

Prepare for Sudden Departures

by Jeff Freedman

7/25/2005

Question: How can I quickly backfill my best manager if he or she unexpectedly leaves my organization?

Answer: Start today. Identify your business's critical roles, and then proactively assess, discuss and develop your top talent. Also, decide the balance of recruiting exceptional external candidates and promoting from within.

Too many organizations wait until it is too late and one of their top managers gets "hit by the bus," so to speak. Perhaps it's a better job elsewhere, early retirement, or caring for a family member. In all cases, avoiding the significant disruption and risk often associated with the loss of an excellent leader is preventable. There are three key actions you can take:

- Link talent and succession planning to your three- to five-year business strategy.
- Institutionalize and execute a formal talent planning process.
- Be relevant, tough and realistic.

Start by engaging the chief executive officer/president, senior leadership and the board. Demonstrate how a formalized talent planning process is critical to executing your business strategy.

Exceptional leaders shape critical outcomes, including customer loyalty, an engaged work force and profitability. Ideally, you want several "ready now" replacements for every critical leadership role. These are versatile individuals with the technical and leadership skills to succeed today in one or more of your most important positions.

Benchmark talent-planning processes in other organizations and industries. Find key elements that fit with your company's size, business and culture. This process should be consistent, fair and repeatable. It should help you assess organizational needs and individuals, output timely leadership actions (e.g., expanded/new role, re-deploy), and be aligned with your core human resources processes (e.g., compensation and performance management).

Lastly, recognize this is not an overnight fix. It can take years to execute the

required combination of internal developmental job assignment moves and hiring the best talent you can afford for key roles. You must also build the discipline to raise the bar, and develop and promote top talent while addressing poor performers who do not deliver results.

Again, start today. Growth companies have a talent mind-set. Ensure that if one of your best managers suddenly leaves, you have several others who have the experience, skills and relationships to step in now and keep delivering results.

Written by Jeff Freedman, president of ClearPath Alliance, a San Diego-based organizational effectiveness firm (www.clearpathalliance.com).

San Diego Business Journal, Copyright © 2005, All Rights Reserved.