

SUCCESSION PLANNING:
A ROADMAP FOR FUTURE LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

ARTICLE

by

Captain Robert Panza
Alhambra Police Department

Command College Class XXXIV

October 2003

Introduction

Leadership, training and planning are fundamental elements of any successful organization's strategy. Each of these topics has been the subject of a countless number of books on management and leadership. The focus of this article will be the combining of each of these efforts into what is arguably one of the most crucial responsibilities facing every leader today. The very survival of the organization may hinge upon how well this responsibility is carried out. The responsibility in question is that of preparing personnel to assume positions of leadership within the organization. This effort is typically referred to as succession planning and, as the term implies, involves those measures undertaken to identify, select, promote and train future leaders.

Vacancies within the leadership ranks of law enforcement agencies are as certain as death and taxes. What is often less certain, however, is the manner in which most organizations go about preparing their personnel for future advancement into supervisory, management and command level positions.

Preparation for career advancement is often viewed as the sole responsibility of the individual seeking upward mobility. A person's level of initiative and commitment may be called into question if he seeks organizational assistance or guidance along the way. Officers may be reluctant to seek career guidance out of concern that their advancement would be perceived as merely a result of their "fair-haired child" status.

Many law enforcement agencies are reluctant to provide their personnel with a roadmap to the top out of fear of being accused of gerrymandering the promotional process. In an attempt to alleviate any possibility of such an accusation and the litigation that is sure to follow, most organizations choose to avoid getting involved in what may be cynically perceived as providing an unfair boost up the organizational ladder. Many leaders within the law enforcement profession prefer to collectively sit on the sideline, relegated to spectator status as they anxiously wait to see who will emerge victorious in the battle for formal leadership positions.

Leadership is too important an undertaking to leave up to chance. Some may argue that those deserving of advancement will always rise to the top. Everyone, however, can readily picture one or more individuals in leadership positions whose reasons for being there defy logic and may even be detrimental to the organization's best interest. Luck, good karma and happenstance is not a good recipe for the selection of future law enforcement leaders.

The manner and method utilized to prepare individuals to take over the reins of law enforcement leadership in the future requires the establishment of a clear and cogent process. That process is referred to as succession planning. Succession planning, simply put, involves those measures undertaken to identify, select, promote and train future leaders.

Succession Planning: A Historical Perspective

Succession planning is neither unique to law enforcement nor a recently discovered phenomenon. Familial lineage was the preferred method of succession planning in the Old Testament. Whether it was vast empires or a mere pittance, kings and paupers alike passed their legacy from one generation to the next in what can only be described as succession planning.

America's forefathers believed that succession planning played so vital a role in a democracy that the blueprint for succession of presidential power was clearly articulated in Article II of the United States Constitution. Succession planning also plays a critically important role in military planning as well. Military doctrine clearly defines the order of succession should a leader become unable to continue serving, for whatever reason.

Private enterprise has likewise recognized the importance of succession planning. Many businesses, large and small, have enacted measures to ensure replenishment of top management and executive level positions. A corporation that has not taken any steps to identify and prepare individuals to take over leadership positions is always only a heartbeat away from potential ruin. A company's stock prices are often influenced by who may, or may not, be waiting in the wings to take over leadership of the firm.

Some forward thinking organizations in both the public and private sector have realized that succession planning is not optional, it's obligatory. Many have created training programs that clearly show employees what steps must be followed in order to ascend the corporate ladder. These organizations

understand and acknowledge the long-term investment that must be made in their employees. It benefits neither the employee nor the organization to obscure the route to the top.

California Law Enforcement: Is A Leadership Vacuum Emerging?

Law enforcement is unquestionably one of the most difficult and complex professions in existence. Societal trends clearly point to a future of increasing complexity for those entering the field of law enforcement. Terrorism, budget uncertainties, changing cultural mores, shifting societal and generational demographics are merely a few of the factors impacting current and future law enforcement professionals.

For many individuals entering the law enforcement profession, these uncertainties merely add further reasons to avoid formal leadership positions. The additional responsibility and commitment inherent with supervisory, management and executive level positions equate to less time with family and recreational pursuits. Future leadership positions may be difficult to fill if a pervasively negative perception of those positions exist within the minds of otherwise qualified law enforcement officers.

Retirement benefits for law enforcement personnel have continually improved throughout the years. Current retirement plans may allow a sworn public safety officer to retire at 90% of his salary with 30 years of service. For many, that means retiring at only 51 years of age. This has led to what has been

considered a mass exodus of law enforcement's most experienced, senior personnel of all ranks.

Recruitment for police chief and other executive level positions has become increasingly difficult as more and more qualified, senior managers opt to forego advancement into these superior positions. Retirement has become the goal of choice more so than ascension into the corner office. Current police chiefs often retire on Friday and return to work the following Monday as a retired annuitant simply because finding a qualified, willing replacement has become such a time-consuming, arduous undertaking.

Succession Planning: Where Do We Go From Here?

The time is at hand for law enforcement agencies to take a close, hard look at the way future leaders are being prepared for advancement within the organization. Every aspect of the promotional process must be closely examined and evaluated. In order for this to occur, a collaborative effort must be undertaken involving all levels of the organization. Frank and earnest discussions must take place between labor and management to overcome any long-festering suspicion or distrust.

A comprehensive, cogent succession plan begins with a clear articulation of the organization's leadership expectations. These expectations are the cornerstone of any succession plan in much the same way as one circles their desired destination on a roadmap. Once the destination or desired outcome is

identified and clearly understood by all affected participants or stakeholders, the journey to that destination becomes easier and more logical.

As with a roadmap, certain milestones or benchmarks must be crossed or achieved on the way to the destination. Succession planning milestones include training, mentoring and practical experience that gives participating stakeholders the confidence-building experience needed on their journey to the top. This also gives decision makers within the organization an opportunity to evaluate performance along the way. The experience garnered through a succession planning program should give both the participant and the organization an accurate forecast of future performance.

Merely providing an outline of training and experiential requirements for aspiring leaders to follow is not a succession plan. These elements are typically found in what many agencies refer to as a Training Master Plan. These plans are limited in scope and usually are one dimensional documents that are rarely updated or reviewed.

Organizational commitment is another essential component of a succession plan. It is imperative to clearly state what organizational measures, means and resources will be committed in furtherance of succession planning efforts. Training, for instance, is an integral component of succession planning. Training is also typically one of the first areas to be reduced or eliminated during times of difficult fiscal constraint. Decision makers must be committed to succession planning and that commitment must be continually demonstrated through a commensurate level of prioritization. Department policies and

procedures must be reviewed in order to ensure they take the succession planning program into account.

Succession planning involves a combination of formal training curriculum, practical experience and mentoring. Each component is designed to build upon the other. Formal training provides the academic foundation while the practical experience reinforces what was learned in the classroom. The mentoring component is arguably the most important element as it allows an interactive learning process to occur between the mentor and the succession planning participant. Mentors have the ability to either boost a participant's leadership desire or extinguish it completely. It is therefore critically important that mentors be chosen carefully and that those chosen fully understand their role in helping shape future organizational leaders.

Does One Size Fit All?

It is important to understand the role succession planning has in any organization. Succession planning may be adapted to appropriately fit any size law enforcement agency, regardless of how big or small it may be. The size of the agency will dictate how much upward mobility participants may be afforded. Succession planning participants are not, however, limited to moving up only within the ranks of their current agency. As a result of succession planning efforts, participants will be better qualified to compete for outside management, command and executive level positions. The entire law enforcement profession

will benefit from individual agency's succession planning programs by raising the preparation and training level of future leaders.

Succession planning is not intended to prepare only those interested in future advancement to formal leadership positions. Succession planning programs can be utilized to ensure that personnel are equipped and trained for future assignments into specialized details such as narcotics, traffic or investigations. The same concept and methods can be used for any succession planning purpose.

A comprehensive succession plan integrates all aspects of an organization's promotional process. Every detail including minimum qualifications, testing standards and probationary period must be taken into consideration. The promotional process must complement the succession plan. The succession plan must prepare the participant for the position, not just the promotional process. Organizational efforts that focus merely on improving promotional test-taking skills, but fail to provide leadership development training, may find their efforts detrimental to both their personnel and the organization as a whole.

Ongoing evaluation of an organization's succession plan is crucial to ensuring the program is meeting its intended goals. An objective evaluation process involves a comprehensive examination of the pros and cons that participants and other stakeholders are deriving from the program. Continual and routine assessments will also allow for periodic program adjustments and revisions.

Conclusion

Time stands still for no one. Each moment that passes brings an organization closer to the inevitable dilemma of having to find qualified, trained and willing replacements for executive, command, management and supervisory personnel. Some organizations are in the enviable position of having a seemingly inexhaustible pool of candidates to draw from. For these agencies, leadership replenishment is not an issue. For the vast majority of California law enforcement agencies, however, identifying, selecting, promoting and training future leaders is an investment that is often overlooked or never pursued to the fullest extent possible.

Succession planning is a strategy organizations can utilize to ensure that future leaders are prepared to take over the reins of leadership. Whether leadership opportunities arise methodically over time or occur suddenly without warning, the need for future leaders remains assured and never-ending. Succession planning is a method organizations can utilize to enhance employee development and ensure that the future of the organization will be in the hands of the best prepared, most qualified leaders possible.