

**The Bill Blackwood
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Succession Planning

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ABSTRACT

Minimizing the impact caused by the loss of intellectual capital due to turnover is crucial to ensuring the operational efficiency of a police department. People who possess unique skills or knowledge will eventually leave their agency. If their departure is anticipated and planned for, the negative impact can be minimized. However, the opposite is also true. If no effort is made to prepare for their loss, the agency will suffer from their departure. Activities that are intended to project future needs and to prepare an agency for the departure of key personnel are commonly referred to as succession planning. Traditionally, succession planning efforts have been limited to upper level management in the private sector. However, not applying these principals to every position that requires protracted training or an uncommon skill set is incredibly short sighted.

While succession planning has been adopted by the private sector, municipal governments, particularly police departments, have been slow to accept it. The failure to prepare for the departure of key personnel is a costly mistake. In addition to the monetary costs associated with turnover, there are also the costs associated with a loss of operational efficiency. For the above stated reasons and many more, police departments need to follow the private sectors example and develop succession planning protocols. There are many different steps a department can use as part of a comprehensive succession program. These steps can include mentoring, job rotation, job enlargement, and formal and informal training. While there will be some costs associated with instituting these steps, the price of not anticipating future personnel needs are incalculable.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, police departments have had a treasure trove of knowledge retained within a few select individuals. However, that knowledge is constantly being lost as these individuals leave their agencies. Jarrell and Pewitt (2007) affirmed that work force losses result in significant erosion in institutional knowledge and expertise. These departures will continue to occur due to the changing demographics of the workforce. Garcia (2010) stated, "Economists have been forecasting a "brain drain" caused by baby boomers leaving the work force" (p. 1). He went on to say that 77% of companies are not taking steps to address this eventuality.

When highly skilled and experienced individuals leave an agency, there often will be a drop in operational efficiency. According to Lynch and Lynch (2005), "there are usually substantial consequences when key people leave, including decreased productivity, costs of hiring a new employee, and increased training time" (p. 82). However, when these departures are anticipated and planned for, the negative effects can be mitigated.

Succession planning is an effective way to retain knowledge and skills and prevent disruption of services. Consequently, it should be an integral part of every department's culture. It can take many forms. Typically, succession planning starts with the acknowledgment that everyone is mortal and will leave his or her position at some time. After that, it involves a series of actions taken to ensure that one or several individuals are properly prepared to step in and assume the departing officer's responsibilities. Huang (2001) described succession planning as "a plan an organization employs to fill its most critical leadership and professional positions" (p.

736). A more colorful description was provided by Michelson (2006), who defined succession planning as, "putting the right people on the bus and getting the wrong people off the bus, and positioning the right people in the right seats" (p. 2).

Traditionally, succession planning has been predominately directed toward an agency's upper management. However, in today's competitive environment, a more holistic approach is needed, and succession planning should be applied to any position that requires a unique set of skills and or knowledge.

There are many obstacles that must be overcome when implementing a department wide succession process. This statement was supported when Green (2000) said that there were many impediments to instituting a formal workforce plan, including civil service law and reluctant human resource professionals. Also, as with any new idea, instituting a formal succession process can trigger a fear of change response. Along with the fear, officers may question their administration's motives. Cost is another concern. Since it is difficult to quantify the costs associated with the loss of intellectual capital or skills, the daunting task of developing a cost benefit analysis for a succession plan may not even be attempted. Additionally, departing individuals may not want to devote the time and energy required to pass on the knowledge and skills necessary for their position to someone else. Finally, an individual with special knowledge and skills often have a perceived authority that far exceeds his or her rank. An officer may be reluctant to pass on his or her knowledge, fearing the loss of his or her elevated status. It will take a resolute and forward thinking administration to overcome these obstacles.

Employee departures can be divided into two categories: anticipated and unexpected. With anticipated departures, an agency may know months or even years in advance. However, with unexpected departures, the time frame can run from a maximum of a few weeks to no advance warning at all. An illustration of both types of departures is given below.

The examples given below illustrate how quickly the loss of institutional knowledge can occur within a department. The described events occurred at a medium sized department located in west Texas. During a ten year period, this department lost decades of experience and an incalculable amount of expertise to a series of unexpected departures, including one reassignment and two deaths. These departures left large voids in the units the individuals were assigned to. Further, due to the fact that the department had not taken any steps to prepare for this eventuality, it was caught completely unprepared. The knowledge and skills these officers possessed had been developed through many years of training and experience; therefore, the vacancies could not be filled by similarly skilled officers. As a consequence, the department's operational efficiency was adversely impacted.

Two years ago, the department lost a very valuable member of its commanded staff to an unforeseen but protracted illness. This lieutenant had been with the department for almost 40 years. He had spent most of that time as the head of the department's narcotics unit. At the funeral, the chief praised the lieutenant for his many accomplishments. Specifically, he stated that the lieutenant was the state's foremost expert in the area of search and seizure. The loss of his knowledge and expertise was a great blow to the department, doubly so since the lieutenant had not passed that

valuable knowledge down to the next generation of officers. If half of the chief's exaltations were true, then the failure to plan for the inevitable departure of so highly skilled an individual was a critical oversight.

The loss of critical knowledge and expertise was not limited to the departure of command level personnel. Prior to the lieutenant's death, the department lost two senior detectives that were integral to its criminal investigation division. They were looked at as the beginning, middle, and end when it came to homicide investigations. So, when one was killed in an explosion and the other unexpectedly left the unit, a huge void was created. Yes, their positions were quickly filled, but their knowledge and expertise could not be replaced so easily. As a direct result of this department's failure to prepare for their unexpected but inevitable departures, no efforts had been made to develop their replacements. Consequently, the Crimes Against Persons Unit suffered for years after their loss. This department's failure to proactively address employee departures has cost it dearly. Unfortunately, the above examples are not unique. Across the nation, an incalculable amount of intellectual capital and expertise walks out of the front door on a daily basis. When an individual leaves without succession planning, the knowledge, and experience the department paid for them to obtain is lost forever (Orrick, 2002).

POSITION

This is a very trying time for law enforcement administrators. Budgets are shrinking while the demands being placed on an agency, from both internal and external sources, continue to grow. And with the continued demand that more be done with less, departments can ill afford to lose any operational efficiency. Consequently, it is

imperative that police administrators conserve the knowledge and skill base that already exists within their department.

One of the biggest problems currently facing police departments is turnover. Two studies that were conducted on opposite coasts illustrated this point. A survey of 80,000 officers in California revealed that 22% of them switched agencies (Switzer, 2009). A similar study conducted in North Carolina showed that 14% of patrol officers left their department for other employment. The study went on to indicate that the average tenure for a new officer coming in to the profession was limited to 33 months (Orrick, 2005). Further, the turnover problem will be exacerbated as the rate at which the Baby Boomers leave the workforce accelerates. Woska (2011) stated "Each year, an increasing number of baby boomers complete their Law Enforcement careers and leave the force" (p. 1).

When skilled individuals are replaced by less skilled officers, the level of service a department provides will be diminished. Orrick (2002) stated, "less experienced officers, often suffer reduced productivity, lower quality of service delivery, and more frequent complaints, and liability risks" (p. 100). Consequently, efforts must be made to ensure that there is a pool of individuals who are prepared to step in whenever a vacancy occurs. Unfortunately, addressing this eventuality will require a change in the way departments conduct their business. They can no longer afford to take a laissez-faire attitude when it comes to addressing the departure of key personnel.

Also succession planning is necessary to ensure smooth transitions between departing and incoming individuals who occupy critical positions within a department. Without it, during these transitions, there will be a period of uncertainty where

operational efficiency is lost. Savage (1992) stated, "During the transition period from one executive to another, police organizations can experience disruption in their coordination of previously stated objectives" (p. 14).

The military and private sector have already embraced succession planning. However, the public sector has lagged behind. Michelson (2006) said, "Succession planning and leadership development are more than just lining up recruits for vacancies and most public sector managers haven't caught onto this yet" (p. 1). The results of two separate surveys support this claim. The first was a survey of 200 medium and large corporations in the U.S. The result of this survey indicated that 54% were unprepared or underprepared to deal with turnover (Pace, 2010). A second nationwide survey, this one of 209 law enforcement agencies, showed that 83% did not utilize succession planning (Garcia, 2010). These surveys indicated that many law enforcement agencies are unprepared to deal with the departure of key personnel.

The proper use of succession planning can reduce the loss of critical knowledge and skills caused by the departure of highly trained personnel. Pitt-Catsoupes, Sweet, and Lynch (2009) stated that "Succession planning is about ensuring a trained pipeline of high-quality talent for key organizational positions" (p. 11). Without that pipeline, agencies can quickly find themselves facing a shortage of qualified individuals to fill key positions as they are vacated.

COUNTER POSITION

Succession planning is not a panacea. And several arguments can be made against it. In order to develop a complete picture, some of the common arguments against succession planning are addressed below.

For many agencies, implementing a formal succession plan will mean deviating from the way things have been done in the past. Since they will be treading new ground, succession planning will present a host challenges. However, while it may be a new idea to law enforcement, succession planning is common in the private sector. Jarrell and Pewitt (2007) stated, "Although frequently used in the private arena, succession planning is rarely employed in the public sector" (p. 297). Consequently, an agency can find the answers to many of the issues encountered while implementing a succession plan by looking to the private sector.

Opponents of succession planning may claim that it is just a "fair-haired child" or a "chosen one" program. In other words, it is another way for those in power to advance certain select individuals, and it will not benefit the rank and file. The fair haired child argument is based on human nature. It is natural to be suspicious of change, particularly within the police community. Consequently, if a succession plan program is not implemented in a logical manner, based on careful planning in conjunction with open communications, even the best intentioned program can produce negative feelings. For example, if it appears that an administrator is placing a given individual in a series of sought after positions; his peers may assume that the individual's resume is being padded to justify a future promotion. This statement is particularly true when, historically, these positions had been filled through a competitive process. Therefore, it is imperative that succession planning be implemented in a thoughtful and open manner. Additionally, access to the program needs to be open to everyone, or at least everyone must be able to compete for the opportunity to participate. Further, to paraphrase Jarrell and Pewitt (2007), to address any perceived

inequities, the department must provide access to supplementary training to all employees. Regardless of how a succession plan program is structured, thorough planning and open communication are necessary for it to be successfully implemented.

Another argument is that succession planning creates disruptions by adversely affecting employee morale, which results in a decrease in productivity. Initiating a succession plan will generate the same type of response as any institutional change. There will be individuals who will move through the five stages of response to change: shock, emotion (anger), bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, the adverse effects of these changes can be minimized by ensuring that everyone involved is informed of the need and purpose of the change, and they need to know how these changes will impact them. According to Putney (2008), "The design of the program must clearly demonstrate its legitimacy so that sworn members understand the demands and the expectations of their participation" (p. 2). Therefore, if these steps are taken, any morale problems associated with instituting a succession program can be minimized.

Some individuals may express concerns that succession planning does not result in the most qualified being promoted, and it benefits organizational climbers. This is true; succession planning does benefit the "Climbers." However, if properly instituted, succession planning will benefit everyone. If the most qualified are not participating in the process, they need to be encouraged to do so. The agency needs to identify any impediments to their participation and attempt to eliminate them.

A final claim is that while succession planning may sound like a good idea, in reality, it is just another expensive program instituted to address a non-existent need.

The costs associated with succession planning was acknowledged in an article titled, "Growing Leaders for Turbulent Times," where it stated, "succession planning often requires a lengthy and costly investment in the selection and training process" (Karaevli & Hall, 2003, p. 65). There are costs associated with instituting succession planning. However, investing in the department's most valuable resource, its personnel, is never a bad idea. When the potential costs associated with not addressing turnover are compared to any additional costs generated by the program, succession planning is clearly a wise investment. Orrick (2002) calculated that the replacement cost of a three year officer at \$58,900 and it can be more for someone who has received advanced training. With the cost of replacing a skilled officer being as high as it is, any costs associated with succession program can be easily offset. Additionally, by incorporating succession planning into the promotional process, the problems created and the financial consequences of promoting an individual to a level above their competency can be minimized. Jarrell and Pewitt (2007) affirmed that even in these lean economic times, succession planning is imperative.

CONCLUSION

Succession planning is an effective way to retain institutional knowledge and skills and prevent the disruption of services associated with turnover. Therefore, it should be an integral part of every department's operational plans. Without the use of succession planning, a department leaves itself vulnerable to the vagaries of the future. Succession planning helps a department anticipate its future personnel needs while simultaneously developing its personnel to meet current needs.

Succession planning can be used not only to develop personnel, but also as a screening tool to prevent costly, inappropriate promotions. The Peter Principle claims that a person will rise through the ranks of an organization until he or she reaches his level of incompetency. However, through the proper application of succession planning, that level can be moved further along the scale or at least identified. By identifying an individual's maximum level of competency, an agency can reduce the chance that the wrong individual is selected for any given position. Michelson (2006) stated, "That the cost of a bad hiring (or promotion) can be as high as 200 percent of a year's salary" (p. 2).

Succession planning utilizes many tactics to develop newer officers and future leaders. Many of these methods may place the officer outside of his or her comfort zone. However, unlike the old "sink or swim" methods, succession planning provides a coach or mentor to accompany the officer on this journey of discovery. While opponents of this type of support could point out that the officer will lean on his or her mentor/coach, the response to that statement is that they should. But this is also where the screening portion of a succession planning program would be implemented. If, after an appropriate period of time, the trainee does not begin to act independently, a reevaluation of their participation occurs. This reevaluation addresses not only whether or not the trainee should continue in the program, but whether or not the training methods being utilized are appropriate.

In order for a succession planning program to be successful, it must start with communication from and the unequivocal support of the department's administration. This can be accomplished by issuing a formal policy statement. This statement could

be a simple assertion of the administration's support, similar to the following: The department recognizes that its employees are its greatest assets. Therefore, it is incumbent on the department to take every possible opportunity to develop its personnel to their fullest. To this end, the department will establish a formal succession/development program. All employees are encouraged to apply for and participate in this program.

The next step is to determine where the agency currently stands. In order to plan for the loss of key personnel, they must first be identified. This may seem like a simple step and one that anyone in upper administration could accomplish within a matter of seconds. However, this task can be deceptive, particularly in a large organization. There can be many individuals who are seldom thought about who possess unique abilities that a department can ill afford to lose.

In order to identify which positions are of a critical nature, steps must be taken within the organization to evaluate each position to determine what specific knowledge and skills each requires. Then, a personnel survey must be conducted. This survey is used to determine the capabilities of the department's current personnel.

Once the above mentioned evaluations are completed, a comparison between the knowledge and skills required to fill the various critical positions and the knowledge and skills currently possessed by the department's personnel is made. Then, after any shortfalls are identified, a systematic effort must to be implemented to bridge the gap between the employees' current abilities and the organization's needs. There are many methods to close this gap, including mentoring, formal training, informal training, and position rotation.

Mentoring can take several forms. Lynch and Lynch (2005) said, "Mentoring involves encouraging individuals in a coordinated way to utilize personal motivation to promote professional growth" (p. 87). The mentoring process allows an individual to learn from the mistakes and successes of others. Training is an integral part of any development program and can take several forms. It can be formal, informal, or a combination of both. Formal training can be an internally developed course taught by the individual possessing the unique knowledge and skills or one taught by an outside source. Informal training, much like mentoring, is less structured. It can be conducted in small groups or on a one on one basis. Position rotations, as the name implies, involves rotating individuals through various assignments. By working in multiple positions throughout the department, a potential leader will develop insight into the demands and the needs of the individuals serving in those positions. Mentoring and training can be effectively utilized in any development program. Position rotation, however, is most effective when used in the development of management personnel.

This brief description is not intended to be an implementation guide. It is an overview of what needs to be accomplished. Further, what works for one agency may not work for another. There is no magic bullet. All succession planning efforts must constantly be reevaluated and adjustments made when necessary. Succession planning is a way to deal with the organization's greatest assets, its people, and it must become part of a department's culture. It should be integrated into every department's standard practices. It is necessary to prevent the loss of institutional knowledge caused by the departure of key personnel. Fulmer (2002) stated, "Succession planning is a journey not a destination" (p. 2).

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