

Avoid the Five Most Common *Succession Management Mistakes*



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An assistant general manager at one of your airport locations just gave notice. She's leaving for personal reasons and tomorrow is her last day. Is the "right" person ready to step in? And how do you know they're the "right" person?

Let's assume that your top store manager is ready to fill the job. Who will fill the open position left by that store manager? Will that store's revenues suffer when the manager leaves?

Succession management is the ongoing process of ensuring that you have top leadership candidates in your bullpen at all times, ready to step in when key managers leave. Effective succession management systems are insurance policies for your company, protecting it from gaps left by management turnover.

In the hectic, fast-changing airport retail environment, strong leadership is the glue that holds together the location's performance. Companies that don't have a strong process for identifying, developing and promoting emerging leaders will always be struggling to fill open management positions, and keep them filled with the right people. This presents a particular problem in airport retailing,

where it's already a challenge to recruit and retain people who are willing and able to work in the airport environment.

To strengthen your management bullpen and ensure that it's constantly full, avoid the following common succession management mistakes.

MISTAKE #1:

Assuming that your best front-line employees will make great managers

Leading and doing require different competencies. If you profiled your best "career" manager and your best "career" salesperson, you'd find that they have different strengths, motivations and skills. For example, a retail salesperson may excel when working one-on-one with customers in a small, controlled environment (such as a single store location), because he loves helping people and working on one task at a time (such as stocking shelves). However, promote him to manager and suddenly he finds himself dealing with personnel issues, team scheduling conflicts, airport logistics problems, and juggling multiple priorities. He has less time left for what he loves to do, and what he's good at, which is helping customers. Inevitably, he either fails as a manager or quits. Now you've lost a great salesperson and you have an open management position.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Perform a job analysis and profile the competencies (knowledge, skills, personal traits and motivations) of your best managers and front-line employees. Use this profile rigorously as a measuring stick to assess all job candidates, including potential successors. This provides you with an objective picture of who the right people are for each position.

MISTAKE #2:

Assuming that once promoted, successors are "ready to go" without support

Many companies have strong leadership development programs and invest heavily in getting people "ready" for their next career step, only to let them sink or swim once they're in the new

leadership position. A "ready" successor may crash and burn once promoted if they don't have a solid support network and coaching to help them transition to their new responsibilities.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

To get a return on the investment you've made, make sure that every successor, when selected for a promotion, has a comprehensive transition plan in place. No matter how talented or confident the person is, she'll need support in making the transition. Even if the leader is simply moving from a small market to a larger one, she'll need coaching and support. What is different about the new market? What challenges may arise that the person isn't prepared for? Where can the leader turn for coaching if the transition isn't going smoothly? What ongoing development might the person need to be successful long-term? Make sure that your transition plan answers such questions.

MISTAKE #3:

Assuming that what made a great manager in the past, still applies

What was required of leaders a few months or years ago may be different today. Yet many companies use old leadership profiles to identify successors. Any change in the marketplace, business structure or workplace environment may impact what is required of your leaders. For example, changing airport security regulations cause hassles for travelers and retail employees, which causes the number of complaints and conflicts in stores to rise. As a result, airport retail managers may find themselves addressing more customer service and employee issues than in the past, and the escalation level of these issues may be higher. A manager who was promoted because she was strong operationally, but was weaker in dealing with employment issues and customer complaints, may struggle in the new environment.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Every time you have an open leadership position or work on succession planning,



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ask: What will the successor need that the incumbent didn't need? What has changed in the marketplace, business structure and the position itself that may impact leadership requirements?

MISTAKE #4:

Failing to explore candidates' motivations and interests

As an employer, you can give people information. You can place them in situations that build their experience and knowledge. You can provide them with skill training, but you can't "train" people to be motivated or interested in their jobs. The number one reason people fail in new jobs isn't a lack of skill or knowledge. It's poor fit between the characteristics of the job and the individual's motivations, interests or natural talents.

Managing in an airport retail environment requires a unique type of person, according to Les Russell, vice president of human resources, The Paradies Shops.

Airport retail managers must "love" building relationships, not just with customers and employees, but also with other airport staff and management. Managers who aren't willing to build and sustain these relationships will have difficulty getting things done and quickly burn out. Successful managers are also comfortable with the complexities of leading in the airport environment. For example, at a big box retailer, a truck backs up to the back door with merchandise. This is a relatively simple process compared to the logistical challenges of moving merchandise from a truck, through the airport, to the store shelf. A person who doesn't enjoy planning, coordination and logistics management won't be happy or successful in airport retail management.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

When identifying successors for leadership positions, always ask yourself, "To be successful, what must the new leader love?" "What must they be passionate about?" "What personality traits will derail a leader in this job?" To answer these questions, look back at leaders who have been successful and those who have failed. What motivations and traits did the stellar performers have in common? What did those who failed have in common?

When approaching potential successors, be sure to explore their motivations and interests to ensure they're a match for the targeted leadership position. Be candid about the position's rewards and

challenges, or better yet, put them into situations that allow them to experience the job's challenges first-hand. The right successor candidates will be excited, not put off, by the challenges.

MISTAKE #5:

Viewing Succession Planning as an event

Many companies take their eye off the ball when it comes to succession management. They craft a succession plan they feel comfortable with, put a leadership development program in place, but don't do much to keep it updated or monitor its effectiveness.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Give your succession management system a checkup on a regular basis, to ensure that it doesn't collect dust and become outdated. Given the speed at which business changes, this can happen in just a few months.

According to Dr. Jay Conger, professor of organizational behavior at the London Business School and author of the book, *Building Leaders: How Successful Companies Develop the Next Generation*: "The best (succession management) systems incorporate frequent checkpoints throughout the year. These checkpoints monitor who is where and where the person should be going next. A checkpoint function is built into the system to spot a problem before it becomes a problem." Conger observes that succession management is so important that "the best practitioners don't ignore this function for even a quarter."

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