

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Emerging Leaders: Closer Than You Think

By Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney



WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF A KEY MEMBER OF THE SENIOR EXECUTIVE TEAM LEFT A COMPANY?

Would the organization be recognizable a decade later? Or would someone with an entirely new agenda wipe out any memory of what the old senior executive team accomplished?

Would those who step in after the old guard leaves be leaders who were personally selected and groomed for several years? Or would their replacements be people they had absolutely no input in selecting — from another company, perhaps another industry, maybe even another country?

For anyone willing to retire in less than 10 years, or who is responsible for filling the shoes of leaders who plan to leave, these questions should be in the forefront of their thoughts and plans. For those retiring in three to five years, these questions should already be answered.

Successors connect where a company is now to where it will go. These individuals will set the tone for a legacy; yet, talent managers often avoid this conversation for as long as possible.

It's understandable: Identifying a successor can be daunting. It is not just another promotion. How a successor is selected and groomed will say much about the past leader's accomplishments and the organization's future prospects.

What Should Leaders Look Like?

Defining what characteristics and behaviors

future leaders should exhibit requires talent managers to connect the personal and the professional. Identifying potential can be challenging when that potential has not yet been realized. Discovering high-potential talent requires that talent managers evaluate what an employee can do, not necessarily what he or she has done.

Jack Welch groomed many executives to be his possible successor. When asked who his replacement would be, all he could say for certain was the next CEO of General Electric would be very different from him.

To help identify someone as a successor, ask: What qualities do top leaders need to possess? Should they be able to convey confidence and engender trust, express their ideas convincingly, listen well, get direct reports to open up, share ideas and concerns, collaborate effectively, coach others, identify problems before they become crises and/or take necessary risks?

Create a description of the individual who could ideally step into key positions. Then ask: Does your organization make a concerted effort to identify and develop people who have those qualities? To get the answer, ask

each member of the leadership team how well the organization prepared them for their first leadership roles.

How to Recognize Potential

Many organizations inadvertently get in their own way when recognizing and developing future leaders' potential. They expect leaders to act one way and everyone else to act a completely different way. Specifically, they expect leaders to call the shots and everyone else to do the shooting.

This can lead to typecasting, and that limited view can prevent talent managers from identifying people who can move beyond current business needs and excel in a future state, especially those individuals who aren't natural self-promoters.

Recognizing potential takes an unwavering organizational commitment. Leaders need to understand that, when all is said and done, one of their most important accomplishments will be to identify, connect with and develop the potential of those around them.

Unfortunately, executives often get mired in day-to-day problems, and developing future leaders becomes an afterthought. In the worst cases, organizations develop roadblocks

to identifying and developing top performers' potential.

Consider the following example. In one organization, every member of the leadership team said one of the key qualities that distinguished new talent was the ability to ask the right questions at the right time. But drilling down a layer or two into the organization revealed that questioning actually was discouraged. There was an underlying theme throughout the organization that authority was not to be questioned.

To develop leaders who will ask necessary questions, the organization has to first create an environment in which questioning is encouraged, developed, recognized and rewarded. Questioning has to be valued throughout the organization. That way the best answers — and the best leaders who ask those questions — will rise to the top.

Further, the organization has to allow everyone to practice asking questions. To facilitate that, senior leaders have to encourage questions to come from all angles, at all times, from all people. By discouraging questions, they cut off the oxygen supply for future leaders.

This is just one example of how leaders can get in their own way by not developing a culture that promotes the qualities they seek in leaders. Those qualities that distinguish top leadership might include empathy, persuasiveness, collaboration, creativity, problem solving or taking necessary risks. Those qualities form the organizational culture.

To identify the underlying character and potential of future leaders, talent managers must create cultures that foster the behaviors they seek.

Create an Environment for Leadership Development

Talent managers also must create an environment that allows individuals to step up and rise to new challenges. That is the only way to reveal new leadership potential. Further, it is important for an organization to actively identify high-potential individuals, rather than assume the best leaders will “bubble up” without support and be able to gain the skills and experience needed to lead in the future.

Many companies that believe in identifying and developing talent demonstrate their commitment by conducting and sharing in-depth personality profiles, as well as 360 analyses, with employees. This assessment data ensures talent managers and other

business leaders have a clearer understanding of what motivates top performers and how they might facilitate or create development opportunities that will encourage high-potential leaders to rise to meet the next challenge.

The insights gleaned from an in-depth personality profile and a 360 analysis can indicate whether someone has the potential to lead by delving into questions such as: Do they listen well to others? Can they collaborate? Do they know when to ask tough questions? Are they willing to take risks?

With that background, executives can sit down with promising individuals and inquire about their goals and aspirations. This next step is critical to identifying solid successors because, while some employees may be high-potential candidates, if they don't want to take on additional responsibilities, the conversation changes.

For those with real potential and an expressed interest in moving up, learning and

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development plans can be put in place. These may include coaching and stretch assignments or experiences, such as managing a new project or a new team, that allow them to take on responsibilities to prepare them to lead effectively.

But providing training and experience is the easy part. The real challenge comes from working to develop the interpersonal skills, the leadership and communication skills and emotional intelligence. This is where a mentor can make a world of difference.

Beyond the individual's business acumen and associated leadership skills, the successful identification of emerging leaders comes down to the chemistry between the old and the new. If the old guard has a real connection with the potential successor, he or she can form a connection that will act as a foundation for future growth.

Success will have much to do with

chemistry. Equally important, the old guard must determine how a potential successor will get along with the rest of the leadership team. That chemistry is one of the most difficult and important things to flesh out, and it often is the reason succession planning efforts fail.

Connecting With Others

Ultimately, selecting a successor involves looking within. Then, by working with a coach, the departing leader can become comfortable with this professional crossroad. This comfort can impact chemistry, or how well the old leader can transfer his or her knowledge and experiences to the successor.

This is a time for total honesty. Can the old leader let go? This transition can be a complicated time, personally and professionally. Often, large changes occur in life, and we have to learn much about ourselves. A coach can bring this process into focus, facilitate understanding on a much deeper level and help the old leader move forward and let go gracefully.

The ultimate question is: Is the old leader prepared to help his or her successor?

The final call or judgment on this type of transition will come if a successor succeeds. The process includes far more than just transferring acquired knowledge, however. It is about sharing successes and failures. And oftentimes, those aspects are the most difficult for the executive stepping down to coach on because they tend to come almost intuitively.

How did the person work most effectively with the boss? How did he or she get the best out of everyone in the department? How did the leader bond with colleagues throughout the organization? How did he or she connect with clients?

For leaders, it all boils down to this: What will you leave behind? Selecting a successor should be among every executive's primary goals. Finding and grooming a successor says a lot about how an organization moves into the future. Nothing could be more important. ■

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