

Successful Succession

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Imagine that you've worked hard to establish an effective organization. Daily you have solved a continual flow of problems. You made it through some rugged times. Despite the periodic crises, it has mostly been fun. Through it all, you've had the privilege of working with competent, caring colleagues.

One day, your interests turn toward missionary or philanthropic work. Maybe you're inspired to start a new business. Or perhaps you simply want to spend more time with your grandchildren. What are you going to do with this institution you've built? Are you prepared to turn over your legacy to someone else?

Marshall Goldsmith has published what he calls a "memo to the CEO" entitled *Succession: Are You Ready?* It's a small book packed with sound, practical guidance for handling the emotional aspects of successfully transitioning your legacy. By sharing tidbits, my objective is to stimulate your awareness.

Goldsmith quotes a client. "I finally realized that my job had become my best friend. I loved the company, my coworkers, and our customers. Going to work was always a joy for me. The time just flew by--and then one day it was time to leave. It hurt. It's very hard to leave your best friend."

The sooner you begin preparing mentally for turning over your creation, the more advantages accrue. You develop many competent leaders. Allegations that you are playing favorites will be fewer. You feel less pressure to make something happen quickly. Your successor will be well prepared, and so will you.

In his introduction, Goldsmith writes, "Leadership development should be an ongoing process that is part of life for leaders at all levels--not just CEO candidates." If you have effectively established a culture of continuous learning and improvement, preparing your successor will simply fit with the environment.

Goldsmith offers diagrams that contrast "effectively letting go" with "trouble letting go." Each illustration shows three activities and the percentage of energy you will spend on each: leading the organization, developing your successor, and creating a great rest-of-your-life. "My advice is simple," writes Goldsmith. "If you want to do a great job in creating a great transition, look more like the leader in figure 1 and less like the leader in figure 2." Figure 2 shows you waiting far too long to develop your successor and to envision and plan for a great rest-of-your-life.

Your transition out of the organization, Goldsmith predicts, will be far tougher than you can imagine. You will be tempted to just keep going. If your company is faltering, you will want to make things right before you leave. If your company is doing well, it will be hard to imagine the company doing even better under the leadership of someone else.

When you are the leader, people laugh at your jokes and nod in agreement with your comments. You're probably not that funny, creative, or smart. Folks defer to you because you are the leader. When you stop being the leader, this truth will become painfully obvious.

Goldsmith advocates that you develop an internal successor if possible. He maintains that hiring a CEO from the outside is "indicative of a failure of leadership development for the company."

An internal successor will naturally live by the values of the culture you've worked so hard to establish. An outside candidate brings perspectives and underlying beliefs that are not necessarily bad, but are different, generating unnecessary disruption and confusion.

Seeking an external successor will cost you a ton of money. Further, the new leader will want to assume authority quickly, giving you less time to execute the transition with quality. If the successor fails, the reputation of the company will suffer badly. The damage inside the company will be even worse.

Coach your potential internal successors to build healthy relationships with all key stakeholders, especially where there are political sensitivities. Politics exist in every job, but politics is especially present in the role of CEO. Good relationships with colleagues are particularly important. The succession candidate will need the support of his or her former peers.

Each potential successor will likely have strengths of intelligence, diligence, achieving results, integrity, and commitment to the organization. Behavioral improvements often include listening, developing others, delegating, being open to differing opinions, not trying so hard, and dealing with ambiguity.

Goldsmith explains right up front that his book does not focus on strategic or technical issues. The more academic treatments of succession ignore the fact that CEO's and their successors are human beings. *Succession: Are You Ready?* addresses the hopes, fears, and grief of the transition for all parties.

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