

Successful Succession

The Story of Pelekamoyo

Petro Pelekamoyo came from rural Chipata in Zambia. He had been educated by missionaries in such an inspiring way that he went on to found one of the mainline Protestant churches in Zambia.

He faithfully served as pastor in a rural setting for more than 30 years. When he reached 65 he was required to retire. A retirement ceremony was arranged. After collecting all the gifts Pelekamoyo stood up to address the congregation. After the normal courtesies he proceeded to tell his congregation that he was not going to retire since he still felt energetic enough to continue serving the Lord. This surprised many people since such a thing had never happened in that rural town. After a further five years of service, Pelekamoyo had a tragedy.

While cycling between villages to preach, Pelekamoyo had a serious accident. He never recovered from those injuries until his death only three days later. Perhaps the bicycle accident would not have happened had Pelekamoyo accepted to retire at the right time. The attitude to cling on to power needs critical attention. Leaders need to be prepared to pass on the baton. No human being is immortal.

You would not have thought the word 'succession' was so frightening. Yet the mere mention of succession is guaranteed to put most leaders on the defensive as with Pelekamoyo. But the need for succession is a fact of organisational life. It should therefore be a completely normal part of any strategic thinking and organisational change. A new book by CORAT entitled 'Succession Management' with contributions from a number of our learning group members tries to disarm and demystify the concept. It reveals that far from being something to fear, succession planning is the key for organisations to adapt and change.

Why is the thought of succession so threatening for leaders? Perhaps because it can make them feel unwanted and unappreciated. Perhaps it makes them feel they are just not good enough. As a result, talking about succession is almost taboo. If discussed at all, succession is spoken in corridors and in secret. It is too touchy to talk about publically. It is too sensitive to be an explicit part of strategy.

As a result we are often assailed by leadership problems. Avoiding questions of succession, we frequently find ourselves suffering from Founder's Syndrome. In one chapter of this CORAT book, Japhet Ndhlovu explores why this should be and what we can do about it.

Churches and Christian organisations may face particular challenges with succession. Christian leaders are not immune to overstaying their time. They fail to see there is a time for everything under heaven. In fact, their sense of calling can make Christian leaders even more resistant to moving on. They may have cut themselves off from vital feedback by over spiritualising issues.

Most churches too appear to struggle with succession. Different denominations approach it in different ways (such as Apostolic or Episcopalian), but none have found the secret as Dr Ndhlovu points out. He says they struggle due to their strongly entrenched dogmas which they claim to have been passed on either directly from God or from many centuries of tradition. At a congregational level, succession can appear like random reshuffling. Pastors and priests seem to be transferred without much discernment or even thought - certainly not part of a considered change strategy.

Yet Bible is not silent on succession. Whether talking about Joshua taking over from Moses, Saul from David or Jesus with his disciples the Bible is full of examples of succession. In his chapter, Micah Amukobole describes how Elisha's succession from Elijah highlights some key biblical principles for effective succession:

- A clear focus on the mission
- A strong performance by the predecessor
- Early announcement of the departing leader
- Development of a wider group of leaders
- Ex-leaders moving on to higher things
- Listening to God in the selection process

CORAT's book emphasises that succession is ultimately the responsibility of the board or governance of the Christian organisation. This question of succession may not be easy, but it is possibly the most important governance role. Putting succession on the agenda is not an optional extra for a board - something which can be left for later. Succession should already be being discussed and planned for from today.

A board or governance structure may be able to assist this process by helping the incumbent leader think beyond their current post. They may need to remind leaders about meaningful life and potential contribution that await beyond their current role. This may help the leaders relinquish control when the time is ripe, rather than clinging onto power. Micah Amukobole helpfully describes a number of processes that boards need to oversee in ensuring that any leadership transition is as smooth as possible. The book also warns boards to avoid the temptation to create non-executive roles for the outgoing leader. They recommend a clean break.

But succession not just an issue for a board to deal with. The key to effective leadership succession actually lies in leaders themselves. Good leaders bequeath good succession. And tricky succession issues can often be traced back to poor performance by previous leaders. Good leaders make succession easier by:

Investing considerable proportion of their time in developing others. Some

management writers estimate that the best leaders spend 50% of their time developing their staff. This provides a rich human resource pool to share leadership roles and bring on future leaders.

Setting in place informal and formal feedback systems that enable them to hear honest opinions. Being able to hear truthful feedback goes a long way to prevent the Founder Syndrome from developing. This is because honest feedback is the antidote to the self-deception that is at the core of most leadership issues and which blinds leaders from the need to move on.

Ensuring that they have good support. This can be from peers they can receive advice from or be accountable to (described in the book as a kitchen cabinet). Such support could also come from coaching or mentoring programmes as William Ogara and James Nyamosi describe.

Constantly concentrating on what is best for achieving the mission of the organisation. By being more concerned with ensuring they are leaving a good legacy for others, rather than self-interest, leaders lay the foundations for successful succession.

So succession is not something that should be feared. It is a fact of organisational life that needs to be managed in advance, not ignored until it is too late; something that can be discussed in the light, not gossiped about in the dark. This book by CORAT provides a good starting point for thinking through such issues. It gives us the confidence as well as the ideas to go 'where angels fear to tread'.

This paper is adapted from 'Succession Management: A Beacon for Learning Organizations', available from CORAT Africa [HYPERLINK "mailto:coratafrica@nbi.ispkenya.com"](mailto:coratafrica@nbi.ispkenya.com) coratafrica@nbi.ispkenya.com or [HYPERLINK "mailto:corat@coratafrica.com"](mailto:corat@coratafrica.com) corat@coratafrica.com