

Succession Planning

More process: less engagement

Succession Planning may be one of the most uninspiring and unproductive preoccupations of your organisation. It often operates in a vacuum detached from the organisation's strategy or current needs and is driven by an over-reliance on process and a total failure to create a challenging and engaging dialogue between organisation and individual. As part of a strategy for retention, engagement or performance it is often deeply flawed and poorly implemented: a costly waste of time and money.

Levels of engagement in many organisations are currently at an all time low. Whichever survey you consultⁱ there are indications that 40 percent - 60 percent of the workforce feel disengaged and are actively seeking to change where they work within the next year. If anything these figures will increase as the recession eases and the availability of new employment opportunities increase.

Succession planning which gives the nod to the most talented individuals in an organisation should really improve levels of engagement at least for the chosen few. Yet the figures show that the "brightest and best" supposedly identified in succession plans do not feel any greater sense of engagement than the "largely ignored" who do not make it through the process. In fact the recent surveys show that more than 25 percent of the most talented individuals, those on the Succession Plan, intend to leave their organisation within one year. Moreover, 40 percent of them have little faith in their peers and even less confidence in the senior team who have identified them as potential successors.

The process of being identified as “high potential” may actually increase the feeling that there are better prospects elsewhere. High Potentials often know their own worth, to current and future employers, and do not feel they owe organisations a lifetime of commitment simply because they are part of a dubious line of succession. They neither feel grateful nor more connected. The anointment itself is simply not enough if they do not respect the leadership, their peers, or the organisation’s values and mission.

Being selected may be deeply traumatic. Expectations raised are not always fulfilled for either the organisation or the individual. The promotion opportunities simply do not arise and there is no discernible difference to the job they are doing or their prospects. Simply dropping people into the talent pool from a great height does not mean they will swim.

Performance is embedded in the context where we work (the resources, the people, the environment) and talent does not simply transplant. That potential may be flawed, identification of promise may have come too soon, or as Macbeth succinctly put it *“Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself / And falls on th’other side...”* (Act 1 sc 7) Surveys show that upward of 40 percent of internal job moves involving identified high potentials end in failure.

Now, I am not statistician but if 25 percent of those on the Succession Plan are planning to leave, 40 percent have little respect for their peers or their leaders, and more than 40 percent make a mess of the new assignment given to them then at best there is only a one in three chance that those on the Succession Plan are going to fulfil their own potential and meet the needs of their organisation. This is a costly and clumsy investment in the “human asset” of high-potentials for a very uncertain return.

What message does succession planning give to the “largely ignored”, those who are neither identified to enter the process in the first place or who fail during the process to show the necessary talent? Even in a well-run organisation which is transparent, inclusive, diverse, there is a risk that however well crafted the official response (“we value you all...”) the underlying message is that “you are not of the chosen few we see taking us forward?”

Acceptable for those who hold no wish to be part of the succession route, but for so many a major preoccupation is where they fit in the great scheme of things, how they are regarded by peers and by line-managers, and how secure their careers will be. Succession Planning can undermine confidence and commitment and lead to a sense of personal insecurity as well as jealousy and resentment of others. Other opportunities in other companies must begin to look singularly attractive.

Who would choose to be a HR or L&D specialist entering the lion’s den and expecting to walk out unscathed from such an intervention? Where does it all go wrong and what on earth can we do to address the issues at such a critical time?

Far too many Succession Plans are written in isolation from the business need. At some time the Board sat down and recognised the need for succession planning. But in too many organisations the responsibility was then handed down to the HR or L&D team who have steadfastly continued the process without really going back to see what it is all meant to achieve. It has become a HR process rather than a leadership responsibility.

Frankly if Succession Planning is not owned and driven throughout by the Leadership Team from inception to completion then there is no hope of success and once it becomes the annual ritualised exercise for the HR team then it is worthless. The role of

HR is to facilitate the Succession Planning process not to own it: additionally they should hold leaders accountable and shame those who abdicate their responsibility.

Too many of the plans lead nowhere: they may raise expectations but cannot deliver to that promise. Bright-eyed High Potentials, still blushing with pride at their selection, wander around, attend feedback-sessions on their leadership potential, begin to meet more senior leaders and start to discuss the bigger issues of the day in high-level workshops. But then what? All too often they simply continue in their current posts waiting for the next mini-bite-sized morsel of development or sit as inert spectators observing the work of others. They are neither given new challenges nor expected to put that leadership potential to the test. They seldom are exposed to demanding situations in front of their peers and they may appear to be molly-coddled.

Talent needs to be stimulated and challenged, testing their capability, and to be held accountable for their performance. Whether taking on a promoted post, or leading a demanding project, or simply being exposed to some of the tougher issues inside the organisation those who are part of the Succession Plan should immediately be stretched in key operational or organisational roles. There must be an element of risk to justify the rewards.

Sadly, Succession Planning tends to perpetuate current mediocrity within organisations. All too often the competence framework and appraisal system leading to selection simply asks for people in the image of the current leaders.

Looking for people in our own image, who voice the same attitudes, display similar characteristics and behaviours is a sure fire way of *finding* people in our own image. That may work for the complacent organisation in terms of its recent past or current challenges, but it is not likely to work for the future of the dynamic organisation where there are new challenges requiring new solutions.

Succession Plans are risk-averse - they seek to replicate current leaders for what are future challenges. It is such a pity that “gut feel” or “instinct”, that flamboyance of “a hunch for the future” plays so little part in our staid selection criteria. Small wonder that little new thinking, creative or innovative ideas, or risk taking is encouraged. Choosing potential successors should rock the boat of current leadership not provide a simpering endorsement of the present culture and compliant behaviour supporting the *status quo*.

Succession Planning has become an inexorable process that takes on a life of its own and replaces imaginative content, human judgement, calculated risk and challenge. Far more is invested in the planning process than in the implementation. Meeting time-lines, critical planning dates, target numbers becomes the overriding concern. Over-planned and under-inspired our current approach to succession planning fails to take on the spirit of the age. We are engaged in a redefinition of organisations and indeed of the whole meaning of work. Our conventional beliefs are called into question, our assumptions about business are challenged, and our trust in organisations and their leaders seriously damaged. We do not know the way, we have no clarity on what needs to be done and no longer can we simply draw out a plan and implement it.

At such a time it is critical that Succession Plans actually engage potential leaders in a *conversation* - a responsible and energetic dialogue between the present and the future, the leader and the led, experience and innovation. This is a dialogue in both words and actions. Building such a dialogue into Succession Plans in a stumbling attempt to explain the present and articulate the future is a key opportunity for organisations to move forward rather than desperately cling to the present.

High Potential individuals need to take a key part in this leadership dialogue, to challenge and to be challenged, to bring new ideas and new working practices to the organisation for rigorous evaluation and where appropriate effective implementation. All the processes and systems in the world are no substitute for heated debate, impassioned advocacy, heady successes, magnificent failures, constructive conflict and positive activity. Let's make succession planning more exciting, dangerous to know, with a rush of new blood coursing through tired old veins.

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