



# The Need for Succession Planning

BY LUANNE THORNDYKE, MD, AND R. KEVIN GRIGSBY, DSW

The complexities of academic medical centers (AMCs) demand good leadership. Hopefully, AMCs recognize good leaders for their contributions to the organization. In spite of whether a person has been a good leader or has not, every leader is subject to his or her own mortality—be it physical or professional. Changes in leadership are inevitable. Organizations—and leaders—are usually in a reactive position to transitions in leadership each time a leadership vacancy occurs or a need for new leadership is identified. However, the choice to take a proactive approach offers advantages. Succession planning, a deliberate process designed to promote organizational stability during changes in leadership, is a useful tool that allows organizations to take a proactive approach to leadership transitions.

## What Is Succession Planning?

Succession planning is a rational and planned approach to maintaining a refreshed, renewed, and vital organization by promoting successful leadership transitions. Changes in leadership occur as a natural and inevitable part of organizational life. *Planned transitions* occur due to retire-

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ment of key leaders or career advancement of key leaders within or outside the organization. *Unexpected* departure of key leaders may occur with the diagnosis or progression of a serious illness, sudden death, termination of employment, rapid advancement elsewhere, or reassignment of duties to fill another leadership vacancy. Whether planned or unexpected, organizations should orient succession planning to both immediate and long-term leadership needs.

## Advantages of Succession Planning

Active planning for transitions offers several advantages to the organization. A forward-thinking, rational transition process allows an organization to promote or maintain continued effective organizational performance over

time. Succession planning offers an opportunity to develop the next generation of leaders and to retain the “knowledge assets” of the leader in the aftermath of his or her departure.

Everyone in a leadership position needs a succession plan. Succession planning allows an individual to plan for his or her own professional future, whether accepting a new role, moving to the next phase in a career, transitioning to another career, or returning to a previous role, e.g. a department chair returning to the teaching faculty.

## Why Is It a Difficult Topic?

Let's face facts: It's uncomfortable to think and talk about one's mortality. Most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about or planning for “the worst.” Of course, leadership transition isn't usually death in the literal sense, but it may represent a form of “professional” death. As such, asking others to plan for “the end” is likely to be unwelcome or misinterpreted unless one is careful to include a discussion of future options. Orientation to the future is critical, because such options may in fact lead to, or result in revitalization, renewal, and greater fulfillment.

Approaching succession planning with

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attention to psychological understanding and sensitivity to the topic is important. Individuals may react as if “death” is imminent. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified stages in the process of coming to terms with death. Although the leader may not be dying literally, the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance may be demonstrated in response to a professional “terminal prognosis.” Effective succession planning encourages the leader to consciously acknowledge a “life after” the leadership transition.

As a result, succession planning is a topic often neglected in many organizations. Without an effective plan for leadership transition, an organization may lose ground when the inevitable change in leadership occurs. Organizational stability and performance may be threatened by the leadership vacancy. New leadership may be assigned to unprepared personnel. If succession planning is an afterthought, the organization may experience a difficult “lesson learned” about the wisdom of planning for a stable and predictable future.

### Start Early

Succession planning should begin on the first day on the job. A good starting point is to conduct an organizational assessment. How does your organization plan for transitions in leadership? How do you plan for transitions in leadership when you are the leader? What are the desirable knowledge/skills/behaviors for a particular leadership position? Through assessing both the short-term and long-term need for leadership, one can begin to identify and develop key personnel over time. Evaluating and assessing current personnel as potential successors should be an ongoing process. On the other hand, the organization or individual should be prepared to look outside the organization if internal talent is unavailable.

Engaging in developing, coaching, and mentoring potential successors is a sound investment, with both short term rewards as well as long term pay-off. Through this process, potential successors can be offered the opportunity to demonstrate skills on an interim—and relatively safe—basis. Recognizing that future needs may require new or additional skills allows the organization and its leaders to be proactive in developing leadership skills in current leaders and potential successors. Embedding the

expectation for succession planning in the annual performance review process offers a mechanism to weave succession planning into the fabric of the organization.

### Enhancing the Process

Start by acknowledging the uncomfortable nature of planning for and implementing transitions. Explicitly identify competencies needed for the position. A changed behavioral repertoire can enhance the transition process. Even so, the topic may be unwelcome (“This is too morbid!”) or misinterpreted (“Does this mean I’m going to get fired?”).

Organizations can prepare their leaders to incorporate succession planning in their leadership portfolio by introducing the subject to the *leadership group*. Individuals are less likely to feel singled out or threatened when the topic is raised as a theoretical construct rather than as a request for response. It is important to acknowledge that the topic is uncomfortable and allow ample opportunity for frank discussion. Emphasizing the positive aspects of succession planning will



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help leaders to accept it as a strategy for “protecting investment” in the organization.

Leaders want to be seen as vital to the life and success of the organization. An unexpressed wish may be that “the whole place will fall apart when I am gone” and reinforces a sense of self-importance. Effective succession planning is difficult in this mindset. A better perspective on succession planning is to view it as a specific type of mentoring designed to “build a legacy” within the organization. Mentoring for succession provides for the retention of the “knowledge assets” of the leader and leaves a continuing imprint upon the organization. From this perspective, the leader can cultivate and perpetuate impact that will transcend the change of personnel.



**R. Kevin Grigsby:**  
“Succession planning offers an opportunity to develop the next generation of leaders.”

Organizations need to recognize and reinforce effective grooming and mentoring, particularly in the area of administrative leadership. In some organizations, an effort to develop and establish a culture of mentoring within the organization may be needed. Public, tangible support for the process of succession planning can be provided through transition workshops for new (and old) leaders. Discussion of succession planning is a necessary introduction to this often-neglected topic. Additional training may be needed to fill gaps in skill sets, including the art and skill of mentoring. Again, using the annual performance evaluation process presents an opportunity to introduce the concept of succession planning and offers a mechanism to incorporate succession planning as routine within the organization.

Transitions in leadership are inevitable. A proactive pursuit is better than reactive response. Organizations should establish an expectation of succession planning as a necessary part of planning for the future. Grooming a potential successor is a form of strategic mentoring, and investing one’s knowledge assets for the benefit of the organization. Ideally, leaders should start early but the point is that it is important to start. Leaders may need to learn new skills to maintain their effectiveness and to engage in this type of planning. The organization may need to look outside for new talent. Individually, succession planning is planning for the future. The topic is uncomfortable, but it can be woven into the fabric of the organization by making it an expectation for all leaders and cultivating the concept of building a leadership legacy. ❖

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