

# Continuity of High-Performing Leadership: Are You There Yet?

By Bill Musick, BS, MBA

**Y**ou've probably heard a lot of buzz about "succession planning" and "talent management." Both topics are receiving significant attention due to the anticipated retirement of senior hospice managers, the nursing shortage, and increased focus on risk management, quality and "getting the right people on the bus."

Succession planning (or "leadership continuity planning," as I prefer to call it) helps an organization prepare for vacancies in key leadership positions. Talent management encompasses a philosophy of dedicated attention to recruiting, training, assessing, rewarding, and retaining high-quality staff and volunteers.

More and more organizations are recognizing the importance of pairing plans for continuity of leadership with talent management as key elements of sustained organizational performance and market leadership. This is a best practice for achieving the goals set forth in Quality Partners' 10 Components of Quality in Hospice Care, at least in three areas: Organizational Excellence, Stewardship and Accountability, and Workforce Excellence. Together, these plans encompass a number of key attributes of excellent organizations: intentionality, transparency, well-managed risk, constructive board-staff partnerships, and revitalization.

A plan for leadership continuity by itself outlines who might step into vacant positions. However, without a parallel plan for developing leaders, a succession plan may provide for continuity, but not ensure high performance by those who fill the vacancy.

In a study conducted by the Furst Group and NHPCO in 2005, 38 percent of responding hos-

pice executives said they had a succession plan in place, yet only 37 percent of those plans were in writing and only 45 percent had been approved by the board of directors or shared with executive staff. In a more limited study conducted in 2007 by The Corridor Group, 61 percent of respondents reported having a succession plan in place, but of those, 82 percent covered a planned departure, while only 27 percent had a plan in place for emergency succession. Clearly, most hospices have an opportunity to strengthen their plans for ensuring leadership continuity. They can take things to an even higher level by pairing their succession plans with a talent development process.

Together, leadership continuity and leadership development plans provide deliberate and intentional processes to:

- Minimize gaps in leadership;
- Minimize time for new leaders to get up to speed;
- Support those who are stretching in new or interim positions.

## Getting Started with Leadership Continuity Planning

It makes sense for organizations to prioritize the development of leadership continuity (i.e., succession) plans based primarily upon the potential impact of a vacancy and, secondarily, on the probability of a vacancy in that position. Hence, most organizations begin their continuity planning with the chief executive position and then often expand their plans to cover the senior leadership team and, eventually, the board officers and chairs and/or all management positions.

Continuity plans typically address two types of vacancies: the planned and the unexpected (or emergency). The details of succession plans usu-

ally are based upon whether the incumbent is expected to return and how long it will be before that happens. Each of the two types of vacancies are typically addressed in plans for short-term (three months or less), long-term (more than three months, but incumbent is expected to eventually return), and permanent vacancies. So, a typical plan addresses the six combinations of type (planned and unplanned) and duration (short-term, long-term or permanent).

For each situation, plans typically address the following items:

- Who are the candidates to serve as the interim leader?
- What authority will the interim leader have?
- What compensation change will be made for the interim leader?
- Who will oversee and support the interim leader?
- How will changes be communicated? By and to whom?
- What will define the end of the interim period?
- Will a transition committee be formed? If so, who will serve and what will be the process?
- What systems will be used to ensure that key information held by leaders is documented and retained?

For permanent (and in some cases long-term) vacancies, these additional elements may be added:

- Will a needs assessment be conducted? If so, how?
- What will be the search process? Who will be involved?

And for planned transitions, a final element will be:

- What are the expectations for the departing incumbent?

Many of these elements may be the same across the spectrum of types and lengths of vacancies, but it is a useful exercise to consider what variations, if any, might be appropriate for each situation. All plans should assign responsibilities for oversight and support of those who provide interim leadership.

### **Developing High-Performing Leaders**

Developing plans for leadership continuity are comparatively simple compared to developing a culture of leadership development. Such a culture includes deliberate and intentional processes that not only develop high-performing leaders in their current jobs, but also nurture a pool of candidates ready to step into new roles and be high performers in those roles. This effort requires dedicated resources and systems to assess, recruit, train, nurture, and retain high-performing individuals, and the capability to forecast future leadership needs.

Organizations committed to high-performing leadership development are characterized by rigorous screening of candidates, use of behavior and skill assessment tools, in-depth orientation to culture as well as position, and fostering employee/volunteer ownership of their own development. These organizations commit a high level of management focus, and financial and systems support to achieve these goals.

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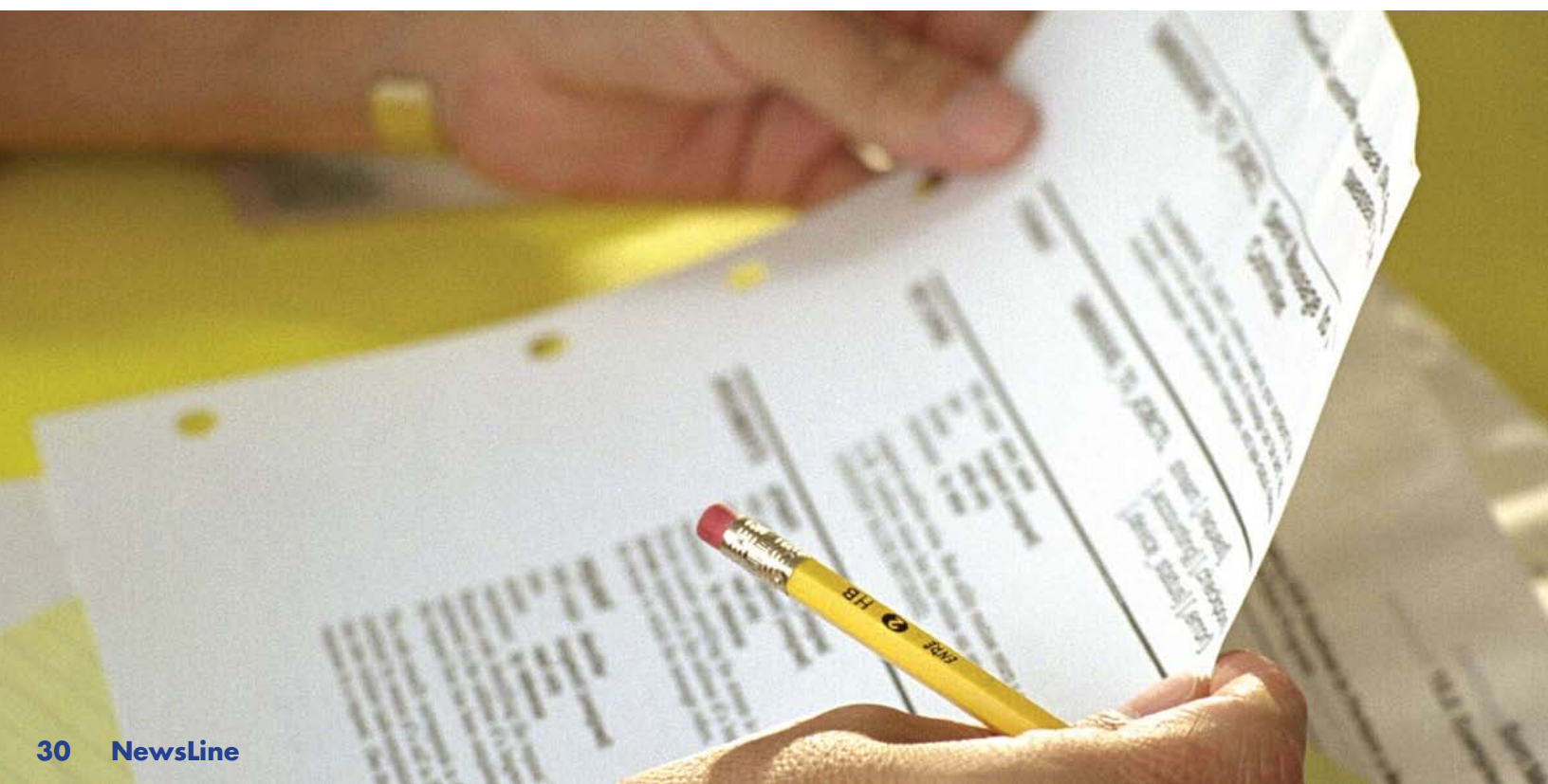
Getting started on creating such a culture can begin with assessing where the organization currently is and where it wants to be in a number of areas. An organization can start with any one of these elements and develop a plan to eventually address all areas as management focus and budget allow:

- Identifying desired behaviors and competencies;
- Incorporating desired attributes into assessments of candidates and current staff;
- Developing a system to track assessments and to document development plans for each staff person;
- Articulating a recruiting “brand” that distinguishes your organization from others;
- Assessing how your orientation process instills organizational values and insures competencies;
- Evaluating the tools that your managers have at their disposal for encouraging and rewarding high performance;
- Integrating leadership development into strategic plans and objectives;
- Matching career paths with formal education, mentoring, and opportunities for “stretch” assignments;
- Monitoring turn-over and employee satisfaction.

### Checking Progress— Where Do You Stand?

Use the following checklist to assess your progress on ensuring continuity of high-performing leaders:

1. Does a written policy/procedure exist for:
  - a. Unplanned vacancies? ☐ Yes ☐ No
  - b. Planned vacancies? ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Are systems in place to track leadership development efforts? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Are resources and incentives in place to support leadership development (training, mentoring, budget)? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Are systems in place to capture key information? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Are leadership continuity and development integrated into ongoing processes:
  - a. Strategic planning ☐ Yes ☐ No
  - b. Performance reviews ☐ Yes ☐ No
  - c. Budget development ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Is a defined process in place to project needed skills, behaviors and competencies for future openings? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. Are the plans and processes noted above reviewed and updated on a regular basis? ☐ Yes ☐ No



## How to Start on a Sure Footing

Here are some suggestions on how to avoid the typical barriers than can derail continuity and leadership development plans:

### *Focus on the long-term goal*

Initial discussions between a chief executive and his/her board or between levels of management can often get bogged down by second guessing why each party is bringing up succession planning at this particular point in time (e.g., Is the staff person planning to leave? Is the board or superior unhappy with the staff person?). It is important to establish up front that succession planning is a best practice in and of itself and isn't necessarily geared to any near-term actions.

### *Make sure that all levels of the organization are committed*

A strong level of commitment is key to successfully implementing a combined set of leadership continuity and development practices. Especially for leadership development, an organization must be ready to commit energy and financial resources toward building and maintaining its talent pool. A key part of fostering commitment is including those impacted by the change in defining the change and in re-evaluating the situation on a periodic basis.

### *Celebrate progress*

Look for and celebrate any progress in each area. Remember that changes to culture need to be reinforced on a regular basis.

Pairing plans for continuity and leadership development can have a tremendous payback in terms of reduced turn-over, improved morale, and high quality operations. Establishing this linkage takes time and commitment, but can bring rewarding results.

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## Resources:

2005 Hospice and Palliative Care Leadership Survey, National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and Furst Group, 2005.

Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership, Jeanne Bell and Timothy Wolfred, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, and Richard Moyers, The Meyer Foundation; [http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/194\\_daringtolead06final.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/194_daringtolead06final.pdf)

The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Executive Transitions Monograph Series ([www.aecf.org/publications](http://www.aecf.org/publications)):

- Capturing the Power of Leadership Change
- Interim Executive Directors—The Power in the Middle
- Founder Transitions: Creating Good Endings and New Beginnings
- Up Next—Generation Change and the Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations
- Staying Engaged, Stepping Up

"Preparing an Organization to Sustain Capable Leadership" Karen Gaskins Jones, Non-profit Quarterly, Spring 2007, pp 69-71.

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