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## LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: PLANNED OR UNPLANNED?

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*The management of leadership succession at various levels of the enterprise is something every organization faces; but in recent times education researchers in the U.S., the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia have all reported an increasing difficulty in attracting principals for Catholic schools. The problem is not restricted to Catholic schools. This article details a flexible 12-phase process designed to ensure that when a vacancy occurs the organization has available people who have received some preparation for the position. A framework for the development and induction of leaders in Catholic education is provided. The strategy, developed and implemented by the author in recent years, is both practical and appropriate for use at various levels, from faculty coordinators and principals to superintendents.*

Sooner or later, every Catholic school must decide how to manage leadership succession. One option is to wait until a vacancy occurs and then quickly put in place a selection process to seek out the best available person. A second, more proactive, option is the development of a succession management plan designed to ensure that when a vacancy occurs the school system has available people who have received some preparation for the position. Those responsible for the new appointment can then begin the selection process confident that some of the applicants will have significant potential for success. An effective succession plan reduces the likelihood of making a risky appointment or deciding to readvertise the position. It is also more likely to achieve a smooth leadership transition.

Succession planning has been widely used in a variety of organizations over the past 30 years. A review of the research literature reveals that com-



mercial organizations in North America and to a lesser extent in the U.K. have taken positive steps to ensure the preparation of leaders for all levels of their organizations. While the literature on leadership succession is expanding there is some evidence of resistance, with a gap between theory and practice.

There is not much evidence that Catholic organizations have embraced succession strategies, apart from an ardent prayer that there will be someone "out there" somewhere who will be able to fill the vacancy.

## AVAILABILITY OF APPLICANTS

My interest in succession planning has grown out of the increased difficulty of filling executive leadership positions in Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Sydney. We have struggled to find teachers suitable for or willing to apply for appointment as principals or assistant principals. The increasing number of acting principals or assistant principals (mainly in elementary schools) is one indication of the need for succession planning. The small number of female applicants for secondary principal and assistant principal positions in Sydney provides a further challenge.

The availability of suitable applicants for leadership positions is a cause of concern for many diocesan authorities and leaders of religious institutes. Bishops have struggled to find diocesan directors and assistant directors; provincials struggle to fill significant leadership positions; diocesan directors in turn have struggled to find consultants and other key Catholic Education Office (CEO) staff. In the Archdiocese of Sydney the number of applicants for principalships of large and complex schools is often disappointing. "Ours is a good school! Why weren't there more applicants?" is a question frequently heard when selection panels convene, especially from parish priests and parent representatives.

For the 2001 school year, 27 principalship vacancies were advertised in the Archdiocese of Sydney. A total of 39 applications were received. In the previous year, 26 applications were received for 17 vacancies. In both years, some positions were readvertised and some acting principals appointed.

A recent survey for the National Association of Head Teachers in the U.K. (*Times Education Supplement*, 2000) discovered that "one in five primary Headships had to be readvertised because a suitable candidate could not be found." The same survey reported that "Roman Catholic schools encountered significant difficulties in attracting senior staff to fill vacancies" (p. 4).

Sr. Mary Peter Traviss, of the University of San Francisco, reported in *NCEA Notes* (1999) increased vacancies for Catholic school principals and superintendents. In 2000 the U.S. press contained accounts of school districts struggling to hire suitable principals and superintendents.



## WHY SO FEW APPLICANTS?

Identifying the factors contributing to the shortage of applicants for leadership positions in Catholic schools is beyond the scope of this article. Much work is being done on the changing nature of schools and the role of principals and the pressure on school leadership resulting from societal changes (Ramsey, 1999). In a project flowing out of the author's research, the Australian Catholic University is completing a study entitled "Why Are More Persons Not Applying for Principal Positions in Catholic Schools in NSW?" The results of this research will guide the development of future strategies across the Catholic school network. At the personal level many factors impinge on an individual's decision to seek or not to seek a leadership position. These range from the ability to handle pressure associated with the increasing complexity of Catholic education to the location of the position, with associated travel and housing costs. These factors require considerable exploration.

The dearth of leadership is not limited to education. Bolt (1996) contends that this leadership crisis (in the U.S.) is in reality a leadership development crisis and that currently

- training is not comprehensive
- training offers a "quick fix"
- training is generic and outdated
- training ignores leadership (p. 164)

Conger (1996) offers an interesting perspective on generational differences that may help explain why interest in principalship from those born after 1960 appears to be waning.

## PLANNED INTERVENTION

Increasing the pool of applicants for school leadership positions will require a variety of initiatives appropriate to particular cultures. In the U.K., for example, a National College for School Leadership has been established at Nottingham, England, and a national qualification for head teachers introduced. Teachers in Catholic schools in Sydney have access to a Catholic School Leadership Program (CSLP) and to leadership courses offered by the Australian Catholic University and supported by the Catholic Education Office. Other school systems offer incentives and programs to help prepare leaders.

The next generation of leaders must guide Catholic education at a time of continuing change in both Church and society. Much will be expected of these women and men, not the least being the competence and confidence to continue the evangelization and faith development focus of the Catholic



school in an increasingly secular environment. They will require knowledge, skills, and competencies different from those of today's leaders. I believe that without some planned intervention the future provision of high-quality leadership for Catholic schools, colleges, and universities cannot be assured.

The present generation of educational leaders is in a position to contribute to the future effectiveness of Catholic schools by making a commitment to the preparation of the next generation of leaders, men and women with a passionate commitment to Jesus and his Gospel. We must take steps to ensure a steady supply of well-prepared, future-oriented leaders. We must develop strategies to enable more women to accept leadership positions. This may well involve reconceptualizing some roles, including the principalship, to bring them more in harmony with the demands of family and community life.

In the Sydney Archdiocesan school system, a more proactive approach to succession planning is designed to complement the current selection and appointment processes. Advertisements will continue to be placed, and the most suitable applicants appointed to leadership positions. Participation in a leadership succession scheme or program does not guarantee a position; likewise, nonparticipation does not preclude a successful application.

The future effectiveness and authenticity of Catholic education is inexorably linked to its quality of leadership in the years ahead. The provision of this leadership is too important to be left to chance, and Mary Peter Traviss reminds us that "Catholic colleges and universities will have to cooperate in working on this apostolic challenge. It is a need that will not resolve itself" (1999, p. 15). This article is designed to stimulate discussion on leadership succession and to encourage further research and planned intervention.

## SUCCESSION PLANNING PROCESS

While the ERIC database and other publications indicate continuing interest in leadership succession in educational settings, particularly in the U.S., the author has been unable to locate any comprehensive frameworks or management processes that would be of assistance in planning strategically for educational leadership. Figure 1 is a contribution by the author to the field of leadership succession. It consists of a 12-phase management process designed to facilitate leadership succession in Catholic education. It is based on five major assumptions, namely:

- the need to enhance the long-term evangelization thrust of Catholic schools
- the need for all organizations to realize their goals
- the need to ensure leadership continuity at all levels
- the need to identify future leadership requirements
- the need to develop a pool of potential leaders



This management process is a critical component of a leadership succession mindset. The remainder of this article develops the 12-phase process.

### **Figure 1** **Leadership Succession Planning**

An effective leadership succession process will be developed and implemented by:

- clarifying **future strategic directions** that embrace the vision, mission, culture, and emerging priorities of the school
- establishing **criteria and competencies** (linked with the strategic intent of the organization) for the various positions that will eventually need to be filled
- identifying **future leaders** through a variety of assessment strategies and maintaining pools of high-potential staff at all levels of the school
- providing **developmental opportunities** that are critical to an individual's leadership preparation
- identifying **disincentives** that discourage staff from seeking leadership roles and putting in place appropriate incentives
- planning for the long-term **retention** and development of high-potential staff
- assuming those aspiring to leadership positions will **accept significant responsibility** for their own professional development and career planning
- recognizing that some staff will feel **passed over** in their quest for immediate leadership opportunities, and keeping them motivated in their current positions
- expecting staff with current leadership roles to **accept responsibility** for the preparation of future leaders
- recognizing that different institutions require different leaders and that different communities have **different needs** and expectations
- providing recently appointed leaders with a quality **induction program** that includes some organizational and professional socialization into their new roles
- communicating about the **management of succession planning** with those with a stake in future leadership appointments

When implemented, this 12-phase management process could be expected to result in a succession planning mindset throughout the organization.



## **SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE**

As organizational theorists strongly agree that a systems perspective offers important insights into the workings of complex organizations (Robbins, 1983), the author used a systems perspective in constructing the 12-phase process. Recognizing that an organization (that is, a single school or a diocesan grouping of many schools) functions as a system characterized by a network of relationships between the parts of the system and between the system and its environments (Owens, 1981), the author sought to bring together the relevant components of a leadership succession process.

In this systems approach, the parts are not isolated in order to explain the whole. Rather, the parts of the whole organization are perceived as being in dynamic interaction with each other as well as with a host of other variables. The 12-phase management process is not linear, and any implementation must recognize the constant interaction between organizations and their environments.

### **CLARIFYING FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS THAT EMBRACE THE VISION, MISSION, CULTURE, AND EMERGING PRIORITIES OF THE SCHOOL**

The clarification and articulation of a school's future strategic direction is the starting point for any leadership succession initiative. Once the strategic intent is clear, leadership competencies can be established and future leaders identified and developed. Included in this strategic intent should be the specific articulation of the culture that binds and motivates the entire organization as a corporate entity. An effective strategic plan will provide a platform for developing staff and leadership commitment to the vision, mission, culture, and priorities of the organization. Strategic management leads naturally into the preparation of those who will take forward the goals of the organization.

### **ESTABLISHING CRITERIA AND COMPETENCIES (LINKED WITH THE STRATEGIC INTENT OF THE ORGANIZATION) FOR VARIOUS POSITIONS THAT WILL EVENTUALLY NEED TO BE FILLED**

Schools must identify specific competencies incorporating the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of current and future leaders for all levels of the organization. These competencies must address the vision, mission, culture, and priorities, as well as the strategic direction of the organization. The involvement of a cross-section of staff in the development of competencies and criteria for various positions should ensure ownership of the outcomes as well as understanding of succession planning.



## **IDENTIFYING DISINCENTIVES THAT DISCOURAGE STAFF FROM SEEKING LEADERSHIP ROLES AND PUTTING IN PLACE APPROPRIATE INCENTIVES**

The pool of future leaders is diminished by those staff with potential who do not respond to advertisements or other invitations. What stops talented staff from coming forward? At the various levels of an organization there is a need to identify any disincentives that discourage staff from seeking leadership opportunities. With these data, the current leadership may be in a position to minimize factors that make some leadership roles less attractive to some people. It may also be possible to institute some incentives that help to offset the disincentives.

## **PLANNING FOR THE LONG-TERM RETENTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF HIGH-POTENTIAL STAFF**

While employment mobility is a characteristic of our society, organizations committed to succession planning will be aware of the desirability of retaining staff with significant leadership potential. At the same time, it must be recognized that some highly talented staff will move on in order to fulfill their career ambitions. Strategies for retaining high-potential staff include identifying staff the organization wishes to retain, letting them know this, and providing opportunities for development and involvement. These staff members must feel valued by the leadership of their organization and on appropriate occasions their value to the organization must be publicly acknowledged.

## **ASSUMING THOSE ASPIRING TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WILL ACCEPT SIGNIFICANT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER PLANNING**

Staff aspiring to leadership positions must be held responsible for the development of their own leadership potential. While organizations have a responsibility to provide development opportunities for staff, care needs to be taken to avoid the trap of a parent-child orientation in which the staff member holds the organization primarily responsible for his or her career advancement. Communication between staff and the leadership of an organization is critical to the development of these staff members.



## **RECOGNIZING THAT SOME STAFF WILL FEEL PASSED OVER IN THEIR QUEST FOR IMMEDIATE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES, AND KEEPING THEM MOTIVATED IN THEIR CURRENT POSITIONS**

Assisting staff who feel passed over in their quest for further leadership is one of the more difficult aspects of succession planning. Applicants who are unsuccessful can easily become disappointed and demotivated. This situation is exacerbated if they conclude that further promotion is unlikely. Considerable wisdom and sensitivity are required when dealing with these staff, particularly in the provision of honest feedback. Some may benefit from coaching, while others may have unrealistic perceptions of their own abilities. Again, the communication between the organization's leadership and the individual staff member is critical. Highly motivated staff at the middle management level are as important for the development of the organization as are those leading the organization or in the top positions, and this fact must be recognized and clearly communicated throughout the organization.

## **EXPECTING STAFF WITH CURRENT LEADERSHIP ROLES TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PREPARATION OF FUTURE LEADERS**

Effective succession planning requires considerable enthusiasm and support from those occupying leadership positions throughout the school. These staff must be encouraged to accept responsibility for the preparation of their successors and collectively help to develop a succession planning mindset throughout the organization. In this regard the modeling and coaching that current leaders can offer should be used as a major development strategy.

## **RECOGNIZING THAT DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS REQUIRE DIFFERENT LEADERS AND THAT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS**

Different schools have different needs and require different leaders. This fact must be recognized by both applicants and selection panels. Sometimes applicants express disappointment when they are unsuccessful despite the possession of appropriate qualifications. In the final analysis, there must be a good match between the specific position requirements, the talents of a particular person, and the culture of the organization. Sometimes achieving this match requires considerable discernment by all parties.



## **PROVIDING RECENTLY APPOINTED LEADERS WITH A QUALITY INDUCTION PROGRAM THAT INCLUDES SOME ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION INTO THEIR NEW ROLES**

While most newly appointed leaders can expect to receive some orientation to the position, the provision of a quality and systematic induction process extending over a year or two is the exception. Leaders new to the position should take the initiative in seeking this support from their organization. Induction is a process rather than an event and will touch on major aspects of the role as well as the context in which the new leader is operating. The process will allow the new leader to reflect on the match between early leadership behavior and the perceptions and expectations of those being led as well as on the school's culture and climate. The lack of success of some leaders is related to the quality of the induction process and the importance the organization's leadership attaches to such a process. Current leadership vision, knowledge, insight, and skill are key factors in meeting the challenge of developing future leaders.

## **COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE MANAGEMENT OF SUCCESSION PLANNING WITH THOSE WITH A STAKE IN FUTURE LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS**

The implementation of any effective process of succession planning requires sensitivity and trust combined with the ability to communicate with all those with a stake in promotion and leadership appointments. The concept of succession planning is often not understood where people are wondering about their future. To ensure the integration of individual and organizational goals, or in other words to win the minds and hearts of staff, the leadership requires a two-way communication process that helps staff become familiar with the organization's culture and strategic direction. In large organizations, responsibility for developing the next generation of leaders will be shared among many staff who subsequently must communicate to others about future leadership preparation. Without effective communication, succession planning may result in some undesirable consequences, which could demotivate rather than inspire a commitment to this important leadership goal.

## **SOME OUTCOMES OF SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Schools implementing a leadership succession planning process are likely to develop the following characteristics:



- renewed focus on mission, goals, and priorities
- a dynamic culture in which everyone is encouraged to keep growing
- strategic continuity despite leadership changes
- increased confidence in the school's ability to effect smooth leadership transitions
- focus on development of leadership potential rather than on executive replacement
- continuing growth in leadership competencies among those responsible for implementing the succession plan
- a disciplined approach to leadership and management
- creativity and flexibility that allow for rapid response to change

A truly effective strategic management process will not be a rigid, step-by-step affair, but something adaptive to changing circumstances.

Schools and school systems lacking a leadership succession planning process tend to cope by:

- not making an appointment, and readvertising the position with the associated costs and disappointments
- making an appointment of the best applicant, although this person does not possess the competencies to satisfy the criteria for the particular position
- attracting a suitable applicant from another school
- leaving the preparation of leaders to other organizations

## **ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY**

Two professional development programs have specifically targeted future leaders, namely:

- "Preparation for Principalship" (in the CSLP series), offered to potential principals for the first time in 1994-95
- "Developing Leadership Skills for Middle Managers in Catholic Schools" (in the CSLP series), offered annually since 1994

Some graduates from these programs have subsequently been successful in applications for principalship.

Following their appointment, principals are assisted in a variety of ways:

- regular visits from their regional consultant and participation in the Personnel, Performance Planning, and Review process which involves annual goal setting and appraisal
- participation in "Leading the Catholic School Community" (in the CSLP series)



The three programs in the CSLP series are recognized by Australian Catholic University for credit at the master's degree level. Professional development for principals is an ongoing process.

## **IDENTIFYING FUTURE LEADERS**

Since 1996 principals and senior CEO staff have been involved in a number of initiatives for identifying future leaders. These initiatives included:

- Elementary principals (N=113) were surveyed to identify future assistant principals.
- High school principals (N=40) were surveyed to identify future staff for the CEO.
- CEO directors and senior staff (N=18) were surveyed to identify potential leaders at the levels of executive director, central/regional director, regional consultant, principal, and assistant principal.

Succession planning was taken further through the following strategies:

- Elementary principals (N=113) and high school principals (N=40) were briefed by the executive director of schools on leadership succession. Some principals followed up with written responses to the paper "Leadership Succession: Planned or Unplanned?"
- "Exploring a Career within the Mission of Catholic Education" was published by the CEO, Sydney, and a series of workshops were held.
- Principals (N=153) and assistant principals (N=130) were invited to complete a "Professional Development Needs (1999-2001)" survey. The return rate was high and the results helped shape a new leadership development program for school leaders.

More recently, work on establishing new criteria and competencies for future leadership positions in Catholic schools was completed. The context of this task is the Sydney Catholic Schools "Towards 2005" Strategic Management Plan.

## **THE FUTURE**

The challenge of ensuring the availability of competent and well-prepared leaders willing to take forward the educational mission of the Catholic Church continues to become more pressing. The leadership of Catholic schools, colleges, and universities must prepare men and women to lead our schools through the early years of the new millennium. The implementation of an effective succession planning process across all facets of Catholic education would be a significant contribution to the education of future generations of students.



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