Succession Planning

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Abstract

Succession planning is the process of successfully backing up operations in case of short or long-term employee absences. Typically associated with upper management positions, this concept can also apply to most other vacant positions in the workplace.   The application of this concept necessitates the coordination of planning between both managers and employees, taking into consideration the operations within the unit and the potential impacts for non-performance of these operations, both within and outside the unit. Outlined within this column are points for consideration with suggested solutions for carrying out a successful succession plan.

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In the business world, "succession planning" is often limited to planning for replacement of upper-level management positions. However, this concept is applicable to any level of the workforce – otherwise seen as a backup plan for any individual vacant position. Managers must consider how to carry out essential operations when vacancies occur – the primary emphasis being on *essential*. Managers can begin with the basic question "What would you do if a particular staff member didn't come to work tomorrow or ever again?"

Managers must first know the job responsibilities of his/her employees in order to effectively plan for carrying out operations in their absence. Yearly evaluation periods can be a time to formalize and update job descriptions as part of this process. Other individual meetings/reports throughout the year can also keep the manager abreast of job performance duties. Once managers know the job duties, they can prioritize operations within a particular position, as well as compare how those operations interconnect to other individuals within the unit and overall departmental operations. This gives the manager a picture of how and individual's absence affects the unit.

Succession planning does not have to mean the permanent departure of an individual. Managers need to consider individual backup plans for short to long-term absences as well as permanent leaves. Both short and long-term absences can be either planned or unplanned. Examples of these different types of absences are as follows:

- Short-term planned (vacations)

- Short-term unplanned (sickness)

- Long-term planned (sabbaticals, retirement, layoffs, reorganization)

- Long-term unplanned (sudden death, extended accident recovery)

- Short or long-term planned/unplanned (medical leaves, new job/transfers)

The manager needs to consider the job duty coverage during the types of absences above. Short vs. long-term can vary by individual and type of activity. Normally, as one moves up the administrative ladder, job responsibilities become more long term, although this is not always true (who approves time cards if a supervisor is on vacation?). The manager can place "notes" within an individual employee's file to indicate coverage for particular tasks during the interim, and refer to those notes when absences occur. These "notes" can take a variety of forms. The author keeps paper copies of tasks in employee files that outline major tasks/operations that need to be performed if an employee vacates a position. The manager does not have to create this process alone. Often the person most knowledgeable on how to cover those duties is the employee. This discussion can be a part of the performance evaluation process. For example, asking the employee this question can offer significant insight: "If you are out of the office for xxxx period of time, how essential is xxxx duty, or how/who could carry it out?" If it is essential and there is no current backup plan, creation of a contingency plan is possible. Consideration of this question by individuals prior to their evaluation would help them be prepared with an answer. The manager could ask employees to consider this question within their primary areas of responsibility. The employees could also ask themselves:

- If I'm gone (for short or long term periods), what needs to be done?

- What can wait?

- For how long?

- Who is my backup now?

- Who potentially could be my backup?

This could also be a good opportunity to document procedures so that they can be available as backup. For example, if a particular technical procedure specific to the employee needs to be

performed in his or her absence, a video could be made of the procedure for future reference. In the author's case, an employee made a video of the patron load procedure, which can be viewed later as necessary and can be used as a training tool.

Successful succession planning involves not only the manager and the employee, but also cooperation within the unit. This requires "buy-in" from others in the unit to cooperate as backups through participation in mentoring, cross-training, and contingency planning. Mentoring and cross-training would provide individualized training between individuals. Simultaneously it would provide other benefits, including closer working relationships and the understanding of another's job duties. Cross-training can also be formalized (classes, written routines) or non-formalized (ad-hoc, group meeting, presentation, etc.). The method varies depending on the individual and subject matter.

For the purposes of this column, succession planning is viewed in a broad sense – providing procedures to whomever "succeeds" an individual in a particular position. Documented procedures can be used for training a person being promoted or new to the position (the common application of succession planning) or filling in on a temporary basis (more commonly viewed as contingency planning). Reference to the documented procedures can be used in either case. As an example, the author currently has a vacant Systems Librarian position. The author and the Systems Librarian met together to finalize duties and document procedures prior to his departure for use by the next person filling the position. However, given the current budget situation it is unclear whether this position will be filled. The discussion is still pending on how duties will be covered in the interim – fill the position temporarily (in-house/external?), divide the duties to current personnel (which duties and to whom?) or "triage" all of the duties and reassign only the most critical (temporarily/permanently?). In any case,

it is helpful to have the Systems Librarian job duties well documented to ease the reassignment of those duties as needed.

The manager may also need to consider communication with others outside the unit regarding succession planning. If specific expertise for coverage is not available within the unit, contact with someone outside the unit may be necessary to cover operations. For example if a specific expertise for a technical operation were not available within the unit, contact would be necessary with someone in the information technology unit (either within or outside the library). The manager also needs to consider the impacts of changes in operations and their effects on other units. If particular operations are delayed or halted, other units affected need information in order to minimize negative relations.

In summary, succession planning involves preparation for the continuance of operations in both the short and long terms by individuals. This planning includes both the manager and employee working together by reviewing job responsibilities and their impact on unit operations. Implementation of this process includes a variety of methods, including cross training, mentoring, workshops, written procedures and performance reviews. An effective succession plan assures smoother operations when expected or unexpected vacancies occur.