

Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow



Here's how to
keep succession
planning on the
front burner.

By Michael H. Shenkman

Hal, the executive director of a nonprofit organization (not his real name), recently contacted a professional mentoring service. He had never considered how such a service might help him — until the day his board of directors caught him by surprise.

Hal had planned the board meeting down to the last detail. And it had gone well. His plans for the quarter were on track, and his strategic plan for the next 18 months still made sense. So Hal was feeling good. Then, from the other end of the table, his closest friend on the board raised his hand. “Dave,” Hal nonchalantly said, acknowledging his request to speak.

“Hal, great job today. I think we’re all ready for a drink!” There was laughter from the group, but Hal suddenly felt less at ease. “But Hal, I was just wondering, who’s in the wings to succeed you? Even

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you won’t live forever, and you probably want to hit the golf course while you can still walk.” More laughter. “So who do you have in line to lead our organization?”

Hal’s mind went blank. But, keeping his composure, he managed to respond, “Dave, great question. You know, I’ve been thinking about that...”

Now another board member chimed in: “You planning to leave, Hal?” Again, laughter.

“No, but, you know, succession is part of my job. I guess it suddenly became a higher priority.”

And in fact, this incident motivated Hal to seek a professional mentoring service. He finally figured out how mentoring fit into his strategic plans.

Succession Planning: A Job for the Top

Yes, succession planning is the executive director’s job, but one that’s often put off till another day. “After all, there are other, more immediate things to do,” the executive thinks. And, of course, that’s absolutely right. Managing a nonprofit organization is a complex job. The demands for efficiency, for productivity, for innovation — each one an absorbing challenge — are unrelenting.

Yet, as Hal looked around the room at the senior officers who had joined him for this pivotal board meeting, he realized he didn’t know if there was a successor among them. It wasn’t that he hadn’t thought about it; he had actually taken some steps toward that end. He had dined out, for example, one-on-one, with all his top officers. But those conversations focused

either on specific organizational issues (which Hal took the lead in solving) or were purposely kept social. So Hal still didn't know whether any of his staffers could take over were he to be hit by the proverbial bus.

Hal's situation is far from unusual. Succession planning is usually taken seriously but not considered urgent. Yet it doesn't take a sudden death to make the issue critical. Sometimes the director leaves for another job with no one groomed to succeed. Or the leader may take a sabbatical or come down with a chronic illness. As a result, several new directors may come and go in a short time if there isn't a pipeline of prepared successors.

Few executive officers poo-poo the idea of succession planning; it's just that they don't get to it amid the tumult of a normal day. Even when time is taken to go to dinner or meet with high-potential candidates, the conversation is usually restricted to unrevealing subjects: problems with meeting the numbers, problems with a troublesome employee, or social items. In the typical one-on-one performance review, there's usually so much angling for decisions around bonuses, raises, promotions, or disciplinary issues that a conversation on growing as a leader hardly happens at all. Thus, despite good intentions, few occasions help detect nascent leaders or signal optimal choices for a successor.

This is no fault of the searching executive director. The ability to lead doesn't always present itself in the same way managerial prowess does. For that reason, mentoring, not just managing, matters in the succession-planning arena.

Why Mentoring Matters

A mentoring relationship requires a different focus than managing. Consider the following interactions that occur in mentoring and *not* in managing. As you'll see, they are qualitatively different from a manager's usual interactions:

Mentors hear the quiet stirrings

of leadership. When top managers ask, "Who are my potential leaders?", they look at the people pleasing them, getting things done. Most executive directors are determined to spur results now, to keep costs down, to keep people focused on their tasks, so they don't necessarily look at the people who are quietly asking, "Shouldn't I be doing more?"

Yet often, the call to lead emerges in subtle ways, making it possible to miss good prospects.

Mentors aren't coaches.

Sometimes the prospects themselves don't recognize that a drive to lead is taking shape in their lives.

Continuing our story, Hal had a professional come in and act as a mentor to those he suspected might be successor prospects, including "Susan." Hal told the mentor that he felt Susan was a great performer and good with people, but he wondered if she might be too "soft." Did she have that extra edge to spur people over the top to success?

Susan was aware of his concerns. She told the mentor, "I'd never say this to Hal, but sometimes I wonder whether I shouldn't be doing more. There are times I feel I should say things to people or help with their problems in ways I never have before. But I try to ignore the feeling and get back to my job."

If she confided this to Hal, his suspicions about her "softness" would no doubt be confirmed. It's not that Hal is insensitive. But as an executive, he can be overly focused on results, working hard to meet projections, objectives, and budget numbers — a great trait in many leader situations, and certainly a vital *part* of a leader's job.

But another part of Hal's job, one that was never his forte, is the people part. Although fair, honest, and mentally sharp, Hal isn't always the best of listeners. He sometimes misses nuances, preferring things

to be spelled out.

A mentor, on the other hand, is always listening for subtleties. So when Susan confided these thoughts, the mentor realized they reflected her impulse to contribute more, develop new parts of herself, and become a leader.

Mentors let their protégés fail. Mentors aren't coaches who help leaders perform better, apply better managerial skills, or give better speeches. A coach, often the leader's direct supervisor, can't afford failure. Thus coaches prod people to succeed at any cost. Mentors, on the other hand, have the luxury of encouraging more leadership — developing risks and allowing failure.

It's not that mentors want their charges to lose heart as a result of failure. A mentor cares deeply about the protégé. Acting on that care, a mentor puts people in the right situations, with the right frame of mind. After that, it's up to the protégé.

Mentors deliver the bad news. Mentors bring the bad news that no one else will convey. Ernest, another employee of Hal's, comes to mind. Hal considered Ernest among the top candidates to succeed him. Others, too, found Ernest an effective manager, hard driving and with a great sense of humor.

During one of their sessions, the mentor observed him in a different role when Ernest's wife and daughter entered the office. Ernest was affectionate, animated, and full of joy at their entrance but after they left, as he returned to the subject of his role in the organization, all the warmth and passion drained out of him. The contrast was startling.

"Are you always this way when it comes to your role in the organization?" his mentor asked.

"What way?" Ernest responded.

The mentor replied: "Dispassionate. By the numbers. Calculating. That's what I feel from you when we discuss your role here. Seeing you with your family really drove it home for me. It's now clear why our conversations

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can get, well, a bit boring.”

“You think I’m that way? I am not that way!” responded Ernest.

“Well, I certainly see that you aren’t such a cool, calculating character with your family,” the mentor replied. “But as soon as they left and we got back to your role here, all that excitement went away, didn’t it? How do you expect to get people to perform with excitement and passion if you’re a dry, execution-focused executive?”

Who but a mentor would give Ernest the benefit of such a painfully honest observation? His boss wouldn’t, because Ernest always got things done without fail, and with little or no supervision. He was the very embodiment of the maxim, “Managers are needed by their bosses; leaders are needed by their followers.” Why would his boss want to spoil a good thing?

And those who reported to him obviously wouldn’t say anything. So only a mentor could offer Ernest an honest take on his lack of leadership charisma.

If employees aren’t prospects for leadership, having an uninspiring demeanor may not be an issue. But if they’re going to inspire success and steer the organization to growth and prosperity, it *is* an issue.

So the mentor must be willing to risk hurt, insult, even a parting of ways to cultivate the attitudes that make up a creative leader. Who else but a mentor can provide this kind of guidance?

Executive directors need to shift their mindset toward mentoring. They must have the kinds of conversations that offer insights into a successor candidate’s potential. They must open up discussions that offer mentoring to the candidate. Unfortunately, most top executives haven’t had much practice in this role.

How Managers Can Become Mentors

If you’re a busy, results-oriented executive director, how do you provide mentoring for your top

officers? The most effective way is for you to do the mentoring yourself. Here are a few tips for making this leap:

Focus on the person. Mentoring conversations are quite different from those that have to do with performance and managerial proficiency. While managing is concerned with processes that encompass people, machines, and resources, mentoring focuses on a single person. Managing concentrates on an end result, while mentoring centers on a person’s life.

A mentor puts people in the right situations, with the right frame of mind.

Look for hidden clues. Managing relies on information that is decision-ready, awaiting the executive’s assent. Mentoring must unearth personal information that may not be readily given: The engagement between mentor and protégé often hinges on the mentor noticing and responding to signals that are completely nonverbal.

Be ready to accept disagreement and resistance. Contrary to the executive-command model of relating to another person, mentoring requires a willingness to give and take. The protégé is expected to push back, to disagree with the mentor, to show the self-trust expected in leaders.

Don’t be afraid to get personal. Many top officers are reluctant to get too personal with a colleague lest it interfere with decisions the director needs to make, including transfers or terminations. But the mentoring relationship is very personal. Mentors must attend to the growth of others and take responsibility for seeing them succeed at a higher level. Any executive who prefers to separate the personal from the professional will be brought up short on this aspect of mentoring.

You Can Be Both

These differences between managerial and mentoring relationships highlight why many executive

directors aren’t comfortable being mentors. But, with practice, it’s possible to be both a manager and a mentor.

Top officers in need of successors, and organizations seeking leaders to meet creative challenges, must incorporate leader mentoring into their action plans. Doing so provides an organization with irreplaceable benefits, including the assurance of future success. Though no one’s at fault for being unable to serve as a mentor, the true leader must be determined to manage for today *and* mentor for tomorrow. ■

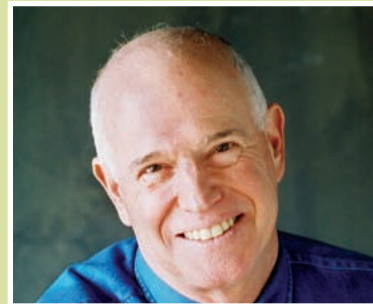
Resources

Duncan, Reginald, “Four Keys to a Professional Mentoring Program,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 5.

Temkin, Terrie, “Nonprofit Leadership: New Skills Are Needed,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Santora, Joseph, “Planning for Leadership Succession: Are You Ready?,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

*These resources are available from the Society’s Resource Center, www.snpo.org. Also see Learning Institute programs online: *Mission-Based Management* (www.snpo.org/li).*



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