



SUCCESSION

Succession planning is a vital risk management concern for any water district or river authority because it addresses one of the most important elements in managing risk to the district – Leadership. Effective leadership recognizes risk to the district, establishes expectations for mitigating risk, and helps insure the effective and continuing functioning of the district. Effective risk management means that the district 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 district leaders in all functional capacities. Most of the 94 members of the Fund have leaders who have been in their positions or at their districts for many years. They know their people, how the major functional areas operate and have good relationships with peers, associations, their community and state legislators and regulators. In many cases, they are the “rock” of the district, 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? Do effectiveness and quality diminish? What about the key knowledge person who has kept the IT system running through thick and thin? Or the shop mechanic who has kept older backhoes and bull dozers running? Or the Laboratory Director who deals with the TCEQ to make sure water and wastewater are in compliance?

The consequences of a departure, whether sudden or planned out, of a district’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 district’s organizational chart. The obvious candidates are the general managers, associate general managers, heads of the operational units, 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, GIS, 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 general manager, the associate general manager, and the operational managers 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 suddenly and their job duties “cascade” onto others. What usually happens is the unsuspecting recipient of all the new responsibilities has little to no idea what to do. A comprehensive succession plan that includes thorough job descriptions, cross training, and a transition plan when someone leaves could prevent much 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 subject to 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 district’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 outside firm
- Advertisement of the position on the internet, in periodicals or association forums
- Search committee
- Human Resources process

If the position is the General Manager, the district’s board of directors determines what the process will be. The General Manager is their only employee and they are responsible for the selection process with possibly some support from district Human Resources. Other positions should fall under the district’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 managers 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 district is the GIS Technician. This is a critical support role for management and crews or anyone going out in the field to do construction, repairs, or maintenance. 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, educational qualifications, credentialing, experience, essential functions, 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, especially in GIS.

Any activity conducted within the succession process should conform to the district'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, MVR's, and completing and signing the application are completed.

Replacing the GIS Technician 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 GIS department during the transition period.

Each associate general manager 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 district after a sudden or planned departure.