
Receiving the secret: do we care about succession planning in higher education libraries?



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INTRODUCTION

A recent article proposed that much of the explanation for the inexorable rise of Tesco to become the nation's favourite retail outlet –and the similar decline of Sainsbury and Marks and Spencer over a similar period– was their varied success in finding successors to previously highly effective chief executives. Given the disparity in these recent performances it is worth taking notice of the importance of succession planning for corporate success. Despite this, too few of us pay any attention at all to succession planning.

Perhaps part of the problem with succession planning is the company that it keeps. George W Bush succeeds his dad as commander in chief of the free world thanks to his brother whose own election as governor of Florida of course had nothing to do with his dad. Hilary Benn joins the cabinet but what if his dad had been a grocer or a doctor instead of one of the most recognisable and respected politicians of the 20th century? Do we buy Stella McCartney clothes because she is a brilliant designer or because her dad wrote such ground breaking works as 'Mull of Kintyre' and 'The frog chorus'? And the world is amazed when –after an exhaustive international executive search strategy– BSKyB appoint James Murdoch as its next CEO, the son of the bloke who owns the company.

With role models such as these it is little wonder then that the HIMMS Report can conclude that –despite a recognition of its potential– there is

very little evidence of formal succession planning in higher education libraries or their institutions, and even some scepticism from senior managers and directors that succession planning is of its nature discriminatory. A current position statement on succession planning might look something like this:

- 1 Succession planning is critically important to the future strategic well being of organisations
- 2 Done properly succession planning can provide strategic advantage and competitive edge
- 3 Despite all of this nobody seems to give a toss about succession planning
- 4 And most of those who do it are completely useless at it any way

WHY SUCCESSION PLANNING?

So why should we feel the need to contemplate succession planning for our libraries? Well, one reason could be that for all the reservations, concerns and downright opposition that it attracts, the HIMSS report still concluded that we should encourage the development of leadership and managerial skills and that we should '...look at developing a structured succession planning programme aimed at people early in their career who have the potential to become a senior manager.'

The other is perhaps to do with all the benefits that are claimed for it by its champions. In almost all the articles I have read about succession planning you find grand claims for the power of succession planning. Some of typical quotes include:

- 'Successful succession management can lower turnover rates, improve staff morale, and place the most qualified candidates in key positions'
- 'Identifying future talent will secure the business success of our organisations.'

As well as guaranteeing our organisation's fitness for the future, succession planning (we are told) will also ensure that –in a world where competition for top people is increasing– we can secure the best people with most potential. In the private sector, if we are to believe its champions, succession planning will enable companies to make significant improvements on their return on investment, can turnaround organisational performance, reduces the attrition of high flyers, and offers a more egalitarian approach to future planning than the wait-until-we-have-a-vacancy alternative which it is claimed weakens the commitment and deepens the dissatisfaction of expectant high fliers, encouraging them to 'jump ship' for better

prospects. Indeed as it appears to have the combined efficacy of Viagra and HRT I am surprised we have not been receiving an avalanche of spam about it!

WHAT IS SUCCESSION PLANNING?

It appears that succession planning can mean several things in several different contexts. To help understand this I have done a bit of mapping of types of succession planning to develop a kind of taxonomy:

- Primogeniture - being born first....that's about it really: unless you want to refine that to male primogeniture which is more sophisticated and involves being born first and being a bloke
- The casting couch - Pia Zadora, Sarah Brightman, Celine Dion...need I go on?
- The boot room - Liverpool FC dominated English football by a succession of managers all of whom worked together on the coaching staff: unfortunately the pool is eventually exhausted and you appoint the final remaining candidate who turns out to be well meaning but completely incompetent and you finish half way down the table
- The Conservative Party - men in grey suits talk amongst themselves about candidates that are people like themselves nominated by people like themselves and you end up picking a succession of spectacularly incompetent blokes and one completely flaky woman
- The Labour Party - where we are unfailingly seduced by charismatic and passionate left wingers who when elected move to the right so fast it makes their ears pop
- The King Lear principle – where you base your succession on a curious combination of excessive vanity and transparently superficial sycophancy and everyone ends up dead
- And finally ...the Dilbert Principle: Scott Adams found that at the top of the list of things that most annoyed staff about management was 'idiots promoted to management'. In the past this concept was known as the Peter Principle by which capable workers were promoted until they reached their level of incompetence. At least, suggests Adams, this principle generated managers who had once been good at something and held out the prospect for everyone to rise to a level of highly paid and comfortable incompetence. Now the Peter Principle has been replaced by the Dilbert Principle where 'the incompetent workers are promoted directly to

management without ever passing through the temporary competence stage... the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can least damage... management'.

More seriously, successful organisations –we are told– succeed because they have the right people in the right position at the right time. This statement, redolent of Ranganathan, is the basis of succession planning. It is not just about appointing new staff or replacing staff, it is also about keeping good staff and fulfilling potential, through effective timing of advancement and matching people to the organisation's needs at the right time. Above all, succession planning is a formal and structured process designed to ensure that we attract and retain the people and the skills that the organisation needs now and in the future to create a supply of current and future key job successors to optimise the organisations strategic needs and the aspirations of its individuals. The process includes the following elements:

- an organisation-wide expression of its purpose and vision
- identifying and analysing key positions and developing a clear idea of what are the managerial qualities that the organisation needs for the future in those positions
- creating a large enough pool of potential candidates for these senior roles –now, in 3-5 years, and in 5-10 years
- assessing potential candidates against possible job opportunities and their own personal aspirations and their ability to perform at the higher level
- some process for selecting people from this pool of potential candidates
- individual development plans for potential candidates.

Another way to look at succession planning is to see it as a three stage evolutionary process. The first stage is what one commentator calls 'the staffing approach' to filling vacancies. This is where we only respond to succession when we have an immediate crisis such as an impending resignation or retirement. It is a one-shot, high-pressure, high-risk process that offers no opportunity for organisational learning. More developed organisations have been able to adopt a future-looking focus, and have identified a set of options for replacing vacancies linked to the organisation's needs and including identifying suitable candidates before a crisis occurs. At the top of the food chain are those organisations who in addition

of all the other factors in the replacement stage have added a clear recognition that they need to employ objective criteria in making appointments and have recognised that the successful candidate will themselves have development needs linked to their own and the organisation's future so a management development plan is added. This is real succession planning.

WHY WE HAVE A PROBLEM NOW

Apart from the promptings of the HIMSS Report, there is a rather more pressing reason why we need to explore the potential for succession planning before it is too late.

Many of us old ones are part of the so-called 'baby boomer generation' or –as some call it– 'phenomenon'. The baby boomer was born between 1946 and 1964 accounts for 25% of the population and a large percentage of us are approaching retirement all at the same time. This demographic peak was also apparently accompanied by a boom in libraries and therefore people going into libraries as a career. This was reinforced by the downturn in public sector fortunes under a succession of governments (but mainly Thatcher's) which led to those same people staying put as job opportunities declined with the contraction of the public sector. Thus they have become the dominant working age group staying often for 25-30 years in the profession and often in the same or similar post.

There hasn't really been any detailed analysis of this in our profession with which I can scare you but there was recently a very worrying article about the current plight of secondary education. The article went on to warn that 'schools face a demographic time bomb leaving them seriously short of head teachers in 10 years' time'. Councils are being urged to make the development of prospective leaders a priority to avoid a looming crisis.

It went on to record that more than half the teaching profession is over 45 years of age and less than 20% are under 30. And 45% of heads are over 50. Consultants warned that 'leaving leadership development to chance or individual whim in these circumstances is short-sighted' and continued:

The public sector approach to leadership succession and development has been passive, simply letting candidates emerge, whereas in the private sector some organisations have

actively recruited and developed potential leaders.

I would be surprised if the library and information sector is a great deal different in structure than this but the situation is further compounded by the characteristics of the generation which will succeed us, the so called Generation X, who demonstrate quite different attitudes and expectations to work and to careers.

Generation X are sceptical, not as career orientated and not as focused about work as we old folk are. They are often viewed critically by baby boomers as they are independent, self-reliant and exhibit far less allegiance to an organisation, being loyal to themselves not to others or to organisations. Generation X has higher expectations of what it should receive from organisations especially more positive experiences from their employment and a greater commitment to their lifelong learning. Finally they have a better work/life balance, are more flexible and have no problem with either downshifting or staying put as necessity dictates.

The implication is that there is no longer a guaranteed supply of like-minded (lemming-minded?) careerists to replace us unless we do something to create an effective succession.

Finally, if we need any further encouragement to understand why succession planning is a problem now we can add to all this the perennial problems of our profession: increasing competition for scarce and more flexible skills; the declining intake into the profession including closing of LIS courses; the poor visibility of the profession as a career; and of course we don't pay enough!

BARRIERS AND PROBLEMS

Part of the problem with succession planning is that the alternative to ignoring it completely is to do it... but do it very badly. I have already mentioned one of the most obvious problems, which is leaving it too late to start planning for succession: waiting for a vacancy and then hoping that we can graft an effective succession planning process on to an urgent need to get someone in place. To do it properly succession planning takes a long time, and certainly more than you have if all you do is wait for a vacancy before starting planning a replacement.

The other side of this coin is that there are examples of where people have been appointed as the

result of a planned process and this results in a significant cross over between an out-going manager and the successor. This is fine provided that someone had planned how that process would work. There is often a reluctance to cede responsibility or indeed to leave at all from the out-going manager, and this is compounded by an obvious impatience to get on with the future from the new incumbent. Who then makes the decisions, and what of they cannot agree?

One of the most important barriers to successful succession planning is linked to our desire to secure our legacy. It is what Rosabeth Moss Kanter refers to as the 'the heroic self concept of the departing leader'; the assumption that not only do we have a legacy to pass on to our fortunate successors but that the legacy is the outcome of some great historic mission that only we the great leader can fulfil. The hidden fear that plagues us all according to Kanter is that we and our work will all be forgotten as soon as we walk out of the door. So we build succession planning strategies around the need to secure our legacy completely ignorant of the fact that what worked well for us in the past is no guarantee of being what the organisations we have served so heroically will need in the future.

If few organisations are prepared to invest the time and effort in trying to define a clear vision for the future of their organisation, very few managers are comfortable with envisioning a future that does not include them and they have even greater difficulty understanding what else -apart from our own skills and experience- could possibly be needed to continue our work.

Another problem is that the normal subjective identification processes that we use for filling many vacancies is inadequate when we are talking about strategic leadership because it fails to generate a sufficiently large pool of candidates from which we can be sure we will get an effective appointment. Unless we enrich our search processes we keep seeing the same people for the same kinds of jobs and we just keep putting more square pegs into more round holes. It is what Kanter calls 'homosocial reproduction', the propensity for looking for the 'right kind of person', which tends more often than not to mean our desire to leave behind our fingerprint by appointing a successor in our own image. What better way to achieve a sense of immortality than to leave the organisation in the hands of a younger version of ourselves?

If we were charitable, we could understand the reluctance to risk radically changing the management model, especially if it has worked so well in the past. If we were not being charitable, we might be critical of this touching belief that the best will rise to the top automatically and are just hanging around waiting to be anointed, when in fact those who rise to the top are usually those who understand how to fit in most closely with the current leaders and are thus spotted or rewarded for fitting in rather than for actually being any good.

If the positive benefits of succession planning are that it helps motivate staff by identifying high flyers and giving them some sense of expectation and a route to the top, the down side –of course– is that if you are NOT amongst the chosen few you are going to feel significantly de-motivated. This can only be compounded if those same individuals who have received official blessing then lapse into a state of complacency thinking they have made it already or (even worse) that they cannot risk their anointed status and start playing it safe for fear of screwing up, abandoning the innovation that got them noticed in the first place and trading long-term projects and development for safe, short-term wins.

And perhaps the worst crime of all is what one commentator called the over stress on identification and under stress on development: the failure to recognise that identifying the candidates is only the beginning of the process, not the end. If candidates are to be ready to assume the senior positions that have been mapped out for them successfully they need to be developed to meet the needs of the future. This can be made significantly worse if the candidate themselves are not involved fully in this development process. If they think that succession planning is an entirely external process they are not going to take those risks, identify their own development needs or to recognise their own responsibilities to ensure that their selection eventually matures into succession.

GETTING IT RIGHT/ MAKING IT EFFECTIVE

So if we did want to use succession planning either in our own library or information services or across the sector what do we have to do to get it right? Again I have tried to identify a line of best fit across all of the material I have used to provide a good practice checklist. It includes:

- **Strategic vision for the organisation:** To be effective succession planning needs to fully

integrated into the strategic planning of our organisation's future needs. 'It is about looking to the future not getting stuck with the pull of the demands of the present.' Above all, it must identify the leadership or other skills that you will require to achieve the future to which your organisation aspires.

- **The right climate:** The climate has to be created from the top so it must include commitment from the most senior staff to plan the process, to buy into it, and to accept that it applies to a situation in which they may not be involved. This will include a clear indication of that support will be available to suitable candidates in order to enable them to succeed as well as candid and open channels of communication.
- **Some form of formal evaluation process** to create and monitor a pool of potential candidates. This must mean enabling us to get beyond the usual suspects to create a large pool of potential candidates not just the anointed ones.
- **Support from managers:** And of course support also includes ensuring that at each level the plan is being actively pursued and followed up and managers are held accountable for making sure that this happens. And inevitably this will have to include funding and support for external development, training and education as well as any internal support.
- **Succession planning and leadership development at all levels, not just the top:** This is apparently being done at the University of Melbourne in Australia. But when I read that this was referred to as 'leveraging the intellectual capital of their employees' I stopped reading in despair.
- **A formal development programme:** One commentator referred to this as creating a career road map or a strategy for individual career movement. This will include actively identifying new opportunities and rotating managers across different functions and even across different institutions.
- And finally the process requires **the active participation of the candidates.** Candidates have to have a clear picture of what is expected of them as part of this process and incentives and encouragement to see the process through to the end.

CONCLUSION

So that is a quick trip around succession planning and you may have noticed a certain ambivalence

about it in what I have had to say. This is probably because I am a bit ambivalent as indeed are some commentators. We seem to have a sort of Catch 22 situation. We need to be better at succession planning to identify and produce the future senior managers for our organisations, but if we adopt a succession planning model it is likely to be seen as discriminatory. It appears to be enormously important and enormously difficult in equal measure, there appear to be as many barriers to it as there are opportunities for it, and the demographic indicators suggest that we have real cause for concern.

But finally I have one ultimate concern about succession planning which is. 'Why should I care?' Isn't succession planning just another corporate (and in our case library) version of the nanny state, something along the lines of 'we can't trust the lazy buggers to look after themselves and to make themselves decent and skilful candidates so I suppose we shall have to do it for them'? Why isn't it the responsibility of each aspiring individual? Ardent disciples of succession planning seem to neglect the fact that individuals are quite capable of identifying themselves for succession to senior roles and getting themselves suitably tooled up for the job. Why do I have to do it?

And of course we can't do it in isolation. Shouldn't it be the university who are concerned about succession planning after all the library serves their mission? Well it would be but sadly the HIMSS project showed that in most cases senior executives haven't the faintest idea what they want in or expect from their library/information directors.

But the main reason why I won't care is that when I leave and move into a new job I shall have my hands and indeed my mind full with concentrating on the new job where I have to build my reputation, win over the sceptical staff and the cynical customers and the demanding VC. Who takes over from me will be a matter of supreme indifference to me.

When I retire on the other hand I shall care even less. I shall be on the Algarve in my villa, with my new trophy wife and the proceeds of several years of illicit currency dealings (feel free to substitute your own fantasy here). I won't give a toss who is running the library I have left behind and won't have the faintest interest in whether they have the skills to do the job properly. All my energies will be invested in my suntan, my next round the world trip and my next pint in my local pub.

As I reach the end of my career what possible incentive can I have to invest time and effort in identifying some smart arse young know it all to pass on all the secrets of my success, to have them question the practices that have kept me going for years, and above all spotting that actually what I do is neither difficult nor clever and that I have been managing an elaborate charade for the past 20 years?

So there we have our options. We can either:

- Go on as if nothing is wrong, waiting for vacancies and hoping we can fill them.
- Embrace the benefits and confront the challenges of succession planning. We already have some building blocks for this. We have a SCONUL Vision, the HIMSS analysis of the skills we need, and the work that the SCONUL Advisory Committee on Staffing are doing to provide development programmes for the next in line.

Or

- We can adopt the cynical view that despite all the evidence frankly my dear we don't give a damn.

And if we do give a damn then the questions we need to start asking -now that we have sat up and took notice of the problem of the future generation of leaders of the profession- are all related to what are we going to do about it:

- How are we going to identify the next generation of leaders and thinkers?
- What are we going to do to/or with them when we do identify them?
- What happens if we can't find them?
- What do we do to maintain interest and motivation amongst all those who think they should be the next generation but aren't on the list?
- How do we identify what we want this new generation to do?
- How do we know what the future will hold for them?
- How do we develop them to meet that future?
- Do we do it on our own, with our institutions with our peers, or with other professions?

Its all very well having some old bloke like me coming along and pontificating about the problem but unless it leads to some form of action to agree first of all if it is a problem and then if so how we manage our way out of the problem then

no matter how interesting this might have been it will have been in vain.

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