

# The Neglected Elements of Implementing Strategic Succession Management in Public Organizations

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**Abstract**—Regardless of the extent to which succession management is implemented in the private sector, it is still overlooked in the public sector. Traditional succession management is evolving providing a better alignment between business strategies and HR strategies. Succession management brings sustainable effectiveness for succession programs through career path development, knowledge and skill transfer, job retention, as well as high-potential candidates' empowerment for upcoming vacancies. By way of a systematic literature review, we bring into focus strategic succession management in public organizations and discuss best ways of implementation.

**Keywords**—Succession management, strategic succession management, public organization, succession management model.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE ability to recruit, develop and retain the right people in the right roles has been a concern of human resource professionals in the private and public sectors for decades, appearing in the business literature in the 1960s [6]. Many terms have been used to describe these activities such as “succession planning”, “succession management”, and “replacement planning”. Currently, strategic succession management is considered the best approach for addressing concerns about an expected shortage of employees, as well as the right solution for addressing organizations' concerns as to where the next generation of leaders is to come from.

Reviewing academic and practitioner literatures shows that most public organizations have some sort of succession plan but not a necessarily systematic and productive one. Most factors promoting effective succession management – or removing barriers to its implementation – have been neglected in public organizations, as Santora et al. [1] stated in their comparative study. Their findings indicate that most nonprofit organizations (including public organizations) do not plan for a successor.

There is a compelling need for all public organizations to consider the consequences of not planning for executive succession or to devise an appropriate strategy to improve the selection and appointment process to replace departing executives. Public organizations' governing bodies should connect succession to strategy to provide their organization, its staff, and its constituents the benefits of a coordinated strategy. Achieving this coordination would ensure seamless

succession outcomes and enhance the sustainability of organizations by perpetuating and improving the cultures of those organizations.

The public sector is facing a host of new economic, social, and demographic issues such as globalization, new trends of outsourcing and downsizing, baby boomers' retirement and aging population, budget barriers, and hiring knowledge workers. Simply recognizing this labor force dilemma is an important first step for public organizations. Today's public organizations must develop strategies to ensure their future leadership capacity, address changing worker beliefs and wavering workforce values, prepare top performers for promotion and advancement, and ensure leadership continuity in key areas of the organization.

The successful public organization has a strategic plan that underscores its identity and vision, and promotes the linkages between all its subunits and all HR functions. Unfortunately, “Findings from several non-profit governance surveys on succession planning from 2004 through 2014 suggest that succession planning has been seriously neglected in both small and large non-profits. For example, slightly more than 23% of studied organizations in several researches (which are totally more than 6800 organizations) have planned for succession, while the majority of them (74%) have not. Based on these data, it seems that non-profits have overwhelmingly not planned for executive succession and succession planning. Moreover, many non-profits have been rather reluctant to identify successors for a variety of reasons, including the fear associated with the loss of the executive leaders' power and authority a false sense of immortality or denial. Rationalizations for not preparing for such an event include ‘not a top priority,’ ‘too small to require,’ and ‘too small to create a succession plan’ (p. 20)” [1]. Therefore, the aim of this article is to present strategic succession management as it applies to public organizations. The results should help practitioners initiate and implement strategic succession management.

## II. STRATEGIC SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

Many organizations are in a perpetual state of flux. Change happens. Reacting to change and being proactive to avoid its pitfalls is difficult. Regardless the circumstance, change interrupts people's daily activities, imposes perceptible chaos into a work environment, and causes general havoc for most individuals [2]. In an effort to emphasize better business practices in times of change, it is vital that leaders and subordinates alike understand what occurs when transitions take place and how transitions can happen more effectively

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[3].

Succession management is an ongoing human resource function that addresses organizations' continuous transitioning, as it is vital to future business needs, processes and operations. Succession management catalogues, inventories, and manages replacements through proper development, education, coaching, and experiential programs designed to help leaders succeed [4]. Some argue that organizations simply cannot succeed without succession management [5]. Others believe that the sustainability of an organization requires a succession of high performers to fill key positions and to meet current or future talent needs [6]. Succession planning and management is critical to the sustainability of organizations. For example, Lynn states that "the continued vitality of an organization is linked to its ability to survive a leadership void"; she offers a succession process model for "organizational continuity through time, adaptive, and ongoing change in the development and deployment of leadership talent" (p.116) [7].

The strategic alignment of succession management programs with human resource management systems is an indicative response to different internal and external pressures within an organization. It is clear that numbers of studies to investigate the process, nature and outcomes of succession management programs and its connection with human resource management strategy and practice are quite limited. A plethora of claims about the effects of succession management programs are observed in both academic and non-academic journals as well as human resource management consulting companies. Generally, the claimed advantages of strategic succession management are which they influence on effective human resource planning whereby the right people are in the right place at the right time to accomplish business goals successfully, in long term [8].

Effective succession management planning involves three key factors [3], [9]:

1. Alignment of the plan with current and future organizational needs;
2. Understanding of the talent pool in terms of fit throughout the organization (not just leadership positions); and
3. Integration of incoming personnel into well-defined roles throughout the organization.

Taken together, these three tenets can be used to develop processes related to turnover and increase the likelihood of a successful, well-managed transition between two individuals [3], [9].

There may not be a specific trigger for initiating succession planning and requirements will not always be visible or easily identifiable. Planning efforts should involve an ongoing assessment of processes and identification of potential candidates for assuming a variety of key roles. This helps with predictable as well as unexpected changes [10]. This cannot be done without purposefully using forward looking decision-making processes – in other words, the planning must be strategic rather than a matter of running a program [7]. Blakesley suggested that "succession management may increasingly be viewed as just a part of strategic planning

processes, as we decide what must be done and what can be given up, and how to reallocate, retrain, and realign the people who remain in our organizations" (p. 2) [11].

The importance of strategy to the planning and implementation of succession management is what we define as *Strategic Succession Management*.

### III. STRATEGIC SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT RELEVANT FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The ability of an organization to survive turbulent times is based on its capacity to produce sustained and high quality leaders or teams of leaders over time. For public organizations, an effective and sustained leadership helps weathering storms of change, whether caused by downsizing, technology, or public expectations. Interestingly, examining initiatives in both the public and private sectors, Ross revealed most existing succession management planning was found in the private sector, and few local governments had anything to offer beyond a job rotation program. Furthermore, much of Ross' research discovered informal programs that merely identified and selected persons to fill specific positions without providing developmental skills to a qualified talent pool [12].

The paucity of sources specific to public organizations lead us to suggest two sets of generic guidelines from which public organizations can draw on. First, Rothwell [6] classifies characteristics of effective succession management programs in organizations, as following:

1. Top management participation and support;
2. Needs-driven with external benchmarking;
3. Focused attention;
4. Dedicated responsibility;
5. Strategic succession planning;
6. A systematic approach;
7. A comparison of present performance and potential;
8. Clarification of high-level replacement needs;
9. To identify and prepare successors by each executive;
10. Conducting specific developmental programs;
11. High-potentials work while developing;
12. Developmental programs;
13. Developmental experiences;
14. Succession planning based on necessary qualities;
15. Formal mentoring; and
16. Other characteristics: a systematic way of identifying candidates; cross-divisional sharing of people and information; career path development; frequent opportunities.

Second, Berger and Berger [13] suggest integrating organizational competencies, performance appraisal, and forecasting employee/manager potential through the following conditions:

- (a) Talent planning;
- (b) Building diversity into succession;
- (c) Coaching, training, and development;
- (d) Using compensation to implement a talent management plan;
- (e) Using information technology to support the talent

- management system; and  
 (f) enabling high levels of employee satisfaction [13].

#### IV. FOCUSING ON STRATEGY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

So what is strategic in strategic succession management? Our analysis of traditional succession management and the need for a more forward-looking view characterized by strategy lead us to the following distinguishing features.

1. Comprehensive alignment of all organizational strategies including succession management strategy.

Although a few academic works pointed out to this element, it is neglected overall. The alignment will secure the long-term effectiveness managing succession.

2. Ensuring succession management and its implementation is consistent with organizational culture.

Considering organization's culture will reduce resistance while helping the speed at which the results of succession management become effective.

3. Determining current and future key roles based on the standard systemic methods

Two elements are important here. First, strategic succession management does not only focus on vacancies. Second, it does not only focus on leadership positions. Rather the emphasis is on key roles, whether they are vacant currently or will be eventually, and which include but are not limited to leadership roles. This strategic perspective will help provide more long-term organizational sustainability.

4. Determining role-specific standard assessment tools for assessing candidates' competencies.

These tools should help employees gauge their potential for and the steps towards all key roles.

5. Design a career path that uses competencies to reach each key roles.

Closely related to the previous point, the establishment of a competency-based career path provides employees with a concrete way to consider future roles.

6. Continually assess candidates and create a high-potential candidate pool for each key role

Such a pool helps organizations preempt sudden needs and avoid breakage in operational capabilities. It also helps reduce the negative impact of prolonged lack of resources on those left to deliver government programs.

7. Individually empower individuals' progression towards key roles.

Planned development should be customised for each candidate regarding to his/her future position while the process of development should be assessed continuously for a sustainable productivity.

8. Implement multi-approach short- and long-term development activities.

Variety in what individuals can benefit from to reach key roles (e.g., coaching, mentoring, special projects, deployments) helps address various learning needs and preferences.

9. Evaluating succession management to ensure its relevance and efficacy.

A reflective view towards the elements of a program is a

necessary characteristic of a strategic stance.

#### V. IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

Our review of implementation models leads us to suggest four that hold particular promise for the public sector.

In one of the most used models, Rothwell suggests a phased-in roll-out approach. Based on this roll-out approach, organizations go through a life cycle of development in their succession planning and management programs. He suggests the "Pointed Star Model" for systematic succession planning and management with the following steps: Make the Commitment, Assess Present Work /People Requirement, Appraise Individual Performance, Assess Future Work /People Requirements, Assess Future [14].

Pointing out that replacement planning is far behind the times, Byham et al. [15] suggested a different approach to grooming executive talent which is focused on the accelerated development of pool members through:

- Stretch jobs and task-force assignments that suggest the best learning;
- Offering mentoring, coaching, training, and special developmental activities such as university executive programs and in-company action learning sessions;
- Highest visibility opportunities.

Byham et al. [15] explained the process of the Acceleration Pool in five phases:

1. Nominating and Identifying high potentials;
2. Diagnosing development opportunities;
3. Prescribing solutions to development opportunities;
4. Ensuring that development takes place/ documenting development;
5. Reviewing progress & new assignment.

As Charan mentions, the Leadership Pipeline model was developed from the *crossroads model* created by Walt Mahler, a highly acclaimed HR consultant [16]. From this model, Charan [16] suggested an improved process of succession planning. In the first step, the organization tailors the Leadership Pipeline Model to fit their organization. The second step is to translate standards for performance and potential into their own language. The next step involves documentation and communication of the standards set in the previous step throughout the organization. In the fourth step, organizations evaluate succession candidates through a combined potential-performance matrix. The final step is to review the plans and progress of the entire pipeline frequently and seriously improving previous models.

Later, Kim [17] suggested a new operational model with the following steps: Initiation: Set policies and procedures, Assessment: Assess individual candidates, Development: Develop candidates, Evaluate: Evaluate Succession management.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

To fill a gap in knowledge and practice about the sustainability of public organizations we proposed *strategic succession management* as a more proactive and

comprehensive version of traditional succession management and – given the paucity of public service-specific sources – proceeded to review and analyze a variety of relevant available sources.

After defining the concept, we provide 9 key elements that constitute what is strategic in strategic succession management. Finally, we provide implementing guidelines.

It is time for public service organizations to have a healthy assessment of current practices regarding succession management. We believe that strategic succession management offers the best chances to build long-term organizational sustainability.

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