

Case Study

Succession Planning

Preparing Top Talent for Senior Leader Positions in the Public School System

A key issue for many school districts is the impending retirement of baby boomers. Many school districts find themselves losing key leaders without adequate successors for replacement. One school district in Florida faced the challenge head on. The board defined Succession Planning as strategic goal for 2007-10. This quality minded school district wanted to implement best practices for organizational performance excellence and applied for the Florida Sterling Award. This award is similar to the Malcolm Baldrige, requiring applicants to identify best practices in Leadership, Strategic Planning, Customer and Market Focus, Information and Analysis, Human Resource Focus, Process Management, and Business Results. They actually won The Sterling Award, the state's most prestigious award for performance excellence for education, in 2007.

When 27 senior leaders retired in a two-year timeframe, the school district realized the need to develop a succession planning process for future senior leadership positions. In the past, they focused on developing Teachers and Assistant Principals. Some key administrators developed their own successors, but there was no formal development process in place for identifying successors across the district and developing them for key leadership positions.

The district's succession plan began nearly a year ago when the School Board hired a consulting firm that specializes in organizational development. The OD consultants meet with the client to determine the current succession planning and replacement process, to identify key positions in the pool, and to define the needs, challenges, and desired outcomes. The consultants suggested nominating a group of senior leaders to a Guiding Coalition. The Guiding Coalition's role is to provide feedback and support and to communicate the SP process throughout the organization once it's defined. Next, a Human Resources Task Force was organized to support the project and implement the plan. The Task Force established guidelines, roles, and responsibilities for developing and implementing the succession plan strategy.

Gathering Data

Data was needed to identify the current situation. 37 administrators, superintendents, principals, and union members were interviewed and asked how they gained experience throughout their career to advance to the next position. We asked them to describe the current leadership development process, what was working, what needed to change, what were the gaps, what were issues and challenges, and what recommendations and suggestions they had for leadership development.

To determine best practices in Succession Planning, the OD consultants conducted research. They benchmarked other school districts locally and nationally to determine other succession planning processes for senior leaders in public school districts. One school district in Illinois had received the Malcolm Baldrige Award but admitted they did not have the resources to develop a Succession Plan. Several research studies

conducted by CCL and the Executive Leadership Council identified Succession Planning best practices in leading organizations.

Results of Data Collection

The results of the interviews indicated that a formal plan was needed similar to the principalship program that already existed. Several issues emerged – a senior leadership competency model tied to senior leadership positions was needed. The principalship competency model defined by the state was used for all levels of leadership did not address the behaviors, skills and knowledge required at the senior level. The performance management process needed revising to include career planning and succession planning discussions, and to change the performance evaluation to include senior leader key job requirements and competencies. The compensation plan needed to be reviewed and modified to encourage participation in the succession planning program, a process for selecting replacements from the high potential pool when critical positions became open needed to be defined.

Interviewees indicated that many leadership positions are vacant due to lack of a replacement pool. Recruiting from the outside is difficult, and not always successful. Most senior leaders have years of experience dealing with the diverse culture of the district, new leaders can't always adapt quickly and turnover is high.

Interviewees provided many examples of existing leadership development processes that helped develop leaders in the past, and interviewees shared suggestions for future development opportunities.

The results of the feedback showed the need for formal Succession Planning Process focus was critical. Lack of a talent pipeline is an issue. From the Principal level up, there were few successors developed for senior leadership positions and few replacements available to fill senior leadership positions when they move.

Succession Planning Process

The Human Resource Task Committee and the Consultants developed a Strategic Plan Process that was implemented into the district. The first step was to launch the program. A communication plan was developed to announce the program and invite employees to apply.

139 employees were invited to informally apply for some of the district's most senior and highest paid positions. Forty principals and 21 district administrators, or roughly 44 percent of invited employees, asked to be considered for a spot on Brevard's senior staff. Over the next few months, district officials will put them on a training track to move up the ranks. Ten employees, including eight principals, formally turned down the offer. The 68 employees didn't respond.

Next, senior leaders were asked to complete a job profile to define the requirements of their jobs, experience, education and training requirements, and competencies needed to be successful in the job. Candidates completed a career profile to identify their current and previous job experience, education, and key leadership accomplishments.

From this information, individuals were rated on their performance potential and career profile and their readiness level for promotion was identified. Next a development plan was created. The plan indicates what development activities the high potential needs to reach their full potential. Activities such as training, project teams, committee meetings, mentoring, coaching, and conferences; on the job training opportunities prepare replacements for top leadership positions.

The key to succession planning is to start developing talent before there is a vacancy and create a pool of top talent. The process can be simple – define the requirements of the critical position, identify high potential development needs, involve managers in the development process, remove obstacles that stand in the way, create opportunities for developing a talent pool, use existing resources to provide development experiences, evaluate the outcomes, and providing organizational support to achieve the goals.

Future Trends

Currently the school district is grooming replacements for its top 15 leadership positions, more than half are at or nearing retirement age. The succession planning process appears to be the first of its kind among Florida's 67 school districts.

Eventually, the multi-year plan is expected to identify and prepare successors for more than 200 leadership positions, from cafeteria managers and childcare coordinators to ground supervisors and head custodians.

By identifying potential successors, creating development plans, providing mentoring and development opportunities and training future leaders, the district hopes to prepare for a potential loss of talent and loss of experience.

Although succession planning has been a common practice in the corporate arena, it has been less prevalent among government entities like school districts, which have neither the time nor resources to invest in the process. There is a growing concern in other school districts. It's a topic they need to address as baby boomers mature and begin to retire in the next five to 10 years.

Most School Districts can't afford to create and implement a succession plan, which requires extensive staff training. However, School Districts need to develop their leadership talent to ensure success for the future. Talent is a competitive advantage needed to grow your business. Committing to talent management as a critical strategy is the first step. If you aren't prepared, other school districts are already planning to steal your top talent! Can you afford to wait?

About the Author:

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