

Taking the right steps toward succession planning

Last month we looked at some of the issues surrounding the pending retirements of the baby boom generation. The following steps may help you get started with your city's succession plan.

Step 1) Identify at-risk positions

Take a close look at your city employee demographics and chart the retirement dates. Find anyone within five years of retirement age and pay close attention to those go-to employees who are crucial to service delivery. These are your at-risk positions because vacancies for any length of time in these positions could disrupt the delivery of city services.

Step 2) Communicate with employees

Provide a list of positions you found to be at-risk. Express to employees the importance of avoiding vacancies in these positions and your desire to start a process of developing existing talent so future vacancies are short-lived. Remind employees that participation in the succession planning program is voluntary and may provide an opportunity to increase their knowledge, experience and abilities that will prepare them for a supervisory, management or executive leadership role in the future. Explain how succession planning will assess their individual strengths and improvement areas, establish individual leadership development and training plans and assist in the development of skills necessary for their career advancement or enhancement.

Step 3) Candidate selection

Develop a succession planning program application form, something simple and straightforward, similar to a job application. Have interested employees complete this form and provide their educational experience, job experience, certificates, licenses, awards and most importantly, their career goals and aspirations. Ask them what they hope to gain through completion of the succession planning program.

Step 4) Assessment process

Use a 360⁰ assessment survey that analyzes employee strengths and areas of improvement. A 360⁰ assessment process is important because it provides an understanding of where employees are now, what their current strengths are, the level of current performance or leadership effectiveness and primary development needs. The employee, his/her supervisor and several co-workers should complete the 360⁰ assessment survey. Good assessment data helps clarify what needs to be learned, improved or changed. The city of Bismarck used the SKILLSCOPE® instrument, an internet-enabled multi-rater feedback tool from the Center for Creative Leadership. The use of SKILLSCOPE® allows for easy creation, distribution and collection of assessment surveys.

Step 5) Evaluate assessment feedback and prepare training and development plans

Hold feedback sessions with each participant. Present and review their specific results, discuss their individual strengths and areas for development and identify individual training and development plans to help them achieve their goals. Remember to make a connection with the employee's career goals and the aspirations and interests listed on their application form. A well-conceived training and development plan is the link between the employee's motivation to acquire new skills and the work of the organization. It is a description of what the employee intends to do in order to become more effective, prepare themselves for future challenges and how he or she intends to go about it.

Step 6) Implement training and development plans

In order for succession planning to succeed, employees must be given the chance to develop their skills, knowledge and attitudes. Give some extra emphasis on developing “soft skills” identified in the employees training and development plans. Often there is over-reliance on increasing employees’ technical skills with a presumption that improved technical competence directly translates to effective management practices and leadership behaviors. Most supervisors and managers ability to be an outstanding technical performer does not translate to the ability to be an effective manager. The performance of managers today in progressive organizations is rated much more on people skills rather than measurable output. The ability to solve problems, resolve conflict, participate on teams and make decisions are the soft skills that frontline staff require. The city of Bismarck, like most government organizations has invested a large majority of past training budgets in employees’ technical performance. Our recent adoption of the workforce planning program report has caused a change in the city’s employee training and development investment philosophy.

Succession planning with its many steps can seem like a lengthy process but it could be the key to your city’s future success.