

Succession Planning: Avoiding the 21st Century Version of Healthcare Recruiting Musical Chairs

Do you have a succession plan? If not, you are playing the 21st century version of musical chairs. And the odds of winning the game are not in your favor.

The Game

When we were growing up, a common party game was musical chairs. You remember - eleven children at the party, 10 chairs, the music starts, we all marched around the chairs, the music stops, and one child is left without a chair. In the healthcare industry the game is different. We still play musical chairs - even though we may not recognize it or admit it. In the 21st century version of healthcare musical chairs, there are still ten chairs, but only eight players. When the music stops, all eight players are sitting in their assigned seats and two chairs are empty. When the next round starts, a player decides to leave the game. This is how the search for clinical middle management talent is developing. Middle managers include: managers, supervisors, assistant directors, associate directors and directors.

The Evidence

And it doesn't much matter which clinical specialty we are talking about. There are recognized and well reported shortages in the nursing, pharmacy, technologist, and therapist professions. The American Society of Health Systems Pharmacists found that 46% of the hospitals surveyed said it took 3 to 6 months to fill management positions; 26% said it took 7 to 12 months to fill management positions and more than 50% said recruiting is more difficult than it was 3 years ago. Experiences with other healthcare professionals are similar.

There are many reasons given to explain the shortage in qualified clinical middle managers. Reasons include:

- Middle management reductions (de-layering) as a cost reduction initiative, which reduced the number of candidates for management positions;
- Shortages in the professional ranks;
- Aging workforce;
- Less interest in management positions for various reason:
 - Nature of the work
 - Time commitment to do the work
 - Compensation

Understanding the reasons for the shortage of qualified middle management candidates is important from a historical perspective (How did we get here?), but what is more important is finding qualified candidates to fill the vacant middle management positions and finding them in a timely manner. While we may all agree that talent is important to organizational effectiveness, talent is also becoming a scare resource.

The Solution

Every organization should have and implement a talent enhancement strategy, which includes:

- Completing a succession plan for all middle management positions in the organization
- Supplementing the succession plan with projected future needs based on growth strategies or new service / program initiatives
- Identifying gaps
- Creating a plan to fill the gaps
- Executing the plan
- Evaluating plan effectiveness
- Updating and revising the plan as required

A succession plan should identify all middle managers within the organization and identify viable candidates to fill these positions. There are many reasons a manager leaves. Some are predictable; some are not. Examples include: accepting a job in another organization; moving to a different part of the country for personal or family-related reason; illness; accidents. The reasons vary and this is only a short list. It is because of the unpredictability factor that viable candidates should be identified for all manager positions. The succession plan should also include new positions that are anticipated due to growth, new programs or other initiatives that require management support.

Creating a succession plan reveals gaps. There should be a process to fill the gaps. A common mistake organizations make is to dismiss the need to identify a successor for a new manager or a manager who is 5 years or more years from retirement. Any manager can leave at any time for any reason.

When developing a plan to fill the gaps, the following should be considered:

- Identifying high potential individuals within the department or service area
- Identifying high potential individuals within the organization but not in the department or service area
- Recruiting high potential individuals and preparing them for a future leadership position

Executing a succession plan involves more than identifying individuals to fill management positions. It requires preparing them to fill management positions. In the late 70's, 80's and early 90's, departments had deeper layers of management than they have today. Assistants and associates could move to leadership positions within the organization or could be recruited to fill a leadership position in another organization. There are fewer candidates with this background today. Organizations must take positive steps to prepare future leaders realizing that creating "leader in waiting" positions is not a viable option.

Some actions to consider are:

- Creating formal and informal educational initiatives for high potential middle manager candidates:
 - Targeted course work at a college or university
 - Advanced degree programs
 - Internal "residency" programs

- Seminars
- Conferences
- Professional association sponsored programs
- E-learning
- Giving assignments that demonstrate skills and enable the candidate to learn new skills and develop skills that will be required by middle managers in your organization;
- Conduct semi-annual reviews that focus on:
 - Skills learned
 - Skills demonstrated
 - Skills to be learned
 - What went well
 - What can be done better

Candidates identified as high potential future managers would continue in their current job: clinical pharmacist, charge nurse, microbiology manager. They would, however, agree to participate in a management development initiative, and as such work with the program director and a mentor to identify how best they can improve their skills and competence. The specifics of each candidate's program may be different depending on their skill, education and work experience. What will not be different is the focus on developing internal candidates to fill middle manager positions.

Summary

Succession planning should be the way healthcare organizations address talent enhancement. Making it a program immediately labels it as something that may stop or get cut in a budget downturn. Programs stop; they get eliminated. Imbedding it into the fabric of the organization creates: this is the way we do business around here. When it becomes part of the culture (i.e. the way we do business) it doesn't stop.

Planning for your future is critically important and one of the most important factors in having effective clinical leadership continuity. Can you afford to play the 21st century version of healthcare musical chairs? What will your organizational chart look like when the music stops?

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Tony Kubica & Sara LaForest are co-founders of Kubica & LaForest Consulting and the Growth without Sabotage™ model for performance and organizational improvement.

The information presented is based on the ideas and concepts presented in their forthcoming book on the damaging effects of self-sabotaging behaviors in business

We can be reached at:

KUBICA & LAFOREST CONSULTING

132 Governors Drive

Warwick, RI 02018

(401)595 7485; (907)229-7948

www.growthwithoutsabotage.com

tony@growthwithoutsabotage.com

sara@growthwithoutsabotage.com