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Leadership



**Cultivating
Next-Generation
Association
Leaders**
Page 10

**Trust-Building
Conversation is
Leadership Worth
Practicing**
Page 14

**Know Thyself:
The Emotionality
of Leadership**
Page 19

**ELEVATE 2018
Highlights**
Page 22

Cultivating *Next-Generation* Association Leaders



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What is your association doing to ensure that it has a talent pipeline for key positions, especially leadership positions? This article provides practical strategies for addressing succession and leadership development in a thoughtful, structured manner. The underlying assumption is that you want the association to be ready to tackle the challenges of the future and recognize the vital role that well-developed leadership talent plays in enabling that to happen.

Before we begin to discuss ways to lay your leadership pipeline, let us be clear about the rationale behind this effort. Mary Parker Follett was ahead of her time when she wrote: “Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders.” (Follett, 1924, p. 3)¹ Her contention that leaders must be focused on developing leaders is the premise of this article. The association leader’s talent management end game must move the organization further in advancing its strategy by cultivating skilled leadership. Here are three core elements of that end game:

1. Leadership development must create higher levels of commitment to the association, its mission and strategic intent.
2. Leadership development must engage high-potential employees in meaningful experiences that not only stimulates their intellectual curiosity but also advances the aims of the organization.
3. Leadership development must foster a culture of personal and professional accountability to learning and growth.

Initial Conversations

Assuming these three core elements are in place, you can begin devising a comprehensive approach to growing leaders able to position your association for the future. There is an important conversation you must have with each individual employee in your pipeline. Invest in strengthening the talent pool by surfacing three probative questions with your high-potential employees. These questions will require reflection. Here are the essential elements of the conversation:

1. Who are you?
2. Who are you working to become?
3. How can we collaborate on your path of becoming who you aspire to be?

Having this initial conversation is important because it lays the foundation for a more clear, well-defined developmental relationship. It also sets the stage for the reflective component of professional development. Not only will you be asking employees to reflect, you will be doing quite a bit of it, too. Another of the underlying assumptions of focusing on leadership development in the association is that growth happens for all involved parties.



Once you have started this initial conversation, you will need to assess three things about the employees you want to develop. The first is whether they are developmentally ready. While an employee may be a superstar in his domain, that does not mean that he has the maturity or commitment required to assume greater levels of leadership. Do not confuse technical proficiency with leadership potential. The second is whether they have an orientation toward learning and not just goal attainment. Starting a leadership development journey necessitates a willingness to learn about different disciplines, functions and approaches. The most successful participants in

developmental journeys are committed to their learning and growth. Third, and finally, is whether they have a high degree of self-awareness. Self-awareness is the first component of emotional intelligence. It aids in the development of a healthy self-concept. This ability to know oneself is essential to strengthening leadership competence.

Building Organizational Capabilities

Not only must the employee be developmentally ready, the association must also be capable on many different levels. Consider your organization's readiness and

capability for deep development of a strong pipeline.² Indications of this readiness and capability include having a clear knowledge of the skills and competencies required throughout the organization to execute strategy. Not only should you know what skills are needed, you would be well-served to have a plan for developing those competencies throughout the association. Your skill and talent development need to be well-aligned with the strategy that guides the association. Leadership development cannot exist in a vacuum. It must be linked to strategic intent.

Knowing the skills and competencies required enables



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the association to build even more capability by intentionally having a pool of next-generation leaders ready to take the helm. These leaders-in-waiting should represent the full range of diversity necessary for sustainable success. This includes obvious forms of diversity like race, gender, age, sexual orientation and national origin. It also extends to include diversity of thought, approach and experience. It is important to have a clear process for identifying, assessing and developing talent throughout the organization.

While skill assessment, alignment with strategy, and a viable diverse talent pool are important in building organizational capabilities, there are additional capabilities that have to be cultivated. Using developmental plans that are customized for each employee provides a clear, measurable framework for plotting a path to reach full potential. A comprehensive individual development plan should address career objectives, skill/competency development, learning goals, network expansion, and civic engagement. Certainly, there can be other elements based on the needs of the association. However, the items mentioned are the basis for a solid individual development plan. Managers and leaders at all levels should be using these plans with all employees as a talent-management strategy.

The Performance Conversation

Ensuring that all employees, particularly those being groomed for leadership, have developmental opportunities requires a focus on current and potential performance. Having regularly scheduled conversations, at least quarterly, ensures alignment between you and employees on performance goals and expectations. Be certain to discuss strengths, weaknesses and unexplored potential. Make sure this is a dialogue, not a one-way conversation. There are eight key areas of inquiry that can guide these conversations:

- Ability/Aptitude
- Interest
- Productivity
- Outcome Quality
- Relationships
- Aspiration

- Engagement
- Satisfaction

As you begin formulating questions about these areas of inquiry, consider that each question should spark reflection, dialogue and action. That action will ultimately advance the aims of the association. Do not limit your areas of inquiry to the eight items presented above. Consider additional areas of inquiry that you would like to explore and formulate probative questions related to them as well.

Potential Pitfalls

While we want our successors to soar, there are pitfalls that can get in the way. It is important to realistically acknowledge those obstacles and have ideas for moving beyond them. There are five obstacles that we will briefly consider. The first is diminishing engagement. While an employee may have been on fire for the association at one point during their tenure, that level of commitment and enthusiasm may have waxed and waned. It is important to use performance conversations and observations to determine when engagement is on the decline. The second is the failure to fulfill potential. A person's innate brilliance is not a predictor of what they will accomplish in the workplace. Pay close attention to whether gifted people are delivering mediocre results. Do not assume that potential and performance are always going to be aligned.

Derailment is the third obstacle. Any number of events, both personal and professional, can knock even the highest potential employee off track. Be attuned to the negative impact organizational politics can have on dampening the spirits of employees. Pay attention to their struggles so that they do not ultimately sabotage the success you seek. The fourth potential pitfall is unethical behavior or practices. It is important to attend to the elements of character that are essential for respectable leadership. Do not turn a blind eye to bad behavior. It sets the tone for character and culture throughout the organization. Finally, be alert for egos, arrogance and pride running amok. The association is not well-served by having egomaniacs at the helm. It is important to seek

behavior that is congruent with healthy values and an affirming, positive culture.

Summary

Ensuring your association has a talent pipeline able to face the future with confidence and competence involves identifying talented people ready to take on current and future business challenges. Once those high-potential contributors are identified, you can then move to having in-depth conversations that require reflection and promote higher levels of self-awareness. None of this work happens in isolation. There is an organizational context. It is important to assess the association's readiness to tackle leadership development in a proactive manner.

Formal tools like individual development plans create the structure required to frame activities that are congruent with the association's strategy and goals. Ongoing performance conversations also provide a structured method for building a pipeline of high-potential future leaders. These performance conversations should be targeted and promote dialogue.

Be alert to the potential pitfalls that may affect your decision on which employees are truly viable candidates for advancement and substantive investment. It is important to be discerning and identify the behaviors indicative of a problem. If those actions become pattern behaviors, it is time to reevaluate the person's true leadership potential.

1 Follett, M.P. (1924). *The Creative Experience*. New York: Longmans Green.

2 Adapted from "Make Your Company a Talent Factory," D.A. Ready & J.A. Conger, *Harvard Business Review*, June 2007.

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