

Succeeding at Succession Planning: Pipeline Management

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

The winter months annually present many government managers with the challenges of not just low temperatures and hazardous driving conditions, but something even more threatening: a spike in retirements. Whether it is the result of shrewd planning to postpone income tax bills for 14 months or simply because the end of the calendar year is a natural time to embrace transitions, retirements often hit a cyclical peak in the winter.



For the manager of the new retiree, the season triggers the need to organize retirement parties and the need to think through what to do about the newly vacant position. In a tough fiscal climate, the now vacant position may simply be abolished. Alternatively, with a sigh of budgetary relief, it may be consciously left vacant for a number of months so the unused salary dollars can be spent on other priorities. Ideally, you will be able to fill the position.

Why Succession Planning?

For mission-critical positions or supervisory positions it is typically desirable to fill the slot as soon as possible after it becomes open. All too often the retirement, even if it was expected (which is not always the case), creates stress and anxiety for the affected manager. The typical refrain runs something like, “Who in the world am I going to find to fill that job?”

High-achieving and experienced employees are never easy to replace. However, a manager can take steps far in advance of a retirement or other departure from the agency to create

viable options. Succession planning is the process of identifying and developing current staff so that they are prepared to fill more senior positions in the organization when vacancies arise.

Succession planning is a long-established and carefully managed process in larger private sector firms. Managers may be identified years in advance as potential candidates for succeeding to particular executive positions. They attend formal training courses and are often given selected developmental positions over time to prepare them for the targeted position. It becomes generally known inside the company that a particular individual is being groomed for a key position.

Government is Different

Succession planning in government is usually more of a challenge. Most governments have some variation on a civil service system designed to protect and project merit system principles. These principles are intended to promote fairness and equity in government employment. The notion is that every qualified individual has a right to apply for any government position, and should receive fair consideration for that appointment. Pre-selection—knowing in advance who you want to hire for a particular government position—is, at best, frowned upon, and at worst constitutes a violation of applicable laws and regulations.

Nonetheless, there are meaningful steps one can undertake in government to accomplish succession planning and still be consistent with merit system principles. First, realize that succession planning is not really necessary for most government positions. Most jobs can be filled relatively easily because they neither require specialized experience nor involve an unusual degree of responsibility. For these positions, there are

predictably plenty of qualified applicants. Succession planning really is only appropriate for mission critical occupations and managerial roles. Even for mission critical occupations succession planning can be limited to the particular jobs where experience has shown that qualified applicants are difficult to find.

Second, start succession planning with demographic analysis. Take a look at the profiles of the current incumbents of the positions for which you anticipate succession planning. When are they expected to retire, or if experience suggests that a particular position tends to turn over on average every few years as incumbents change jobs, when do you predict the next vacancy will occur?

Don't Plan for Yesterday's Skills

The third step is to take a close look at the targeted position. Assess what knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies the next incumbent will need in that job. Do not look for someone just like the current incumbent without first reflecting on how the job requirements may be changing over the next several years. The person who is a perfect fit in a given position today may not be a good fit for how that position will have evolved in five years. Even if the job is predicted not to change at all, there may be advantages to the organization from shaking things up a bit. For instance, if the current incumbent is very quantitative in their approach, the agency may be better off if the next incumbent's strength is in qualitative analysis. The change may encourage the agency to develop valuable capabilities that had languished under the outgoing incumbent. Perhaps the plan is to automate manual processes. In that case, it would be good to have someone succeeding to the leadership role in the

organization that has some skills in technology.

Once one can predict when a critical position may become vacant and has a good sense of the professional capabilities that will be needed of the next individual who holds that position, you are ready for the next step. Focus on the more junior people in the workforce—the pool of possible successors one or two levels below the incumbent. Create a list of the high-achievers. Include people who have won awards or received high performance ratings from their supervisors for their performance in their current jobs. However, don't confuse excellent performance in the current position with guaranteed ability to perform at a more senior level. The next job up on the organization chart may require a somewhat different set of skills. The classic mistake is making the best computer programmer on your IT staff a supervisor just because of their superior technical skills. Without first understanding the would-be supervisor's leadership potential, you may be setting up your technical expert for failure—and the organization for major morale problems.

Instead, once you have identified your more junior superstars, look more closely within that group. Who shows signs of being able to develop skills or competencies that you know will be needed at the next level, based on the analysis you have completed? Have they had an opportunity, or created an opportunity for themselves to showcase their creativity or leadership skills? Sometimes the traits you are looking for will manifest themselves outside of the context of the person's day job. Did they lead the annual Toys for Tots drive at Christmas, and significantly surpass all previous years' records for donations? Did they take your office's chronically lackluster softball team and lead it to its first winning season in years? Were they the driving force organizing their peers to address some sort of special project in the office environment? Ironically, specific job knowledge is less important as a screening tool. If a person has the right attitude, a basic aptitude and the necessary native intelligence, most necessary knowledge can be acquired through formal or informal training.

Formal Training or Informal Nurturing

At this point you should have identified a cohort of high-potential individuals. You now have several alternative paths from which to choose.

If it is clear that the group as a whole needs some developmental opportunity or training to succeed at the next level, then the organization can establish a formal leadership development or training program to help fill those competency gaps. Encourage those in your previously identified cohort to apply for the program. However, make the application process available to all interested parties. You don't want to exclude from consideration anyone who thinks they have something to offer the future of your agency. Convene a selection panel to evaluate the applications. Populate the panel with human resources staff and people currently occupying the role or roles you hope your trainees may eventually fill. A word of caution: it is both an inefficient use of the agency's resources and unfair to the employees themselves to admit many more people into the training program than there are likely to be positions to fill.

While you want to ensure a reasonable amount of competition for important jobs, you do not want to create a situation where the majority of your trainees are disappointed because they never actually achieve a position for which they have ostensibly been trained. That will only lead to employee disengagement and ultimately the attrition of some of your better talent.

Alternatively, you can work informally with the current supervisors of those in your cohort to create Individual Development Plans (IDPs), ideally with a multiple-year planning horizon. An effective IDP essentially lays out future experiences that will facilitate a career path for the employee. IDPs can be useful tools when the employee's supervisor is genuinely interested in helping staff develop professionally. However, the application of this tool can be haphazard when you are trying to apply it consistently to individual members of a cohort. There are too many variables that are

difficult to control, including the degree of cooperation from the supervisor and the availability of training funds across organizational subcomponents to implement the IDP. If you want to confidently achieve consistency in the quality and quantity of training and other developmental experiences, a formal training program is preferable.

With a little bit of luck, using this approach you will have successfully:

- Predicted what high priority positions you will need to fill in the next several years.
- Validated what *future* knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies will be needed by the next incumbents in those positions for them to be successful.
- Identified a cohort of promising candidates who you would like to see apply for those positions based on their current track record and your insight into their nascent capabilities.
- Put in motion a formal or informal developmental plan for members of that cohort, and other high potential candidates, so they are well-positioned to be highly competitive applicants for the high priority positions when they do become open.

Congratulations! You have done a great job of succession planning!

Scott Cameron, IPMA-CP, is senior vice president at R3 Government Solutions, where he leads the human capital consulting practice. Until March 2006 he was chief human capital officer at the U.S. Department of the Interior, with 70,000 employees at 2,400 locations across the country. He can be reached at scameron@r3consulting.com.

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