

The Need to Practice What We Teach: Succession Management in Higher Education

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“Practice what you preach” is often a phrase used to emphasize the importance of maintaining one’s integrity through performing as one advises others. In the case of succession management, this phrase can be used to emphasize the differences between educators and practitioners. Furthermore, it is the practice of educators to instill in students the understanding that a succession plan is necessary in business practices. However, within the confines of higher education, succession management plans are rare. This brings into question if institutions are aware of the immoral implications that it establishes by teaching a concept itself is unwilling to implement.

INTRODUCTION

A succession management plan is a proactive process that ensures continuing leadership committed to the organization’s values, mission, and strategic plan by intentionally developing employees within the organization for advancement. For example, in 2001 when Herb Kelleher, the Southwest Airlines co-founder retired, he stated that Southwest prioritized succession planning and named James Parker, the company’s general counsel to be Chief Executive Officer and Colleen Barrett, Kelleher’s former legal secretary to be President and the Chief Operating Officer of the airline (Hirsch, 2001). While corporate America has embraced the model of succession management, the concept, although emphasized in the classroom in higher education, has largely been shunned by the administrations of universities and colleges. With the understanding that institutions of higher learning are operating businesses, universities need to implement the succession management strategies they teach in order to retain their credibility in the service-based business of educating.

THE ORIGIN OF SUCCESSION MANAGEMENT

Mahler and Wrightnour (1973) established their dominance of the theory of succession management with their initial publication titled “Executive Continuity”. Mahler and Drotter (1986) reinstated the importance of the practice of succession management in their work, “The Succession Planning Handbook for the Chief Executive”. In both works, the authors assert the importance of practicing succession management of designated positions as well as the longevity and success of organizations. In his research, Mahler studied companies such as Exxon and General Electronics to demonstrate the way succession management practices can lead to the growth of future leaders. Mahler worked with Ted Levino, vice president of human resources for General Electronics at the time, to create and establish a set of guidelines to emphasize the importance of replacing key executive positions, often before a vacancy has been created. Mahler and Levino are recognized as having developed the succession strategy to such an extent that General Electronics became known as an “academy company” due to its success in producing future leaders (Kesler, 2002).

Through his research, Mahler created a systematic approach to establishing a successful pattern in developing leaders. Over the years, management experts have added to the original methodology as well as principles that have evolved with respect to the value and means of succession management. Many of the new concepts have been developed through the failures of more antiquated methods (Kesler, 2002). For example, experts have determined that that it is more rewarding to practice the sound growth of leadership pools that include multiple candidates than it is to place emphasis on forecasting specific replacement management. Also, recommendations specify CEOs emphasize developing potential leaders rather than saving face with boards of directors who have little influence on the overall future of the company (Mahler & Drotter, 1986).

ESTABLISHING A BASE LINE: UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP THROUGH BUSINESSES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Regarding the theory of developing leaders, practices of creating pools of replacement candidates should not lead to organizations merely creating replicas of their existing leadership. Although the current leadership may be successful, tomorrow’s leaders should have an understanding of the importance of flexibility and vision that is necessary to remain relevant in a constantly progressing world. By syncing this business strategy with the existing and forthcoming human capital of the organization, businesses are able to maximize the value and strength of their potential candidates for the succession of a position. This is accomplished by moving employees through different roles in a company and presenting them with challenges that require the invocation of knowledge acquired through past experiences.

As demonstrated through the actions taken by Southwest Airlines, many of today’s premier companies are developing strategic succession management plans to remain competitive and atop their respective industries. Many colleges and universities have embraced the belief that the most effective means for operating their institutions is through that of a competitive business approach in the industry of higher education. This commonly accepted rationale of thinking leads to the belief that institutions of higher learning should implement forms of succession management in order to remain competitive with other colleges and universities with similar characteristics. However, many universities and colleges fail to understand the importance of this idea. Cembrowski and Costa (1998) stated that due to a lack of information in education sources about succession practices, a need exists for leaders in higher education to review the business literature on the topic. Although many universities will teach the importance of succession management for a healthy organization to their business students, many of these same institutions will fail to practice what they preach.

Clunies (2007) examined this lack of implementation of succession management in higher education and concluded that significant contrasts in education and business cultures result in a challenge to apply succession planning in the field of academia. Lampton (2010) also cited the difficulty in connecting a principle taught in classes with a concept that should be applied in the administrations of higher education

institutions. Lampton conducted a study that determined a majority of respondents believed that succession planning would not be useful at their university. This is an alarming response indicating avoidance by administrations in higher education to a proven successful business concept. Lampton's findings disclose that the departmental managers in universities surveyed had made plans for implementing their own form of succession management within their division, but that they had not received any support or leadership from their supervisors regarding these plans.

OPENING MINDS TO OUR TEACHINGS

Although Lampton's respondents felt that succession management should be implemented and could be used as a successful tool, they have not been able to reap the rewards that are associated with proper implementation of an established plan. Clunies (2007) supports Lampton's supposition that the leadership in higher administration must be committed to a succession management plan or it will fail at the departmental level. Without the support of supervisors and current leaders, even the strongest plan will not be able to survive or successfully be executed.

Educational leadership involved in succession planning across the entire organization ensures the proper enactment of the strategic plan. By keeping the values, mission, and strategic plan at the center of the organization's succession management process, the organization, whether it is a corporation or an institution of higher learning, is able to compete with a rapidly evolving environment. If the succession plan is not correctly linked to the strategy that the organization as a whole is pursuing, then the plan is doomed to fail; and is thus a waste of money and time. However, if successfully implemented, a succession management plan will ensure that institutions will be able to retain and develop their current good employees, and also establish guidelines for attracting employees of that caliber throughout the entire organization for the foreseeable future. Clunies (2007) maintains that colleges and universities are continually being forced into a changing environment in which they must adapt in order to compete and survive. He asserts that part of this adaptation process is maintaining an evolving perspective based on introspective ideas such as: Are we keeping the level of employees desired for our organization, and what types of employees will we need to maintain our business strategy in the future?

IDEAS FOR PRACTICING WHAT WE TEACH

Cembrowski and Costa (1998) emphasize the role that human resources plays in the succession planning activities. They believe that the human resources department is responsible for overseeing and providing the information and data for the review process. Clunies (2007) agrees adding that top performing employees are generally discovered through periodic human resources review meetings and plans for their continued development are established. Mahler (1986) also believes that the review process is the most vital component in the succession system. These review meetings allow for the organization's leaders to discuss candidates in an open environment that allows for unified support or criticism. Also, these meetings allow the key leadership positions to be able to maintain an understanding of the importance that the succession management process carries. Interestingly enough, processes similar to these are typically practiced in colleges and universities by their tenure boards (Clunies).

Cembrowski and Costa (1998) conducted a study of leaders at a postsecondary institution in an effort to discover what was most important to their success. Their findings show that the leaders attribute their success to the key role their environment played. The opportunities to grow and learn are most prevalent in scenarios in which employees are given the chance to complete various job duties. This opportunity creates a need and desire to be challenged, which, in turn, produces personal growth and acquired knowledge through practical learning that could not have been learned otherwise. Clunies (2007) states that most institutions of higher learning have not implemented the practice of job rotation at the senior management level. This concept supports the premise that most colleges and universities are not successfully implementing succession management plans that provide the most benefit for their employees.

Job rotation plays a key role in the success of employees throughout their time spent at the respective institution. Clunies (2007) concluded that for developmental purposes, employees should be rotated among several organizational positions designed to fully educate them on the various aspects of the business. This practice should include individuals experiencing differing positions even if the timing is not ideal for the short-term business goals. The important inference here is that the character and lessons that will be learned through these intentional movements will vastly outweigh the slight drawbacks that could be correlated with marginally less educated decision making in the short term. Although the employee might not make the same decision as their predecessor, they will be forced to push the limits of their current capabilities in order to make the best decision possible. In the long run, this will play a vital role in the success and cross-layering of the intellectual property of the institution's employees.

Clunies (2007) has postulated an interesting idea. Businesses and corporations have shown the advantages that arise from challenging employees through new job tasks. The challenges that are faced by high-potential candidates often require the same skill set needed for being a successful executive officer. However, imagine if this concept is paralleled with the practices of institutions of higher learning. A vice president of finance will have a very interesting view point when called upon to complete the tasks of the vice president of student services. Likewise, the vice president of academic affairs will have even more insight when asked to perform the duties of the vice president of development. If this chain of job rotation is continued for an established period of time, the lessons learned and understanding acquired through these positions would be of utmost value when the time comes for consideration of the next president of the institution.

Success has been measured as a level of achievement and in life that is the direct result of education through learning and growth that is provided through the challenge of new experiences (Cembrowski & Costa 1998). Often, in universities and colleges, due to the fact that the main objective of these schools is to provide for the education of their students, the institution's employees are not viewed as needing additional education. This neglect results in the faculty and staff creating their own plans of actions in order to obtain more education to become better employees. A self-motivated not an institution-directed education is the norm on most campus for employees.

In addition to identifying the existence of self-motivated learning in higher education, Cembrowski and Costa (1998) also discovered that there are certain opportunities that increased the potential for positional progression up the ladder in universities and colleges. Their study indicates that job rotations, formal training plans, and administrative internship programs are viewed as the most rewarding mechanisms available for faculty through universities. Dilworth (1995) supports the importance behind the theory of job rotation and cross-position learning especially for lengthened periods of time that allow for the rotating employee's accountability of their decisions. Formal training programs allow for a systematic approach to theory learning. However, the importance of this program can not completely be realized with the implementation of a mentorship or administrative internship program.

The mentorship program allows for direct learning from an accomplished, successful advisor. An alternative to this is an administrative internship program, which is similar in style to the job rotation format. The employee is given an established period of time to experience the responsibilities of a new job. However, the internship program allows the opportunity for lower-tier staff to gain favor and credibility through performing administrative tasks that are deemed much more challenging than their prior position provided (Cembrowski & Costa, 1998). The importance of employee empowerment and education is key because it allows for trust to be established and further developed leading to the desired synergy that has become a predominant factor in leading organizations. When successful means of employee education are established, university departments will likely work in sync and be able to accomplish far greater feats than they could individually.

EVALUATING OUR PRACTICES

However, the best succession management plans will fail if the institutions that practice them do not involve the correct employees. These methods of improving the quality of the faculty and staff will not

reach their greatest potential if the wrong candidates are put through the program. There is a valued importance in choosing the correct training pool that cannot easily be measured. Although external candidates are always an option when considering the succession management of a position, executive search-firms have shown that there is a distinct advantage to an internal versus an external candidate. Barden (2008), vice president of an academic executive search-firm, emphasizes that an external candidate may be more accomplished and have greater experience with respect to a given position, but the working knowledge of the institution that an internal candidate brings to the table is an incredible tool and frequent deciding factor. The intricacies provided through an internal candidate's perspective often times lead to a more complex vetting process.

Through the proper implementation of a succession plan, institutions of higher learning will be able to push their academic and organizational excellence to new levels. Utilizing this strategic process, colleges and universities will be able to attain a degree of accomplishment that can only be efficiently derived through employee self-motivation and internal support. Through these facilitating mechanisms, colleges and universities alike will be able to continue to advance their own capabilities and the means of measuring these advancements will be evident through the growth of the benefited students. The education of future leaders relies on the capacity of mentors to pass on gained knowledge and experience that is learned through job rotation, formal training programs, and employee education. Only by making the most of the faculty and staff, will institutions be able to capitalize their available tools for improvement and growth in their industry as an organization. By practicing the methods in the boardrooms that they are teaching in the classrooms, universities will become a haven of self-improvement and reciprocal education.

Scott-Skillman (2007) restates the importance for institutions of higher learning to establish succession management plans by showing there is a deficiency of effective leaders within the foreseeable future of educators. Clunies (2007) asserts that an important aspect of this process is defining a benchmark to similar institutions. Establishing these benchmarks will allow for a comparison through which the institution will be able to measure their growth and success rate outside of the direct results of the students they are producing. In the absence of comparisons, institutions are allowing themselves to become vulnerable to not fulfilling their potential, which is a mistake of dire consequence. By not performing at the best of their ability, colleges and universities compromise their integrity as a body of higher learning, and as Scott-Skillman (2007) points out they are jeopardizing their existence. This risk of failure is due to the direct relationship between the institution's existence and the current and future student's perception of the value of that institution's academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

Simply enough, the enrichment of the employees at a university has a direct reflection on the success of that university due to the enrollment of students desiring a high quality education. A succession management plan is the most effective way of attaining this desired outcome. In order to operate as a modern organization, institutions of higher learning must adhere to the insights and follow in the footsteps of larger private sector businesses with relation to their administrative practices. This can be seen in the success of the future practice of succession management in higher education.

The future success of quality leadership at institutions of higher education largely depends on the implementation of a succession management plan. Taking into consideration careful selection of the personnel included in the plan and the appropriate training of the personnel, the university or college will initiate a positive and sustaining program designed to further the organization to greater heights and establish confidence of the university personnel in the future leadership of the institution. Through following in the instructions they issue to their business students, institutions can demonstrate a belief in their educational practices, as well as provide an example to their graduates and other institutions of the benefits of succession planning.

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