

Is Your Organization's Leadership A Joke? **By Hardy Smith**

Every audience laughs when I ask about selecting leaders by the all too familiar method of “whoever is absent or whoever leaves the room gets elected.”

When it's time to fill leadership roles, do you just accept someone who expresses interest without regard to performance expectations? Do you ignore experience, qualifications, and ability – or lack thereof? This sadly but accurately describe far too many nonprofits and their approach to leadership succession.

The idea that this selection process will work is pretty much a joke. My challenge question is this: If the leadership selection process is a joke, how can it be taken seriously about achieving its stated purpose?

What kind of process does your organization have for selecting the people in whom it entrusts its future?

Here are three action steps that will help you create a successful leadership development and succession structure

- 1. Make A Decision** on exactly what kind of organization you want it to be and where you want to take it. Identify what leadership skills, experience, and qualifications are needed to generate the results you want.

- 2. Once a decision has been made on where you want to be and what type of leaders you need, Develop a Leadership Pool** of potential people to take you there. Identifying candidates for your leadership pool should be an ongoing process and should also include identifying prospects who are not yet a part of your organization.

The pool can be a source for future board members, officers, and committee project chairs. Not everyone in the pool has to be in the future president category.

Honest conversation should be held with those in your pool about expectations and amount of personal time required for your different leadership positions. Make sure each individual is comfortable about the task at hand and is satisfied that he or she can meet the obligations they are

signing up for. Sometimes a “no” can be the best answer when someone is asked to take on a leadership role. Don’t force them into a “yes” and end up with a position filled by someone who really didn’t want to be there.

3. Prepare Your Leaders for Service by proactively making sure they are ready for their leadership role. Often the focus on preparation is directed to the incoming chair or president. Every position should have a job description as well as a performance expectation. Every position should be provided orientation and training.

Create leadership development opportunities for those in your leadership pool such as promoting attendance at state or national conferences.

Use your events and activities as training tools so those with less organizational experience have opportunities to learn rather than immediately having them in charge of your most important fundraiser.

Don’t lose future leaders by overloading and burning out the over eager new member. Bring them along gradually.

Invite those in your leadership pool who don’t yet hold leadership positions, to sit in on board or key committee meetings. Designate someone to serve as a mentor to those in your pool (which is a great way to involve your more experienced members).

The organization should be helping to make sure those in leadership roles are succeeding. Don’t let them either “sink or swim.” If they sink, you’ve probably lost someone you had identified as an important asset. If they sink, that means some activity the organization identified as a priority has not been successful.

By defining your goals, a leadership pool, and appropriate preparation, your organization will be successful in developing leadership by purpose and design, a process not to be taken lightly.

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