

Succession Planning - Strategy Beyond Recruitment

In recent months, I've noticed a growing number of blogs, many published by recruiters, focused on succession planning. Whilst the increased attention is welcome, much of the information shared does not in my view reflect genuine succession planning!

In our work at Distinctive People HR & OD Ltd we support many organisations in formulating composite succession plans, and we have noticed that the terminology 'succession planning' is often used interchangeably with workforce planning and organisation development. These are undoubtedly connected, but they are not the same thing. Each has a distinct purpose, operating at different levels of organisational planning. They are complementary disciplines, combining strategic foresight with tactical action. A contradiction in terms? Not at all.

What prompted me in particular to share my thoughts on this was a recurring theme in many - but not all - of these blogs: an apparent justification for making internal appointments. The recruitment process itself was presented, implicitly or explicitly, as a safeguard for ensuring competence and capability. But here's the question: **does a robust recruitment process demonstrate that succession planning has taken place, or does it simply demonstrate that a vacancy has been filled through a structured process?**

The two are very different things.

Indeed, I suspect that, in some organisations, what is described as succession planning may amount to little more than an informal, untested assumption around the Board table that "X would make a fine CEO." Perhaps a collective, almost telepathic conviction that someone is the natural successor.

That may be an understandable starting point. It is certainly not a succession plan.

Start with the role, not the person

For succession planning to be meaningful, fair and impactful, it requires a more proactive, considered and evidence-based approach.

Crucially, it must start with the **role, not the individual**.

This is becoming increasingly important as organisations move towards skills-based appointments, with roles being shaped around future strategic direction rather than constrained by traditional, static job descriptions.

The question should not simply be, "Who could replace our current CEO?" It should be, "What leadership capabilities will our organisation need to succeed in the future, and how do we develop a credible pipeline of people who could deliver them?"

That is a fundamentally different starting point. It shifts the emphasis from identifying a favoured individual to understanding future organisational need.

Look beyond the organisation as it exists today

Effective succession planning requires a detailed analysis of the changing organisational context, the external environment and the needs of the customers, communities and stakeholders the organisation serves.

In supporting succession analysis, we systematically address a number of key questions: What challenges lie ahead? What will the organisation need to do differently? Which capabilities will become more important, and which may become less relevant? How might changes in technology, funding, regulation, customer expectations or organisational strategy reshape the leadership and specialist skills required?

These questions should inform a clear assessment of the skills, experience, behaviours and capabilities needed for critical roles in the future.

That assessment should then be translated into a coherent, living document — one that evolves as organisational priorities, external pressures and talent needs change. It should not be a static spreadsheet, dusted off when a senior leader announces their departure - indeed a whole number of enabling interventions should be planned throughout each planning cycle to give the discipline of succession planning true meaning.

Most importantly, the process should identify capability gaps and establish how they will be addressed. That might involve targeted development, mentoring, acting-up opportunities, broader exposure to strategic decision-making or, where appropriate, external recruitment.

Internal progression can be a positive outcome of succession planning, but it should be the consequence of demonstrable capability and deliberate preparation, not the predetermined objective.

Fairness, transparency and challenge matter

There is also an important governance dimension.

A credible succession planning process should be sufficiently transparent to command confidence, while recognising the need for appropriate confidentiality. It should be based on objective criteria, with clear consideration of potential, readiness and development needs.

It must also be open to challenge.

Are we identifying the strongest potential successors, or simply the people we know best? Are we mistaking current performance for future potential? Are we inadvertently reproducing the existing leadership profile rather than preparing the organisation for what comes next?

And are we giving a sufficiently broad range of people the opportunity to develop the experience and capabilities that future roles will demand?

These are not peripheral questions. They go to the heart of whether succession planning is genuinely strategic, equitable and effective.

Recruitment is the final piece, not the starting point

Of course, a rigorous recruitment process remains essential. Whether an appointment is made internally or externally, the organisation must be confident that the successful candidate has the capability to fulfil the role.

But recruitment and succession planning serve different purposes.

Recruitment selects the best candidate for a role today. Succession planning prepares the organisation to have the right capabilities available for tomorrow.

One is an appointment decision; the other is an ongoing investment in organisational resilience, leadership capacity and future performance.

The two should reinforce one another, not be confused.

Ultimately, good succession planning is not about predicting who will occupy a particular office. Nor is it about creating an entitlement to promotion or protecting particular individuals from external competition.

It is about understanding where the organisation is going, identifying what it will need to get there, and deliberately building the capability to make that journey possible.

If the first serious conversation about succession takes place when a vacancy arises, it is probably too late to call it succession planning.

It is recruitment.

And that distinction matters.

If you would like to discuss future succession, workforce planning or Organisation Development needs do give us a call to see how we might add value – 07944 411484.