# Succession Planning Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*

## 1. What is succession planning?

Simply stated, succession planning is a process of developing talent to meet the needs of the organization now and in the future. Every time a manager makes a work assignment, he or she is preparing someone for the future because he or she is building that worker's ability. Work experience builds competence, and different kinds of work experience build different kinds of competence.

## 2. How is succession planning different from replacement planning?

Replacement planning is about finding backups to fill vacancies on an organization chart. But succession planning is about grooming the talent needed for the future. They are related but different.

## 3. Why is succession planning needed?

Organizational leaders need to think about aligning their staffing and leadership needs with the organization's future strategic objectives. If they do not take action to establish an effective succession planning and management program, they are likely to fall victim to the so-called "like me" problem. That is the dilemma in which people are biased to pick people like themselves, viewing them more favorably. It is not intentional discrimination—but rather human nature—to see the world through our own lenses. For that reason, men tend to prefer men, women prefer women, engineers prefer engineers, and so forth. The more ways that you are like your boss, the more likely your boss is to regard you favorably. Since there is a tendency to want to "clone" job incumbents for successors, organizations must take steps to counteract that built-in bias for the simple reason that the job incumbent of today, while perhaps perfectly suited for the business environment now, may not be suitable for the business environment of the future. For that reason, organizational leaders must take steps to determine how many and what competencies are needed for the future so that succession plans can overcome the "cloning" bias and pick winners who can help the organization realize its strategic objectives.

## 4. What are the essential components of a succession planning program?

Think about:
- **The Purpose of the Program.** Why do you need it? (Do NOT assume that all executives of the organization will just naturally share the same objectives. They will not. Some will want some things; others will want others. But confused goals will not lead to effective results.)
- **The Measurable Objectives of the Program.** What measurable results are desired from it over time?
- **The Competencies Needed for Success Now.** What kind of person is needed to be a successful performer in every department and at every organizational level?
- **The Way Those Competencies Are Measured.** How well is the organization's performance management system measuring present competencies? (This is needed because we only want to promote those who are succeeding in their current jobs.)

- **The Competencies Needed for Success in the Future.** What kind of person is needed to be a successful performer in every department and at every organizational level in the future, if the organization is to realize its strategic objectives?
- **The Way the Organization Assesses Potential.** How do we know that someone can succeed at a future, higher level of responsibility if we have never seen him or her perform it? (Think of this as measuring performance against future, as yet unperformed, job challenges.)
- **Narrowing Gaps.** How do we narrow gaps between the person's present job requirements and present performance and his or her future targets or possible future levels and what he or she needs to know or do to be ready for that higher-level or more difficult responsibility?
- **Evaluating Results.** How do we know that our efforts to narrow gaps is working, and that the succession program is achieving its mission and accomplishing its measurable objectives?

## 5. What are the most common problems that organizations experience in getting started on a succession planning and management program?

Common problems in getting started on a succession planning and management program include:
- **Defining It as an HR Problem Rather Than Defining It as a Responsibility Shared By the Board of Directors, Senior Leadership Team, Managers at All Levels of the Organization, and Even Individual Workers.** Everyone has some responsibility to groom talent to meet the organization's future needs.
- **Understaffing the Effort.** A good succession program requires time and effort. Someone must coordinate that. It cannot be "completely outsourced." Consultants can help, but they cannot "do it for you." Managers cannot abdicate responsibility—or accountability.
- **Establishing Confused or Overly Ambitious Goals.** If the organization's leaders do not focus the succession effort on specific, and measurable, objectives to be achieved, the succession program will lack goal clarity—and resources will be wasted in pursuing many confusing, overlapping, and perhaps conflicting goals. You have to be clear about what you want before a program can be established to accomplish it.
- **Failing to Hold People Accountable.** This is perhaps the biggest problem facing all succession programs. What happens if this year's Individual Development Plans are not met by an individual? What happens if the senior executive in charge of a division does not meet measurable talent-development objectives for his or her division? These questions center on accountability. Different organizations solve the problem in different ways, depending on corporate culture. But the real question is: How do we arrange consequence for building talent or failing to build talent? How does talent development stack up against meeting the numbers for this week, month, quarter, or year, and what do we do if we are making profits or sales, but not grooming people for the future?

## 6. What are the biggest benefits that organizations experience from a succession planning and management program?

If an organization has established an effective succession planning program, organizational leaders should expect that:
- It will take less time and expense to source talent to fill vacancies because the talent has already been identified and prepared.
- People development efforts have been aligned with the organization's strategic objectives so that the right people will be available at the right times and in the right places to meet the right objectives.
- The organization is prepared to deal with sudden, catastrophic losses of key people.

7. **What is the role of the corporate board in a succession planning and management program? What is the role of the CEO in a succession planning and management program? What is the senior management team's role? What is the HR department's role? What is the individual's role?**

- **The Board** should ensure that an effective succession planning and management program exists, and is actually working effectively.
- **The CEO** is personally responsible for ensuring that an effective succession planning and management program exists and works effectively. If he or she does not, it is like a pilot who is not flying the airplane. If the plane crashes, who is responsible?
- **Senior managers** are like the co-pilots of the airplane. Each is responsible for establishing talent development objectives for his or her own division or department, and then meeting those objectives.
- **The HR department** provides support for the effort by arranging for the policies, procedures, technology, and other support to help ensure that the "plane flies in the right direction." Think of the HR VP's role as akin to the navigator of the plane. He or she gives advice to the pilot where and how to fly…and provides on-the-spot advice about how to deal with unique problems, situations, or challenges.
- **Department managers** are responsible for attracting, identifying, developing, and retaining talent for their respective departments. They should realize that they are responsible—and accountable—for both "making the numbers" AND "grooming talent to meet the organization's future requirements."
- **Individuals** are responsible for knowing what they want out of life, their careers and the organization. They are also responsible for developing themselves for the future. While there is nothing wrong with individuals "wanting to stay where they are"—particularly if that stems from a work/life balance decision—individuals have a responsibility to let people know what their objectives are so long as it does not hurt their own interests and possible future employability.

8. **Why is it important to gain support from collective bargaining units when we are discussing succession planning for Presidents and other executives who are not represented by a union?**

Succession planning is about identifying individuals seen as having high potential/high motivation early in their career or tenure. At this time in their career, these employees may be in a position covered by one of the collective bargaining agreements within our system, such as: IFO, MSCF, MSUAASF, MAPE, AFSCME, MNA, MGEC, MMA, etc.

9. **How is succession planning impacted by a union environment when seniority is a required to be part of the promotional process?**

It is helpful to remember that when we're doing succession planning work, we are not promising the next open position to any one particular employee. Succession planning is about identifying and developing a number of candidates so that we have a pool of qualified candidates who may be ready to apply for any open position when it becomes available.

10. **We would like to groom our current faculty to become dean level administrators of the future. How does salary play a part in their decision to accept the role of a dean?**

Dean level administrator positions are compensated on an annualized basis and not by workload or work assignment. When considering developing faculty members for dean positions, the faculty member's long range career plans and the potential personal financial impacts of the different approaches to compensation should be discussed with the identified candidate.

## 11. How does the length of an interim assignment affect the ability of an employee to experience the full breadth of a position?

An interim assignment is seen as just one of the many ways individuals can build knowledge and skill and receive experience in a new position or work area. Depending on the situation and requirements of the assignment, these interim assignments can go from a few weeks up to three years.

## 12. Why should I communicate our succession planning strategy?

It is helpful to communicate the succession planning program and outcomes so that stakeholders are aware that a fair and equitable talent planning process is being undertaken to meet the long-term needs of the institution.

*adapted from Rothwell, William J. (2005) Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within. New York: AMACOM