

Career Compass No. 109: Succession Planning—Nine Classic Mistakes to Avoid

Are you encountering various talent challenges and aiming to enhance the development of your successors? Here are some recommended solutions and modern tools.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Aug 27, 2024 | Article



I am the HR director of a medium-sized suburban city in the northwest. Ever since the pandemic, we have experienced a lot of staff churn and lost a significant amount of talent. In trying to replace staff, we have been mostly unsuccessful in attracting talented professionals and managers from other local governments. The city manager and executive team have finally recognized that we have to grow our own talent.

The city manager charged me with drafting a succession plan that we have started to develop with department heads. Given all the urgent matters and demands, developing and implementing a succession plan has been difficult with lots of starts and stops with some departments actively participating and some not.

In the current year, we have raised salaries and benefits to market and we significantly increased budgeted monies for conferences and training workshops; however, we seem to have made a number of missteps, undercutting any progress. For example, department directors have complained that the forms are too complicated and take too much time to complete. Some employees have complained that they have been ignored and not fully considered for development and advancement, and only the favored few have received attention.

How can we improve the involvement of department heads in the succession planning process? How can we simplify this task? What missteps have other agencies encountered that we might avoid as we move forward?

Response

Given the big need to retain and develop staff, succession planning is a key business imperative for all local government agencies. The good news is that your city manager and executive team are trying to address your talent challenges.

While private sector corporations have long been involved in succession planning, local governments have not typically engaged in structured and longer-term efforts to develop their bench. We in local government have only recently realized that succession planning is critical to our long-term viability and organizational success. And as we have initiated these leadership development efforts, we have stumbled along and made some classic mistakes.

Allow me to highlight:

- Classic mistakes and better approaches for succession planning.
- A suite of new talent development tools to help you better develop your successors.

A Bias Concerning Terminology

This journey to grow and strengthen our bench should not be called “succession planning.” It is not about “planning” and filling out organizational depth charts and identifying mission-critical positions and individual employees who may be ready or almost ready to fill those key positions once incumbents retire or resign.

Rather, it is more about development. Therefore, I prefer to use the term “succession development.”

What Is Succession Development?

Succession development is a business strategy to identify and develop potential leaders. It aims to prepare a pool of individuals who can fill a variety of leadership roles when they become available.

Why Engage in Succession Development?

There are several reasons to engage in a structured succession development (SD) effort.

First, as you noted, local governments can no longer rely on stealing talent from other agencies. It is imperative to get talent ready to move up into more responsible professional and management roles in your own organization.

Second, we must recognize that talent is mobile. Because some staff have excellent technical and interpersonal skills and often the self-confidence to compete for other jobs in the marketplace, they can easily leave an organization. The literature calls these employees “free exiters.”

Therefore, one of the goals of SD is to create “organizational stickiness.” Learning and development become the social glue. As long as talented employees are learning and growing, they tend to stay with the organization. Once they stop learning and growing, they tend to leave.

Third, organizations win the war for talent on culture and an enriched employee experience. By growing your own talent, you demonstrate that learning and development are key aspects of your culture and that management cares about employees.

What Are the Classic Mistakes?

Mistake #1—Relying solely on compensation to win the war for talent

Local governments must pay competitively and provide good benefits if “free exiters” are not to leave. Unfortunately, top management and elected officials tend to overly focus on a “transactional” approach and increase compensation and benefits as the preferred solution to retain staff. Of course, employees at a minimum want competitive salary and benefits, but what they desire most is a “relational” approach that includes a more caring and supportive organization.

Organizations win the war for talent on culture, especially a culture of learning and development. Other key elements of an enriching culture include purpose, autonomy, a sense of belonging, and ongoing appreciation and recognition. (See [Career Compass #85 “To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance the Employee Experience.”](#))

A Suggested Approach

Yes, you must ensure that your agency provides competitive compensation. Then, quickly ascertain how you can enhance the organizational culture and develop and implement a plan to do so. (See [Career Compass #51 “Building a World-Class Culture”](#) and Peter Pirnejad and Frank Benest, “[Resetting Organizational Culture with the Power of Stay Interviews](#),” PM magazine, May 2024.)

Mistake #2—Focusing on position replacement

Many local governments as well as some private sector organizations adopt a “position replacement” mindset. They identify mission-critical positions (such as the finance director or public works director) and skilled and well-regarded employees who may be ready or almost ready to fill those positions when they may soon become vacant.

Position replacement is the wrong approach. The employees who have been anointed may leave before the position becomes vacant. More likely, they may not have all the leadership and communication competencies required for an executive position. This approach may also discourage others to accelerate their development.

A Suggested Approach

A better way is to create a “leader-full” organization (a wonderful phrase from Margaret Wheatley) that features leaders at all levels of the organization. Instead of identifying individuals to replace certain executives or other senior managers, you aim to create a pool of talent throughout the organization—leaders who are ready and able to move into a variety of critical positions when incumbents exit.

The private sector metric for a successful SD program is to groom and have available at least three qualified internal candidates for any important position that becomes available. (As a city manager, if I had one qualified internal candidate for any senior management position, I’d do a jig and buy drinks for everyone.)

Mistake #3—Putting all the attention on the known “stars”

Often in succession planning, agencies focus on the well-known “A” players in the organization. Yes, we have limited time, attention, and resources so it makes sense to focus on known stars or other identified high-potential employees. (The literature terms these employees “hi-pos.”)

Again, there are shortcomings with this approach. First, there are not enough “A” players for all the senior management or mission-critical positions. We must strive to identify “hidden stars” and encourage “B” players with high-potential to step up.

Second, most employees desire development opportunities. There will be backlash if you limit SD opportunities to a chosen few.

Third, we in local government have an ethical duty to promote equity in our HR practices. If we do not deliberately seek equity in hiring, developing, and promoting talent, we are behaving in an unethical manner and will be legitimately criticized.

Finally, we will fail to take advantage of diverse strengths, skills, ideas, and perspectives as we move forward. This limiting of vision and perspective will undercut our longer-term viability and success.

A Suggested Approach

My suggestion is that executive teams focus their attention and resources on high-potential (hi-po) employees and offer development opportunities to all. For instance, as a result of talent discussions at the executive level (see below for a template for talent discussions), you may encourage certain hi-pos to enroll in a leadership academy or accept a challenging stretch assignment. In addition, you may offer all employees a “lunch and learn” opportunity or a class on how to take charge of one’s career or a development conversation with their manager or coach.

Moreover, there are many rounds of talent assessment and development. The initial round of talent assessment and development by the executive team may be limited to a few. However, over a number of years, there are subsequent rounds involving more and more employees, thus enlarging the talent pool.

Again, it serves the agency to focus attention and resources on hi-pos but also offer development opportunities for anyone wishing to learn and grow and demonstrate their potential for leadership and advancement.

Mistake #4—Over-emphasizing classroom education and training

Most local governments overly rely on classroom education and training, sending high-potential staff to conferences, workshops, and seminars. The problem with classroom education is that it at best provides a theoretical or conceptual framework for new behavior. However, it does not change behavior or enhance skills unless the learner applies the information by doing something and then reflecting on the changed behavior.

A Suggested Approach

A better way to accelerate development is “learning by doing” coupled with helpful and candid feedback and coaching. Therefore, it is most valuable to provide emerging leaders with stretch assignments, team leadership opportunities, job rotations, and acting positions. Another way is to encourage and support an up-and-comer in taking on leadership positions in professional associations.

The ideal mix of development opportunities is 70% learning by doing, 20% coaching, and 10% classroom training.

To support their leadership development, managers can engage emerging leaders in development conversations and suggest that they consider a menu of development opportunities. (See below for “A Suite of New Talent Development Tools.”)

Mistake #5—Assessing only hard skills

Many local governments tend to assess and focus on the technical and analytic skills of candidates for advancement. For instance, to broaden technical skills and knowledge, the HR director might offer the manager of recruitment to serve on an interim basis as the class and compensation manager. If this is the general approach, it is fairly limiting.

The Cal-ICMA Talent Initiative conducted 11 focus groups of chief executives across the state of California and surveyed over 250 chief executives, HR directors, other senior managers, and emerging leaders. Based on this research, the top development need of emerging leaders was leadership and communication skills. (For the Cal-ICMA “Talent 2.0 Report,” go to www.calicma.org/talent-initiative.)

A Suggested Approach

A better approach is to incorporate into any development plan an opportunity to further learn leadership and people interaction and influence skills. As one example, the executive team may provide an emerging leader a multidepartment team leadership assignment, an acting position in their department or another department, or participation in a regional leadership development program such as a leadership academy.

Certainly, if there are some gaps in technical skills or knowledge, the executive team should support the hi-po in learning those hard skills or acquiring the knowledge. However, it is crucial for emerging leaders to enhance leadership and communication skills. In one study, 80% of manager failure was related to poor people skills. As one advances into management, it is the soft skills that produce the hard results.

Mistake #6—Paying too much attention to “readiness”

In executive team discussions about succession, we often assess whether the potential candidate for advancement is “ready,” “almost ready,” or “ready in 3-5 years.” We hope that more seasoning in their current position will get them ready for advancement into senior management.

There are several problems with over-relying on readiness. We cannot wait 3-5 years. We have talent shortages now. We must look to accelerate the development of emerging leaders and other hi-pos. In addition, the kind of experiences needed to further develop candidates for advancement won’t necessarily happen in performing their normal duties in their current position.

A Suggested Approach

Instead of assuming that candidates for more senior positions will learn all the necessary skills in their current positions, we should assess “potential,” especially learning agility.

Given the adaptive challenges facing local governments (i.e., climate change, homelessness, lack of affordable housing, the need to adopt new technologies), it is crucial that hi-pos are agile learners. Adaptive challenges have no right or wrong answers. Therefore, are candidates for senior

management willing to do some research, consider various options (none of which will satisfy all stakeholders), take a few steps forward, see what works and what does not, pivot, fix things up, and learn as they go? (See [Career Compass #94 “Ten Principles for Leading in Turbulence”](#))

So, several key questions for the executive team include:

- Does the candidate demonstrate a baseline of technical, analytical, and people skills?
- Has the candidate exhibited learning agility and the capacity to “figure it out”?
- If provided additional learning and growth opportunities, especially outside the normal course of their current position (such as stretch assignments, acting positions, the regional leadership academy), will the candidate likely accelerate their development and more quickly be able to advance?

Mistake #7—Offering only a limited targeted number of development opportunities

Some local governments have committed to growing their bench and have thus created a few targeted development programs, such as supervisory or management academies or a job rotation program. However, different employees have different needs. They may be at different places in their careers; some may have young children or elders to care for; others may have more time, energy, or desire to learn and grow than others.

Moreover, employees want choices. Choices and options empower people.

A Suggested Approach

Your agency might offer by itself or with other nearby agencies a leadership academy for up-and-comers identified by the executive team. In addition, it is important that the organization offers a menu of development opportunities, some delivered by your agency or on a regional level or through a university or a state-wide professional association. Some may be more costly for the agency and require a higher commitment by the participant (such as a certificate program) while other development activities (classes or lunch and learn sessions) may not.

Mistake #8—Letting departments hoard their talent

There is a strong tendency for departments to keep their talent in their department and, therefore, might resist development opportunities (i.e., job rotations, acting positions, stretch assignments) in other departments. However, departments do not “own” the talent; the organization does.

Another related tendency is for the department director to do all the assessment of their department hi-pos with little if any feedback from other department heads. For instance, the finance director might identify the assistant finance director for the finance director spot once she retires. The finance director should do the initial assessment and then, in the executive team discussion, all department directors need to provide feedback. The other department directors might chime in that the assistant finance director might have all the required technical skills but is difficult to work with, is a poor collaborator on cross-department issues, and exhibits an arrogant interpersonal style.

A Suggested Approach

While many people want to stay in their discipline or department (for example, it is unlikely that a sergeant in the police department will want to move to a leadership position in the community development department), there are people in positions that are better suited for moving to other departments. For example, a budget manager in the PD could move after some development to become the city-wide budget manager or budget director. Other examples would be management, financial or HR analysts; program managers of all kinds; executive assistants; or communication specialists.

So, how do we give hi-pos in one discipline or department learning and growth experiences in other departments, especially with an emphasis on developing their team leadership and communication skills? These cross-department opportunities can be explored during executive team talent discussions with everyone providing their views of the candidate's skills, competencies, and potential.

Mistake #9—Not training managers on how to conduct development conversations

Agencies might have a plan to promote SD and even offer a menu of development opportunities. However, all this effort will be for naught unless managers know how to conduct development conversations with their direct reports. (See below for “A Coaching Model for Managers.”)

A Suggested Approach

A key element of any SD effort is to train managers on how to conduct a development conversation and offer ongoing support for any career development activities on the part of their employees.

A development conversation is an informal discussion with an employee, colleague, or friend that provides an opportunity for the manager/coach to

- Explore the coachee's hopes and dreams.
- Provide feedback.
- Identify opportunities to learn, participate, and lead.
- Offer support and resources.

A Suite of New Talent Development Tools

[Cal-ICMA](#) (the California affiliate of ICMA) has undertaken a [Talent Initiative](#). As part of this initiative, Cal-ICMA has recently developed a suite of four new talent development tools that are available to local governments wanting to promote succession development.

The suite of four new tools:

1. [Template for Talent Discussions with your Executive Team](#). Sample (an online fillable form completed by individual department heads and then discussed at an executive team meeting)—[an orientation video on how to use the template is available on the Talent Initiative webpage](#).

2. [Menu of Development Opportunities](#) is an online fillable resource that can be customized for your agency (to be used as part of a development conversation).
3. [A Coaching Model for Managers](#). A demonstration of how to conduct a one-to-one development conversation with a direct report—a [training video on how to conduct a development conversation is available on the Talent Initiative webpage](#).
4. [Stay Interview Questions and Instructions](#) to help organizations retain their talent.

These talent development tools are available without charge at www.calicma.org/talent-initiative.

Creating Legacy

Initiating a succession development effort obviously helps the local government agency deal with the talent challenges undercutting our ability to deliver sufficient and high-quality services now and into the future. In addition, effective SD allows us to create a legacy. Building legacy is highly motivating for senior managers who seek to become reenergized in our difficult environments.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, ICMA Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. [Read past columns of Career Compass in the Archive](#).

If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future issue, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.

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