



# 10 Pitfalls to Avoid When Embarking on Succession Planning

**Amy Hirsh Robinson, Principal, [Interchange Group](#)  
*Workforce Strategies for the New Economy***

**M**any executives, HR professionals and boards embark on succession planning thinking it is a straightforward, finite process in which candidates are assessed and selected for predetermined roles. On the contrary, succession planning is one of the more complex and nuanced aspects of human capital management. It is not something that you can codify or get done in one sitting.

Succession planning is a focused program of keeping talent in the pipeline for the evolving roles that matter most to companies for the future. With thoughtful dialogue and participation, succession planning can be one of the most effective tools for leadership development and business growth. When handled poorly, it can be a waste of time and other precious organizational resources.

## **10 Pitfalls to Avoid**

There are hazards to a successful succession planning process and outcome. To succeed with your company's succession planning efforts, avoid the 10 most critical pitfalls.

1. **Overly complex practices** - Succession planning should be simple. Tools like the 9 Box only serve to diminish HR's credibility and disengage executives.
2. **Generic competency models** - Ditch those generic competency models that water down a company's unique needs for talent. Instead, create specific competencies for each position or job family that will guide your leadership decision making.
3. **Focusing only on the executive level** - Succession planning should extend beyond the top executive level to all tiers of the organization.
4. **Lack of support by managers and key influencers** - Stakeholders who do not buy in to the process and purpose of succession planning can easily sabotage efforts. Educate managers and key influencers on the benefits of succession planning.
5. **Delegating full responsibility to HR** - Real responsibility for managing the talent pipeline falls on senior management. Ensure the accountability and participation of leadership in the process.

6. **Weaknesses in performance management** - The best succession plans are integrated into effective performance management processes. Developing talent means you have a consistent method for providing performance feedback in their current roles.
7. **Not consulting with potential successors** - Do your candidates even want the job? Validate assumptions about the ambitions and expectations of employees, especially those from younger generations, to deter false senses of security about the future.
8. **Organizational silos** - Work to create a company-wide mindset and incentive for sharing talent. It is too difficult to provide real development opportunities for employees when silos exist and managers hoard their star performers.
9. **Not updating plans regularly** - Incorporate regular reviews of succession plans into strategic planning and management meetings to ensure ongoing relevancy with future talent needs.
10. **Relying on one person vs. a pool of talent** - Things happen. People leave. The criteria for success in any given role changes. Regardless of the reason, relying on a single person to succeed an outgoing leader is a dangerous proposition. To ensure the right fit for the right role at the right time, develop pools of talent from which to draw.

### **Take the Time to Develop Expertise**

Succession planning is a series of ongoing conversations that takes place at the executive level. The successes and outcomes of those conversations depend on the expertise going in. Companies that take the time to develop that expertise internally will reap the rewards for years to come.

