principles.

PREPARATION

If one element of our succession management formula is left to chance, it is preparation. Preparation is what individuals do to get ready for a job at the next level before they get there. A promotion is not more of what the individual is already doing. It is new things, and different things, and unusual things all rolled into one.

The next level may require financial skills not previously needed. It may require greater awareness and sensitivity to cultural, community, political, and international events. It might require a higher level of self-awareness (emotional intelligence) and relationship building skills. It could require stronger strategic planning skills, openness to new ideas, or flexibility. Future leaders can start learning these skills when they get the promotion, or they can start learning them along the road. When succession management is part of the corporate culture, they start learning them along the road.

Successful succession management creates opportunities for cross-functional assignments (a Sales Manager temporarily working in HR, Procurement, Finance, or R&D). It plans for unique assignments to develop perspective and skill well in advance of the time it will be needed (an international assignment on one or more continents). It makes advocacy a responsibility for managers and executives. Advocacy occurs when a manager says, “You need to attend the next manager’s meeting with me, so you can begin to see how managers interact and work with each other.” It occurs when an executive says, “You need to attend the next industry conference with me. I will be giving a keynote. You need to help me

prepare. You need to come along to meet some of the key people in our industry.”

Preparation comes with a significant dose of personal responsibility. In a successful succession management program, future leaders understand and accept the responsibility to read, take classes, and seek out developmental assignments. They help those around them grow in their jobs and their careers. They don’t wait to become a manager to start acting like one.

POTENTIAL

If you have read this far, you see how succession management is far more than a once a year meeting. It is a way of thinking about leadership development. It is a commitment to mining for leadership potential at all levels. The success of your organization depends on it. By some estimates 70% of employees do not want their boss’ job. By others, only 30% of employees want to move into management. Many organizations are reporting 40% or more of their leaders will move into retirement in the next five years.

If these numbers are anywhere near correct, succession management is no longer interesting. It is a crisis. It depends on an organizational culture where every leader makes work experience, performance feedback, and promotion preparation an integral part of their job. They see and practice developing potential as their responsibility. They understand the future of their organization depends on their ability to grow, build, and identify leadership potential. They see it as their responsibility to protect their organization against the risk of failing for a lack of innovative and creative future leaders.

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