

**Title: Uncertain times ahead? Don't leave the office without your plan, your succession plan that is.**

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In today's increasingly volatile business environment, it has never been more important to have the right talent in the right roles throughout your organization. From the executive boardroom to the front-line, succession management has become a constant and often heated topic of conversation.

Which leadership positions are most critical to the organization? To what extent is there a plan to mitigate risk against critical positions? What is being done to accelerate development to ensure ready-now talent pools of leaders are in place for critical leadership positions? These are all fundamental questions that every leader must now be prepared to answer.

**From Succession Planning to Succession Management**

The failure of traditional succession planning processes are often rooted in the fact that many leaders still view succession planning as a process of identifying successors for every senior position in the organization. This results in over-protecting some senior leadership roles that are not at great risk and under-protecting some critical positions where there is significant vulnerability<sup>1</sup>.

So with this in mind, where do HR professionals need to be placing their efforts in order to build a sustainable succession management process within their organization?

**Build the Business Case**

Articulate the eminent risks to business continuity to capture the attention of relevant stakeholders. Presenting key facts around upcoming retirements, relaying challenges associated with tricky senior level searches or identifying the number of critical positions with no active talent pools of ready-now successors can all help stimulate the motivation to kick-start or reinvigorate a succession management process. In short, do what it takes to stress the urgency of the issue and facilitate an aligned understanding among stakeholders to help move the process forward.

**Focus on Future Requirements**

Engage key stakeholders from the outset to gain clearer insights into the challenges, opportunities and future leadership requirements facing the organization. This critical step provides a foundational building block to position the organization for long-term success and acts as a consistent platform for anchoring succession management activities.

By building an aligned definition and a common language around future leadership requirements, today's development efforts can be tailored to focus on the competencies, skills and attributes that will be most important in the future.

**Share the Accountability**

Distribute responsibility beyond any one person or any single department as a foundational element to building a sustainable succession management process.

Executives must take ultimate accountability for enhancing overall leadership capacity while ensuring the business is protected against risk and vulnerability in all critical positions. Executives need to model the right behaviours, facilitate talent development opportunities, actively participate in coaching and mentoring efforts and drive overall leadership development.

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss, D., S., & Molinaro, V. (2005). *The Leadership Gap: Building Leadership Capacity for Competitive Advantage*. John Wiley & Sons Canada, Mississauga, ON.

HR needs to take the lead in developing practical tools and processes that can be leveraged across the organization. This includes implementing consistent talent planning frameworks, designing practical talent tracking systems, integrating development planning tools, facilitating accelerated development opportunities, formalizing coaching and mentoring initiatives, and integrating existing programs such as performance management.

### Keep it Simple

Too often we hear stories about the executive who comes to a talent planning meeting armed with a thick binder filled with various charts and endless replacement statistics ready to discuss every employee within his or her department. Unfortunately, these binders may only get dusted off once a year and there is a significant risk that little progress is made to move talent development forward between these meetings.

By taking a deliberate approach, talent pools can be established directly around the most critical positions and development efforts and resources can be focused to the areas where they will have the greatest impact.



### Create Transparency

Deploy succession management programs in an open and transparent manner to enhance understanding and engagement to the process throughout the organization. However, this doesn't mean sharing all information with all people. Transparency is about demonstrating objectivity and ensuring all employees are clear on how the process unfolds, how people are selected for development and what the requirements and expectations are of those who are selected<sup>1</sup>.

It is a fundamental flaw when all talent planning conversations happen behind closed doors and individuals remain unaware that they have been identified as succession talent. Under

these circumstances, the organization risks losing a high potential employee who is not aware of the investment and value placed on his/her skills, knowledge and experience.

### **Invest to Accelerate Development**

Contrary to traditional succession planning exercises, accelerated development provides deliberate development to succession talent pool members with tailored stretch assignments in identified areas to quickly move them to ready-now status.

Anchored to insights from a robust assessment process, accelerated development focuses on providing individuals with practical opportunities to develop skills and competence in new areas that will position them for longer-term success. This includes early and frequent exposure to the types of situations they are likely to encounter in future roles, which can include everything from leading special projects to increasing interactions with the executive team and taking on more senior responsibilities such as critical decision making or strategic planning.

### **Leverage Existing Programs and Practices**

Never treat succession management as a standalone initiative... period! Most organizations are already dedicating significant time and resources to initiatives such as leadership development programs, coaching and performance management processes. Actively work to integrate succession management efforts with existing programs and practices to leverage the efforts already taking place and translate the insights into the development planning process.

Further to this, it is critical not to ignore the rest of the leadership – they need development too! Notwithstanding everything said about focusing efforts first on mitigating risk to the business and developing candidates for critical positions, an integrated approach to leadership development also needs to address the broader leadership talent<sup>1</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Succession management is an organization-wide effort to protect against the unnecessary risks associated with vacant critical positions. HR now has a unique opportunity to address a growing business challenge that will continue to be front and centre in executive and board level conversations for the foreseeable future. When the investment in succession is done properly, this ensures the organization's ability to weather uncertainties in the market, the economy and allows it to continue delivering value to its business, stakeholders, and customers.

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