

## How to Make a Compelling Case for Implementing a Succession Process

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Despite all the talk about the importance of developing and implementing an effective succession process, few (if any) fire and rescue agencies actually have moved from talk to action. Why is that?

I've heard lots of reasons or excuses not to engage in this process. Here are a few of the most common:

- Filling vacancies with the nearest warm bodies has worked okay in the past.
- It takes a lot of time and resources.
- I don't know what a succession process looks like, or where/how to start.
- We don't have the expertise to do it.
- Given that the process seems daunting, the status quo is looking pretty good.
- We are too busy putting out literal and figurative fires to deal with it.
- Decision-makers who don't see the benefits won't allocate the necessary resources.
- Stakeholders aren't holding us accountable for having a succession process.

My response is this: as the world has become more dynamic and the demands for public safety-related services more wide-ranging and complex, it has become critical for fire and rescue agencies to ensure that their staff are consistently and fully prepared to keep their communities safe, healthy, and economically viable. Taking a replacement approach to staffing critical jobs and functions doesn't work anymore. It's time to step up your game by ensuring your agency has a pool of qualified applicants for its critical jobs and functions throughout the organization. Quite simply, putting your head in the sand on this issue and hoping for the best represents a huge disservice to your community. Un- or under-prepared first responders are a danger to themselves and those they serve.

My definition of an effective succession process is an on-going, systematic process for developing talent throughout an organization that results in a pool of qualified applicants for all critical jobs, functions, and skills throughout the agency.

For those who are not sure how to counter the above arguments or begin to overcome the years of inertia, here are a few of the benefits of implementing an effective succession process. It:

- optimizes scarce resources because it allows for the coordinated

development of employees.

- increases the safety of staff and the community because those in critical positions are well prepared for their duties.
- increases public confidence that the agency is run in a professional, effective, and efficient manner.
- increases productivity, as advancement opportunities are tied to performance.
- ensures the continued readiness of all staff by providing for on-going professional development.
- is efficient because it provides a process for preserving valuable and irreplaceable institutional memory.
- reinforces the connection between performance and promotion by communicating expectations and tying advancement to performance.
- reinforces the agency's vision and mission by demonstrating a clear connection with each person's job.
- provides motivation for staff who want to advance by providing them with clear paths for doing so.
- inspires trust in staff and the public because the process is transparent and tied directly to the community's safety, health, and economic viability.

- is a risk management tool because it prevents premature or ill-advised promotions.

Importantly, an effective succession process provides for leadership continuity and excellence. As noted in the 2006 Wingspread V report, "The executive skill set of the fire chief will to a large part define the success of the organization" (statement of national significance #10). The same can be said for other leadership positions as well as for those who staff critical jobs, perform critical functions, and bring critical skills to the table.

You may think that your agency cannot afford to develop and implement an effective succession process. My question is, how can you NOT afford to do so, knowing that the safety, health, and economic viability of your community as well as the well-being of your employees are at stake? ➔

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