

HR INSIGHTS

Magazine

from the eyes of industry leaders



IS YOUR COMPANY CULTURE HOLDING YOU BACK



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Succession Planning — FOR

AS AN HR PROFESSIONAL, chances are you've participated in conversations to identify potential candidates to fill the most senior positions in your company in the event a key leader departs unexpectedly. As necessary as those conversations are, however, it's equally critical to focus on succession planning for the junior ranks, too, because their leadership acumen is the catalyst (or obstacle, when the acumen is lacking) for achieving the vision, mission, and objectives set forth by senior leaders. A proactive approach to managing talent at all levels can ensure a pool of qualified candidates whenever the need arises for additional leadership capabilities. And if you plan well, one of those middle managers may someday be on the short list for a C-suite position.

TO TRAIN OR NOT TO TRAIN

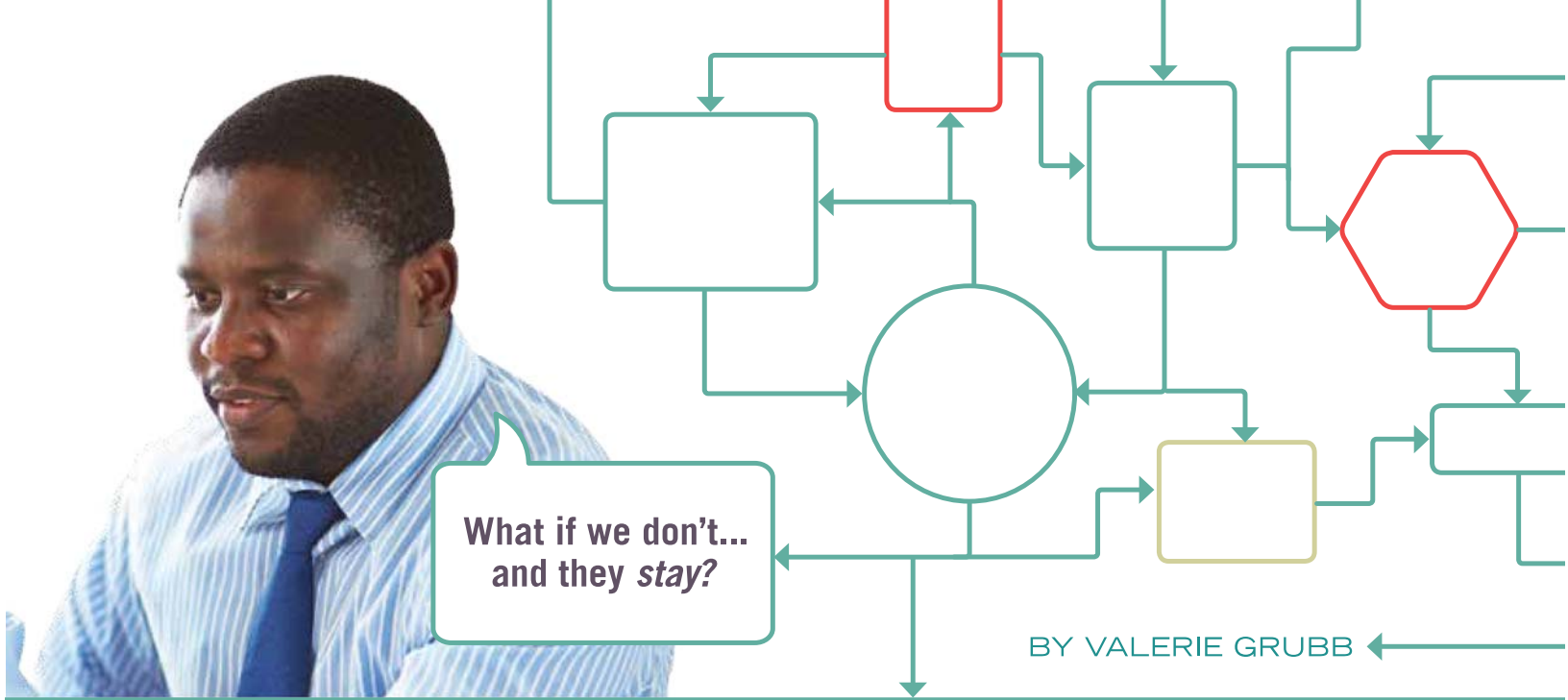
In a cartoon that circulated widely a few years ago, one executive says, "What if we train them, and they leave?" and a second one replies, "What if we don't, and they *stay*?" If you've been in HR in corporate America for even a short amount of time, you've surely encountered this conundrum! Although it's awful when highly trained employees leave (especially if you've invested time and money in their development), it's far worse to have unskilled employees executing your company's vision. When you link succession planning to leadership development, your high-potential employees see opportunities for personal growth and are therefore more likely to remain at your company.

When kicking off succession planning for employees below the senior executive level, consider this two-pronged approach:

1. Identify the critical job functions at the heart of your operations. What skills, knowledge, and abilities are needed to lead these positions?
2. Identify the employees your company should work to keep. Conduct a gap analysis on your high potentials to determine where they are now—and where they need to be to fill the critical positions identified above.

Use the gap analysis as the basis for your succession development plan. Keeping in mind the twin goals of training employees for future responsibilities and honing the skills they need for their current positions, identify what is important now and what is required in the foreseeable future. The most successful development plans typically cover a timeframe of one to five years but are still "living" documents that change as an employee's proficiency in desired skills continues to grow. And remember, without visible support from top management, a succession plan won't be a priority and will thus be less effective.

Think of leadership as a pie, with each slice representing a different skill set. A person's skill requirements change as his or her responsibilities shift, and mastery of all those skills gives that individual the potential to be an effective leader. With that image in mind, focus succession development plans on the skills (or slices of pie) that need improvement, both for the employee's current job and for his or her future responsibilities. A succession development plan should contain concrete objectives and be tied to the company's performance management process for both the employee as well as his or her developmental mentor.



What if we don't...
and they stay?

BY VALERIE GRUBB

THE — Whole Organization

TYING SUCCESSION PLANNING TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Successful succession development involves a formal, individualized plan for each high-potential employee—not a one-size-fits-all approach. Standard concepts can be taught in group sessions, but for everything else you need to offer measurable, challenging, and time-bound developmental activities tailored for each person. Some possible activities include:

- Rotational assignments in departments (such as critical production areas) that will increase the employee's knowledge base or in areas where the employee needs development
- Projects that are in line with an employee's current skills yet still challenging in some fashion
- Classroom training or case-study analysis, with the results presented to senior management
- Individual coaching or mentoring from either an outside expert or a qualified internal executive
- Coaching and mentoring other employees in their growth and development
- Specific reading assignments with reports to senior leadership (including discussions of how to use concepts and practices internally)
- Role-playing, with observer feedback
- Shadowing executives

Although hypothetical situations can be great learning experiences, leaders should receive their training in real-life scenarios wherever possible. Nothing beats on-the-job learning, because real-life situations (and their real consequences) motivate high-potential employees to succeed. That said, it's important to understand that leaders-in-training can and do fail. Rather than crucify these young leaders for their mistakes, push them to learn from failures and apply their hard-won knowledge to future challenges.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The goal of succession planning is to have the right people in the right place at the right time—a goal that applies as much to your middle managers as it does to your senior leaders. Now is the time to start developing leadership talent at *all* levels within your organization. Rather than wait for leaders to knock on your door (or walk out the door), build on the potential and drive of your current employees to *make* your leaders and ensure the success of your organization now and in the future. ■

Valerie Grubb of Val Grubb & Associates Ltd. (www.valgrubbandassociates.com) is an innovative and visionary operations leader with an exceptional ability to zero in on the systems, processes, and personnel issues that can hamper a company's growth. Grubb regularly consults for mid-range companies wishing to expand and larger companies seeking efficiencies in back-office operations. Her expertise and vibrant style are also in constant demand for corporate training classes and seminars. She can be reached at vgrubb@valgrubbandassociates.com.

1. Robert Pernick. 2001. "Creating a Leadership Development Program: Nine Essential Tasks." *Public Personnel Management*, 30(4), 429–444.