

Focus on Leadership Development: the key to successful succession

Based on 'Succession of Leaders' by Dag-Hakon Eriksen July 2010

Changing leadership is a potentially fatal or life-giving process in any organization. It is like a heart transplant. Yet all Christian organizations and churches have to go through leadership succession it at some time in their lives. Not dealing with succession well has caused the untimely death of many Christian organizations. Given how serious this operation is, it is surprising is how little effort has been invested in understanding the complex process and what makes it successful.

We are fortunate that one of our members, Dag-Hakon Eriksen from Norway, has made an important contribution in this field. He undertook a comparative study of two major Christian organizations: the Vineyard Church in USA and African Enterprise in South Africa to examine how they managed the transfer of responsibility from the founder leader. He found that whether or not the leadership succession was successful or not depended on: how focused the organization was on second-line leadership development and how much the existing leader embodied this approach.

Focusing on Leadership Development

The study revealed that developing second-line leadership is arguably the most critical factor in whether or not transition away from a founder leader is successful or not. Not surprisingly Jesus provides a role model with his focus on his disciples. We have seen that many of the leadership values, such as servanthood, stewardship, and humility contribute positively towards succession. Dag-Hakon's study demonstrates that developing second-line leadership needed for effective succession requires:

Explicit intention

Developing leaders does not happen well by accident or even naturally. In the case studies he looked at it required a purposeful approach that seeks to equip people and release them into ministry. This was helped by an empowering and relational leadership style which created a culture of learning and participation. In such a supportive environment the trust and confidence needed for growth was established.

A systematic approach

The case studies showed it was important to start leadership development as early as possible. In one of the case studies, they saw constant leadership development as a key to institutional flexibility and on-going success. Equipping and releasing people was an overall organizational strategy. They took a variety of formal and informal approaches. They planned and measured the outcomes of the process.

Emerging leaders were not merely clones of the existing leader. The qualities needed by a pioneering founder leader may be different as the organization grows and matures. Using personality-based or culturally-dependent criteria may be counter-productive.

Structures for decision-making

The case studies also showed how structure also affected succession. In one of the organizations, the informal nature of decision making actually undermined and disempowered the formal leadership. The informal power was kept within a small circle of leaders. This proved dysfunctional for emerging leaders and their development. It discouraged participation and ownership which contribute to effective succession. In the other example, leadership succession was assisted by restructuring the organization to stay dynamic and better aligned with the new situation. There was a gradual handover through relationships, but they also used symbolic rituals to illustrate the power transfer.

Good existing leaders

Team-oriented leaders

Good leaders beget good successors. The personal aspect of existing leaders is key. For the founder it seems that an identity rooted elsewhere than performance, and an attitude of rejoicing when others excel, is critical for the good leadership succession. This related to what personal criteria the founders have for success. If the founding vision is truly great, it will not be achievable for the founders themselves. They will have to achieve it through others and success will be measured as a team effort distinguishing the founder's lasting legacy. While one of the leaders exemplified such an approach the other was more individualistic, a one-man band.

Investing time in discipling

Just as Jesus spent time with his disciples, so great leaders invest time in their people. The two cases clearly demonstrated that leadership development required time together. In one of the cases, the leader was felt to be an 'absent father'. They found you cannot develop leaders if you are not present.

Stopping leading

'Dysfunctional competence' is when someone, by their very giftedness, actually hinders development in others, thereby reducing the overall organizational performance. If a founder outshines everybody else, no one dares to follow in his footsteps, because they know they will fail. This does not provide many learning experiences for the emerging leaders. It leaves the organization unprepared for a succession of leadership. The better leader in the study was able to restrain himself, giving others an opportunity, even if he could have done it far better himself. The other leader's extra-ordinary giftings actually appeared to hinder the development and growth of others.

Adjusting leadership style

A situational leadership style helped succession. Leaders needed to be able to combine relational and task-oriented behavior, so as to match the follower's readiness level. As the

readiness level of the followers increased, the leader's style should change accordingly. In one of the cases, the leader started with a fairly autocratic leadership style. But as the emerging leaders matured, he gradually adjusted his leadership to a more participative style. He gave room for the emerging leaders to exercise their leadership.