Succession Planning in University-level Technology Programs

J. Mark Estepp

The "Most Admired" section of the October 27, 1997, issue of *Fortune Magazine* included a piece called "Key to Success: People, People, People." Consultants for *Fortune* conducted a survey of top companies to find the common traits of these very successful companies. The seven most common traits they found may be instructive to leaders in the academy who may ask, "How many of these traits exist at my institution?"

1. Top managers at the most admired companies take their mission statements seriously and expect everyone else to do likewise.
2. Success attracts the best people and the best people sustain success.
3. Top companies know precisely what to look for.
4. Career development is seen as an investment, not a chore.
5. Whenever possible, promotion is from within.
6. Performance is rewarded.
7. Workforce satisfaction is measured.

Leadership is a topic of great interest in our profession, and higher education in general (Bennet & Figuli, 1990). In 1983 the American Council on Industrial Arts Teacher Education (now the Council on Technology Teacher Education) devoted its yearbook to the topic. Recently, articles have been written about faculty perceptions of selection criteria for department leaders (Paige, 1997). Although informal types of leadership development exist in our profession, there is little evidence that many formal arenas for leadership development exist, particularly embracing the preceding traits within a structure that can be called "succession planning." This article details the concept of succession planning and discusses its possibilities for higher education, particularly in the fields of industrial technology and technology education.

WHAT IS SUCCESSION PLANNING AND WHO DOES IT NOW?

Some companies have developed very detailed processes for succession planning. For example, a Xerox policy of the 1970s stated that managers were not eligible for promotion unless they had recruited, trained, and developed their own replacements. General Electric is considered to have a model succession plan that involves moving individuals identified as future leaders through different positions and geographic locations to prepare them for eventual leadership. Banta Corporation, a large digital imaging and printing company, utilizes succession planning by having current leaders identify, recruit, and develop new leaders. Other companies have succession plans much less structured in nature, such as voluntary administrative internships or mentorship programs, or workshops and seminars (Loven, 1993).

Clearly, succession planning does not mean the same thing to everyone. A visit to the Internet will show that the topic of succession planning is big business. Typing "succession planning" on Infoseek's search engine yielded 3,047,407 hits for me, including software for sale, workshops to attend, books to read, and consultants to hire. Most of these deal with large corporations, family-run businesses, family farms, and will and estate planning. They present themselves almost as a form of insurance or catastrophic coverage for surviving family members or business associates (e. g., www.iasiservices.com/seplanning.htm).

In contrast to this abundance, succession planning in educational institutions seems not to be widespread. Again, utilizing the Internet, if one tries a combination of "succession planning" and "higher education" or other similar key phrases, no relevant hits occur. An ERIC search found several citations dealing with human resources information, but none related to using succession planning in education.

FIVE QUESTIONS

To determine the extent and effectiveness of succession planning in industrial technology and technology education programs, a survey of five questions was developed and administered via the Internet to program area leaders or department heads in these fields. Fifty-five complete responses yielded a response rate of 45% out of 121 emailed. The results for each question are presented along with respondent comments and author interpretations.

Question 1. Do you know of any succession planning models on your campus? Seventy-six percent (n = 42) responded "no" while 24% (n = 13) responded "yes" (see Figure 1). Those who answered "yes" cited administrative internships, workshops, seminars, and programs specific to minorities and women as examples.

Question 2. Do you think succession planning works (or would work) in a higher education structure? Slightly over 60% (n = 33) said

Dr. Estepp is Chair of the Department of Technology at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. He is a member of Gamma Epsilon Chapter of Epsilon Pi Tau.

that they believe such a model would work while 22% (n = 12) said they do not believe it would work (see Figure 2). Those who believed succession planning could work generally said that any kind of planning for future leaders provides some positive effects. Most individuals perceive that no training is offered on most campuses and that "baptism by fire" is the norm. Those who do not believe succession planning would work cited such things as office politics or that the lack of "new blood" caused by internally selecting candidates might cause the "status quo" to continue. One individual commented that to select individuals for "grooming" would be the "kiss of death." Some observed that succession planning would require a commitment that a university administration might not want to make relative to the future of a program.

Question 3. What process does your institution use to select departmental/program area leaders? Overwhelmingly, the answer to this question was some variation of the "typical search process" of utilizing a faculty search committee, making a recommendation to the dean, who makes a recommendation to the provost, who makes the final decision. Some departments utilize a rotation process for departmental leadership position, which inherently increases turnover, but could also benefit from some form of succession planning. Appalachian State University, for example, recently instituted term limits for chairpersons. Unfortunately, no training process will accompany the new rotating chair procedure.

Question 4. Can the process your institution employs and a succession planning process co-exist? Thirty-six percent (n = 20) responded "perhaps," 27% (n = 15) responded "yes," and 18% (n = 10) said "no" (see Figure 3). Those who favored co-existence observed that many internal candidates are qualified, but often do not receive any consideration, and that this process could identify quality

Figure 1. Current succession planning models on campus.

Figure 3. Co-existence of current institutional process and succession planning.

Figure 2. Possibilities of succession planning being successful on campus.

Figure 4. Knowledge of institutions using unusual processes for selecting leaders.

internal candidates, thus relieving the department of the gamble of the less well-known external candidates. Those who thought otherwise shared comments such as "politics," "ego clashes," and "succession planning used only as an Affirmative Action vehicle."

Question 5. Do you know of any institutions of higher education that have unusual processes for selecting leaders? Because 100% said "no" (see Figure 4) and because a majority of the respondents indicated that they do not know of any formal succession planning models on their campus, it is safe to conclude that succession planning is not being utilized. On the other hand, it certainly warrants further investigation because a majority of respondents believe it can work.

CONSIDERING SUCCESSION PLANNING

Since no models appear to exist in education, possibly business models can be adapted. Loven provided (1993) the following base questions that an organization should consider in a formal succession planning process:
• Is the mission of the organization clearly understood?
• What are the short- and long-range goals?
   -Has everyone "bought into" these goals?
• After having identified the goals, are both the financial and human resources in place to achieve those goals?

These questions are certainly pertinent to any institution, even if it is not involved in succession planning.

Potential leaders must also feel comfortable with certain institutional parameters. If an individual selected for leadership grooming cannot agree to the following basic questions, he or she is not suited to a leadership position in that particular institution:
• Are the goals of those identified as potential leaders consistent with the organization? With the larger institution?

This is not to say that everyone must "tow a company line" (No one in higher education could be that naive!), but a general sense of direction and mission that is congruent with the faculty and administration would seem necessary.
• If the faculty are not happy with those chosen to be groomed for leadership, can the problem be identified and overcome?

In business and industry, this line of questioning relative to unhappiness with the chosen individual might touch on issues that we in academe would not (or as some would say, should not or cannot) explore. For example, in his book *Success(ion) Planning for Closely Held Businesses*, Loven (1993) suggested addressing the following topics if tension arises

between the current leadership and the identified potential leaders:
• Is the difference a question of ethics?
• Is the difference a question of age?
• Is the difference a question of lifestyle?
• Is the difference a question of religion?
• Is the difference a question of culture?

Keep in mind that the ownership of a privately held company might feel justified in bringing up these issues, particularly if the succession model involves only family members. In fact, Loven (1993) only identified two topics with which we in academe might feel comfortable addressing:
• Is the difference a question of credibility?
• Is the difference a question of interest?

Unfortunately, but truthfully, the other issues listed above could very well go on as unspoken obstacles to succession planning on campuses.

CAN SUCCESSION PLANNING BE USEFUL AND CAN IT WORK?

A majority of respondents believed that succession planning can work on their campuses, and thus it may be worth trying. Since some benign forms of succession planning such as administrative internships, workshops, seminars, and mentoring are already in place on many campuses, one may ask in what form ought succession planning go forward?

Leaders in business and industry tell us that these elements are not really succession planning. To get some industry perspective on this, I interviewed a retired CEO of a Fortune 500 company who now serves on our faculty in a Distinguished Professor role and also a vice president for human resources of a major company in North Carolina. When the former was asked if leadership programs, as described above, are succession planning models, he immediately said "no." He stated that succession planning models work because the current leadership of a company or organization selects the potential new leader, most often for a specific position. Our model of faculty governance (which he freely admitted he does not understand or appreciate) will not blend with a model of administrative directives.

The latter has been closely involved with our department for years, serving on advisory boards and giving class presentations. His perspective is similar. He correctly recognized the fact that most academic leaders only have the authority to make recommendations, and that any real leadership power lies at the provost/vice chancellor and president/chancellor levels. He believed that until real decision-making authority trickles down to the departmental (or at least college) level, true

succession planning will not work.

It is not clear that succession planning can work in our academic programs. The concept of identifying and preparing individuals for leadership through a planned process has its appeal. It could lessen the stress many feel when new leadership is brought in. If it were known who was being groomed for a position, one would better know what to expect from the new leadership. There are also unappealing facets to succession planning within departments. Faculty tend to be fluid, and one being groomed for leadership might well leave before his or her time for leadership arrives. Also, as one respondent to the survey indicated, identifying someone early on as the new leader could be the kiss of death for that individual, due to jealousy or other factors. Finally, the issue of "inbreeding" comes up, and many institutions are very hesitant to promote from within. The adage "a prophet is not respected in one's own country" may apply here. Perhaps only a modified form of succession planning, where individuals are prepared for leadership, but not for a specific position, will turn out to be workable.

SOME FIRST STEPS TO SUCCESSION

1. The faculty of industrial technology and technology education departments could present to their current leadership a position paper that would identify the type of leader the department is seeking. Such a paper could identify leadership traits the faculty feel are essential for successful leadership. The National Center for Research in Vocational Education identified, as part of a broader study, 37 leadership attributes. This list contains attributes such as energetic with stamina, insightful, visionary, confident, persistent, and adaptable (Moss & Johansen, 1991). While most would say that these attributes are expected, it does not hurt to reiterate the type of leader being sought. This process could serve to create an environment where all faculty feel involved in the process.

2. A faculty could develop and present a plan for a new way of selecting leaders to the administration. Several very interesting software packages dealing with succession planning or other leadership selection processes found on the Internet could be considered by the faculty for the educational setting.

3. Encourage faculty involvement in industrial technology and technology education professional organizations in which they will have leadership experiences. We are confronted with an increasing diversity of faculty whose professional backgrounds, interests, and agendas make it much more difficult to find a leader among them who understands and is willing to support the mission of industrial technology or technology education programs.

Succession planning appears to be widely utilized in business and industry, taking many forms from very structured to informal. The incentive for a business is clear. They are expected to survive the loss of any leader and continue to be profitable.

However, in higher education, succession planning does not appear to be practiced, at least not as industry individuals would define it. Many institutions do involve potential leaders in less formal processes such as mentorships, administrative internships, workshops, and seminars, but there is no evidence that institutions clearly identify and groom individuals for particular positions. While doing so might offer the benefits of a less stressful transfer of leadership and a better prepared leader, the negative aspects include the exclusion of outside competition for leadership positions and identifying individuals who might become targets for disgruntled faculty members. While some aspects of succession planning might be useful to us for the development of leaders, the "industry model," without careful modifications, may be too authoritarian for the academy.

References

Bennet, J., & Figuli, D. (1990). *Enhancing departmental leadership.* New York: ACE/Macmillan.

Loven, G. D. (1993). *Success(ion) planning for closely-held businesses: Planning for success.* Spokane, WA: Breakthrough Publications.

Moss, J., & Johansen, B. (1991). *Conceptualizing leadership and assessing leader attributes.* Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, National Center for Research in Vocational Education.

Most admired. Key to success: People, people, people. (1997, October 27). *Fortune Magazine*, p. 232.

Paige, W. D. (1997). Faculty perceptions of selection criteria for department leaders. *The Journal of Technology Studies, 23*(1), 33–37.