



Trends

NEXT IN LINE

To secure strong future leaders, organizations need a good people plan

BY JEFF WELTON

One are the days when succession planning meant simply promoting the most senior employees to top jobs. Today's successful organizations take a more strategic approach.

It is vital to ensure that a company's talent strategy is aligned with its business strategy. As a firm looks ahead—five and even 10 years down the road—it must determine if it has prospective leaders to fill critical roles. It is important to ask not only, Do we have the talent to succeed in the future? but also, What skills and experiences will we need in our future leaders? To secure this pipeline, organizations should continually upgrade their talent by “buying” high-potential employees and/or developing them internally.

Employees with executive potential need to start their leadership development well in advance and at an early stage in their careers. They need to develop the ability to provide the vision for change and communicate the rationale behind it. Another skill they need is the capability to shape the culture of the future and thrive in a complex environment, demonstrating cross-organizational savvy. Coaching skills as well as a passion for developing others are also crucial.

Current leaders need to understand that cultivating talent is part of their job, too—not exclusively that of HR—and be willing to commit the time to nurture

future leaders. Many successful firms introduce mentoring, coaching and other measures to hold leaders accountable for developing others so they understand that it's their responsibility to unlock the potential in people.

The Chosen Ones

One aspect of succession planning where there is a lack of unanimity is whether to tell future leaders that they have been identified as such. While the consensus seems to be to tell them, the organization must manage the expectations of those who are identified as “leadership material” by letting them know what they need to

execute their succession plan. Here are some tips to think about.

- Establish a method, such as regular HR and executive feedback, for identifying top talent early.
- Identify the skills the employee needs to develop, and establish a plan for cultivating them.
- Ensure that the employee and his or her manager are confident that the process will succeed.
- Provide exposure to multiple executive sponsors who support the employee's potential as a future leader. To gain exposure to numerous sponsors, an

Current leaders need to understand that cultivating talent is part of their job

work on, what assistance they will receive to develop leadership skills and when they could potentially assume a senior role. This kind of transparency may help to retain current talent.

While the news of who's been chosen would likely not be broadcast widely, it will become obvious to those who aren't selected when they don't get the same development opportunities. Companies should articulate the leadership qualities they're looking for and equip managers to have positive discussions with those who haven't been chosen.

Plan Ahead

Of course, employers need a strategy to

employee may need to take on “stretch” assignments—perhaps in another department or location—that are cross-functional.

- Observe rather than measure development goals. Gain sponsorship for the future leader from sources at all levels within the firm and even from those outside (clients, vendors, etc.).

Good leaders recognize that they cannot have an attitude that says, “After me, the flood.” That's one of the lessons they will pass on to their successors. 

Jeff Welton is managing director of Verity International Ltd. jwelton@verityintl.com