



Move Over and Make Room

5 Principles of Succession Planning that Acknowledges Generational Diversity

By Joanne L. Smikle

There are so many generations in today's workforce that it's almost dizzying for managers looking for ways to capitalize on the talent available while planning for future staffing. The blending of Millennial's, Gen X's, Gen Y's, Baby Boomers and those of us born on the cusp of any of these groupings calls for a level of management expertise with which many are just not equipped. This article provides tools for both blending generations and creating workplaces that integrate the very best of each generation while skillfully planning for the passing of the baton. The transition is made less difficult by building a pipeline filled with talented people. This article also provides pointers for creating the pipeline required for skillful succession planning.

The title is quite intentional. It is essential that managers create purposeful movement. While older employees are often thought to be the repositories of valuable knowledge and history, they may forget how important it is to focus on the future. Hence the need to move over and make room for the next generations responsible for the agency long after retirement dreams have been realized by today's seasoned, senior employees. But moving over and making room does not flow in one direction. In fact, youthful up and comers are well-served by moving over and making room for the learning that can come from working with those who have had real-world experience navigating organizational politics, problems and processes. It is the mutual movement that allows for smart succession planning that respects age diversity to begin.

Five Principles of Moving Over and Making Room

There are five principles that underlie the contention that moving over and making room is essential to smart succession planning. The next few paragraphs explore each of those principles.

1. Movement is inevitable. Whether we like the changes that come along with having so many different values and views in the workplace, the changes are inevitable. While one generation may value high tech solutions and the other be more prone to high touch interactions, both have to move towards the middle and blend preferences for the enterprise to flourish and be strong in the future.

2. Making room begins above the neck. A mindset that allows one to believe there is room enough for multiple generations and their diverse contributions is essential. Managers are responsible for cultivating this mindset by intentionally creating opportunities for multigenerational partnerships on key projects. These partnerships create new pathways for learning that allow the organization to consciously grow its next level of leadership. These future leaders benefit from having ongoing exposure to the knowledge possessed by more tenured employees.

3. Movement creates discomfort. By asking people to become full partners, regardless of their age and stage, managers are possibly creating a level of uneasiness and anxiety. The tenured may fear the hard-charging approach brought on by aggressive up and comers. By the same

token, the less experienced may be intimidated by the confidence and competence possessed by well-established professionals. In both cases there is discomfort that has to be acknowledged and addressed. The reality of the situation is that it behooves both constituencies to experience the discomfort, learn from it and find ways to alleviate it for others in similar situations.

4. Making room follows the laws of nature. Nothing in nature is eternal. Seasons change. Societies emerge, evolve and end...remember the Roman Empire, the reign of the Pharaohs and other lessons from more recent history. Much as we hate to admit it, people naturally age and eventually decline. It is vital that organizations be strategic in planning for the inevitable. There will be retirements, deaths, illnesses and other openings created by the natural aging process. It is essential that the organization have a well-developed plan to fill these sometimes unforeseeable, unavoidable vacancies. The succession plan represents a pipeline that keeps the organization moving as it naturally evolves.

5. Denial does not halt movement. It is unfortunate that many tenured employees, in management and staff ranks, deny the inevitable. There is a pretense of being as sharp as ever in spite of advancing age. There is a fantasy of being able to contribute fully until the very end of time. Organizations buy into these self-serving myths and fail to begin filling the pipeline for key positions. The sun rises and it also sets; denying that very natural fact does not stop the process. People in your organization also have sunrises and sunsets. Rather than pretending that they will be with you forever, face the denial and collaboratively craft a plan that protects that entire organization.

Building a Viable Pipeline

Each of these five principles represents an important step in building a pipeline of well-qualified, committed, competent employees able to move your organization into the future. Your pipelines should have multiple people able to fulfill key roles. It is not sufficient to follow the model of either having an heir apparent or no one at all. Instead, focus on grooming multiple people able to function well in different roles. This is contrary to the longevity-based model of filling positions. Longevity is often not the most valuable criteria for succession. Consider focusing on competencies, character and genuine commitment to the larger profession.

When beginning to consider approaches beyond longevity for filling your pipeline, seek out employees who have quietly been the sources of positive change. There are always unsung heroes living quietly in the shadows. According to Pascale and Sternin (2005), there are people in organizations who are already doing things in a radically better way. These people are the talent pool that deserves serious consideration. Reaching these unsung heroes

requires a collaborative approach to talent search that will utilize the insights of many different stakeholders throughout the organization. Rather than having a select few senior executives tackling the succession planning issues, build a diverse team drawn from multiple functions, representing a wide range of ages and stages. This is how you will be best able to locate the hidden gems.

While it will be tempting to fill your pipeline with technically superior employees, do not fall into that trap. Cultivate staff with a bigger vision and broader understanding of the enterprise, its stakeholders and critical issues. Employees who focus too singularly on operations or technical issues often lack the capacity to see possibilities on the horizon. They may also lack the capacity to break down silos for the good of the organization. Pipelines should have employees who demonstrate vigilance about the broad panorama of issues impacting the entire enterprise.

As you begin to fill your pipeline explore potential employees who demonstrate a high degree of commitment to both the organization and the larger profession. For example, a social worker who identifies with her profession by being active in associations or schools that foster the advancement of that profession will bring a higher level of appreciation for the unique issues faced by her colleagues. This is different from an employee who only has commitment to a single executive or the company. They may be myopic and may lack an understanding of the issues impacting the larger profession. The involved, active social worker will, most likely, be able to advocate for a profession not just your organization. She will be able to understand organizational issues, trends and concerns that may have far-reaching impact.

Summary

Approach succession planning with an honest look at generational diversity requires clarity about the fact that nothing stays the same in organizational life. Moving over and making room acknowledges the fact that there are multiple generations vying for positions. These disparate generations bring a range of approaches that may, or may not, coalesce. Wise leaders understand how important it is to cultivate talent, build collaboration and create a path for smooth transitions. They further understand how critical it is to have pipelines, not just an heir and a spare.

¹ Adapted from "Your Company's Secret Change Agents," by Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin, Harvard Business Review, May 2005.



Joanne L. Smikle provides consulting and leadership education to organizations across the country. She can be reached at joanne@smiklespeaks.com.