

LESSON 31: Business Performance

Succession Planning God's Way

INTRODUCTION

Succession planning is an essential part of the maturing process of successful businesses. Every business needs to think through how they are going to continue by examining how up-and-coming leaders are identified, technically trained and exposed to the nuances of each business. In today's culture of employees frequently moving from job to job, one of the most significant issues is how to keep future leaders long enough to be adequately trained and ready to step up once the existing leaders are prepared to step down, or worse yet, the leader passes unexpectedly.

In addition, if the ownership transition over time is intended to be to existing employees of the company, then the succession planning for future leaders must also include their potential to become a business owner.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Succession planning is a focused process for keeping employment talent in the pipeline. For successful businesses, this is a continual process where leaders are identified very early in their careers. All organizations benefit from the practice of identifying crucial job skills, business knowledge, social relationships and organizational practices—and then passing them on to the next generation of business leaders.

Several keys to follow when considering succession planning are:

Know who you are as a company. When it comes to succession planning, it is essential to recognize that it is not a one-size-fits-all process. To benefit from succession planning, company management must begin with a clear idea of who they are as a company, so they can plan appropriately for the future.

Look at your entire organization. Next, assess the current workforce and identify critical positions paired with specific employees. Recognize, sometimes employees are not suited for upper leadership. At the same time, consider all employees, so that you do not miss a critical person or position.

Determine a succession planning strategy. There are many ways to proceed with succession planning. The best succession plan is the one that fits the organization. To determine what will work best, consider these questions:

- Are you planning for all positions or only upper management?
- Does your company have specific vulnerabilities, such as a large percentage of retiring employees?
- What is the ultimate goal or outcome you are you hoping for?

Identify your rock stars. Once key positions are identified, find two to three employees who would make suitable successors for each of the critical roles. Look at employee performance objectively and remove any personal attachments. Typically, highest-potential employees will be lifelong learners who are both self-aware and socially aware. Look also for employees who are excellent problem-solvers, adaptable and able to take on more responsibility. If your staff is not deep enough, consider how you will build a talent pool over time.

Tackle tough decisions and discussions. Discuss with each potential future leader their career goals, where they see themselves in the future, and what training and education they feel is needed in the meantime. Succession planning will not just help build a future for the few employees you consider to be promotable; it will also help develop plans for the employees who aren't future management material.

Understand that growth does not have to be upward. Your employees are the backbone of your company, especially the ones who do a good, solid job—day in and day out. But some of these employees may not have the potential to move up. Possible reasons could be they're already doing the job they're best suited for, or they're simply not interested in rising through the ranks. These employees need to know that even though they won't be moving up in the organization, you still want to nurture their growth and acknowledge that they are a valued asset to the company.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1Do you have a succession plan? If not, what are the impediments to creating one? If so, what are they and how could they be improved?

2. What are the biggest risks internally and externally in completing a successful succession plan?

3. What feelings and concerns do you have about handing off some or all of your responsibilities to others? How would your staff feel as well?

BIBLICAL APPLICATION OF SUCCESSION PLANNING

Succession planning has multiple Biblical implications, two of which are addressed here. They are implications to employees, and implications to the employer.

Employees

Focusing on succession planning is highly beneficial to all the business's employees. This in-depth process addresses the need to evaluate demographic changes and talent demands. Through this process, management will be identifying skill gaps and training requirements, boosting morale by increased spending on training and reinforcing unique or highly specialized competencies.

In short, succession planning forces management to focus on all the employee issues they should be focusing on anyway. However, because of the impending change in leadership, the employees need also to be comfortable with change, willing to learn new skills, prepared to accept uncertainty and able to adapt to multiple work environments and leaders.

As we all know, change is seldom comfortable. Corporate leadership is responsible for preparing all their employees for this shift long before implementing changes.

Numbers 27:12-23 is a primer on how we are to view succession planning from a Biblical perspective. Moses, who has been the leader of the Israelites for over forty years and who knows he will not get to visit the promised land, is given a chance to see it from high atop a mountain in the Abarim range. Here Moses says,

“May the lord, the god who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will

lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."
 ([Numbers 27: 16-17](#))

This is the last time that Moses talks to God, and his most pressing concern is the people—that they should have a leader. Ironically, in Moses' first meeting with God at the burning bush, God charged Moses to care for his people: *"I've seen the degradation of my people"* ([Exodus 3:7](#)). So God's first charge to Moses and Moses' last request of God is both about the good of the people.

The Bible mandates we, as business leaders, are to care for our employees, whether we are transitioning internally, externally, or to close our doors.

Employer

Most succession plans avoid addressing the personal impact on the exiting owners or leaders and on the business itself. A great succession plan can still be derailed by the leader who is not emotionally ready for the transition or when the culture or direction of the business changes dramatically because of the following leader's style or vision.

First is the loss of identity. We all associate with our jobs. Our jobs become a part of our persona, and we are individually recognized by that association. As the business owner, you are the business, and one's identity can be shaken to the core when a transition happens.

Second is the issue of loss of control. Even though departing owners know things will change, as the new ownership implements new processes, introduces new products and services, and invariably changes the culture and imagery, those changes will occasionally feel as affronts and insults to the original owners, who are now powerless to respond.

Finally, the ex-owner will awake one morning and have nowhere to go, no one to consult, no questions to respond to and no advice to deliver. Habits, developed over decades of repetition, are instantly unnecessary.

Fortunately, we have [Ecclesiastes 2:18-21](#) to lean on for advice.

"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19 And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. 21 For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune."

Ecclesiastes is a great study. King Solomon tells us that human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But, he discovers that owning things and consuming

things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. He (we) learn that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

Our trust and comfort, as in all things, but especially in passing our leadership responsibilities for a business, is only found in the Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you identified your successor? If not, at what point in your career will it be time to take this action?

2. Is it possible for someone else to replace you, or do you feel your skills, talents and leadership are irreplaceable? If they are irreplaceable, how will your business role be fulfilled upon retirement, disability or death? (e.g., filled by several people, new job description, etc.)

3. Are you prepared to see everything your leadership brought to the business change? What things can they change that you will be unaffected by, and what things, if changed, will be painful?
