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## COMMENTARY

# Performance Management, Succession Planning, and Professional Learning Communities

*by Bill Hall, Joy Salamone, and Susan Standley*

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# Performance Management, Succession Planning and Professional Learning Communities

| BILL HALL, JOY SALAMONE, AND SUSAN STANDLEY

**C**lose your eyes and imagine yourself sitting at your desk. A colleague comes running in screaming that a key senior leader in your department has been in an accident and will be out for eight months. Is your response one of panic?

In the Brevard County Public Schools, we are making progress against one of the most overlooked challenges facing public education today: the lack of formal succession planning and management. Due to districts' inattention to succession planning, changes in leadership typically result in changes in direction for schools. As leaders depart, so do the improvement initiatives that they fostered. Most school districts in the United States are reactive when it comes to filling positions. If any notion of succession planning exists, it typically stops at the building principal level, and is often synonymous with "Principal Preparation." These programs are typically far from what is considered a best practice process, and also do not address the most senior leadership positions.

Districts must learn to proactively prepare for vacancies by having a plan and a process in place before positions become available. Ultimately, being proactive means moving our school districts away from systems where we rely on leaders' self-selection to ones where the districts intentionally help engineer leaders' identification and growth. In Brevard, our district's tagline is *First in the Nation*, and we recognize the importance of investing in our human capital development and leadership succession in order to achieve that goal.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Richard DiPatri, who is retiring this year after serving as the district's superintendent since 2000, our district has operated under a tightly aligned and managed strategy. We recognized early on the importance of investing in human capital to support our district strategy. A strong human capital operation will result in better and more sustained execution of all curriculum and instruction initiatives, and will simultaneously reduce cost through improved operations and continuity. In fact, this investment has been tightly linked to our strategic plan and district objectives. Our district planning process clearly lays out district and school targets, School Improvement Plan (SIP) planning and objectives, and measurement systems including balanced scorecard reporting tools. Notably, our strategic plan contains an objective of High Quality Leadership, with a discrete strategy for implementing a formal succession planning and management process. This strategy is closely monitored by a team of leaders in Human Resources Services under the supervision of Deputy Superintendent Leroy Berry. Human Resources team members responsible for the district's succession planning initiative are Bill Hall, Director of Educational Leadership, Joy Salamone, Director of Human Resources Services/Labor Relations, and Susan Standley, Director of Compensation and Benefits. Throughout our experience in developing Brevard's Succession and Management Plan, the Superintendent, School Board, and senior leadership team were actively involved and maintained the initiative as a priority. Our plan includes certificated and non-certificated leadership positions, and is currently entering a second phase of rollout.

For many districts, these terms and processes will be unfamiliar. What does "formal succession planning" really mean? The "name game" conjures up many overlapping terms: Human Capital Management, Creating Capacity, Talent Management, Ensuring Leadership Continuity, Building Talent from Within, and more. In Brevard, succession planning is far more than job replacement. Job replacement is short-term and short-sighted. Succession

planning is long-term and systemic. Succession planning allows the momentum of existing leadership to continue long after the current leader is gone. Succession planning allows districts to identify potential leaders and provides the process and personnel to fill vacancies. Succession planning helps districts focus on leadership skill development and professional development opportunities. Finally, it helps keep districts prepared and focused on the future.

FIGURE 1



However, succession planning should not and must not stand alone. As defined by Susan Standley, it should be considered within a performance management system (see Figure 1) that creates a more dynamic environment. "Performance Management" is an over-arching concept that suggests that in order for an organization to achieve its strategic goals, as well as to fulfill its mission and vision, all employee behaviors are managed in ways that result in movement toward common objectives. The Brevard Performance Management System aligns a broad set of human capital initiatives and recognizes their interdependency. In Brevard, we define succession planning as a deliberate and systematic effort to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, retain and develop future intellectual and knowledge capital, and encourage individual advancement. The system should also address the need for critical backups and individual development in any job category. An effective succession plan without effective performance >

management is like having no plan at all. A plan without the management component is like a new car without an engine — it surely looks good, but it won't go anywhere. Organizations must have both components in place — a plan and management of that plan.

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When we started our planning efforts, we were surprised and somewhat dismayed to find that there were few, if any, models for us to copy. Despite great attention paid to the topic in the private sector, resources and examples in

education were scarce. Bill Hall informally interviewed luminary education researchers with deep interest in human capital issues including Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves; no one knew of any school districts that could serve as models for us to follow. A simple set of Google searches that we recorded highlighted our challenge: Number of results for “Human Capital Management”? 62,000,000. Number for “Leadership Sustainability”? 10,800,000. Number for “Succession Planning and Management”? 6,890,000. Number for “Succession Planning and Management and Public Education”? *Zero!* Our planning process was therefore developed largely in-house, with external assistance from an organizational development consulting firm at the outset to provide guidance on program design. Fortunately, management theory built into other major district initiatives like the development of Professional Learning Communities is well aligned and

## Q&A with Dr. Richard A. DiPatri, Superintendent, Brevard Public Schools

**DMC: Succession planning and human capital management have prominent positions in Brevard's strategic plan. Why? Was there a specific catalyst that helped raise Succession Planning as a priority?**

**DiPatri:** There was not so much one specific incident or condition — it was more of a combination of events happening around the same time. One of our senior leaders, an Associate Superintendent, was in a serious automobile accident and was out of work for an extended period. There was a minor push from the board on the idea of succession planning. We were also starting to work with a consultant on assessing our organizational performance based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Criteria for Performance Excellence. We started to realize that our senior leaders would not be here forever. I saw the initial stages of our efforts

more as “everybody has to have a backup”; we didn't all have backups nor were we thinking along those lines. We weren't thinking of formal, systemic sustainability. I did not see succession planning that way at first. Eventually, we put into our Strategic Plan a formal strategic objective to implement a succession planning and management process.

**DMC: As Brevard has rolled out the pilot process, have you needed to tackle any unforeseen challenges?**

**DiPatri:** No, there have been no unforeseen challenges.

**DMC: What tips would you give other districts looking to augment their succession planning activities?**

**DiPatri:** Simply do it. Think strategically and systemically and start somewhere. You have to look at the overall organization and at how you



are going to sustain the initiatives, efforts, and direction that you have in place. Formal succession planning is probably not something you will do in the first year of your superintendency because you don't know your people and their strengths and developmental areas. After you understand who you have on your team and where their talents and potential lie, you will want to put formal structures into place to ensure organizational sustainability. □

FIGURE 2

**Sample Job Progression Matrix**

Function/Salary Guide	1 \$-\$	2 \$-\$	3 \$-\$	4 \$-\$	5 \$-\$	6 \$-\$	7 \$-\$
Instruction	Entry	Level II		Level III	Manager		Director
Finance	Entry	Level II		Level III	Manager		Director
Facilities		Entry	Level II	Level III	Manager		Director

serves as a great complement and source of leading succession management practices. However, most districts have stopped short of applying these concepts and protocols to their most senior leaders.

**The Brevard Process**

As a starting point, we believe that succession planning is the responsibility of both the organization’s leadership and the individual employee. While the individual employee must have an active role in the succession planning process, it is leadership’s role to provide the process and structure necessary for success. Our structure was developed over the course of 2007 and started with a pilot program that focused on the superintendent’s position and his 13 direct reports.

Our succession planning process has five core steps, which are similar in nature to DMC’s comprehensive process laid out elsewhere in this journal.

First, we created a workforce forecast and determined our overall strategy for the succession planning process. We needed to answer questions about where our needs and our risks were greatest, and also what we wanted the system to look like in the future. The overarching desired outcome is to provide for 100% replacement of every employee in a key leadership position. This year, we will put the full process into effect and in 2010 will continue our rollout with an on-going, systemic plan.

Second, we developed a candidate recruitment plan. To achieve this, we conducted an assessment of potential internal candidates to determine the potential leadership pool. The Superintendent and others in formal leadership positions recommended individuals to enable greater proactive identification of future leadership talent and

reduce reliance on a system of simple self-selection. The Office of Educational Leadership within Human Resources has the lead role in assessing and confirming leadership potential and determines placement in the pool. Also, clear candidate recruitment and selection processes were defined collaboratively. Candidates for future positions are identified by supervisors or other leaders. Potential candidates complete a career profile that will be reviewed by the HR team. For each candidate, a formal development plan is created that will guide growth opportunities for that individual as their leadership role progresses. If immediate replacement is needed, potential candidates are interviewed by the HR team and top candidates are recommended.

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Third, career paths are being determined for each key leadership position. Figure 2 is an example of career paths defining the transfer of skill sets and identifying how individuals move through an organization. Each position needs to be considered for lateral movement, including any ▶

FIGURE 3

**Sample Career Development Matrix**

	<b>Entry-Level</b>	<b>Level II</b>	<b>Level III</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Director</b>
<b>Decision Making</b>	Under close supervision; specific oral and/or written instructions provided as guidelines; anything not in guidelines is referred to supervisor; responsible for bits and pieces of a process.	Under general supervision; responsible for a complete process or a small unit; oral and/or written guidelines provided; apply wide variety of rules, regulations, and procedures.	Work independently with limited supervision; responsible for several complete processes; may supervise the activities and behaviors of staff members.	Oversee numerous functions and staff. Principally responsible for determining policies and procedures that will ensure the success of the operation.	Perform work that involves high level issues, processes, or organization needs. Responsibility for determining goals, policies, and desired outcomes. Determine the level of resources to meet the organization's needs.
<b>Leadership</b>	Work from specific directions or procedures. Supervisor provides feedback and verifies the work.	Work from general guidelines but determine the approach for doing the work. Supervisor focuses on the outcomes of the work.	Oversee the work of a team engaged in providing specific services, completing specific projects, or assisting other units.	Organize work around broad organizational goals and processes. Supervisor oversees activities through regular meetings.	Oversee, plan, and implement major programs and services for the organization. Report on progress to the organization's executive team.
<b>Complexity</b>	Perform entry-level professional work including basic data analysis and synthesis, report creation, process performance, and regulatory or compliance activities. Work may involve statistics, operational analysis, or forecasting.	Perform professional-level work dealing with data, people, and technology that relates to administrative, technical, scientific, engineering, accounting, or legal skills.	Perform work that encompasses advanced technical, scientific, legal, or mathematical concepts. Work directly contributes to the implementation of specific policies, programs, or initiatives of the organization.	Oversee work that involves the use of complex technical, scientific, or mathematical concepts that increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. Analyze and make recommendations on how to improve the operational performance of the organization.	Develop policies, long range plans, and allocate funds. Make decisions that involve multiple priorities, limited resources, and internal and external challenges. Decisions impact the organization as a whole.
<b>Relationships</b>	Work with less than ten coworkers who mostly engage in the same activities.	Work with more than ten coworkers who mostly engage in the same activities.	Oversee and manage more than two employees in the organization performing similar work.	Oversee and manage work involving multiple units. Work regularly with other managers to successfully meet the goals and objectives of the organization.	Provide updates to senior staff, elected officials, or other community groups or organizations. Work regularly with other Directors or senior staff to ensure the provision of efficient and effective services.
<b>Financial Responsibilities</b>	Accountable for inventory/property management	Accept, receive, and/or collect payments; prepare/process purchase orders; accountable for inventory/property management	Make recommendations that impact the budget; accept, receive, and/or collect payments; prepare/process purchase orders; accountable for inventory/property management	Manage the budget within assigned department; may manage or administer grant funds; prepare/process purchase orders; accountable for inventory/property management	Manage the budget within assigned unit/division; may manage or administer grant funds; purchasing authority; accountable for inventory/property management

potential non-linear movements. This tool transparently answers the questions for all employees — “What is the next level for me and what is required for me to get there?” The matrix is based on functional areas, job titles, job levels, education, training, experience, and job requirements.

Fourth, we are aligning compensation and succession planning processes based on the matrix data, asking these questions: Where are the holes? Where do unreasonable jumps exist in skill development? Where does compensation progress not make sense? Career paths define transfer of skill sets and identify how individuals move through the organization. Figure 3 demonstrates how we are articulating these shifts in responsibility as people progress up the career ladder. This tool will allow us to create career ladders that have appropriate steps in compensation as well.

Fifth, we articulated and expanded the structure to provide career development opportunities for individual leaders. Investing in leadership development, both through formal and informal methods, helps provide a pool of talent for future positions. Supervisors discuss career opportunities with employees on a yearly basis and the development plan is updated accordingly. Emerging leaders contribute to the process by completing a career profile of interests, expertise, background, education, and training. Overall, the career planning process is managed by the Brevard Human Resources team, which reviews progress with the Senior Leadership Team. The HR team meets with each potential candidate to discuss their development plans and goals. Also, individuals are assigned a mentor or coach.

Leadership development opportunities (see Figure 4) were created to align with three leadership development tiers:

- **First tier** – career path to Senior Leader
- **Second tier** – career path to Director
- **Third tier** – career path to Manager

Employees are recruited to participate in leadership development programs. Lastly, the process will run as a continuous improvement cycle, constantly refreshing itself.

Much of the theory we applied in this process for senior leaders parallels that which we promote through our professional learning communities (PLC), a concept that is more familiar to school districts and that has grown tremendously in popularity over the last decade.

### **Connections with Professional Learning Communities**

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, Rick DuFour and

Robert Eaker state that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.<sup>1</sup> When closely examined, many benefits of establishing and maintaining professional learning communities become clear — increased student learning, quality collaboration among teachers, focus on results to name a few. Another advantage is developing the leadership capacity in school environments such that administrators are viewed as leaders of leaders and teachers are viewed as transformational leaders.<sup>2</sup> In *Leadership & Sustainability*, Michael Fullan suggests that established professional learning communities are more likely to be disrupted or discontinued when a new leader steps into the principalship. Focusing on internal leadership sustainability can counter this discontinuity of direction.<sup>3</sup> Building professional learning communities is a solid step in ensuring continuity.

“Schools and districts that do not adopt formal succession planning processes and structures expose themselves to external change agents who could dismantle current practice.”

Succession planning and leadership development are consistent with the professional learning community culture. Leadership development for the purpose of ensuring leadership sustainability is the critical element in dealing with the cultural changes that impact professional learning communities. If schools hope to weather the storms of internal and external changes that swirl around them, their leadership development must be a purposeful, planned, and formal component of their culture. ▷

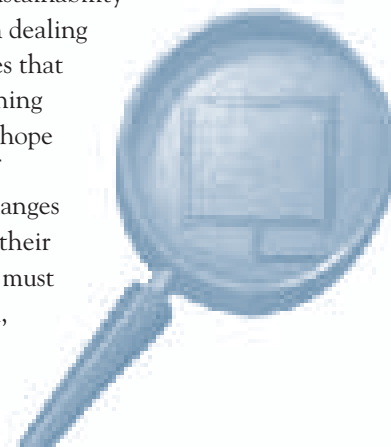




FIGURE 4

<b>Development Opportunities</b>		
<b>Education</b>	<b>Job Assignments</b>	<b>Mentoring/Networking</b>
Public Seminars	Job Rotation	Mentoring
Executive Leadership Programs	Special Projects	Coaching
Advanced Degrees	Committees & Team Projects	Intern Program
Customized In House Training	Lateral Moves	Job Shadowing
Brown Bag Lunches	Cross Functional Job Moves	Cross Functional Assignment
Self Directed Study	Temporary Job Assignments	Professional Associations
In House Leadership Development	On-the-Job Training	Conferences
Conducting Training	Activity Assignments	Business Meetings
External Training from Professional Groups	New School Openings, Construction, and Start-Up Projects	Community Involvement
Books or Videos	Temporary Replacement or Fill-In	External Assignments/Relationships
Study Groups	Job Enrichment/Increased Scope of Responsibility	Professional Learning Communities
Action Learning	Stretch Assignments	Senior Management Meetings
Experiential Learning	Turn Arounds	Special Assignments Externally— Other schools within districts, other districts
	Leading a Project Team	Customer Relationships

A school improvement process that relies on professionals learning in concert with each other holds the key to developing the leadership capacity and sustainability that schools and systems so desperately need. Professional learning communities thrive when districts experience consistent leadership across the district, and so, succession planning and professional learning community development must go hand-in-hand. The best way to prepare people for leadership is to put them into situations where they are called upon to lead. Learning by doing and learning by leading provide powerful experiences when embedded into the culture of professional learning communities.

In addition to building professional learning communities as a recommended management tactic, there are a number of complementary ways that we have identified for schools and districts to promote leadership development. In Brevard, we are systematically pursuing all of them.

- **Create a formal *Leadership Development Plan*.** Planning formalizes the district’s commitment to developing leadership and holds district leaders accountable. A formal, written plan must clearly identify who is responsible for what action and must be communicated to all stakeholders.
- **Develop a *Succession Plan* at the district level,** emphasizing a formal process that spells out how districts will replace their leaders. This planning process identifies critical leadership positions and communicates how the district prepares and develops individuals to become eligible for these positions when they are left vacant through retirements, resignations, and promotions. Formal succession planning focuses on the “how” of filling vacancies (the process), not on the “who” will fill each vacancy (the individual). Professional learning



communities can be an integral component of succession planning, creating a critical mass of leaders that will continue the focus on school improvement and student achievement.

- **Think Laterally and Vertically.** This concept builds on Michael Fullan’s research advising that a leadership development framework must provide for both lateral and vertical capacity building.<sup>4</sup> In other words, development opportunities need to exist across the organization, as well as within functional areas.
- **Distribute Accountability Through Guiding Coalitions.** One way professional learning communities endure changes in the principalship is through vesting leadership not solely in the principals, but in collaborative leadership teams. John Kotter<sup>5</sup> addresses the importance of creating guiding coalitions, which are effectively teams, assembled of the right people who trust each other and work toward a common goal. These guiding coalitions have the capacity to make needed change happen despite all the forces of inertia.
- **Make Leaders Responsible and Accountable for Leadership Development.** As part of an organization’s performance management system, revise all administrative and supervisory job descriptions to include leadership development as an essential job function. Leadership development is not the responsibility of the human resources department — it needs to be accepted as the responsibility of all leaders. Administrators and supervisors should be evaluated on their effectiveness in developing employees who report to them. Included in their annual performance appraisals are the results of the steps they take to develop leadership capacity in their schools, departments, or divisions. Through this one strategy, leadership development becomes every leader’s responsibility.

Individually, these approaches can contribute to leadership development and sustainability efforts. When implemented in learning community cultures, these strategies give districts potential for substantive, sustained leadership development. Schools and systems that integrate leadership development with professional learning communities will be more likely to thrive when they encounter future leadership challenges. □

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