

Common Succession Planning Mistakes and How to Overcome Them.

There are numerous reasons why organizations should deploy a proactive succession planning process, yet many companies easily fall victim and make blunders along the way. Below are some of the most frequent mistakes I see companies make.

Common Mistakes:

1. Only Thinking About Succession Planning when a Leadership Role Needs to be Filled.

Many organizations fall into this trap because it is easy to do. Other priorities or the need to respond to unexpected activities often take precedence, causing succession planning to fall into the “nice-to-do” category when there is more time.

Taking this reactive posture puts an organization at risk because it can lead to making mistakes, and selecting the easy decision as opposed to the right, well thought-out, unbiased decision.

Companies that take a reactive approach to succession planning fail because they rush their decision-making process and, as a result, often overlook critical success factors.

How to Overcome:

Make succession planning an essential activity. Dedicate time for substantive succession planning activities. You can do this by establishing pre-determined times to dedicate to meaningful discussions regarding who and how to prepare your talent for future roles.

2. Not Aligning your Succession Planning process to your Organization’s long-term Strategy.

Companies often launch succession planning before identifying the critical skills necessary to be successful in each key role and help the organization achieve its long-term strategy. Simply trying to look across the organization to identify talent without first identifying the critical skills necessary to achieve the organization’s strategy will be a costly mistake that will ultimately fail. Without aligning the organization’s succession planning process to the organization’s strategy and the critical skills necessary, succession planning will simply become all about steps and not about helping the organization achieve its strategic goals.

How to Overcome:



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View succession planning as a subset of your organization's larger strategic plan. It is important to think about the organization's strategy in terms of how the key role will impact an organization's ability to achieve its strategy and what skills are critical to do so. The company's future strategy should be guiding which individuals to develop and prepare for larger roles. Even if your organization has already launched a succession planning process, you should still initiate this important step to identify the critical skills required to be successful and create value in those key roles and for the larger organization.

3. Anecdotally Selecting potential Successors instead of Leveraging a thoughtful Succession Planning Process.

The process of identifying successors is often influenced by a leader's perception and unconscious bias. Companies easily can make the mistake of selecting potential successors based on "gut" or "instinct," ignoring a thoughtful, consistent process that relies on data. Companies run the risk of selecting people who may not be ready to step into a larger role and/or their skill sets are not appropriately aligned to what is actually needed to be successful.

Everyone finds comfort in what is familiar, as such it is natural to have biases. This temptation to give greater weight to factors such as familiar backgrounds or anecdotal comments over data regarding a potential successor's ability and potential to demonstrate critical skills is putting the company's long-term success in jeopardy. Not having a formal, clear process, and objective criteria for assessing and selecting potential successors for key roles, creates an environment where bias can grow easily.

How to Overcome:

Ensure you use a thoughtful succession process that leverages an objective evaluation to assess potential successors. Such a process needs to include an objective evaluation of potential successors' ability to demonstrate the critical skills necessary to succeed in the key role. By planning ahead and building your bench based on a consistent and objective approach, the successor selected is the one with the critical skills best suited to be successful in the role.

4. Making Assumptions about Potential Successors.

A common mistake made in succession planning is making various assumptions about talent. Dangerous assumptions include: assuming the individual wants to assume a larger role; assuming the individual will perform just as well in new role as old role; and/or willingness to move to another geographic area, etc.

How to Overcome:



People's circumstances and goals may change over time. Continued success is not always a guarantee. Therefore, leveraging consistent criteria to evaluate a potential's successor's potential and ability to demonstrate critical skills needs to be the foundation.

Avoid assuming top employees will naturally step into a larger role. Ensure you hold conversations with employees to understand their career goals and desires before designating them as a successor. Holding candid conversations with the possible successors will ensure they feel supported, and resources are invested wisely.

5. Not Having an Emergency Plan or only Identifying One Successor per Position.

A common mistake companies make is relying on or limiting possible successors to just one individual. This is a risky bet and organizations often find themselves caught off guard when staff in critical roles depart the organization unexpectedly. Whether it is an unexpected departure, an event, or an incorrect assumption about a possible successor who is no longer able to step into a designated role, not having multiple options when an unforeseen circumstance happens, puts the company's strategic priorities at risk.

How to Overcome:

Rarely do departures go as expected. Take a proactive approach and identify two to three possible successors. It is also important to identify two possible emergency successors to temporarily step into the role until a selection is made. This proactive approach will enable you to make adjustments as needed, but also allow you to be prepared when unexpected changes outside of your control happen.

In summary, even if you have fallen into one or more of these traps, it is not too late to change course. Start today and take a more proactive approach to succession planning.

How First+Third Can Help Your Organization:

First+Third Consulting partners with organizations to enhance their succession planning processes to ensure the organization is prepared and ready to be successful in the future. Contact us today to learn more.

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