

# Don't Overlook Your Best Successor

Are you making any of these fatal mistakes?

By Joseph C. Santora

**B**oards rarely consider seconds-in-command as replacements for departing CEOs. They tend to seek outsiders to fill the CEO position rather than turning to an insider—an experienced person with a working relationship with the organization.

Why would boards follow such a policy? One likely reason is the outsider's potential to change the organization's direction through a strategic imperative. Sometimes the board feels that only an outsider can effect dramatic change in a stodgy organization. Or perhaps board members think an external candidate will bring political clout to the organization. But usually the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of incumbent CEOs who, consciously or unconsciously, place several obstacles in the paths of their seconds-in-command.

It's extremely rare for one charismatic leader to succeed another.

## Long Reigning CEOs with No Deadline in Sight

Many CEOs act as if they'll live forever. They give little thought to the negative parts of the work-life cycle: getting ill, retiring, or even dying on the job. In a word, they believe they're *invincible*. The longer they're in power, the more power they attain, and the more fiercely they seek to protect that power. Thus, they rarely introduce leadership succession planning to their boards.

Especially guilty are organizational founders: They're the least willing to tackle this issue. They can't envision "their" organizations existing without them. In their view, there's no need for succession planning.

Unlike businesses, which usually set a mandatory retirement age, nonprofits rarely prepare a realistic



timetable for the CEO's departure. Nonprofit CEOs often say, "I'll retire when I'm no longer effective." Forget this cavalier comment. Personal assessments are inflated indicators of performance; we all think highly of ourselves. Without a realistic plan for the future, CEOs who are reluctant to step down do serious and even irreparable harm to their organizations; they prevent organizational development and growth *sans* their special brand of leadership. Such actions offer seconds-in-command little chance for professional development.

### Psychological Factors Causing Damage

CEO personality contributes to the problem. Too many CEOs retain all the glory for organizational accomplishments and are unwilling to share accolades with staff members. Many can't believe that anyone could replace them, and they drive away any potential successor. Some even manufacture crises to prove how vital they are to the organization's survival. Such insecure, egocentric CEOs create unbridgeable barriers to the advancement of seconds-in-command.

Limited exposure to the board is the death knell for seconds-in-command.

### Being Too Close May Be Dangerous

Seconds-in-command must overcome an unhealthy identification with the incumbent. Too close a relationship between the CEO and second-in-command prevents a board from distinguishing between the two. The second-in-command is viewed as the CEO's clone. On the surface, such a relationship may seem appealing; however, it becomes a major impediment for the second-in-command when

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board members want to introduce organizational and strategic change. They view the second-in-command as someone who will prolong the status quo.

### Not Allowing a Relationship with the Board

CEOs create a major obstacle for seconds-in-command when they bar them from active participation in board affairs. Limited exposure to the board is the death knell for seconds-in-command. When they're prevented from preparing board packets, attending board meetings, and informing board members about new organizational initiatives, they remain an unknown entity to the board. When the succession process begins, therefore, board members don't consider seconds-in-command as viable candidates for the vacant CEO position.

### Casting Too Large a Shadow

CEOs often throw a final roadblock in the way of a second-in-command. Some CEOs, especially charismatic ones, give a larger-than-life appearance and cast a large shadow. Working in the shadow of a charismatic CEO is unhealthy for current and future organizational performance. It creates an almost impossible hurdle for any second-in-command to clear. The second-in-command continues to be measured against the incumbent, who stands in the limelight and makes it virtually impossible for organizational stakeholders to view the second-in-command as a successor. Unless the CEO makes a point of grooming the second-in-command, stakeholders will seek a charismatic leader to replace the incumbent — an attempt that's doomed to fail, for it's extremely

rare for one charismatic leader to succeed another. The consequence is loss of talented leadership for the organization.

### The Remedy

Unfortunately, many organizations are led by obstructionist CEOs. They remain intoxicated with their own self-importance and power, too insecure to groom a second-in-command to succeed them, and indifferent about creating a healthy organizational environment. When CEOs throw obstacles in the path of seconds-in-command, they automatically exclude them from the succession process. As a result, seconds-in-command often leave their organizations and create a serious organizational void.

Especially guilty are organizational founders.

Secure CEOs who care about creating a strong organizational legacy support their seconds-in-command, give them chances to learn and grow, and nurture their unique leadership abilities. They tell the board about the accomplishments of seconds-in-command, encourage seconds-in-command to interact with the board, and put mechanisms in place to ensure that their seconds-in-command get a chance to make it to the top. ■

### Resources

Carver, John, "The Founding Parent Syndrome," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 5.

Mason, David, "How to Live with a Charismatic Leader," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 5.

Peck, David, "Choosing a CEO: The Board's Six Biggest Mistakes," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 2.

*These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members).*

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