

# SUCCESSION PLANNING: "THE SEQUEL"

By Patrick Ibarra



## The year 2008 seems like an eternity ago as it relates to economic prosperity and healthy budgets.

During the years leading up to that time, government leaders at all levels were experiencing significant impacts resulting from the "baby boomer" generation retirement trend, but had the dollars to counteract the "brain drain" occurring within their workforce. Case in point: while employees were departing, the ability to replace and sometimes even backfill positions was occurring fairly regularly. Additionally, funds were available to equip your future leaders and managers with skills needed to continue the high level of performance to which your residents had become accustomed.

Flash forward to this year, 2011. Significant budget limitations are the "new normal." Contrary to forecasts, public sector employees continue to retire. With public pension reform gaining traction, the retirement trend will continue since pensioners want to be "grandfathered in" under the current system and not be adversely impacted by any changes to the system. Additionally, young employees remain quite mobile since talented people always have options, regardless of the state of the economy. The departure of seasoned, knowledgeable employees places your organization at a critical juncture: the need for experienced and seasoned professional staff members has never been greater and the trend shows these organizational members as the most likely to be leaving the organization in the very near future.

As a result of the "brain drain" underway and constrained budgets, the public sector is facing a number of specific challenges, including:

- A reduction in the workforce and the likely subsequent decrease in productivity.
- Primarily due to budget limitations, serious difficulty to replace an employee when he or she departs and a vacancy is created.
- The loss of knowledge, experience, and institutional memory of retirees.
- A limited pool of employees qualified to replace retirees because of past reductions in force or budgetary cutbacks on training and development opportunities.
- A limited pool of potential candidates because of a national decline in the number of workers in the 25- to 44-year-old age range.
- Stiff competition with other employers to retain talented employees who are not retiring, from seeking advancement opportunities elsewhere.

## Q. WHAT CAN YOU DO TO RESPOND TO THESE CHALLENGES?

A. Great question. "Succession Planning: The Sequel," which contains a series of specific actions government leaders can immediately take to offset the impacts from employees who are departing.

First, though, a quick background on succession planning, the concept and its application. Succession planning can be a sensitive issue in that it includes some people and excludes others. Challenging the assumption that "seniority translates to competence," succession planning is not about preselecting employees or playing favorites when it comes to promoting employees. What it is, in fact, is an effort to increase the likelihood that current members of your workforce will be competitive when promotional opportunities occur and to ensure the pipeline of talent is abundant with qualified candidates. After all, the overall purpose is for your organization to (continue to) execute its mission, so consider succession planning as a tool to ensure the continuity of service delivery.

# ESSENTIALLY, SUCCESSION PLANNING IS A **PROVEN STRATEGY TO ENSURE YOUR WORKFORCE MEMBERS ARE PREPARED TO HANDLE SERVICE DEMANDS, EVER-SHIFTING PRIORITIES AND EMERGING CHALLENGES.**

An **effective** succession planning process must include:

- 1) a systematic rather than anecdotal way of identifying employees poised for promotion;
  - 2) leadership that rewards managers for promoting rather than holding onto their best employees;
  - 3) career ladders;
  - 4) progressive recruitment and selection practices;
  - 5) human resource policies that reflect a contemporary workplace;
  - 6) training that focuses on competency development, is accessible to employees and is well-designed and delivered;
  - 7) frequent opportunities for employees to accept new challenges; and
  - 8) recognition that employees have a stake in the organization and share its successes.
- Consequently, effective succession planning requires a comprehensive strategy of multiple tactics.

## **Five targeted actions you can **immediately implement** to activate Succession Planning: The Sequel in your organization:**

1. **Partner** with other government agencies and bring in top-flight, quality trainers imparting powerful tools and techniques to members of your workforce. We're way past still trying to teach employees software skills, and building capacity in your workforce isn't strictly about employees' technical proficiency; quite the contrary. Developing more effective leaders and better managers is what's needed. Training around healthy work practices like leading change, managing employee performance, and fostering an innovative workplace culture are the skills and approaches your employees need to obtain.
2. **Beyond a democratic institution, you're an employer!** You're competing for talent. People today aren't simply looking for a job, they want meaning and impact, and local government is all about employees having an impact on the quality of life for your residents. While you may have a hiring freeze in place and think recruitment of employees is something off in the distance, take this opportunity to refresh your entire recruitment practices. Redesign your agency's Web site with more curb appeal including a Web-based application process. Feature testimonials from current employees about what a wonderful organization yours is and how the work is so challenging. Build your own pipeline by convening your seasonal employees; those college students who spend the summers serving as lifeguards and mowing your parks. Capture their names, e-mail addresses, colleges or universities they're attending, and courses of study. Share with them the power of a career in local government and, whatever you do, when summer ends, stay in touch with them so they remain connected to your organization.
3. **Revise** the minimum qualifications (MQs) for positions in information technology, finance and engineering by decreasing the emphasis placed on local government experience. There is an abundance of qualified professionals in the job pool today for these professions, but archaic MQs unwittingly deter strong candidates without public sector experience from even applying for a position with your organization. It's time to discard the myth that a candidate possessing local government experience is a predictor of his/her high performance. While there are several FTE positions in which local government experience is necessary, drop the "one-size-fits-all" approach and adjust your MQs to reflect changing trends in the workforce. You can teach newbies about the public sector, but you can't teach them good work habits and a desire to have a positive impact.

# PUT FIVE ACTIONS TO WORK FOR YOU. PARTNER. GO BEYOND. REVISE. ASSEMBLE. CAPTURE.

4. **Assemble** what I refer to as your “blue chip” group of current employees in the 25- to 40-year-old age category and ask them one simple question: “What more can we (i.e. agency leadership) do to keep you actively engaged in your work?” Then sit back and listen. Don’t try to convert or correct them; just pay attention to what you’re actually hearing. People from this generation are vocal and will share with you that they need to be fully engaged in their work; it’s not always about more money. Usually, it’s about them wanting more challenging work, having more access to key decision makers, to see evidence of their contributions in bettering the community, new stretch assignments; you know, inexpensive solutions like that. Don’t make the mistake of administering a written survey to this group since they’ve grown up valuing in-person interactions.
5. **Capture** the “highlight reel” of how employees execute their role and complete tasks, using what’s referred to as tacit knowledge, before they leave your organization. Recently, the Utilities Department of the City of Fort Collins, Colo., undertook a comprehensive, systematic and practical knowledge transfer program. With more than 400 employees delivering water, wastewater, electric and storm water services and several with more than 30 years of service, the retirement wave is about to crest. When these highly experienced and long tenured veterans depart, the risk is real that the “Fort Collins Way of Doing Business” may be diluted and not carried forward by successors. Consequently, a “highlight reel” of how a number of employees execute their role and responsibilities, and a recording of this tacit knowledge in a format that will help their successors begin performing at a high level shortly after their hired or promoted, are necessary. The transfer of key contextual knowledge in such a way that it can be used by other employees is essential. In short, knowledge transfer is a crucial element of any succession planning effort, so don’t wait until your veteran employees leave before you extract the valuable knowledge about how things are done in your organization.

Those are five straightforward steps you can **immediately implement** to achieve significant and **sustainable benefits**. Now is the time to pursue **Succession Planning: The Sequel** as a powerful tool to help you ensure the delivery of **high quality** public services.



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