

# Building a Strong Bench

Successful succession planning requires strategic thinking and leadership development long before crises occur. **BY SARAH LEVITT**

If there were a crisis of leadership at the top of your organization – think Uber – would your company be able to withstand it? Could your organization smoothly continue on? Or would there be a mad scramble to get people in place?

If you don't have a strong bench, both in depth and breadth, you're risking a crisis. And you may have created a corporate climate that signals there is little development available for those who want it.

Although the climate problem is less immediately critical than a crisis, it may be more corrosive to long-term growth. Attracting and retaining top talent is difficult when there is little room to excel. And talent is the engine that drives competitive market advantage for any organization.

There are six keys to creating a real bench, one that is both deep and broad. With a deep bench, there will be a long way to go before your company exhausts the talented and skilled people who could successfully assume bigger roles. And a broad bench has enough cross-functional knowledge and capability among the senior leadership, so there would be a smooth transition in the event of a leadership change.

**TAKE A GOOD, HARD LOOK.** Identify your organization's leadership needs, both short and long term. What are the roles and their responsibilities? Are there significant and important long-term needs that are being forsaken for the immediate?

**TAKE ANOTHER LOOK.** What does your bench look like relative to those needs? How many strings of players do you have before you're in trouble? What are the key functional and knowledge components that need to be represented for exemplary execution? Assess the gaps.

**WHAT ARE YOUR DEAL BREAKERS, AND WHAT ARE YOUR NICE-TO-HAVES?** As you look to fill any holes on your bench, determine what the core competencies are. Consider both technical and leadership expertise. The higher an executive rises in the ranks, the



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more likely it is that she/he has the technical competency but may need to develop leadership skills.

**TIMING ISN'T EVERYTHING, BUT IT MATTERS A LOT.** Do you have a realistic plan and timeline for creating a solid bench? Are the key stakeholders, such as your board of directors, in agreement? Is there buy-in about what's needed, when and how to proceed?

**UNDERSTAND THAT LEADERS ARE MADE.** Although some may have good instincts or a natural bent toward leadership, great leaders rarely come pre-assembled. Instead, the best are developed, often inside organizations where leadership is cultivated and invested in.

**LOOK AT THE NON-OBVIOUS CHOICE, TOO.** Some executives may not stand out as an obvious choice for an elevated leadership role. But do they have the ability to learn? Do they

allow influence and seek it? Do they value the opinions of others, particularly dissenting opinion? Are they good at execution and at distributing the glory?

After leaders have been identified, they need to master three elements not related to technical expertise.

■ **PRIORITIZATION.** Not everything has equal weight, although when in a new role, it can seem that way. Leaders must be able to filter all of the demands that come to them and quickly assess whether to take on added responsibility or give it to someone else. Identifying and executing on the most important initiatives is critical.

■ **DELEGATION.** Giving real responsibility to direct reports and putting guardrails and guidelines in place is a must. Delegation can be challenging if for no other reason than an executive's prior success may have come from being in the weeds and fighting fires. But, most often, their new role requires them to lift their heads and look forward.

■ **STRATEGIC THINKING.** Shepherding the most relevant initiatives of the organization is key, as is being able to introduce new strategic ideas. Managing the most important relationships of a new role; thinking longer term rather than merely working to meet deadlines, and behaving with confidence and decisiveness are also vital.

With successful succession planning, your organization won't get caught in a mad scramble when there is a leadership crisis.

It will have leaders who hit the ground running when entering new roles, rather than finding themselves drinking from a fire hose.



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