

# Succession planning for our next-generation leaders

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*“Success without a successor is failure.” – Hans Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make**

Much has been written about succession planning and many organizations are being proactive at setting up programs that will help identify the next generation of organizational leaders. The May issue of the *APWA Reporter* had a very good article from the City of Tempe on their succession planning program.

I received a wake-up call about what succession planning really means about two months ago. When we take on a new job, we think this is the job I will retire in and you think in terms of 10 or 20 years. So, what’s the hurry? Why all this interest in succession planning? After all, I’m not leaving for 10 years or more. The reality is circumstances can change in the blink of an eye. Someone can get injured. Family considerations may require a move. You may get promoted within your organization or to a new organization. In my case it was a diagnosis of a rare form of cancer that woke me up to the fact that I may not be here for another 10 years, or at least I may have to relocate to get the care I need.

If you are just now thinking about succession planning, you are already behind the curve. How do I get caught up? What steps do I need to take to begin the process to have competent people in the pipeline of succession in my organization? Here are the steps I recommend:

1. Recruit and hire good people
2. Train your people well
3. Develop leaders
4. Mentor the leaders you develop

If you follow these steps, you will be creating the next generation of leaders and you can be confident that when you hang up your cleats, someone is waiting in the wings ready to put them on and lace them up. Let’s go into more detail on each one of these steps:

**1. Recruit and hire good people.** We’re not just talking hiring good people; we’re talking the *right* people. It’s the “First Who, Then What” philosophy from Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, where he says you need to get the right people on the bus and once you have the right people in place, figure out the best path to greatness. I made this the first step in the process, because it is the most important. If you don’t hire the right people, steps 2, 3, and

4 will be meaningless. How do you hire the right people? Look beyond the job description for the position and ask questions that reveal their potential to handle the position above them. You might ask, why should I test for a supervisor when all I need is a laborer? The real question is, where do you plan to find the next supervisor when they leave? Is it your policy to promote from within, or do you always find your leadership talent from outside the organization? If you make a conscious choice to look from within the organization, then you can move on to steps 2, 3, and 4. Also, your human resources staff can be helpful at setting up interviews that bring out the leadership potential in your candidates.

**2. Train your people well.** Training begins the day the new employee shows up for work. Do you have a new employee orientation program? Do you have someone from your department assigned as the new employee point of contact, so they have someone they can go to when they have questions about department procedures? Taking care of the little things can go a long way toward paving the way for someone to make your organization a career, not just a job. Training doesn’t stop at orientation. The only way we stay competitive and the only difference between your city and the one next to you is your people. If you keep them current with the technology of your business, whether it is street maintenance, urban forestry, wastewater, solid waste, etc., then you will have an employee who is growing and not just marking time. As John Wooden says, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

**3. Develop leaders.** This is the step that really identifies and cultivates your next-generation leaders. If you are in a position of leadership now, you already know who your “go-to” people are. These are your future leaders. There is nothing wrong with identifying them now, determining their interest in positions of leadership, and providing the training they need to develop their skills. John Maxwell was once asked if leaders were born. Of course jokingly, his answer was yes, we are all born. The point is that leaders can be developed. For me there is nothing more rewarding in my work life than seeing someone rise in the organization because someone recognized their raw talent and gave them the opportunity to develop it. The City of Gillette, Wyoming is entering the second year of its Leadership Development Program. We graduated 12 people from the initial program. During their second year, they will be taking classes through

the City, the local college, and other training organizations such as the Franklin/Covey organization. Each of our leadership graduates identified areas of growth that they want to pursue. This brings up an important point and something I've been pondering since reading Marcus Buckingham's book, *Now Discover Your Strengths*. On the front flap of the book, he states:

*"Unfortunately, most of us have little sense of our talents and strengths, much less the ability to build our lives around them. Instead, guided by our parents, by our teachers, by our managers, and by psychology's fascination with pathology, we become experts in our weaknesses and spend our lives trying to repair these flaws, while our strengths lie dormant and neglected."*

My caution here is that we don't spend all our training dollars trying to fix the weaknesses of our future leaders. Spend your dollars wisely by magnifying their strengths, because that is what you recognized in them to begin with and you want them to be even stronger in these areas.

Also, don't just invest your time on the go-to employees, the high-potential group of employees who will be your future leaders. You need to develop a strong bench as well. There is a group of solid performers in your organization who have critical skills who have the potential to step in and carry the torch when needed. As Yogi Berra says, "We have deep depth. Any successful organization or team needs depth... guys you can count on."



**City of Gillette Leadership Program graduates receiving recognition from City Council**



**Leadership Program graduation dinner**

I purposely placed these photos here because you want to publicize your efforts to develop leaders to the maximum extent possible. Why? Because people do what people see. If employees in your organization see that the City holds leadership development programs in high regard, they will want to be a part of it too. If they see that the path to promotion is full of graduates of these programs, they will put two and two together and recognize that there

is value to be gained from investing time in these developmental efforts. As a bonus, when you recognize people by springing for a dinner on the City or having them come to a City Council meeting, it helps reinforce to the participants that they have accomplished something special.

**4. Mentor the leaders you develop.** After the training is done, what next? We often leave it there and don't do the follow-up necessary to keep the spark alive in those we've trained. Mentors can make a difference. If you ask leaders in your organization if they can name someone who made a difference in their professional life, most of them can name at least one person. What makes a good mentor? According to Stanley & Clinton in their book, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life*, people who influence the next generation of leaders have these common characteristics:

- The ability to readily see potential in a person
- Tolerance of mistakes, brashness, abrasiveness, and the like in order to see that potential develop
- Flexibility in responding to people in circumstances
- Patience: knowing that time and experience are needed for development

*(continued on p. 16)*

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- Perspective: having vision and ability to see down the road, and to suggest the next steps a mentoree needs to take
- Gifts and abilities that build up and encourage others

APWA has a unique program that you can participate in as a mentor at Congress in September. It is called the Emerging Public Works Leaders Program. Mentors are experienced public works professionals who will encourage career development, provide networking training, and help first-timers get the most benefit from the APWA Congress and Exposition. There are special sessions set up for attendees and their mentors. By participating, you can have a direct impact on the next-generation leaders of APWA. If you have the desire to be a mentor or for more information on this program, contact Ann Daniels at [adaniels@apwa.net](mailto:adaniels@apwa.net).

You don't need to have cancer like me to get the succession planning wake-up call. All you need is to have one key person leave your organization to realize whether you've done a good job or not of planning for the future. From the very first day on the job, we need to remember that one day we will have to pass the torch to our successor. As Hans Finzel sums it up: "How we pass that torch just might be the ultimate measure of our leadership success."

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## LEADERSHIP







Lyle Schaller says: Of all the leadership transition mistakes, two occur most frequently:

- Leaders tend to stay too long in a position rather than not long enough.
- Leaders who stay too long do much more damage than those who don't stay long enough.

Hans Finzel says in his book *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*:

- Pride tightens the grip on leadership; humility relaxes and lets it go.
- Finishing well is an important measure of success in leadership.
- Letting go of leadership is like sending your children away to college: It hurts, but it has to be done.
- Mentoring is a nonnegotiable function of successful leadership.



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