

Succession Planning in Academic Medicine: Perspectives from Academic Leaders

Gladys M. Ayala, M.D., M.P.H., Vice Chancellor University Student Affairs
New York Medical College, Valhalla, New York
Collaborator: Edward C. Halperin, M.D., M.A., Chancellor and CEO, New York Medical College



Background

Successful succession planning is critical to the stability of an organization. “Models for best practices in succession planning” is a common topic found in the business literature. On the other hand, there has been scant attention given to succession planning or leadership development in the medical literature. Successful business models could provide valuable insights to those in the healthcare environment, but the medical environment may present specific challenges. Succession planning is not only about instituting a search committee for a vacant senior level position but also responding to the, or preparing for, unexpected vacancies of key leaders. What processes should institutions employ in response to unexpected vacancies or occurrences? While finding the right candidates for critical positions is always the ultimate goal, making wrong decisions in response to planned or unplanned leadership changes can be very costly for an institution.

Objective

The purpose of this study is to collect experiential knowledge from current and past academic leaders as it relates to succession planning, both in the normal course of transitions, as well as during times of unexpected leadership changes. What lessons were learned, both regarding successes and pitfalls? What can be done to make these processes less disruptive, more efficient, and ultimately successful for medical schools and healthcare organizations?

Methods

After a review of the medical literature, a semi-structured interview survey was designed and then administered by phone, email, or in-person to current and past academic medical leaders in medicine.

Study design

The interview questionnaire contained open-ended questions on a variety of issues related to succession planning and changes in leadership. Questions specifically addressed succession processes and initiatives, both for the normal transitions and for the unexpected; challenges encountered; successes and failures; the benefits and challenges of the presence of retiring leaders in an organization; transition initiatives for new leaders; leadership development initiatives for prospective, new and current leaders; benefits and risks of internal versus external hires; procedures for identifying or appointing interim leaders in the event of the unforeseen circumstances; and pearls for current and future leaders on this vital process.

Current (160 current medical school deans in the U.S. and Canada) and past deans will be emailed an invitation to participate in the survey. 60 current deans and 5 past deans were emailed to date. The email contained a brief introduction of the purpose and goal of the study, and the list of questions. Participants were given the opportunity to answer the survey through a telephone interview, by email, or both.

Preliminary Results

<i>Quantitative Analysis</i>	<i># respondents =23</i>
Male	19
Female	3
Avg. Years as Dean (Range from 1 to 22 years)	6.6
Medical School Type	
Private	8
Public	15
LCME Accredited School	
Prior to 1942	10
1942-1959	3
1960-1982	6
2000 to present	4

Qualitative Analysis: Themes Revealed

All deans recognized the importance of succession planning
Succession planning is predominantly as replacement hiring through searches for that involved search firms
Search processes yielded a majority of external candidates over internal candidates
Biggest challenge finding the right "fit" for the institution
Biggest failure in succession: the candidate wasn't the right "fit"
Most deans have participated in some form of leadership development program (mostly through the AAMC)
Leadership transition initiatives included leadership development programs, executive coaches, meeting more frequently with the dean
Few schools have their own leadership development initiatives or programs
Most deans have an identified leader that can serve as their back-up during an emergency
Few deans have a developed process for discussing, identifying or training key-backs for their senior leaders for future roles or for times of unexpected vacancies

Discussion

Academic institutions are becoming more like business in many aspects, with one exception in the area of succession planning. Long standing and successful businesses have developed the tradition of developing leadership from within and through purposeful succession planning (at all levels of management). Although this study is ongoing, the preliminary results demonstrate that succession planning in the academic setting is viewed predominantly as replacement hiring with few attempting to identify or develop talent from within the organization to fill key leadership roles in the event of expected or unexpected vacancies. Most hires come from the external pool of candidates. Few schools have dedicated leadership development programs or initiatives to identify talented individuals with leadership potential. The success, viability and sustainability of an organization will always be dependent on strong visionary leaders that recognizes that talent also exists from within.

Future Direction

The remaining 100 current U.S. and Canada deans will be invited to participate in this survey. Past deans will also be identified and invited to participate. Interviews by phone or email will continue throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2014. Responses will be analyzed by quantitative and qualitative measures. Common and uncommon perspectives related to themes will be explored, along with medical school characteristics of medical schools, and respondent demographics and length of tenure will be assessed.

The ultimate goal of this initiative is to create a collection of succession planning experiences and provide current or future leaders with a fresh community perspective on this vital process.

ABSTRACT: 2014 ELAM Institutional Action Project Poster Symposium

Project Title: Succession Planning in Academic Medicine: Perspectives from Academic Leaders

Name and Institution: Gladys M. Ayala, M.D., M.P.H., Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, New York Medical College

Collaborators: Edward C. Halperin, M.D., M.A., Chancellor and CEO, New York Medical College

Background, Challenge or Opportunity: Successful succession planning is critical to the stability of an organization. “Models for best practices in succession planning” is a common topic found in the business literature. On the other hand there has been scant attention given to succession planning or even leadership development in the medical literature. Learning from the successful business models can provide valuable insights to those in the healthcare environment but is this environment any different? Succession planning is not only about instituting a search committee for a planned vacant or soon to be vacant senior level position. It could be the unexpected short or long term vacancy of key senior leaders that can occur from a crisis or illness, or even a necessary or unavoidable change in leadership. What processes should institutions use to identify key backups for senior leaders during these times of unexpected occurrences? Finding the right candidate for critical positions is always the goal. Making the wrong decision can be very costly for an institution.

Purpose/Objectives: The purpose of this study is to collect the wisdom from current and past academic leaders as it relates to succession planning, both in the normal course of transitions, as well as during times of unexpected crises or events. What from their perspective has worked, what were the pitfalls, and what lessons were learned from the processes and transitions? What can be done to make this process more successful for medical schools and healthcare organizations?

Methods/Approach: After a review of the medical literature, a semi-structured interview survey was designed to be administered by phone, email, or in-person with current and past academic leaders in medicine, such as Presidents, CEOs, Deans, Provosts, or Chancellors. The survey’s aim is to gain insight from respondents through open-ended questions on the following issues related to succession planning: challenges or consequences encounter; successes and failures; challenges and opportunities when a change in leadership was deemed necessary for a variety of reasons; the benefits and challenges of retiring leaders to an organization; transition initiatives for new leaders; leadership development initiatives for prospective, new and current leaders; internal versus external hires; and identifying interim leaders in the event of the unforeseen circumstances. The goal is to create a collection of experiences with succession planning and provide current or future leaders with fresh perspectives on this vital process. Aside from soliciting academic leaders past and present from New York Medical College, the survey was also sent to 160 current medical school deans in the U.S. and Canada and past medical school deans. Interviews by phone or email will continue throughout the spring of 2014.

Outcomes and Evaluation Strategy: Responses will be analyzed by quantitative and qualitative measures. Common and uncommon perspectives related to each topic will be explored, as well as differences in demographics and length of leadership tenure will be assessed.