

Mark Coldren Tells How to Tap the Talent Within

For institutions that don't have formal succession plans in place, who should be in charge of getting the process started?

Responsibility for decisions and actions related to succession planning rests with leadership team members, as they work with their respective direct reports to determine what the organization needs. That said, human resources can play an important role in helping frame and facilitate the process, ensure that the right people are involved, and track progress.

What steps do you suggest that leaders take to devise and adopt succession planning strategies for their institutions?

Four steps are key. First, assess where you are currently as an organization—all the positions you have, where they exist, who they report to, and pertinent details, including the demographics of the individuals in each position.

Second, develop consensus about what you want leadership within the organization to look like. This usually entails multiple conversations, since everyone has his or her personal ideas about what constitutes good leadership.

Third, embrace the importance of a performance management process in which feedback not only allows individuals to gauge whether they are doing the right things but also serves to prepare them for future roles.

And finally, evaluate your commitment to professional development—is that commit-

BY MARY LOU MERKT



Succession planning has captured greater attention across the higher education landscape, as more leaders understand the need to step up the pace in filling a growing number of key positions vacated because of retirement. Mark Coldren, associate vice president for human resources at Ithaca College, N.Y., notes, "The challenge many feel today relates to the search process—namely, are the right candidates out there?" Likewise, says Coldren, the cost and effort of bringing external hires on board begs the question of whether institutions already have that requisite talent within. In this interview with *Business Officer*, Coldren discusses the value of a more intentional approach to developing leaders internally.

ment visible, and do you actually have development plans in place? Together these four steps provide an essential baseline to talk about what succession planning could mean for your institution.

Where do competencies fit within succession planning?

Competencies are core to talent and leadership development. What comprises a competency are the skills, knowledge, and background you need, and the attributes and behaviors you want to see displayed. So, competencies are more than the technical parts of a position. Especially for key roles on campus, leadership attributes—such as providing examples for people to follow and communicating institution vision—are critical.

Many use the terms *hard skills* and *soft skills*, but I think this sets up a false distinction about what is most important. The skill of being a good listener is as important as being able to balance a budget. And very often those soft skills are harder to learn. Self-awareness is arguably one of the most important attributes a leader can display, yet it isn't something we readily identify as a measurable skill.

What other elements might colleges and universities consider with regard to campuswide succession planning?

A broad emphasis on development is critical for establishing a culture where people constantly try to get better at what they do, and a good systematic talent

management approach looks deep into the organization to identify potential. This goes well beyond formulating a plan, for example, to fill my job because I'm thinking about retiring in three years. The ongoing commitment of looking at how you measure talent and give visibility to people is vital.

Should our succession plans be documented?

Yes, but this can be as simple as a worksheet you maintain that identifies key positions for succession; who you consider to be your top 10 performers; what each may still need in the way of competencies and experiences to be successful in those roles; and who might be ready in one, two, or three years, or in five years. Now, if each leader developed such a list and then leaders swapped their lists, this would immediately raise the visibility of all those potential future leaders within the institution.

How do you manage expectations when someone who is being groomed for a leadership role doesn't get the job?

First, if being groomed involves a conversation that takes place between only the protege and the person in that role, this is a setup for failure. Again, if you see someone as having great leadership potential, that has to be a broader conversation with your colleagues at the leadership level. In doing so, you may find that others have a wholly different view of or experience with that person. Also important is making sure you give that individual visibility and exposure



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to your president or your chancellor—and perhaps even board members who may be involved in senior-level hires—since the perception of those key stakeholders may be crucial when a search comes open.

All that aside, when candidates whom you encourage to apply don't get the job, you must be prepared to talk about what that means. I've had many conversations with internal candidates who didn't get the promotion. In the midst of their disappointment it can be natural for them to disengage. By asking them to reflect on the outcome, one response may be that they realize they weren't ready to assume the role. Another reaction could be that they do think they are ready and now feel the need to look elsewhere if those opportunities aren't going to happen for them at your institution. In either case, you must be respectful and try to support employees emotionally as they move through that process.

What is the best way for leaders to encourage employees to take charge of their career progression?

Many in higher education love their institution and are content to stay for a long time. Yet, even those folks after a while may begin to consider the commitment they've made. When we have been loyal to an organization, it is common to feel that we are entitled to new opportunities. What leaders must stress is that this is a partnership. Yes, the institution should provide pathways and help individuals think about career progression. But it is up to all staff and faculty to take ownership of the skills they need to attain and to make

their aspirations clear so that their supervisors can help them seek those beneficial experiences that will prepare them for that next role.

I've also seen talented folks who get antsy if they don't see positions opening up on the ladder. How can we deal positively with that sense of urgency, so that our best talent doesn't jump ship?

That scenario also suggests the need for a conversation about readiness. Very often people who view themselves as high performers will think they are ready for that next role before they really are ready.

As a leader, you may need to provide a framework of all the experiences that would help individuals become even more attractive for that job in the future, so they are encouraged to continue to broaden their skills and knowledge at your institution. For example, participation on campuswide committees, involvement in key projects and institutional change initiatives, and serving on a search committee will help employees see the bigger picture beyond their functional area and develop and hone critical peer communication and leadership skills. Even encouraging some employees to make a lateral move could help them down the road with important career-broadening experience.

It seems one thing that has harmed our industry in recent years is the inability to provide substantial raises to our employees. Does this conflict with what we're trying to accomplish from a performance management standpoint?

Many leaders might argue that if the raise pool is only 2 percent, that's too small to differentiate, and so everyone should be given the 2 percent as a cost-of-living adjustment. My argument is to use what you have in the most effective means available. In real dollars, the difference between 1.5 percent and 1.9 percent isn't much. But on a scale, if that's how you reward, it means everything. You can't apologize for the resources you don't have. And failing to make a distinction based on performance can detract from your larger leadership development efforts.

Many institutions have developed diversity and inclusion plans. How can those benefit from our succession planning efforts?

The two plans can be in conflict if they aren't considered carefully from a balanced perspective. You want to balance the benefits of bringing in new perspectives and individuals of different backgrounds with the benefits of investing in key people you have internally whom you'd like to see develop more responsibility.

A balanced approach seeks ways to implement both plans so that they complement each other. As one example, succession planning objectives can be embedded within diversity and inclusion plans so that individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups aren't stuck in entry-level and middle-management roles,

but become part of the leadership pipeline.

What are some side benefits of succession planning for our institutions?

Because succession planning shows how you value development within your organization, one related benefit is a more engaged workforce. Providing employees with career pathways, offering good performance management, giving employees honest feedback, and creating opportunities for their continued growth allows them to take ownership in where you are going as an institution. And when people see a connection between that larger vision and their own professional development, they tend to invest that extra bit of energy into their work.

Succession planning also provides a means to reinforce your institution culture. If you value leadership development, inclusion, and respect for the individual, then your culture should help you develop people within that framework. And, if you have a culture where you are continually trying to raise the bar, a succession plan can reflect those higher expectations for the behaviors and actions of individuals whom you ultimately entrust to lead.

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