

The Strengths of Intentional Succession

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The Succession Crisis

On February 28, 2013, the world witnessed a phenomenon that had not happened in 600 years. The sitting Pope resigned, triggering a process of succession. Admitting that his health was in decline and staying in office would only hurt the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict left the papacy. The level of self-awareness displayed by such a prominent world leader should act as a guide for leaders in similar circumstances and stages in life. Bob Russell says, “We don’t wait until a tire blows before buying new ones.”¹ Yet, many leaders assume a presumptive posture about their future and the future of their organizations rather than preemptively planning for “what and who” is next. The decision to ignore or delay such considerations will likely become an organizational tsunami, threatening its very existence.

The wave of Baby Boomers entering retirement is forcing organizations of every type to seriously consider the looming leadership transition before them. Not only will pending retirements create a leadership vacuum, but “the increasing value of intellectual capital and knowledge management . . . [make it more] necessary than ever for organizations to plan for leadership continuity and employee achievement at all levels.”² If leaders within

this generation simply turned in their keys to controlling boards and walked from their offices onto the nearest golf course, the organizations they led would lose their wealth of experience, perspective, and ongoing contributions.

Churches are no exception to the deep impact of impending leadership transitions. The U.S. Assemblies of God (AG) faces such a crisis in the next decade as older leaders leave their positions as senior leaders of churches across the country. Statistics from a 2014 report by the General Secretary of the AG, Jim Bradford, reveal that nationally among lead pastors the median age of every level of credential—ordained, licensed, and certified—is above 50. In addition, 51 percent of lead pastors are over 55 years of age, with 19.4 percent being 65 years of age and older.³ Bradford noted the importance of dealing with succession now: “With our active ordained ministers having a median age of around 57, we are headed into a huge leadership turnover in the next 10 to 15 years.”⁴

Thousands of church boards face the daunting question of who will become the next leader. For years, judicatory leaders, local church elders, or bishops have spearheaded the work of succession. In more independent systems of governance, such as the Assemblies of God, recommendations

are solicited from area leaders and given to local pastoral search teams who, in turn, sift through the qualifications to arrive at a candidate who is presented to the congregation. However, this article suggests an alternative. A careful process of leadership succession could leverage the experience and perspective of outgoing pastors, ensuring not only smoother transitions for organizations and carefully prepared successors, but also providing the outgoing leaders with potentially renegotiated positions of continued influence. To do that, local churches must embrace a culture of leadership development that will identify, train, and eventually appoint high capacity learners in places of significant ministry, including the office of senior pastor. This process must be “intentional and homegrown.”⁵

The Need for a Plan and a Successor

The loss of the senior leader inevitably occurs in every church. Indeed, every pastor is an interim pastor. Yet, in many cases there is no discernible process to guide and inform the outgoing leader or a controlling board. If and when a transition takes place, it often sets in motion a long, laborious process led by board members and directors “that have neither the time nor the expertise to do the job well.”⁶ The need for immediate action presses hard on one side while the need for an incredible amount of information regarding tasks, current projects, staffing, and a host of other information locked up in the mind of the exiting leader presses even harder on the other. This crisis-induced state is called *interregnum*, literally, “the time between kings . . . [a phrase referring] to the chaos and conflict that inevitably erupts between the rules of successive monarchs. This has long been a time of danger and risk, typically prompted by succession struggles and ambiguity regarding the legitimacy of various claimants to the throne.”⁷

In view of such danger, “the central goal in transitioning leadership is ensuring that the transfer of knowledge, responsibilities, and relationships are accomplished without interrupting the focus and momentum of the organization.”⁸ Such carefully arranged transitions are the product of open dialogue and the resulting systems put in place to guide every generation of leaders through previously anticipated stages and steps. Unfortunately, such planning is rarely the case.

Discussions among pastors and boards seldom include the awkward topic of succession. The current leader feels a veiled threat and the board, by introducing the topic, engenders a hint of disloyalty. This silence leads to the often unhealthy intervention of outsiders who are unaware of the unique qualities of the local church in their community. Even if the topic of succession rises to the level of open consideration, the process of getting from concept to reality to implementation remains unknown to most leadership teams. However, there is hope. Recent publications such as *Next*, written by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, have changed the landscape, providing anecdotal stories, statistics and a wide variety of perspectives on succession. Many large church transition stories have also hit the market, providing wisdom and insight from leaders who have successfully entered and exited their own succession. In addition, biblical resources on succession, heretofore given only surface examination, yield valuable insights directly applicable to contemporary leadership transitions.

The Bible and Succession

From Adam to John, the Bible records a litany of generational transitions characterized by preservation of the message of hope found in God. When Christ

appeared, hope became incarnate in the “living God” (1 Tim. 4:10). This message was entrusted to an increasing number of leaders who pressed into ever larger numbers of communities and people groups. Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 points to this: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” “Timothy, as Paul’s delegate and successor, was to oversee the appointment and training of new leaders, so that the community would be able in succeeding generations to carry out God’s mission with the church in the world.”⁹ The aggregate of teaching passed on to Timothy and then to others can be found in previous succession relationships revealed in the pages of scripture.

Shared Characteristics of Three Biblical Successors

Three well-documented scriptural stories yield a rich vein of information and clarity regarding God’s priorities for succession: Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, and Paul and Timothy. Although vastly different in context and relational dynamics, all three stories reveal similar fundamental factors that led to successions that work: God’s call, long-term service, private and public commissioning, boldness, and God’s presence solicited. These qualities are briefly noted below.

Each of the outgoing leaders in this chapter received miraculous calls to service from God—a burning bush, an unlikely anointing, and a blinding collapse in the middle of a path to vengeance. These experiences marked each man with indelible spiritual ink, creating a lifelong commitment to God’s assignment for them which they, in turn, imparted to their successor. This impartation not only happened organically

as the relationships progressed but also formally and publicly.

The anointing of all three leaders in a public setting of commissioning each to service stands out as not only a ceremonial symbol of leadership transition, but it also served as an acknowledgement of God’s affirmation and promise of power in each transition. The people who observed each act of anointing recognized its significance for the respective kingdom (Israel and the Kingdom of Heaven), but more so, the recipient and giver of the anointing intimately connected as a product of that moment. The coupling of calling and commissioning inextricably binds a leader with the one served, ensuring a higher source and purpose for future efforts.

This public affirmation of God’s choice for the future led to boldness and courage in the life of each successor, predicated on God’s enduring presence. Whether the task was military, civil, or spiritual, the journey ahead required resources beyond the inherent qualities of each individual.

The final shared characteristic, long-term service, looms larger than the others in some ways because of the importance of the exchange of life and leadership over time. This cumulative impact appears most clearly in the stories of Moses and Paul, although inferences can be made concerning David’s relationship to Solomon simply because of proximity and family connections. Joshua developed as a warrior and tribal leader under Moses’ leadership and Timothy visited churches in a supervisory capacity under the direction of Paul. Although each young leader forged new ground and carried out unique assignments compared to his predecessor, the base of their efforts already existed, and they developed in the work of their predecessors. Joshua surrounded himself with known leaders, systems of tribal organization, and the laws of God, all

provided by Moses. Solomon utilized the vast network of leaders, systems, and resources provided by his father. And, Timothy carried letters of commendation from his mentor, enjoying the capital of Paul's expansive relational network in the churches around the Mediterranean. The importance of such long-term, relational transference has been recognized in many authors writing about a divergent classification of succession in the corporate world.

In 2008, Ram Charan, world renowned business adviser, prolific writer, and teacher, authored a book titled, *Leaders At All Levels*, subtitled, *Deepening Your Talent Pool to Solve the Succession Crisis*. The premise of the book rests on the capture and use of an ancient practice of succession called apprenticeship.

Apprentices are people who learn from doing and that is precisely what the Apprenticeship Model provides: practice, feedback, corrections, and more practice. . . . The Apprenticeship Model vests huge responsibility in line leaders who supervise other leaders . . . But developing leaders is not their task alone. It is a companywide priority. People throughout the organization create jobs, lend their observations, remove obstacles—whatever it takes to keep leaders growing.¹⁰

Intentional leadership succession provides the possibility of a robust culture of self-propagation that sees the progress of the past as a stepping stone for the future led by one trained to take full advantage of the opportunity provided by a humble predecessor. Corporate observers call such trained successors, 'inside outsiders.'

The Inside Outsider

Should an organization choose leaders who are insiders, those who have come up through the ranks of an organization, or outsiders, people chosen from another agency or organization? The relative value of insiders vs. outsiders is described below.

Both insider and outsider CEO's have strengths and weaknesses when they begin. Insiders know the company and its people but are often blind to the need for radical change—they've drunk the Kool-Aid. Outsiders see the need for a new approach but can't foster change because they don't know the company or industry sector well enough. What organizations need, then, is to find a way to nurture what I call *inside-outsiders*—that is, internal candidates who have outside perspective.¹¹

Joseph Bower, who coined the term "Inside Outsiders" says, "The best leaders are people from inside the company who somehow have maintained enough detachment from the local traditions, ideology, and shibboleths that they have retained the objectivity of an outsider."¹² The importance of such leaders cannot be overstated: "During the period 2000 to 2010, external hires resulted in almost twice the CEO failure rate when compared to inside successors."¹³

The insider knows the company, knows the industry, knows the people, knows the networks, knows the subtle and shifting alliances, knows the existing strategy and—for better or worse, knows where many of the existing flaws and faults lie and where all the skeletons are buried and where the dirt has been carefully swept under the rug. Most important, to employ another common but useful cliché, the insider is likely to

be more sensitive to the cost of throwing the baby out with the bath water.¹⁴

In the final analysis, outsider “selections and recruitments are riskier, costlier, and far more disruptive to the fabric of the organization than insider selections.”¹⁵ If this is true for the world of church leadership, the imperative for current leaders is to lead the way in identifying someone who can lead in their stead.

The Chief Task of Leadership: Succession

A growing cry from both national and international church leaders is that “succession is not about filling leadership vacancies; it’s about creating an organization’s future.”¹⁶ More than that, it is about developing successive generations of leaders who will be equipped to step into influential places, lending their gifts and talents to the church’s growth and effectiveness. Indeed, “finding and grooming leaders for succession is one of the chief tasks of leadership.”¹⁷

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, states, “Before you become a leader, success is all about growing yourself. After you become a leader, success is about growing others. Every leader has a responsibility to develop those who can move the organization forward.”¹⁸ In the Christian context, the issue is one of legacy, not simply for the outgoing leader, but also for the local church—and more importantly, for the kingdom of God. David McKenna, a longtime college president, says, “We cannot lose sight of our primary task. It is to develop mature disciples who are ready to step into the role of leadership. . . . Our legacy will be written not in the good things that we have done as Christian leaders, but in the greater things that our successor will do.”¹⁹ This definition of legacy is reiterated

in an oft-quoted statement by leadership guru, John Maxwell.

Of all the laws of leadership, the Law of Legacy is the one that the fewest leaders seem to learn. Achievement comes to someone when he is able to do great things for himself. Success comes when he empowers followers to do great things with him. Significance comes when he develops leaders to do great things for him. But a legacy is created only when a person puts his organization into the position to do great things without him.²⁰

A leader’s current assignment is only a brief expression of what God intends to do in a given location among a neighborhood, village, or city. Tending the Master’s business means not only faithfulness in the present, but also a careful preparation for the future. This preparation is defined as discipleship, and out of discipleship steps leaders in the making. These new leaders should be trained to pick up the mantle of leadership with minimal disruption in order to continue the Master’s work in their context.

Final Observations

The Current Leader is Key

Not all pastoral transitions can benefit from an intentional succession plan. As stated in *Next*, the average tenure of most U.S. Protestant senior pastors is still only eight years.²¹ This length of time goes up according to the size of the church. Regardless of church size, succession can become the best path to long-term cohesion that yields greater community impact. The current senior pastor is always the driving force and advocate. There must be a commitment on the part of the current leader to leadership identification, engagement, and development. This future-centric focus will

most likely require a shift in both thinking and practice.

Bring Potential Successors Close

There must be a redefinition of staff pastors and interns from transactional hirelings to transformational partners. Too often, younger leaders are given tasks to perform and groups to lead, but they are prevented from the relational warmth and dedication depicted in the interaction of a master with an apprentice. Whether the current pastor is seventy or thirty, every generation that is fifteen to twenty years removed from one's own should become a recruitment and training ground for leadership development and ultimately replacement. A commitment to this multigenerational approach to apprenticeship should be reflected at the highest levels of the movement, not only in isolated tokenism, but also in a pervasive commitment to shared authority.

Find and Develop Creative Pools of Potential Leaders

The work of certain church staffing agencies and Warren Bird's organization, Leadership Network, is largely focused on mega-churches. However, the vast majority of churches across the world are small fellowships of committed people struggling to influence their communities. Intentional succession can work there as well, but the pool of potential successors must often be found outside the local church. Certainly the first candidates for succession are former members of the local church who have moved to other locations and ministries but have the DNA of their previous church imbedded in their system. District schools of ministry are producing an increasingly effective stream of trained leaders, coming from other disciplines, who could begin a formal internship with a current leader. Another potential pool of possible successors might emerge from large

churches functioning in the same role as a teaching hospital in which students sign up for a two-year paid internship designed to spill them out into profitable ministry at the conclusion of their journey. If a current leader could partner with such a leader in training a year before transition, the results would increase the possibility of a much stronger DNA transfer and smoother organizational handoff.

Active, Systematic Discipleship is the Roots of Succession

Finally, the metrics of church success should shift away from nickels, noses, and noise to a simple inquiry regarding the presence or absence of an intentional system of making disciples. Leaders emerge as a subset of the larger pool of disciples. Therefore, a commitment to discipleship must prevail in every local church in order to provide the raw material for future leaders. Jesus typified such a disciple to leader pathway in Luke 22:29-30: "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Conclusion

John the Baptist explained his role as forerunner for Jesus by remarking to a crowd around him, "The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:29b-30). Leaders who have "fought the good fight . . . finished the race . . . kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7) are not quite ready to move to their reward. There is yet one more step for them to take. While strength remains, grasp the baton of your leadership and extend it behind you to a new leader, holding on together to that common task until the other's grip is secure.

Then step off the track and cheer your successor to victory.

¹ Bob Russell and Bryan Bucher, *Transition Plan* (Louisville, KY: Minister's Label, 2010), 25.

² William J. Rothwell, *Effective Leadership Succession*, 3rd ed. (New York: AMACOM, 2005), xx.

³ Statistics taken from the General Secretary's Office, Assemblies of God (USA), "Age 2014 Lead Pastors.pdf," received by email on September 23, 2015.

⁴ James T. Bradford, e-mail message to author, August 13, 2015.

⁵ Naomi Dowdy, *Moving On and Moving Up* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2010), 28.

⁶ Margarethe Wiersema, "Holes at the Top," *Harvard Business Review on CEO Succession* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2009), 25.

⁷ Noel M. Tichy, *Succession* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), 21.

⁸ Thomas J. Saporito and Paul Winum, *Inside CEO Succession* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley and Sons Canada, 2012), 202.

⁹ Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 296.

¹⁰ Ram Charan, *Leaders at All Levels* (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 2-3.

¹¹ Joseph L. Bower, "Solve the Succession Crisis by Growing Inside-Outside Leaders," *Harvard Business Review on CEO Succession* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2009), 155.

¹² Joseph L. Bower, *The CEO Within* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 8.

¹³ Saporito and Winum, 24.

¹⁴ Tichy, 207.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁶ Samuel R. Chand and Dale C. Bonner, *Planning Your Succession* (Highland Park, IL: Mall Publishing, 2008), 1.

¹⁷ William Vanderbloemen and William Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 147.

¹⁸ Chand and Bonner, 63.

¹⁹ David L. McKenna, *The Succession Principle* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 121-123.

²⁰ Gary L. Johnson, *Leadership Shift* (Indianapolis, IN: Moeller Printing, 2013), 169.

²¹ Vanderbloemen and Bird, 62.