

The Succession Decision

Adapted from *Managing the Nonprofit Organization, The Effective Executive, and Concept of the Corporation*

By Peter F. Drucker

THE SUCCESSION DECISION

The most critical people decision, and the one that is hardest to undo, is the succession to the top. It's the most difficult because every such decision is really a gamble. The only test of performance in the top position is performance in the top position—and there is very little preparation for it. Every time we elect a president in the United States we pray that Providence hasn't forgotten America. And that's just as true of lesser top jobs.

What not to do is fairly simple. You don't want a carbon copy of the outgoing CEO. If the outgoing CEO says, "Joe [or Mary] is just like me thirty years ago," that's a carbon copy—and carbon copies are always weak. Be a little leery, too, of the faithful assistant who for eighteen years has been at the boss's side anticipating his or her every wish, but has never made a decision alone. By and large, people who are willing and able to make decisions don't stay in that role very long. Stay away, too, from the anointed crown prince. Nine times out of ten that's a person who has managed to avoid ever being put in a position where performance is essential, measured, and where he or she might make a mistake.

What are the positive ways to handle the succession decision? Look at the assignment. In this community college, in this hospital, in this Boy Scout Council, in this church, what is going to be the biggest challenge over the next few years? Then look at the people and their performance. Match the need against proven performance.

The focus on contribution counteracts one of the basic problems: the confusion and chaos of events and their failure to indicate by themselves which is meaningful and which is merely "noise." The focus on contribution imposes an organizing principle. It imposes relevance on events. To focus on contribution is to focus on effectiveness.

To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths—the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior, and one's own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities. To make strength productive is the unique purpose of organization. It cannot, of course, overcome the weaknesses with which each of us is abundantly endowed. But it can make them irrelevant. Its task is to use the strength of each person as a building block for joint performance.

In the end, what decides whether a nonprofit institution succeeds or fails is its ability to attract and to hold committed people. Once it loses that capacity, it's downhill for the institution, and this is terribly hard to reverse.

No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings.

Are we attracting the right people? Are we holding them? Are we developing them? I think you want to ask all three questions

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about the organization's people decisions. Are we attracting people we are willing to entrust this organization to? Are we developing them so that they are going to be better than we are? Are we holding them, inspiring them, recognizing them? Are we, in other words, building for tomorrow in our people decisions, or are we settling for the convenient and the easy today?