



Succession Planning

Succession planning is a vital risk management concern for any community center because it addresses one of the most important elements in managing risk to the center – Leadership. Effective leadership recognizes risk to the center, establishes expectations for mitigating risk, and helps insure the effective and continuing functioning of the center. After all, effective risk management means that the center can accomplish its mission for the many clients it serves in its community.

One of the drivers of leadership change is the aging of the current generation of center leaders in all functional capacities. Out of the 36 members of the Fund, several have been blessed with good leaders who have been in their positions or at their centers for many years. They know their people, how the major functional areas operate, and have good relationships with peers, associations, their community, and state regulators. They are the “rock” of the center, holding it together and holding it accountable. But what happens when that leader leaves through retirement, illness, or recruitment? Does all that knowledge vanish? Do those important relationships just end? Does effectiveness and compliance diminish? What about the key knowledge person who has kept the IT system running through thick and thin? Or the Medical Records supervisor who knows all the privacy requirements, keeps impatient case managers at bay while maintaining HIPAA strictures, and knows how the implementation to a new electronic medical records system migration is progressing?

The consequences of a sudden departure from any of a center’s key leadership or knowledge positions could have unforeseen consequences. Why not plan for this risk event and find ways to control or mitigate its impact? Succession Planning is the risk management approach that can help prevent many negative consequences of turnover.

Succession planning is a systematic way of identifying key positions and high-risk positions for the planning process. It establishes job descriptions and knowledge requirements for the position. Succession planning identifies internal candidates and provides mentoring and other development opportunities for them. If there are no qualified internal candidates, a formal succession plan will provide a pipeline plan for recruiting external candidates.

A starting point for identifying positions subject to succession planning is the center’s organizational chart. The obvious candidates are the executive directors, directors of component functions like mental health and IDD and managers. However, don’t stop there. Key supervisors, team leaders, and other senior staff also have important roles. Knowledge positions, especially in important administrative departments with few employees like finance, IT, human resources, compliance, and facilities also need to be brought into the succession planning process.

Take a look at the string of “reports” each Executive level position has. After the director, the assistant or associate director and the operational manager should be in the pool of succession. Others in the chain may come into the prime spots due to key knowledge or relationships. Every member of the chain should have a job description and some cross training for other roles within the department. This often comes into play when someone leaves and their job duties “cascade” onto others. What usually happens is the unsuspecting recipient of all the new responsibilities has no idea what to do or becomes overwhelmed. A comprehensive succession plan that includes timely communication, thorough job descriptions, cross training, and a transition plan when someone leaves could prevent considerable disruption.

At the management and executive leadership level a more detailed approach is required. The first step in a plan is to identify the positions which can benefit from succession planning.

What are the criteria for selections? Some of the considerations should be:

- Leadership role
- Who does the position report to? Who reports to them?
- Essential duties in support of the center’s mission and clients

What qualifications should the person have?

- Education
- Licensing
- Training
- Experience
- Personality suitable for the role

What is the process of searching for and selecting someone to fill the role?

- Prime candidate already selected
- Search using a recruiter or an outside firm
- Advertisement of the position on the internet, in periodicals, or association forums
- Search committee
- Human Resources process

If the position is the Executive Director, the center’s board of trustees determines what the process will be. The Executive Director is their only employee, and they are responsible for the selection process with possibly some support from center Human Resources. Other positions should fall under the center’s succession plan that considers the elements listed above and provides a process with timelines, who is involved in the recruitment, screening, and selection. The selection committee should include the Human Resources Director, departmental directors, and others who have been involved in developing and implementing the succession process. The group should not include anyone who may be an internal candidate for the job.

Let's look at an example in more detail. One of the important positions at any center is the director of medical records. This is a critical support role for case managers, department or functional managers, compliance, therapists, and anyone who provides services to mental health, IDD, and substance use clients. The job description, usually written by the current occupant of the position, is the starting point. Prior to initiating the succession action, the committee should meet to discuss the job description, credentialing, experience, essential functions, education qualifications, potential internal candidates, and how to publicize and recruit for the position. If there is a strong desire to promote from within, potential candidates should be identified, mentored, and provided educational or training opportunities long before a transition is required. This is a managed process with documentation, oversight, and reporting into the succession committee. The mentoring, education, and training take time.

Any activity conducted within the succession process should conform to the center's equal employment opportunity requirements as well as any federal or state statutory requirements. Human Resources should monitor and ensure that all guidelines are followed and standard hiring procedures like background checks, credentialing, physicals, drug testing, MVRs, and completing and signing the application are completed.

Replacing the Medical Records director using the succession plan process can follow two main pathways:

- Internal candidate identified – seamless takeover with enough overlap for training and orientation
- Candidate search – job description and qualifications help facilitate recruitment of qualified candidates, screening, interviewing, and hiring

If there is no internal candidate qualified for the job, the ready availability of a job description and a recruitment plan already formed should make the hiring process more efficient. The cross-training provisions of the succession plan should also make it easier for remaining staff to carry on the vital functions of the medical records department during the transition period.

Each director or department manager should look at everyone on their staff in terms of succession. Select a cross training approach to help prepare for vacancies and advancement. Make a career path discussion a part of all employees' annual review. Prepare a succession plan for positions that require more education, experience, and training. Either way you help reduce the risk to function and services that can impact the center after an unexpected or a planned departure.