

NO NONSENSE ADVICE

16

GROOMING SUCCESSION

VIDUSHA NATHAVITHARANA

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A LUMINARY PUBLICATION



**PUBLISHED BY LUMINARY LEARNING SOLUTIONS
FOR FREE CIRCULATION
FIRST EDITION, 2020**

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**EDITED BY TATUM DE SOUZA
COVER DESIGN BY ZAFRAN PACKEERALLY**

PROLOGUE:

You can't be there forever : but your Legacy can !

Possibly the biggest testimony to a great leader is the successor he or she leaves behind.

In all earnest : if your successor does better than you : then, you certainly have done a stellar job. So, take the job of finding and grooming your successor seriously : and ensure that you truly immerse yourself in it...

Each individual needs to understand what they want from a successor : and, that the training and development process will certainly take different forms based on the type of job you hold. This book is merely a broad guideline : and a set of curated tips to get you started : the rest, as always, is up to you...

Remember : you won't be there for ever : but your legacy will : in the sense that whoever you choose to take over from you, will carry on your work : and this, possibly, is the biggest legacy you will ever leave for your organization and your team...

So, listen up !

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Chapter 1

Finding a Successor

I. What to look for in a successor

Finding a successor is a serious undertaking. Clearly, there is no 'one size fits all' type list we can offer you: but here are some pointers to get you started:

- Make sure the person is technically competent: in that, he or she has a proper grounding of the basics of your core function/department. Ensure that 'experience' is not mistaken for 'technical competence' : often times, you can do the same 'job' for many years : and not quite 'move around' the department to have a fuller appreciation of the overall function. So, make sure you find a successor(s) who is technically competent.
- Make sure they live values: this is critical. Your successor needs to be a person who embodies values: rather than merely getting the job done. Leadership is a lot to do with personal values too.
- Make sure they are 'respected' : it's important to distinguish being 'liked' from being 'respected' : find a person who is respected by your team : rather than merely liked.
 - Ensure they are team players : and not merely brilliant individual contributors. Oftentimes, individually brilliant people are not good team players : choose a person who knows how to play in a team.
 - Don't take on a person whose ego is bigger than their love for the team : this is crucial. Ultimately, you need a person who puts others first : not themselves.
- Don't take a YES Man(or woman !) : Find a person who will challenge you : and have an opinion of their own : not merely a follower of orders.

Fundamentally, you are looking for a person who can, one day (sooner rather than later) replace you and take over your job. So, find a person who CAN and WILL be better than you eventually.

II. Fighting the innate desire to bring 'someone like me'

One of the biggest mistakes most managers make in finding their successor is to find a person 'just like them.' Don't fall into this trap.

You need to find a person who 'complements' you : preferably someone who can lend weight to your 'blind spots' : rather than compound them. We are all good at some things : and also bad at some things : make sure your chosen successors are able to look after your flank (when it comes to your weaknesses) so that you can augment your core strengths.

III. Ensuring there is a clear process to find a successor

Don't just assume you 'know' who is best chosen for the job : establish a process to select the successors :

- Identify the competencies
 - Identify the skills
 - Identify the core requirements of the job
- Put a 'selection panel' together to help you with the decision : make sure you include a few of your peers and your superior in the panel
 - Have interviews : give everyone the same time : and the same questions : enabling better comparisons
 - Make sure you give each candidate feedback : so that they may understand what they need to improve for the future.

Make the process transparent : and also, make sure you 'invite' people to 'apply' for the job just as you would in a recruitment process : this ensures you are completely unbiased in the process : and also, extremely transparent : which will go a long way in ensuring credibility both for you and also, your chosen candidate(s)

IV. Having a backup plan

Don't have just ONE successor : always have a few lined up. Obviously there may well be a forerunner : specially if you have a rather small team : but always train more than one. Work environments are always volatile : and great talent often gets 'poached' : so, make sure you have a few people trained and developed over time : rather than relying on the one.

Chapter 2

Grooming Successors

I. The Briefing

The briefing for the chosen 'successors' needs to impress upon them what they need to do : and be : in order to replace you or, take your job should you move up (or out). Here are some key aspects to cover in your briefing:

- Key objectives to achieve
 - Key skills to develop
- The fact that they need to work as a team : be clear that 'undercutting' each other in order to 'curry favor' with you will NOT WORK
- The Leadership Skills they need to portray
- How they need to 'behave' within and outside the organisation

Your expectations need to be clear : straightforward and unambiguous : please don't leave room for 'interpretation'

II. Training

Develop a cohesive training plan for each individual. Training should include :

- Key technical skills to develop
- Any professional qualifications required (we don't mean MBA's and such for the heck of it : rather, focused technical qualifications : for example - if you are in IT, a specific technical qualification that may offer required skills and knowledge)
- Specific soft skills training : remember that any soft skills program undertaken must have some form of assessment (such as a project or a 360) to assess what has been learnt : so that this type of training does not become a 'free lunch' !
- Industry exposure seminars : workshops and gatherings

Remember to look at training cohesively and in an overarching way : not merely as a calendar year activity. Look at a 3-4 year time horizon to ensure all core competencies required are covered : and look at it together.

III. Mentoring

Possibly the biggest part of developing a successor is in ensuring you MENTOR them personally. Nothing really teaches than being able to understand how the 'boss' works : and being able to do things themselves and learn from that experience :

- Take them with you for meetings : and over time : allow them to lead them
- Take them with you for important gatherings : and introduce them to key industry players : and get them to build their own credibility with them
- Offer them the opportunity to lead key initiatives : and guide them through the key decisions

The key is a constant dialogue : almost daily : to help give them insights, ideas, counterpoints and get them to constantly challenge themselves.

IV. Exposure outside the organisation

Send them on a series of exposure visits to varied organizations : and tell them to come back and tell you what they 'picked up' on : and also, allow them to implement a few of the best practices they saw. Help them contextualize their best practices to suit your organisation/unit : and help them understand how to 'plug in' ideas from outside the organisation in a manner that suits your culture.

V. Cross functional exposure

'Lend' your successors to your peers to enable them to solve some of their key issues. Make it clear that they no longer 'report' to you : rather to your peer : and see how they adapt to a new 'boss' and make a success (or spectacular failure) of the task given. Either way : give them the much needed feedback : and debrief : which will ensure that learning happens.

VI. Building a network around the successor

Start introducing your successors to your 'friends' who can 'help them out' in a time of need or crisis. Encourage them build their own networks :

- Governmental institutes like the Police, the Fire Brigade, The Labour Department etc
 - Banks : specially the Bank Branch you deal with
 - Key suppliers : and their sales/marketing teams
- Key customers : and their supply management teams
 - Industry bodies : and their key representatives
 - Media : key editors, reporters and such

You will not be there to 'bail them out' all the time : so, ensure they start building a network they can rely on.

VII. Having the tough conversations

Practice 'tough love' : don't cut them slack. You do no one favors (least of all them) by 'letting things go.' Set the tone right : and ensure you are always fair. The idea is not to kill their spirit : or show you are superior : but to make sure they understand, in no uncertain terms that 99.9 % isn't a 100% ! It sounds brutal : but remember : the harshest fires produce the toughest steel : so you decide what type of a successor you want to groom.

Don't forget to praise when they do well too though ! This is equally important.

VIII. Giving leadership roles

You can't build leaders unless you give them leadership roles. So, whenever you can, carve out projects and initiatives for them to take ownership and run. Fight the impulse to 'get involved' and 'butt in' : allow them the freedom to do what they like : and do it 'their way.' However, as always, make sure you observe and study them carefully : and again, as always, constantly give feedback and debrief.

IX. Ensuring the successor is 'accepted'

Start showcasing your successors' work : and start building credibility for them. They will not be able to do this for themselves without looking like praise-hugging peacocks : so, 'sell' their achievements for them. Do this both inside and outside the organization : so that when they take over your role they already have a 'fan base' created.

X. Ensuring the successor does not become 'pig-headed'

Often, actually too often, when a successor 'knows' that they are going to 'get the job' they take on a certain 'arrogance' : never allow this to happen. The MOMENT you see this : address it : and unless it is corrected, remove the candidate immediately from the 'running'. It is important that everyone understands that you will NOT allow ego to come into the equation ! If they are pig-headed BEFORE they get the job, imagine their attitude afterwards !

Chapter 3

Getting the successor eased in

I. Delegating work - one step at a time

Once you are ready to hand over tasks on a more permanent basis, ensure you do so gradually. Although you have tested the individual, they may struggle when overloaded at once. So ensure that you delegate tasks step-by-step or one at a time. This will require that you plan the entire course and set a timeline for the process. That way you will not only be on top of things but also know when the transitioning will be completed.

II. Giving continuous feedback

The process of continuous feedback never stops actually. We are always learning. Although you are confident that your successor is ready to take over, the process of continuous feedback should not stop. Remember, you are now stepping away from the 'boss' role to a 'mentor' role. Also, this is your legacy, so ensure that all the guidance is given.

III. Setting this up to fail/ preparing them to face failure - and understanding how they react

It is important for your successor to understand that while you were there to hold hands and ease the process, it is now up to them to drive this forward and succeed. The other way of looking at this is that, if they drop the ball at any given point, they would surely fail. You must have that conversation and also ensure you understand their take on the matter and their reaction. In a way, it will also be a test of your abilities as well.

IV. The one BIG challenge - to truly establish credibility

The other component of this process and the most important one, will be the ability of your successor to step out of your shoes and establish his or her own credibility. Its almost like riding a bike, you are considered riding one, although you may still have the training wheels, and someone nearby. Now the time is to ride it without any support. Building that credibility building will take time, but hopefully, your successor would have watched you and leveraged on your own contacts and possibly have started building on that.

V. Taking the final decision - or changing your mind about the suitability of the successor

Always remember that this is also your legacy being set. Your successor may be ready to take on responsibilities more permanently. While everything may be going as planned, you do need to keep your eyes open, now more than ever, for signs that may tell you otherwise. You need to weigh in every reaction, every comment, every decision he/she has taken, to gauge if you have made the right choice. Once you sign that dotted line, there is no going back. So ensure that you are confident about the successor, based on your gut feeling and demonstrated actions/behaviours. If you feel that there is still room for improvement, or notice something new, that you have not seen before, be ready to press the pause button, till you iron out the issues and concerns. Don't rush!

Chapter 4

Letting Go

I. Giving over the reins

Giving over the reins is important : without really holding back !

- Officially announce that the candidate is now the 'boss' and not you
- Take your 'stuff' from the office : let your successor 'rearrange it' the way they see fit
- NEVER interfere in the decision-making after handing over : unless you are asked for your weighing in

Remember : you are no longer the 'mentor' nor the 'boss' : they are. They may still report to YOU : but for their own area of purview, you must allow them to reign supreme.

II. Not undermining your successor

Often you can undermine your new successor without you even knowing it :

- Don't make fun of their mistakes in public - even in jest
- Don't entertain 'gossip' about them : nor talk about them in the lunch room with your peers
- Don't give indications to your former team that you are 'there for them for advice' : direct them to your successor instead

Be sensitive : the transition is usually rather dicey : and it is quite common for your successor to be compared to you ! It is also quite common for your successor to want to 'match up' to you. So, make it easy on them : and remove that 'expectation' : allow them, and encourage them to be their own person : not your 'shadow.'

III. Not allowing your successor to lose their way

As much as you support your successor : make sure you 'put them right' if required also. Sometimes, no matter how good people are : they CAN lose their way : so, do keep an 'eye' on them : and don't hesitate to 'take them down' a peg or two. A word of caution : do this privately : and never in public : and never do it in a manner that undermines them.

EPILOGUE

Kissing Ass is not all there is...

Truly wanting someone else to be better than you is not easy. We understand. However, allow yourself that humility : and that moment of quiet reflection : and understand that your role as a true leader is not to shine : but to enable others to shine. No play on words : it is, what it is...

Genuinely train your successor well : and teach him or her everything you know and more. Actively seek opportunities to help them grow them : even after they have taken over your role. Remember : the role of a good 'boss' - as much as a good father - does not end when the 'kids' have 'grown up' : it just takes a different form...

Celebrate your successor : as his or her success is indeed yours too

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



VIDUSHA NATHAVITHARANA

Vidusha is currently the Destiny Architect at High5 Consultancy and Training and also the organization's founder member. His areas of expertise lies with strategy facilitation, HR strategy development and Leadership Training. He has conducted assignments in 15 countries regionally and consulted for the World Bank, the UN as well as some of the top corporates in Sri Lanka and the Region. He is also a member of the board of directors for Chrysalis, a social enterprise working to empower women and youth by fostering inclusive growth in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.