

Succession planning is essential, but who's supposed to handle it?

By Ben C. Ochs

In a perfect world, companies would have successors identified and prepared for every role in the organization, from the front office to the front line. For key leadership roles, two or three candidates would be available. Employees would have clear and distinct paths to follow should they choose to stay on board, and though they might have choices in future roles, the route to each and the necessary preparation would be defined.

Does that happen often? No. Practically speaking, it is nearly impossible. Companies struggle with it all the time. There is, however, much that can be done to bring some clarity to the challenge. But whose job is it anyway? Is it the company's or the employee's? The answer is, well, yes.

There are lots of good ideas and strategies for designing succession plans. Much of the literature on the topic puts the onus on the company, usually through the human resources department. There are assessment plans, skill development exercises and matrices to marry cross-functional roles with goals and timing. There are recommendations for eliciting employee perspectives, but the process is usually presented as the responsibility of the company.

Too often employees look to the company expectantly with a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude. They want to know what sorts of futures the company has prepared for them. They even expect to be pursued, or at least approached with options and opportunities. Some get resentful if they haven't heard anything from the company for a while.

Put employees clearly in the driver's seat. Commit to sponsoring career planning internally or externally: full-fledged, formal career planning. Challenge employees right from the start to do some introspection that puts them on the spot to decide where they want to go and what they want to do.

What even the most cynical employees won't admit and often fail to recognize is that they don't know what they want to do, where they want to be or when. They reserve the right to claim that the company "doesn't care" or "lacks opportunity for growth" or worse, they want the company to present options they can judge and reject out of hand.

When they are guided through a well-designed career planning process and pressed to put something in writing about their anticipated or desired futures, employees benefit -- and so does the company. Employees realize that really thinking about their futures and making definitive statements about them can be difficult and sometimes threatening. It changes their attitudes about the company's efforts to plan on their behalf. The company benefits from knowing employees' interests.

Companies serve themselves well by having thorough, well-designed programs that aim to protect their futures. Deepening their bench strength brings stability to leadership planning.

Companies and employees are both responsible for succession planning. An investment in formal career planning for employees pays for itself by streamlining individual development plans, and it shifts accountability for employee futures to the employees.

Ben C. **Ochs** works with companies to improve the leadership skills of their executives and high-potential managers. He can be reached at bochs@palmeau.com.