

Senior Management's Role in Launching Succession Planning

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Succession planning is a structured process for identifying and preparing potential successors to assume new roles. It generally entails assessing and discussing a talent pool, identifying high potential employees for further development, and providing them with opportunities to prepare for greater responsibility.

Senior managers play a crucial role by simply communicating their support. For example, one CEO sent the following email message to employees who were participating in succession planning:

To: Vice Presidents and Senior Vice Presidents
Re: Succession Planning to Begin

We have begun the important process of planning for the future of our organization by studying our leadership needs and assessing our pool of candidates for VP and Senior VP levels throughout the organization. I am excited about our organization taking a more systematic and transparent approach to leadership succession. It will lead to smoother leadership transitions and allow us to take advantage of growth opportunities by having a deeper pool of candidates ready for leadership positions.

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Participation in this process is mandatory for all VPs and Senior VPs. I personally will participate, as I reflect on the future needs of our organization and study the pool of talent in this organization.

You will soon receive an additional communication about the initiative from (project manager). I encourage you to give this your careful attention, and I thank you for your help in this process.

In addition to voicing support for the initiative and making it mandatory, this CEO also volunteered to be part of the succession planning process. While volunteering to personally participate was not necessary, it contributed to the success of the process. Other “extra mile” steps that senior leadership can take include the following:

- **Give your perspective on the future leadership needs of the organization.** Get involved in articulating the unique requirements that need to be addressed as future leaders are prepared. For example, the organization may foresee future leaders grappling with regulatory issues, or mergers and acquisitions, and thus, today’s candidates may need to gain experience in these areas.
- **Convey that this is a *management directive*, not just a human resources initiative.** Senior leaders can position succession planning as crucial to the future of the business, not just an exercise.



- **Communicate that this is a *process*, not just an event.**
Organizations need to make a long-term commitment to meaningful succession planning. Preparation for high-level roles takes years, and individuals who are slotted for roles this year may no longer be the right choice next year.

In summary, senior managers play a pivotal role in ensuring the success of succession planning by lending their support, which generally requires that leaders understand and can communicate the business value of the process.

