

How to Build Leaders

WHEN DEVELOPING A
PIPELINE OF LEADERS,
ONE SIZE DOES NOT
FIT ALL

By Lisa Brown

The large business schools—Stanford, UCLA, Wharton, Chicago Booth, MIT and others—all have executive development programs in one form or another. But after a student graduates and is in the real world, do companies continue that type of laser focus on leadership planning? The answer is mostly yes, but the methods vary.

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ROBIN WECKESSER
a3 Workplace Strategies



In preparing the next generation for leadership roles, some companies use the term succession planning or development for more defined programs. Absent a formal program, companies may use words such as mentoring, molding or, simply, grooming. Some don’t have it on the radar at all until the situation presents itself.

Even before getting to the promotion and succession planning stage, David Poline, president and CEO of the Atlanta office of Poline Associates, says companies must be intentional when they hire by focusing on both the immediate job need as well as the long-term development of the candidate they are hiring. Overall job satisfaction matters to millennials and a key part of the level of satisfaction is the culture of the company and how that culture aligns with an individual’s personality.

“We see a rising trend with companies assessing the personality as well as the work preferences and basic job skills of potential candidates using standardized assessment tools,” Poline tells REAL ESTATE FORUM. “Oftentimes, these same assessments can be utilized on a post-hire basis for career development purposes as well as identifying areas where an employee can assume leadership roles. The ability of a company to understand the personality traits of their employees and put them in positions where they will be satisfied and excel is key to retention and the growth of future leaders.”

Robin Weckesser, founder and principal of a3 Workplace Strategies, has long valued the importance of molding future industry leaders. He says the process starts with recruiting top talent who are the right fit—in other words, they have a balance of character, skillsets and an entrepreneurial thought process.

“Leadership training is particularly important in today’s corporate real estate environment, where the stakes are so high and technology is changing so quickly,” Weckesser says. “Every good manager should nurture their associates to bring out the best in them, maximizing their production and opportunities for the enterprise to thrive. Our job is to create workplaces that will give clients a competitive edge, responding to their cultures and brands and that requires exceptional leadership, dedicated managers and seamless communication.”

Throughout levels of hiring and molding, companies should always be thinking about succession with a well-crafted plan that is evaluated annually, says Poline.

And, an unplanned exit is a time when a well-devised cross-training program folded into that plan can provide immediate benefits.

“Even with the most loyal employees, the unexpected can happen,” he tells FORUM. “Having a well thought-out plan of succession in advance will help ease the shocks that come with unexpected changes. For every role that requires an experienced person, be prepared with more than one option to fill the void.”

A cross-training program that rotates younger associates through multiple divisions as well as various levels of leadership within the company is a way to propel young talent into leadership roles, Poline says. This type of program delivers several benefits for the new associate, including exposure to a variety of potential career paths as well as hands-on education about the company’s business, operations, vision and values.

“It also offers an immediate opportunity to start building internal relationships across the firm and instills a feeling of being valued,” he says. “These foundational benefits can shape young associates into loyal employees and eventual company leaders.”

Scott Meadows, who directs the business strategy for Wheeler/Brand, agrees with the importance of leadership cultivation. “Succession planning is essential. Without it, companies stall when future leaders fail to emerge. Several simple tactics make this task more manageable: Require each department head to annually rank employees and identify potential leaders. Cultivate those identified as potential leaders and scale a mentoring or training program that aligns with their experience, skills, personalities and goals. Invite employees to volunteer to champion a company initiative such as partnering with a charitable organization or internal team-building initiative. Who volunteers might just surprise you!”

Brandi Popovich, director at RETS Associates, concurs, saying long-term molding is a process that includes a proving period before beginning the retention process. While this is something that instant-gratification millennials may chafe at, nearly all companies require it. Following this period, a company will “bubble wrap” an employee, she says.

“This involves compensation and communication to protect them from the competition. Organizations that are doing it well are sitting down with key players to tell them they are valued and in line for

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DAVID LINK
NorthMarq Capital



key positions. Top companies have transparent mentoring teams in place from the beginning so employees know they are on a track,” Popovich says.

For David Link, senior vice president and managing director, it’s a process he’s lived for the past 18 months while transitioning into the senior managing director role at NorthMarq Capital’s Denver office. Denver managing director Steve Bye announced his retirement after more than 40 years with the company. Link was promoted to managing director in 2015 and has been taking on an increasing share of the leadership responsibility since then.

Link tells FORUM, “Folks in the real estate business are aging out. It is important to find people with a fire in their belly to backfill these positions.”

Of the 36 NorthMarq Capital offices, almost half have the potential for a leadership change due to retirement. NorthMarq Capital has worked to create smooth transitions for clients and employees by developing a comprehensive succession plan. Rather than focus on when the managing director might retire, the company instead focuses on developing junior managing directors through training and mentoring. The best-case scenarios are when the two leaders have 18 months to two years to prepare for the transition.

A key aspect of NorthMarq’s succession planning process, developed by presidents Jeff Weidell and William Ross, has the two directors dividing the workload on a 75/25 basis and then migrating toward 50/50, with the final outcome of sharing the workload before the outgoing managing director leaves. This type of transition is encouraged prior to the retirement to set the stage for relationship transfers, both on the lender (investor) side and the client side, allowing everyone time to adjust to the shift and make any adjustments before a full changeover.

In terms of mentoring, Weckesser draws from his teaching experience. “I apply some of the same mentoring techniques that were part of my approach when I was teaching organizational management. I liked to develop learning outcomes through interaction and reaching solutions together with my students, and this applies to my management style today as I promote collaboration with my staff. I also think it’s important to have an open mind and learn from your associates. The learning process is iterative and, as such, the path is often filled with turns, successes and failures. I believe in

engaging staff so they feel they are part of the final solution. This contributes to an overall sense of ownership and empowerment.”

For Trammell Crow Co., mentoring is a built-in part of the process. New hires are woven into the fabric of the company through a program called Trammell Crow Connections, which pairs newer professionals with principals from other business units. This allows principals to mentor, share insights, build networks and serve as a sounding board for any matters on which the non-principal may want to get a broader perspective. Now in its fourth year, TCC Connections has proven to be a valuable experience for both new people as well as participating principals who benefit from the varied business unit perspectives.

In addition, Trammell Crow works with parent company CBRE in talent evaluation exercises to identify future leaders and the skills that those people may need to round out their leadership experiences and abilities. Michael S. Duffy, chief operating officer of Trammell Crow, says the company has two additional initiatives to encourage the grooming and mentoring of professionals for leadership roles.

The diversity and inclusion initiative provides everyone with the opportunity to succeed, values the differences of each individual and recognizes contributions to the firm’s success, Duffy outlines. In addition, the TCC women’s network connects women to offer a support system, provide professional development and empower them to ensure long-term retention within the company, says Duffy.

Beginning with the new hire from outside the company and through the molding, retention and promotion stage, one thing is certain: the need for filling top-level positions with good people has not changed. Whether companies practice ongoing succession planning or a more ad hoc approach, the methods for accomplishing this task are as varied as each company.

While companies do take on a significant part of the burden when it comes to retention and promotion, the onus also falls to the individual employee to stay relevant and promotion-worthy. For this, Popovich agrees with Link’s use of the “fire in the belly” analogy.

“Future managers must stay hungry and chomping at the bit to compete,” she says. “Tenacity trumps relationships.” ♦

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