

2020 made it clear: Succession planning isn't optional

Cheryl Hyatt, Co-Founding Partner and CEO, Hyatt-Fennell, Executive Search
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Having a succession plan in place is vital to the stability of your institution's ongoing success—here are 4 key focus areas for strong succession planning.

2020 brought an unprecedented wave of early retirements on campuses. This unanticipated contingency highlights the importance of succession planning for institutions. Succession planning is the essential practice of identifying and developing leaders within your organization for their advancement. Successful succession planning yields a stronger workforce and better long-term outcomes. Institutions must not bank exclusively on a few key leaders.

A robust [organization](#) has capable leaders at all levels of its structure. If your college had a sudden departure of a key institutional or departmental leader, would there be other employees willing to fill and capable of filling the gap? If the stability of your organization rests in a small number of individuals, your institution is vulnerable.

Just as 2020 should be a cautionary tale for employers, it has also been a wake-up call for employees.

Many individuals are considering their career paths with renewed scrutiny. The pandemic has caused them to question their assumptions and reevaluate their goals. Whether it's a layoff in the midst of a challenging year or the shift to working from home, employees are evaluating what matters to them. Individuals want to be engaged in meaningful work. They want to see clear paths for growth and success.

Succession planning brings value for employees and employers alike. Employers benefit from stability and growth. Employees are more motivated, engaged, and committed when they see an investment in the development of their career and skills.

In my role consulting with private colleges and universities, I see far too many institutions that put off succession planning. They know they should get to it and they will—eventually. It's something they know they should incorporate but find it daunting, particularly when there is

always a pressing crisis requiring attention. Endlessly kicking the can down the road can prove disastrous when an institution is left without the necessary leadership infrastructure.

Implementing or enhancing succession planning can be undertaken in approachable steps. There are four areas you can consider today to strengthen the outlook of your organization tomorrow.

1. Employee on-boarding. An employee's early days can shape their long-term success with your institution. Does your new-hire training introduce new employees to your organization's heritage, values, and vision? Does it invite them to picture themselves as part of that future? Properly done, orientation communicates organizational culture and charts a path for success. Cast your vision in a way that highlights how your institution thrives through the growth and contribution of each employee. Illustrate who you are and how they fit with your mission.

2. Clear position descriptions. Employees can plateau or stagnate in their allotted positions. Each role in an organization should have an articulated list of skills needed to succeed and grow. Regular performance reviews should provide employees feedback and invite them to set strategic goals. Create an institutional culture of forward momentum. Supervisors should be invested in their employees' success, not threatened by it.

3. Development of soft skills. The skills an individual needs to excel as a leader include problem-solving, communication, and people skills. In addition to providing outlets for employees to continue to develop their industry and technical skills, foster opportunities to grow and develop holistically. Seminars, workshops, and interdepartmental programs are all avenues you can use to strengthen your employees' soft skills.

4. Mentoring programs. Pairing an established leader with a new employee not only helps the new employee develop skills and feel more invested in the organization, it also prompts employees with longevity to remember why they are passionate about what they do. Mentorship programs strengthen institutional culture and spur innovation.

The turbulence we've experienced throughout the pandemic will continue to have ripple effects for years to come, underscoring the importance of resilient leadership. Succession planning empowers employees to become invested in your organization over the long-term.

When they thrive, you thrive.

Employers must foster institutional culture, recognize achievement, and reward innovation. It is short-sighted for a college or university to focus exclusively on the success of a handful of high-profile leaders. Strong leaders at every level of an organization provide a structure for success.

Cheryl Hyatt is the co-founding partner and CEO of [Hyatt – Fennell, Executive Search](#) and president and owner of The Charitable Resources Group, Inc.