

Guidance note: Succession Planning for Senior Staff

This guidance note is aimed at governors and clerks.

- **What is succession planning?**
- **Why is succession planning for senior staff a matter for governors to consider?**
- **How can governors influence succession planning for senior staff?**
- **What opportunities does the sector provide for high quality succession planning?**
- **Has your organization experienced long-term vacancies in key leadership positions?**
- **Would your current executives say they felt adequately prepared for their top management role when they first took it on?**

Introduction

Effective succession means having a plan and making plans to create positive and coordinated flows of leadership, across many years and numerous people.

(Sustainable Leadership 2006, p.92, Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, Jossey-Bass)

At its simplest, succession planning (sometimes called talent management) for senior staff means having a systematic approach that ensures continuity of college leadership of the highest quality. For governors, the most important appointment they will make is that of Principal or CEO, but they may also play a part in appointing the finance director or vice principal positions. The success of the college however will depend on the quality of leadership throughout the organisation. Governors are well placed to demonstrate their own leadership qualities by ensuring that the college has a formal succession plan that articulates a specific commitment to the continuous professional development of staff, including opportunities for leadership development at an early stage in the careers of staff. It is often said by governors that 'the staff are our most valuable asset'. How often is this reflected in the policies and practices of the governing body, particularly the budget allocated for professional development?

Governors have a legal obligation to appoint the senior post holders, but also get involved in the appointment of other senior managers.

Effective succession planning

In their book *Sustainable Leadership*, which focuses on schools but is equally relevant to colleges, Hargreaves and Fink suggest that good succession plans for headship:

- are prepared long before the leader's anticipated departure or even from the outset of their appointment

- give other people proper time to prepare
- are incorporated in all school/college improvement plans
- are the responsibility of many, rather than the prerogative of lone leaders who tend to want to clone themselves
- are based on a clear diagnosis of the school's/college's existing stage of development and future needs for improvement
- are transparently linked to clearly defined leadership standards and competencies that are needed for the next phase of improvement.

Succession planning for the principal's post

Good succession planning for the principal's post requires the involvement of the whole board. As already indicated, much depends on the current situation of the college and its stage of development. In any event, the resignation or retirement of the principal must be seen as a risk and be identified in the risk register with associated contingency plans. The Chair (remuneration committee) will normally take responsibility for ensuring that plans are in place should a vacancy arise; he/she is in the best position to know the intentions of the current incumbent and also be aware of any performance issues. However, best practice would suggest that the responsibility is shared with other senior members of the board. (It is good practice for the Chair of Remuneration Committee to be someone other than the Chair of the Corporation.)

The ideal situation is where governors are clear about the college's vision, where college values are understood and shared and the current post-holder is open about her or his intentions. Where good performance management systems exist for the principal's appraisal and leadership standards and competencies required for the next phase of improvement are in place, there is every chance of a smooth succession. Situations that are less than ideal, including the sudden and unexpected departure of the principal, a very poor Ofsted outcome or some other performance management issue will be both difficult and expensive to resolve. Whilst governors will always have access to professional advice and support, including that of the clerk, the situations just described are the best reasons for ensuring that good succession planning is in place.

Succession planning for other senior staff

In the case of senior staff succession planning other than the principal, governors will normally take the advice of the principal and have a shared approach to appointments. A well run college will be underpinned by a strong commitment to professional development, including leadership development. The senior leadership team will be well supported by the principal and have had the benefit of recognised professional leadership development programmes. Middle managers with the potential for promotion will have been identified at an early stage and encouraged to develop their careers in appropriate ways. Many outstanding colleges will be developing their future leaders from within, some of whom will

go on to promoted posts in other colleges, whilst others will have opportunities for promotion within. The principal will play a major part in the emergence of such a culture, but it is for governors to set the lead by their own example in placing leadership and other staff development opportunities as one of their top priorities.

Governors can demonstrate this by having regular reporting on staff development including budget allocated and spend during the year, information about whole college training days, including feedback and evaluation from staff.

Opportunities for the professional development of staff, including senior staff

In 2013, the Education and Training Foundation was established 'to enhance professionalism and standards in the skills sector'. One of its priorities is leadership, management and governance and a number of consultations are ongoing regarding the future development of leadership training programmes. The Senior Leadership and Management Development programme is already available for those aspiring to the most senior positions in colleges. There are a number of private sector leadership development programmes available to college leaders which include coaching and mentorship.

Governors will want to be assured that all senior staff have professional development opportunities which match their aspirations and become an integral part of the college's senior management succession plan. Conversations about career development need to be held within a well-managed performance management system which has the full support of governors. Well designed and facilitated in-house staff development programmes can also make a significant and cost effective way of improving succession planning. (As stated above Governors need to be kept informed on an ongoing basis of staff CPD activity.)

Further Resources

[The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education](#) provides examples of succession planning techniques; it also includes a number of practical tools that can be applied.

[The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development \(CIPD\)](#) has sponsored an extensive guide 'Talent Management and Succession Planning' by James A Cannon and Rita McGee (2010)

[The National College for School Leadership](#) has practical advice on talent management aimed at the school sector

[The NHS Leadership Academy](#) has practical advice on talent management in the NHS