

Excerpts from HR Manager's Guide to Succession Planning

By Brian Kreissl, LLM, CHRL and Yaseen Hemedat, MHRM, CHRL

Mentoring for Succession Planning

Using mentoring as a development tool for top talent

Like coaching, mentoring can be an important development tool for succession planning purposes. The benefits of mentoring for the protégé include providing opportunities to learn, grow and advance your career.

Mentors provide advice and insight into the organization, access to a wider network and a way to obtain feedback and career advice. However, mentoring benefits not only the protégé, but also the mentor and the organization as a whole.

While they do share certain similarities, mentoring is quite distinct from coaching. Mentoring is really about partnering with a more senior individual who can provide advice, suggestions and feedback to the protégé, as opposed to a coach, who — at least in a business context — generally helps the person being coached find the right answers within themselves.

A mentor can act as a sounding board to answer questions, guide the protégé in his career and open up possibilities the protégé might not have considered otherwise. While a manager should provide a certain amount of mentoring to her team, most formal mentoring programs partner mentors and protégés who are not in a direct reporting relationship, and may even be in another function or organization.

The benefits of mentoring

For the organization, mentoring helps facilitate knowledge transfer and the grooming of future leaders. Mentors are able to provide insight gained through their own experience as leaders, the unwritten rules relating to expectations of leaders and generally accepted norms, values and best practices within the organization and industry.

Mentors themselves can benefit by forcing themselves to think about their own experiences and frame them in a useful way and develop their competencies relating to the development of others (which is useful to senior leaders as they climb the corporate ladder). Mentors can also learn from their protégés.

Some organizations also implement “reverse mentoring” programs whereby employees of different generations are paired up with one another; for example, with older employees sharing organizational knowledge and younger employees providing tips and strategies on technology use (particularly with respect to social media).

While there are different views on this, [the best mentors are generally people who are about three to five years ahead of their protégés in their careers](#). If the mentor is too far ahead in her career, it may be difficult for the mentor to relate to the protégé. On the other hand, a mentor who is only slightly ahead likely would not have any unique insight or

advice to impart.

It is particularly important to have a good fit between the mentor and protégé and ensure both individuals can work well together. While the mentor and protégé need not be in the same department or function, it is necessary to be able to partner aspiring leaders with mentors who are able to provide the right type of advice to their protégés.

Women and diverse employees frequently find mentoring to be particularly helpful to their career development — especially if they are able to obtain advice from someone who faced the same or similar challenges in their careers.

Establishing formal mentoring programs

While many aspiring leaders and other ambitious individuals seek out, find and approach their own mentors, for succession planning purposes it is more helpful if the organization is proactive about mentoring high potential employees by establishing formal mentoring programs within the organization. In order to do that, it is important to obtain executive sponsorship of the program and determine its goals and objectives.

It is also important to set guidelines relating to the matching of mentors and protégés and promote the program within the organization — particularly to senior managers and executives who should encourage potential mentors and protégés to participate.

Mentoring programs generally last one or two years (although individual mentoring relationships could continue beyond that period on an informal basis) and have a formal kick-off, as well as several meetings of all participants throughout the duration of the program. Mentors and protégés should be encouraged to meet regularly, and the program facilitator could provide suggestions to the participants for discussion topics.

It is also a good idea to provide mentors with training and reference materials on how to act as effective mentors and evaluate the effectiveness of the program through questionnaires.

Is the Concept of ‘Bench Strength’ Damaging to Highly Talented Employees?

Ensuring top performers aren't kept on the sidelines for too long

The concept of “bench strength” is frequently used when discussing succession planning. This particular analogy from the world of sports refers to the fact that in any team — whether in sports, business or elsewhere — it is important to have strong team players waiting on the bench, ready to step into the game should the need arise. Like an elite sports team, organizations should have high performers ready to replace top players if they are no longer “in the game” for whatever reason.

Businesses need to acquire, develop and assess individuals to ensure the organization possesses sufficient depth in terms of talent in various stages of readiness to move into more senior or challenging roles. In other words, organizations must ensure they have sufficient bench strength with respect to their senior leadership team and other talented individuals waiting in the wings to step up should the need arise.

Leaders can and do move on for any number of reasons, and new leadership positions can be created due to an organization’s growth, new products or lines of business, expansion into new markets or as a response to external opportunities and threats (such as those related to legal and regulatory developments, competitive pressures and technological changes).

If an organization is serious about enhancing bench strength among its senior management team, it is particularly important to be able to effectively grow talent from within, and to be able to deploy that talent effectively and in a way that makes the best use of individual skills, knowledge, abilities and interests.

Identifying critical positions and talented individuals

However, before working on enhancing its bench strength, an organization needs to determine which positions are most critical. This involves assessing which positions would cause the most problems or be particularly challenging and difficult to fill should the current incumbent decide to leave the company.

It then becomes important to determine which individuals within the organization have the necessary skills, abilities and aptitudes necessary to fill those gaps. But even if an individual is designated as being “high potential,” it is important to create individual development plans for such an employee, since even the most talented individual will often require at least some type of development in order to become fully capable and confident in moving to the next level.

Criticisms of the concept of bench strength

While bench strength is a very popular concept in relation to succession planning, there are some valid criticisms of the tendency to view succession planning through such a paradigm. For example, Erik Berggren argues in a 2008 blog post that to some extent the perceived need to build bench strength is a myth.

Quoting Peter Cappelli of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and his book *Talent on Demand*, Berggren points out that it is actually damaging to the morale of top performers to tell them they are highly talented and then have them essentially sit on the sidelines waiting for a suitable opportunity to arise. In other words, if someone is viewed as highly talented, it is particularly important to keep that person engaged by utilizing her skills in the short-term — as opposed to waiting until a suitable senior management position becomes available at some point possibly several years into the future.

Even if a suitable senior level position is not available immediately or within the next few months, highly talented individuals need to develop and grow, and be assured that their skills and abilities will be leveraged to their full potential within the relatively near future. As well as formal classroom learning, it is also important to provide meaningful growth opportunities for succession candidates through promotions as well as lateral transfers, secondments, temporary assignments, coaching, mentoring and job shadowing.

Cappelli uses the analogy of supply chain management and maintaining a “talent inventory.” He points out that sitting on an inventory of talent is even worse than carrying a large inventory of products simply because talent can walk right out the door. For that reason, it is helpful for organizations to engage in proper “supply chain management” with respect to talent — ensuring the organization’s talent inventory isn’t allowed to grow stale.

For more information, or to purchase this book, please visit:

<http://www.carswell.com/product-detail/hr-managers-guide-to-succession-planning-usb/>