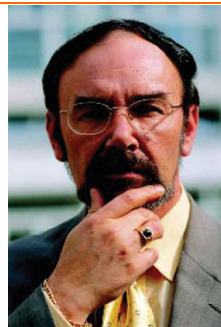


Succession Planning: To Tell or Not to Tell

By William J. Rothwell



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The most famous issue in succession planning is “to tell or not to tell”—much like Hamlet’s famous “to be or not to be.” Most U.S. companies—about 60 percent—choose not to tell.

Consider the advantages of “telling.” Individuals who are doing a good job and are also preparing themselves for future challenges at higher levels of responsibility, preferably under the guidance of their immediate supervisors, are more likely to stay in the organization. They can see a benefit to doing the double duty of performing in their current jobs and preparing for increased responsibility in the future.

Consider the disadvantages of “telling.” Those who are told they are on a succession plan may camp out on the doorsteps of their immediate supervisors, asking when they will be promoted. If they are told they will be the successors of their immediate supervisor, then they are incited to ease out their bosses—what is sometimes called “promotion by assassination!”

The advantage of “not telling” is that the organization is able to keep options open. As business conditions change, there may be a need to make a change in who is selected as successors. Additionally, it may keep people guessing—and get multiple candidates to prepare themselves for future opportunities for promotion.

The disadvantage of “not telling” is that it may lead high potentials to look outside the organization for faster opportunities for advancement. Nor are individuals who are uncertain of their status likely to devote as much attention as they might to preparing themselves for greater challenges at higher levels of responsibility.

“To tell or not to tell” is really a false issue. It sounds like everyone is either told or not told, and it is rarely wise to treat everyone and every situation exactly the same. The real issues are “who to tell, when to tell, and how to tell.” There may be occasions when individuals with business critical skills should be told. They may have to be told if word comes back that they are actively “looking”—that is, floating their resumes. And often managers will need some guidance on “how to tell” to avoid making oral contracts or committing the organization to promotions even when business conditions change.

For this reason, many organizations choose to develop annual “high potential” lists. That allows decision-makers to strike a balance between “telling and not telling.” They tell people that they are on a high potential list. But that is not a guarantee of a promotion regardless of business conditions, individual performance, or individual potential. Individuals may change, and so might competitive conditions. But it still gives individuals hope for the future.

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