Who? No Seriously, Who? Implementing Succession Planning in Higher Ed
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Q&A with Presenters Chandra Alston, EdD and Ron Tredway, EdD

Can you describe what the commitment looked like from the top?

RT: Commitment was generally positive, from the Board of Trustees, the UT President, and the President's immediate staff. The entire President's staff demonstrated their commitment by participating in an abbreviated pilot of the succession planning model. The senior leadership involvement included chancellors from each campus, including the UT Health Science Center, the campus illustrated in our case study presentation.

CA: At UTHSC commitment was fully engaged:
We met with the COO and laid out the vision/plans.
He communicated the meeting request to his team.
He was present and interjected throughout the launch meeting his expectations that the entire team be involved and responsive in this process.
He allocated funding for this project.
He checks in regularly with employees and supervisors on how the process is going.
We report on this in our staff meeting (progress, challenges, etc.)

Did you assess managers' willingness to release and not "hoard" talent? How did you overcome this, especially with faculty hoarders?

RT: No, we communicated the positive messages of the value proposition succession planning can bring to the organization, addressed skepticism about 'NOT' promising jobs (we require all candidates to go through the same application/selection process, even if they are participating in succession planning individual development.

CA: No, we did not assess the manager's willingness to release…not hoard. In my own leadership role (non-faculty) I evaluate staff on how well they cross-train and have back-ups. I have talked to managers about putting HR at risk by being the only person who knows how to perform tasks. If they refuse to show others and there is a need for them to be out without backup, I will use that toward the disciplinary/corrective action process.

Can you share your succession planning template in Word or Excel?

RT/CA: The model and sample templates can be found on our website under Manager's Toolkit items:
https://hr.tennessee.edu/managers-toolkit

Do you always target a specific person for a specific position?

RT: Individual candidates are tied to specific positions involved in succession planning, where those individuals are aspiring to be in one or more of those positions, yet there is no guarantee that the candidate will be selected for that position when the next opening occurs.

CA: We use personal development plans to do general development activities to prepare individuals to be part of the future talent pipeline for targeted positions.

Was it anyone in the institution or just the department?

RT: It varies. Ultimately, the model is intended to support intra-campus, intra-department development. For the Executive Leadership Institute, which is linked to the succession planning model, development of an executive on one campus is supported by mentoring from other campuses beyond their own.

CA: For this pilot (UTHSC), we used just the department.

How do you guard against bias in the search process - or perceived favoritism?

CA/RT: We need to do more work in this area by training and preparing our leaders on implicit bias and selection bias. We do invite anyone in the department/unit who is interested to participate, and we include them as a part of the succession plan.

How do you incentivize the potential successor to stay with your organization and wait for the opportunity to step into the role for which they've been groomed, instead of going to another organization where the opportunity is available immediately?

CA: We didn’t intentionally do this, but we did align the training and development in areas in which they wanted to be developed and it seemed as though people were excited about the opportunities they were getting.

Was there a concern in dealing with situations where someone was groomed, but then was not hired for the next position?

RT/CA: This concern was raised by the senior leadership team during the initial pilot, as being something we would need to be prepared to deal with when it did arise. We have not yet experienced a negative reaction from this perspective by a candidate, and we are attempting to prevent this by conveying the ‘commitment’ to development vs the ‘guarantee’ of a position on the front end of the process.

What do you do if you have multiple people interested in one position? If a person who shows interest and went through the assessment process does not get the position, how do you avoid hurting that person's morale?

CA/RT: While we haven't had that happen yet, we anticipate working hard to remind the individual that was "not selected" that they are still building skills and growing so that when internal and external opportunities come their way, they will be better prepared. This will be hard, but we feel it's better to train them and maybe they leave rather than not training them and they stay.

How does one foster buy-in from a successor that has been nominated?

CA/RT: In the individual planning meeting, the manager should encourage the employee through positive reinforcement that learning skills and competencies toward this position will enhance their overall development and skillset.

How did you decide on competencies? Can you give a few competency examples?

RT: Competencies are decided by the leader of the functional work unit where succession planning is being pursued, tied to a specific position. Samples might include: a) Ability to mobilize volunteers and stakeholders for the enhancement of the university, and b) Demonstrated ability and willingness to delegate effectively and to hold direct reports accountable.

Did you already have the competencies in place? Or was it part of the succession planning process?

RT: In some cases, the position description/job description included competencies developed within the last 3-5 years, and these were used as the starting point for the core, position-specific, and technical competencies for the key positions targeted for succession planning.

CA: For UTHSC, we used web searches for positions and those that we had currently on our job descriptions.

CA/RT: We do not have a formal competency dictionary/library, yet desire to curate/development one in the next several years.

Do you use a consistent competency dictionary?

RT/CA: No, but that is something we are considering as resources are available to do so. We would refer you to the models used by our colleagues at University of Virginia and Georgia State University that have done specific work already in the competency development and cataloging (dictionary) space.

Did you use a standard template for documenting the IDPs?

RT: We used a template collaboratively developed with a paid consultant group the OliverGroup out of Louisville, KY, specifically targeted to what we wanted to accomplish in our model at UT. However, the key components are fairly common, just branded for UT in the format we prefer.

What was the approximate cost of the consultant?

RT: Based on the collaborative nature of using an external consultant coupled with internal Organizational Development and Human Resources talent, the consultative expenditure was less than $50k.

Are you using the Cornerstone 9 box?

CA/RT: No. While we, and members of our executive team are familiar with 9-box, we don't currently apply this model for high potential identification and the development related to it. Our succession planning efforts are more focused on the key positions needed, and collaborative identification of potential successors.

Succession planning is usually a top-level executive-type of activity, but would you suggest it be used at lower level work lead-type positions?

CA/RT: Yes, the death investigator used in our pilot is a non-exempt/hourly position. It is hard to fill and extremely important to our ME office. Our model is built on the premise that any position in the organization can be deemed a critical position for succession planning, based on it being 'hard to hire/hard to fill.' Our templates include Executive, Senior Management, Management/Supervisor, and Individual Contributor.

Have you implemented this process with your Faculty Group?

CA/RT: Not yet, but it's in the works. We anticipate having details to share on this item in the first half of 2020.

If you know you are leaving and have offered to help train the replacement but the university won't fill the position prior to you leaving, how can you convince leadership to better prepare?

CA/RT: You may try providing written standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the person coming behind you or leave your cell # (if you are strongly committed). While it is helpful when the leadership sees the value of some cross-over time and you can't make this happen, it's not always feasible. We applaud the effort in trying.