

Five Succession Planning Values to Keep Your Organization Alive

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Many organizations are just one step away from extinction. Sounds harsh, but think about it. If Jesus hadn't intentionally infused His values, teachings, vision and Spirit into the lives of several high-potential followers, would the church exist today? No. But it flourishes today because Jesus recognized that there can be no success without a successor. "As the Father sent Me, so I send you," He said (Jn 20:21). Thus, the critical importance of leadership succession continues.

Twist the zoom lens to focus in on your organization. If a key leadership position was unexpectedly vacated by death, disability or disqualification, who is ready to assume that position? If you can't name someone immediately, you're not alone. A recent poll shows that 94 percent of organizations have no succession plan. Perhaps if we knew the value of succession planning, we'd be more likely to engage it, more likely to be like Jesus. Look with me at five primary values of succession planning and see how a relay race, swing dancing, a time machine, a treasure chest and the dust of a rabbi can help your organization avoid extinction.

Value One: Build Your Relay Team

Nobody's dumb enough to run a relay race alone; so why do we lead that way? Not developing future leaders is like not having a runner to whom you can pass the baton. Succession planning (SP) develops future runners in the leadership relay race. SP causes an organization to always have an eye on high-potential leaders so they can develop them for future needs. According to William Rothwell, author of *Effective Succession Planning*, SP builds talent from within, strengthens the bench, reduces employee turnover rates, attracts people to whom the organization can be entrusted and increases employee retention and morale by inspiring people to make progress toward advancement goals.

Like training for a race, systematically developing leaders means we get serious about providing the experiences people need to close the gap between their current skill-sets and the organization's future needs, preparing them to make a more significant contribution. We deliberately deepen our pool of leadership talent when we set up specific training programs that provide opportunities for acceleration of personal growth and advancement. Just as a track coach chooses the relay team line-up, SP ensures that leaders put the most qualified people in key positions or at least, have the right people in the right places at the right time.

Not everyone, however, is designed to run the race. Knowing what will be encountered on the track ahead will help us decide which runners can be "cut" from the team without jeopardizing our ideal future. Finally, identifying and developing, precisely the kind of player our organization will need in the future protects us from

the error of searching for a corporate savior and being wooed by attractive personal characteristics to the neglect of our organizational culture, needs or strategy.

Value Two: Swing Through Transition

Swing dancing consists of a fluid blend of twists and turns between two partners, where one dance partner is sometimes replaced by another and yet the dance goes on in an uninterrupted flow. When a succession plan is well executed and a smooth leadership transition occurs, it's like a new dance partner who cuts in to dance with the organization without losing a beat. The new leader has watched the old leader and easily slips into the organizational strategy dance with precise timing and skill – all without interrupting the flow. Such leadership continuity bolsters organizational stability despite the inevitable twists and turns that come in a time of transition. Without SP, a misstep could occur and ruin the dance.

When we strive to fill key leadership positions by developing leaders from within the organization who share our same cultural DNA, we promote a continuity that is something like a chain made up of critical leadership links that connect and draw us toward our ideal future. In this way, to borrow again from the relay race analogy, leaders pass the organizational baton to other leaders who are running on the same track, in the same race, with the same passion, toward the same finish line (or visionary destination). Leadership continuity cultivates a flexible stability which provides strength to the organization in times of transition. A lack of continuity in leadership during times of change increases the risk of organizational instability and may even jeopardize organizational survival. When SP properly pairs the organization with a new dance partner, it ensures leadership continuity and organizational stability.

Value Three: Use Vision to Manage Change

Like a time machine that moves from the past, through the present and into the future, SP strategically uses hindsight to build on past distinctives, insight to maximize present competencies and foresight to move the organization into its ideal future. In the book titled, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, pastoral transition specialists Weese and Crabtree explain that this kind of proactive perspective guarantees that the vision manages change in healthy, God-honoring ways rather than passively allowing change to manage the vision. It also avoids the reactionary responses that typically come from leading in crisis mode should an unexpected vacancy occur. Sharing a clear picture of who God has created us to be as a Body, we're no longer at the whim of an individual leader, but search for and establish leaders who own God's vision, which is bigger than any one man.

In other words, SP asks and answers the question, *where do we want to go in the future and who will get us there?* Such a futuristic focus emphasizes the long-term implementation of the strategic plan and achievement of the organizational vision while anticipating unavoidable changes in leadership. It declares to leaders and followers alike, an unswerving dedication to the organization's vision and strategic direction.

Value Four: Develop a Treasure Chest Inheritance

Every organization holds certain things as precious. It's as if each has a sort of treasure chest which contains the wealth of its heritage that it seeks to pass on to future generations—i.e., its culture, values, vision, key learnings and strategy. Values, especially, are the crowned jewels of an organizational culture. That's where another benefit of SP comes in. Preparing for and performing leadership transitions clarifies and perpetuates healthy organizational culture—especially its key drivers, its *values*. For this reason, in his book *Values-Driven Leadership*, Malphurs boldly urges leaders to go to great lengths to be sure values-alignment exists between the church and a potential successor; verifying alignment demands a sophisticated awareness of organizational culture. Only as cultural values are clarified are we able to identify and develop leaders who share those values and can, thus, perpetuate our very unique culture by championing them into the future.

Perpetuating *key learnings*, which are like pieces of gold and silver in the organizational treasure chest, is a similarly sobering benefit of strategic leadership transition. SP ensures that lessons learned in organizational experience are carried into the future. If an organization wants to achieve continuous improvement in its effectiveness, it should see SP and its necessary leadership development as its primary tools. Why reinvent the

wheel every time a new leader assumes the helm? Why not build into future leaders the cultural DNA that imbeds key learnings or intellectual assets into key leadership positions? The continued cultivation of leadership that occurs in systematic succession planning enfold core values and key learnings into the fabric of an organization—passing on the family fortune to future generations.

Value Five: Be Covered by the Dust of the Rabbi

Finally, SP is fundamentally a matter of discipleship and, therefore, a critical facet of our spiritual formation. When we prepare for leadership transitions, not only are we showing godly wisdom which sees a season for everything—including leadership (Eccl 3:1; Ps 90:12), but we're following a biblical pattern laid out by, among others, Moses (Nm 27), Elijah (2 Kg 2), John the Baptist (Jn 1:23; 3:30), the Apostle Paul (2 Tm 1) and, of course, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:18; Mt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

Biblical scholar Ray van der Laan notes that first century Jews had a blessing that beautifully expresses the commitment of a disciple to follow his spiritual mentor: "May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi." That is, "May you follow him so closely that the dust his feet kick up is what cakes your clothing and lines your face." The central idea is that observation moves to application. When leaders engage SP, they're obediently encrusted in Rabbi Jesus' dusty exhortation to make other disciples who will not only follow Him, but "lead with all diligence" (Rm 12:8). So, SP isn't simply a matter of achieving God's best future for those you lead; it's about obediently following Christ.

Now that you've been immersed in the five primary values of succession planning and have been baptized in the importance of running the race, dancing the dance, traveling through time, passing on your treasure and being covered by the dust of our Rabbi, you're well on your way to avoiding organizational extinction. More importantly, you're en route to impacting the future and making an eternal difference for Christ's sake.

About the Author

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