

Succession Planning Myths and Realities

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Succession planning is a concept that often is misunderstood, to the detriment of all concerned. People tend to use the term incorrectly, thinking it means one thing when actually it means something quite different. For example, people often confuse the succession planning process, which focuses on future needs of the organization, with replacement planning, which is directed at filling immediate vacancies. Before we get to the myths and realities of succession planning, let's define this concept to make sure we're on the same page.

Succession planning is an on-going, long-term **process** to **systematically** develop talent throughout the organization so that there is a readily available, qualified pool of candidates to fill critical positions as they become vacant. The key is to develop the talent *before* individuals are promoted so they can be productive immediately. The ability to hit the ground running is particularly important for those who fill critical positions.

Here are five of the most common myths about effective succession planning and the realities behind each one:

MYTH #1: Succession planning is an event performed as needed.

REALITY: Effective succession planning requires an on-going, systematic process that is tied to the organization's strategy.

MYTH #2: Succession planning and replacement planning are the same thing.

REALITY: While people often confuse succession planning with replacement planning, the two are very different processes. Replacement planning is used to fill vacancies as they occur without questioning the need to do so. In contrast, succession planning is forward-looking, considering not just the organization's present needs, but its future direction and related needs as well. For example, it's possible that positions that exist today will not be necessary in a few years, or that there will be more effective alternatives to staffing them, or that new functions or skills will be required. Effective succession planning processes consider all of these possibilities.

MYTH #3: Succession planning focuses only on senior level positions.

REALITY: To be most effective, the succession planning process must extend to *all* critical positions throughout the organization. A position is *critical* if the failure to staff it results in the organization's inability to achieve its mission.

MYTH #4: During the succession planning process, a few candidates are identified in each area and “groomed” for higher level positions.

REALITY: Potential replacements can come from anywhere within the organization, and employees self-select into desired career paths. Professional development is available to those who choose to take advantage of it, not just to a select few.

MYTH #5: Once organizational leaders recognize the importance of succession planning, implementation is fairly straightforward.

REALITY: Implementing an effective succession planning process is not an easy undertaking. Essentially it is a form of organizational change, and like any change, it must be well planned, have sufficient support, and be treated as a long-term commitment. There are critical success factors that, if not present, will cause the effort to fail.

How important is having an effective succession planning process in *your* organization? Does the reality fit the need?

Try this quick exercise: Pick a specific critical job in your organization – i.e., one that, if not staffed, would prevent the organization from achieving its mission. Imagine that the person doing that job leaves abruptly, and there is no one qualified to replace him/her. What would happen?

After contemplating the answer to that question, you are ready to determine how high

a priority succession planning should be in *your* organization. ➔

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