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## Original Article

# Defining advancement career paths and succession plans: Critical human capital retention strategies for high-performing advancement divisions

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**ABSTRACT** There are many factors that can influence whether a highly talented staff member will build a career within an institution or use it as a stepping stone. This article defines and explores the notions of developing career paths and succession

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planning and why they are critical human capital investment strategies in retaining the highest performers in advancement divisions. The article discusses how developing career paths and engaging in succession planning is a long-term human capital investment with a powerful return. The article will give advancement managers the rationale to develop career paths and succession plans for their highest performers and for sustaining high performance advancement divisions.

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## INTRODUCTION

How do advancement managers keep the best and brightest in their divisions? That is a question advancement leaders have been pondering for years. Stellar advancement officers continue to leave organizations every day for a myriad of factors. We know that the relationship between a staff member and his or her manager is a major reason why people leave (Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2005). We know that professional development is a key factor in retaining advancement officers (Croteau, 2009). We also know that when advancement officers cannot see a professional career path in front of them, they will seek it elsewhere (Thomas, 1996). In a 2007 study completed by Eduventures, 600 advancement officers at 30 institutions were interviewed and 49 percent of those classified as ‘high-performing advancement officers’ said that they would leave their current organization for greater opportunity.

Many higher education and nonprofit advancement leaders think that losing top talent is just the way it is and always will be. They forfeit to the trend and react to the churn and turnover, but do little to change it.

Owing to the well-documented high costs of turnover (Shoemaker, 1995; Thomas, 1996; Bliss, 2006; Iarrobino, 2006; Eduventures, 2008; Smith, 2008; Croteau, 2009), which are exacerbated in a profession like advancement due to the transformational relationships between staff and donors, as well as the shortage of talent in the growing field, advancement leaders can no longer resign to the trends, they must act.

Edward Thomas completed a study on advancement officers in 1995 and found that 50 percent of the documented turnovers he discovered were in their positions for fewer than five years. What is even more alarming is that 48 percent of the advancement officers left for greater rank or opportunity to advance. That was nearly 15 years ago, and we know from the 2007 Eduventures data that little to no progress has been made since then.

There needs to be a paradigm shift in the profession. Advancement leaders need to think strategically about developing talented people and building a pipeline of future leaders from within their organizations instead of letting talented staff simply walk out the door. Developing career paths

and being proactive about succession planning are two critical strategies in retaining your very best advancement staff. Blazing career paths not only helps those within your organization feel challenged and valued, it also adds depth to the bench of talent within your division. The availability of career paths creates a leadership pipeline for an organization, and creating a leadership development plan will ensure successful leadership transitions in the future. Career paths inevitably lead into succession planning. These two strategies, although slightly unique, go hand-in-hand, and it would be counter-productive for advancement organizations to engage in one without the other.

### DEFINING CAREER PATHS

Career pathing is, simply put, developing milestones of opportunities within the same organization for workers to attain. Career paths do not necessarily mean upward mobility. Career paths can focus on building cross-functionality as well as increases in responsibility, but not necessarily promotion. We refer to this kind of career building as outward mobility.<sup>1</sup>

For years, corporations have built highly complex career pathing models to keep their best employees engaged, satisfied, developed, and most importantly, effective. Higher education institutions, in general, have been slow to develop such programs. Some would argue that the faculty tenure process is a type of career path. However, little to no opportunity for upward mobility or outward mobility exists for higher education administrators. Advancement divisions and professionals are no exception. Career paths can be clearly defined changes to one's responsibilities

within the organization. The plan for one's career could be simply expanding a staff member's job responsibilities to include a different discipline, or carving out more opportunity for one to grow within his or her current position. Traditionally, managers have thought about promoting vertically, which is indeed an important part of building career paths. However, managers should be encouraged to think about expanding professionals horizontally.

Given the increased scrutiny being placed on advancement leaders to deliver greater returns on the investments made by their universities, colleges or institutes, career pathing and succession planning strategies are ever more crucial to build effective, cohesive staffs and to achieve staff tenures that better compliments the time it takes to cultivate and solicit major gift donors (Helm, 1993).

With the collapse of employee loyalty in the workforce over the last several decades and the high turnover rates that have plagued educational advancement units for years, there is little doubt that career pathing will move to the center of advancement staff retention strategies. Advancement leaders and senior teams know this is an issue, and some are beginning to take action. Baby-boomers, who make up a large section of the leadership roles in organizations, will be retiring soon and the younger generations like the *X'ers* and the *Millennials* are looking for opportunities to grow professionally. Many Baby Boomers are beginning to sit down at the management tables discussing who will take over the helm when they are gone. When they sit down to have this discussion, they realize that they have not built the pipeline of internal



talent to sustain the trajectory of the organization. Without career pathing and succession planning, there will be a massive vacuum in leadership in the coming decade.

### **BUILDING A CULTURE OF INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS AND ADVANCEMENT MANAGERS**

In order for advancement leaders to think strategically about career pathing and succession planning, they must start by building the base of internal talent, just like they do in building a base of donors in preparing for a major campaign. Developing a culture within an advancement division that nurtures the individual contributor as much as it values future managers is a critical first step.

Traditionally in the advancement profession, the only way to get promoted has been through gaining management responsibilities; whether one was ready to manage people, budgets or programs or not. Major gift officers who have never managed people or resources are suddenly thrown into a director of major gifts position responsible for a budget and six gift officers, all without any prior training or professional development. Many vice presidents across the country will tell you that they were promoted time and again because they were great fundraisers or alumni relations professionals, but were never given the appropriate opportunities to develop their management competencies before taking on those responsibilities.

Some people are good managers while others are not. Some, when trained, learn how to become better

managers. Others do not, even with training. The profession needs to do a better job of establishing career paths for people whom either do not want to manage or whom are not good managers. An incredibly gifted principal gift officer should not think that his or her only path to vertical promotion is becoming a vice president and managing a large team and a large budget. There are other ways leaders can keep such gift officers engaged and highly productive. Some of these strategies are described later in this article.

In establishing that pipeline of internal talent and that culture that values individual talent development, leaders need to hone in on what makes an employee special and a strong contributor. It is also critical to engage the staff member in the process by listening to their goals and aspirations. By working with them to align their individual goals with the needs of the organization, both short term and long term, the staff member feels valued. All advancement programs should be practicing some version of a formal performance management program on a yearly basis, and performance discussions should be taking place quarterly (Croteau, 2009). This is a great time to sit down with a star performer and talk about his or her professional aspirations. Where do they want their career to go? Do they have aspirations to become a manager? Or, do they have a passion for prospect research, fundraising or marketing and do not have a desire to manage a team of people? What skills or competencies do they need to build to attain their goals? The performance discussion becomes a continuous conversation between



the manager and his or her staff (at the very least with his or her most effective staff).

It is important to stress that oftentimes the staff person's goals do not align with the short-term needs of the organization. This is where career pathing comes in. Establishing career paths establishes a long-term road map for the staff member to see into their professional future. It is not a yearly promotion plan. The talent within the organization needs to fit into the organization's long-term strategic goals and promoting every stellar employee into a management position is not going to be an attainable goal. Aligning your talent to the organizational goals is something leaders often overlook. Assessing your talent pool and determining who are going to be your future managers, and who are going to be your future individual contributors is a crucial part of this strategic process.

### **VALUING AND GROWING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS**

Individual contributors are vital members of successful advancement organizations. Programs would fail if individual contributors were not performing at the highest level. Leaders need to identify the strongest individual contributors in their institutions, whether they be gift officers, prospect researchers, gift administrators, information systems specialists, alumni relations officers, campaign officers, or communications and PR officers, to name a few.

The advancement profession has consistently watched idly as outstanding individual contributors, feeling trapped by salary ceilings and lack of career growth opportunities,

leave their area of special excellence to pursue management positions in organizations where promotion exists only for those who 'step up' to management. Then, months or even a year later, these people who had thrived as gift officers or alumni relations officers lament about not having time to be out on the road or to delve deeply into research as they used to. Management responsibilities leave no time for such things. To make the situation even worse, they end up resenting managing their staff and therefore often earn reputations as poor managers.

Advancement organizations, and the advancement profession as a whole, must do more to cultivate talented people as individual contributors and reward them in creative ways to keep them satisfied and productive in their roles. Not everyone is cut out to manage people, programs, budgets or strategic plans. Without the very best individual contributors, an organization has, in any case, no human assets to manage. Some organizations do create sets of criteria that reward individual contributors and give them incentives to reach new plateaus of achievement for themselves and for their institutions. For instance, a department of research at a small liberal arts college has created the entry-level position of research associate. Once that research associate reaches certain measureable milestones, and a certain level of training, he may be promoted to research analyst. Over time, reaching and sometimes exceeding certain milestones, the research analyst may become a senior research analyst.

A similar example of an individual contributor track can be seen in some gift officer positions. Some programs

around the country have created an entry-level position that requires little to no previous advancement experience. A few programs even recruit people directly out of college to serve in what is known as a development assistant or associate position, such as The University of Michigan, Carnegie Mellon University and Boston University (Hall, 2009). These employees assist gift officers at all levels and serve in an 'inside' gift officer role. The development assistants and associates are exposed to the day-to-day work of gift officers and help the gift officer put trips together and prepare briefings for deans or other senior administrators with whom the gift officer may be traveling. We have seen development assistants and associates succeed in their position and move on to a variety of different positions within advancement organizations such as major gift officers, alumni relations officers or stewardship officers.

In the division of University Advancement at Carnegie Mellon University, a career path was developed for development associates. After reaching measureable outcomes in performance, both qualitative and quantitative, and after long discussions with their manager, a development associate could move into an annual fund gift officer position. Usually, six months into the person's tenure in the annual fund gift officer position level, the discussion would begin about whether or not the management track or the individual contributor track was the person's future course. More often than not, at this level within the organization, the individual career track was the chosen path. In order to become a major gift officer, or

many years down the road, a principal gift officer, thoughtful mentoring, training and on-the-road management (when the manager travels and observes the gift officer while on the road with donors) ensued. With this career planning, the development associate knew that there was a career path ahead of him or her.

These development associate positions play a crucial role of building the pipeline for future individual contributor talent in advancement organizations. You have the choice of pathing your most exceptional development associates to major gift officer roles, but you should also consider expanding the competencies of the best development associates to other positions within the organization. Some development associates will make outstanding alumni relations professionals or marketing associates. Individual contributor tracks can be extensive; for instance, a gift officer track can span from the above-mentioned development associate to a principal gift officer. Moving through such an extensive career path takes years and begins to solve the turnover issue. If you think about the continuity of one career path with the continuity of relationships with your donors, the impact could be profound on the bottom line.

Another key individual contributor who is often overlooked is the administrative assistant. Retaining administrative talent can be a major challenge. Managers often forget that these people play a critical role within the organization. Although managers sometimes look for administrative staff who can take on additional, non-administrative responsibilities, and will sometimes recruit administrative

employees with the intention of eventually promoting them into positions beyond the administrative ranks, it is important to also hire administrative staff who want to be administrators and who are going to feel valued by doing that work. Think about ways to expand the individual's competencies within the area in which he or she was hired. This does not mean avoiding hiring people who may have the potential to be promoted into positions outside of administration. Indeed, the best strategy is to recruit a mix of administrators, some who will remain administrators and some who have the potential of moving elsewhere.

The more your administrative staff knows about the mission, goals and objectives of the department or division, the more effective and dedicated they will be. They are a part of the team. They should attend staff meetings, divisional meetings, and other important initiatives or planning sessions. Administrative staff will learn by participating in learning and development programs, just as any other staff member may.

It is critical to reward good individual contributors with responsibility, sometimes a new title, and also with money. When you ask someone you do not want to lose to take on something new or when you alter someone's job description significantly, it is imperative to compensate her/him appropriately. Money is not always a motivating factor. However, when a strong performer senses they are compensated below market value, it can be a demotivating factor. Rewards are essential in retention of staff. When an employee is performing well and

rewarded for the work, make sure you announce the promotion publicly. The outward positive messaging tells your organization that great work is rewarded and appreciated.

## DEVELOPING ADVANCEMENT MANAGERS

Another way of expanding a stellar performer's competencies is to consider the management track. This should be done only after the individual has demonstrated a high potential for managing people. This can be observed through informal mentoring abilities, superb organization and excellent coaching instincts, among others. Considering management for staff members should also come only after extensive discussion with the employee about expanding his or her competencies to include management. Most importantly, before taking on a management role, the employee should have both management training and coaching.

Since we know that the manager is such a key player in staff retention (Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2005), the profession and advancement leaders have to invest in making sure managers are well-equipped to mentor, coach and hold people accountable. It is crucial for organizations and the profession to groom new managers who do not micro-manage and know how to develop talent.

If you have a learning and development curriculum that includes management training, then you should begin to include aspiring managers in the program. However, you need to be proactive and identify the staff members who possess the qualities you are looking for in a manager. If you allow staff to identify themselves,



you are potentially opening a floodgate for people to self-identify. You want a program to be strategic and an incentive for staff. As a manager, you need to sit down with potential staff and discuss their career path as manager and give them the tools to get there. Once the senior team has identified the new generation of management in the organization, get them training. Train them as a cohort, much like an MBA or certificate program. Give them the tools they need to know how to manage difficult situations, how to motivate staff, how to build teams all before they are thrown into management roles.

If you do not have a learning and development curriculum, then find management courses or seminars, either within your organization's human resources offerings or outside of the organization. The aspiring manager's immediate boss should also start to expose this individual to management issues and challenges. Carnegie Mellon's University Advancement Division created a Management Round Table (Croteau, 2009) for managers to discuss and debate tough management issues. It is also important to create a network of growing, learning professionals for those put on the management track so that they can learn from one another, as well. Consider creating a management boot camp, a training program for beginning managers, as well.

After you have completed ample training and the staff member has reached certain performance milestones, gradually add management responsibilities to the employee's portfolio. Add budget responsibilities first, then program management, and,

lastly, people management, one person at a time. Ease them into the new responsibilities. Through each step, you may change the individual's title to reflect the additional responsibilities. Of course, you should also adjust compensation appropriately.

It is important that at the beginning of the process, you set the individual's expectations to accept that these transitions take time, perhaps even years. But do not be inflexible about timing. Some people move faster than others. Focus on managing the individual's growth rather than on establishing uniform milestones created to fit everyone. One size does not fit all, especially when people learn how to become managers.

Good managers should eventually master how to grow new managers. While it is critical to focus on people's strengths, learning how to be a manager is also about learning how to do things they have never done before. They have the ability to assess management talent and to see major gaps within a person's set of competencies. It is a skill to be able to identify management gaps and point them out in constructive ways. Strong managers inspire staff to take on those performance gaps and to aggressively build up the areas that need focus. Once the staff member shows signs of filling the performance or competency gap, a manager can add something to the staff member's portfolio of management. Managers growing a new generation of managers also need to let new managers experience things on their own. When they stumble, correct and help; believe that there are no mistakes, just lessons. Over time, you will find your staff on the management track becoming outstanding leaders within your team.



Growing managers means that the management training does not stop. As new managers continue to progress in their positions over the years, you can introduce increasingly complex and challenging training opportunities. Just because someone is a manager and has been a manager for a long time does not mean learning must stop. Critical management issues and topics should be raised and discussed among division managers on a monthly basis. This enables managers to learn from one another and hear about innovative best practices. Many learn by hearing stories from their colleagues dealing with difficult management situations. Not only can managers learn what to do, but they can also learn what not to do.

Many advancement leaders are against staff networking and attending conferences because they fear losing a promising employee. If you are confident in your retention strategies, however, you have no need to fear your staff members networking with other managers. Exposing your developing managers to the most diverse set of management strategies and tactics will allow them to develop their own style by picking and choosing from what they think works best. Be proactive. Send your staff only to the most appropriate and useful conferences, including those conferences or seminars dedicated to management and leadership training. When you encourage your staff to network, sometimes they find candidates that are a great fit for your team or even best practices that you have yet to enact in your organization.

In the performance discussions, single out those individuals you think

would make strong managers. Perhaps you see a natural ability to mentor others, or you recognize a strong propensity for strategic planning and thinking, or maybe you see someone with strong budgeting skills. Whatever you see in the staff member, share your observations with him/her and ask if they have interest in management in their future. Indeed, this should be among the first questions you ask in your initial meetings with a new staff member. You should acquire as early as possible a good understanding of what it is each employee wants.

Don't assume that everyone aspires to manage. Ask. Does the employee want to be an individual contributor? Does she not want to be bothered with the management piece? If your organization rewards people for management positions as well as for excellence as individual contributors, you will get honest answers about their intentions. On the other hand, if your organization only rewards people for becoming managers, then everyone will say they want to become a manager – or at least believe they do – even if it is a role for which they are not suited. Once you have a good understanding of where an employee wants to go and where you think he belongs, let him know which track he is on. When you put someone on the management track, it is important to explain that there may or may not be a management position open at the moment, or in the near future, but that you are committed to building the individual's competencies so that if one were to open in time, he/she would be amply trained and ready for it. You are not only creating a career path for an outstanding individual, but you are



also taking the first step in succession planning – preparing your organization with future leaders and managers.

### **BE FLEXIBLE AND CREATIVE WITH YOUR BEST PERFORMERS**

As a manager, you need to pay close attention to everyone's professional growth. However, you need to be constantly checking-in with your highest performers about their career goals. You need to be asking specific questions and listening to the answers. By asking a staff member about their professional career, you are making them a part of their career path discussion. This constant communication will give you a sense of what a high performer wants and needs out of a position to keep engaged and focused. Keep thinking strategically about ways to expand individual duties and responsibilities to keep good people challenged.

Flexibility and creativity both play a key role in career pathing. Don't let a talented person get pigeon-holed. For example, a development researcher is a focused and skill-specific position. A good researcher is someone who enjoys sitting at a computer for the majority of the day, writing and pouring over data to uncover the most hidden and important information on your constituencies. We could describe this position as a behind-the-scenes type of position. The immediate career path for this type of position could be a development researcher to a senior development researcher to an assistant director of research to an associate director of research and then finally a director of research. This career path would be the most logical and obvious. For example, after sitting

down with the manager, a development researcher explained that she took the position to understand more about the 'behind-the-scenes' functions of the advancement shop. She was interested in a more frontline position, alumni relations specifically. She was a high performer in the organization, so the manager encouraged her to volunteer and take a more active role in alumni relations' activities. She did and learned the aspects that she liked and did not like and the path she might want to take in alumni relations. She attended conferences that gave overviews on alumni relations and delved deeper in certain aspects of the alumni relations' profession. This individual is still with the organization and is thriving in her current role, as she waits for the right opportunity in alumni relations to present itself.

### **STRATEGIC SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Higher education has only begun to scratch the surface of succession planning. In broad terms, succession planning is preparing your organization's future with the appropriate and necessary development of human capital to succeed into critical leadership positions. (Croteau, 2009). Think of succession planning as securing and sustaining the leadership architecture of the division. Career paths provide the building blocks for future talent. With developed, career progressed talent in the pipeline, you can begin to strategize who will take over the leadership positions if someone leaves, is injured, or is ready to take on new challenges at another organization and becomes a leader elsewhere.

Succession planning is rarely practiced, at least not practiced



effectively, so that when a leadership position vacates, the organization has not built the depth of its human capital at the lower levels or middle management levels to support a leadership transition from within. Thus, the position has to be posted and a national search begins. Going outside of the organization to find new talent is sometimes exactly what an organization needs, but, often, tapping someone from the inside is the best leadership solution. If the organization has not thought about this in a strategic way, however, there is usually no obvious internal choice and it is left with only one option.

Succession planning is just what it sounds like: it plans for the succession of human capital leadership into positions within the organization. Many people talk about succession planning and leadership transition at the uppermost positions within the organization, and that is important. However, organizations should think about succession planning, not only for the upper most echelon of leadership positions, but also within the middle management ranks. This will help solve the turnover issue and it will help with keeping cohesive staffs within organizations.

Succession planning goes hand-in-hand with career pathing. If you want a thoughtful succession plan, you need to invest in developing your stars. Good succession planning discussions take place within the senior-most leadership teams, and discussions around these leadership tables should be frequent and collaborative. Leadership teams should always be planning for the future. Leaders should identify who they are grooming and preparing for future

leadership roles. It should be clear who your stars are, who you cannot afford to lose, and who you are committed to growing. You can even go as far as identifying the positions for which they would be best suited. Leaders need to have open discussions and tell those whom have identified that you intend to invest in their talent development. It is not necessary to be specific about positions and plans – don't make any promises you may not be able to keep – but you should speak to them generally about their bright future within the organization. This opens up a dialogue that will help you to discern whether or not the candidate embraces leadership.

Some managers feel threatened by emerging talent. They feel that they are nurturing a usurper, someone who wants their job. Recognize the feeling, then get beyond it. The real danger to you and your organization is failure to foster the next generation of leaders. Moreover, each of the leaders within your organization should have a deputy, an understudy who is able take over if there is a long absence or if you were to lose someone permanently. Faced with the sudden loss of a leader, for whatever the reason, you should know who within your organization is ready to take over the position right away. Recruiting from the outside is always an option; however, too many organizations leave themselves with this as their only option. This path is risky, usually making for a choppy transition and a loss of resources and talent.

## CONCLUSION

It is a critical time for leaders in the advancement profession to engage in career pathing and succession planning discussions. Many factors point to



how critical these human capital strategies will be to sustain high-performing advancement divisions across the country and abroad. It is clear that one practice should not be implemented without the other. Without careful, thoughtful and strategic engagement of such practices, advancement organizations will not reach their potential and the revolving door of talent will continue.

## NOTE

- 1 Outward Mobility is the process of expanding a professional's competencies and experiences to give them greater breadth and intellectual capital and therefore expands their ability to execute more cross-functional duties for the organization.

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