

Succession Planning Lessons From Steve Jobs

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Steve Jobs, who passed away this week, was the high-profile leader of what many arguably consider to be the world's most dynamic tech company. He knew that when he decided to step down from his role as CEO of the company he helped create that the management of that transition would be critically important. However, rather than give into public scrutiny, he stepped down on his own terms – refusing to disclose his succession plan until this last August.

His handling of that transition has reinforced the point that succession planning is critically important to the continued prosperity of any company. A sound succession plan allows management to:

- keep pace with constantly changing business strategies;
- quickly fill new roles created by organizational growth, or gaps caused by retirement/turnover;
- adapt to job realignments caused by mergers and acquisitions;
- head-off potential skill shortages;
- increase employee engagement and productivity.

Although his methods were somewhat non-traditional, he set two key examples we all could learn from.

Transition proactively. In his letter to Apple's board of directors, Jobs specifically named his successor. He wrote, "As far as my successor goes, I strongly recommend that we execute our succession plan and name Tim Cook as CEO of Apple." Looking back, however, we see that Steve Jobs gradually handed off power and public exposure to other key employees at Apple. Everything did not change overnight, and although the cameras remained focused on Jobs, he acclimated Apple's employees, customers, and the media to the company's future leaders.

Our takeaway? It is that you should create a succession plan before a talent "need" becomes a talent "crisis". Plan for future needs today and remove some of the stress involved in finding a successor and having that person accepted by employees and customers alike. This careful planning can minimize workforce disruption, increase knowledge transfer and lessen the overall shock that transitions cause.

Choose new leaders based on abilities – not personalities. Many of us can hardly imagine anyone but Steve Jobs leading Apple. His unique style of leadership was innovative and defined Apple and its products. When developing his succession plan, however, Jobs wasn't primarily

concerned with finding a leader cut from his same mold. Instead, he assembled an entire management team that he knew could lead the company according to his vision. Different aspects of Jobs' personality and leadership style are evident in his successors, but no single individual is his mirror image.

Our takeaway? It is that you should identify your company's future leaders based on their skillset and their commitment to your vision. Remember, a successful transition doesn't require that you to replace a leader with someone *exactly* like yourself. If that person has the abilities, shared vision and a personality that meshes with your corporate culture, he/she has the potential to succeed.

If you see promise in an employee, but that person lacks essential skills/experience to step into your role, customize a talent development program to close that gap. As his/her growth progresses, that person should be updated on all hiring decisions and kept in the loop about future plans. Most importantly, make sure his/her career aspirations align with your succession plans. This keeps you both working toward the same goal.

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