



Developing vs. Recruiting: Finding the Right Balance in Leadership Succession

Why Leadership Continuity Matters More Than Ever

Leadership transitions, at any level, are defining moments for organizations. Yet, despite long-standing discussions about succession planning, too many organizations still find themselves unprepared when a key leader moves on.

The issue isn't a lack of intent. Many organizations have talent development programs, yet when a leadership transition arises, the internal bench often isn't ready and a transition gap quickly becomes evident. While external recruitment is an effective way to bridge the gap and bring valuable fresh perspective to the organization, a robust succession strategy should also cultivate internal readiness to ensure leadership continuity. Leadership continuity is not only an HR responsibility; it's an organizational strategic imperative. Boards and executive teams must view succession planning as a core part of long-term strategy, not a reactive process when vacancies arise. When well-conceived and executed, succession planning not only addresses immediate needs, it also provides emerging leaders and those operating as the "second in command" with a clear development path and a sense of future opportunity. This clarity is essential not just for readiness, but for retention.

From Strategy to Succession: Connecting the Dots

While succession planning may start at the top with the board or executive leadership team, to be truly effective, it must also cascade throughout the organization.

Strategic planning and succession planning are inseparable. They share the same purpose: ensuring the organization has the right capabilities and leadership in place to deliver on its goals. When boards and executives align on this connection, succession becomes less about replacement and more about readiness.

Leaders influence the talent they cultivate. Many have more potential within their teams than they realize, but identifying, developing, and supporting that talent requires intentionality and time.

“As an executive search professional, clients are often surprised to hear our team reinforce the value of developing internal leaders in succession planning. External recruitment will always be an essential tool in talent strategy but works best when complemented by a strong succession plan with intentional development and support for leadership transitions.”

— [Kevin Stoddart](#)
President, KBRS & Meridia



The Leadership Pipeline Challenge

1. Structural Barriers — Steep hierarchies can make it difficult to move emerging leaders into new roles. High-potential employees are developed, but there’s often no opening to place them in. The result: organizations invest in people who leave to find opportunities elsewhere. While some leaders fear developing employees who might move on, the greater risk lies in not developing them at all. Organizations must also ensure that succession planning processes are equitable, actively identifying and mitigating bias in how high-potential talent is selected and supported.

2. Retention and Renewal — Long tenure has its benefits including deep institutional knowledge, trusted relationships, and continuity. However, it can also lead to stagnation and groupthink. Healthy turnover, when supported by proactive succession and knowledge transfer, fosters innovation and agility.

3. Changing Expectations — Employees today expect visible career paths and regular feedback. Exit interviews increasingly cite unclear progression as a top reason for leaving. Leaders who create transparency around development through career conversations, feedback, and access to learning, signal that growth is both valued and possible.

Supporting Transitions at Every Level

Leadership transitions are moments of both opportunity and vulnerability. They require not just planning, but support.

For new or first-time leaders, whether a CEO or a front-line manager, coaching and structured integration make a critical difference. Early support helps leaders understand culture, build trust, and align quickly with organizational strategy. But support shouldn’t stop there. Experienced leaders stepping into new roles face fresh expectations, unfamiliar dynamics, and critical relationships to build. Without clear communication and alignment, even high-potential successors may struggle.

The more strategically significant the change, the greater the need to consider appropriate supports. Senior HR leaders and CEOs play a vital role in setting this expectation: success in the current role must precede readiness for the next. Coaching, mentoring, and development planning should reinforce this progression, helping leaders grow deliberately rather than leap reactively.

“Leadership transitions are moments of both opportunity and vulnerability. Coaching and structured integration aren’t just helpful, they’re essential to building trust, aligning with strategy, and accelerating impact.”

— [Ryna Young, ACC](#)

Regional Head, Executive Search and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Lead, KBRs



Creating a Culture of Ongoing Development

1. Empower Employees to Co-Own Their Growth – Development isn’t solely the organization’s responsibility. Empowering employees to take ownership of their career paths helps build a culture of accountability. When leaders provide the tools, clarity, and feedback, employees can chart their own course with confidence.

2. Provide Candid, Caring Feedback – Avoiding difficult feedback conversations is a disservice. Direct, compassionate communication is essential to growth. Feedback, at its best, is an act of care and investment in someone’s potential.

3. Create Growth Opportunities – Go beyond online training with structured secondments within your organizations or internal gigs that allow employees to gain new experiences while staying in their current roles. Clarity about these opportunities boosts engagement and retention.

4. Reimagine Lateral Moves – Growth isn’t always vertical. Lateral moves can broaden perspective, expand influence, and develop leadership agility. While they don’t always come with immediate pay increases, framing them as strategic opportunities for development and recognizing the contribution they make helps make the opportunities attractive and meaningful.

“Increasingly employees see value in lateral moves that allow them to grow and make an impact in new ways. Not everyone wants to climb the ladder to the top. Lateral moves can be an effective retention strategy that builds resilience on both a personal and organizational level.”

— [Katherine Risley](#)

Managing Partner, KBRs & Meridia



What's Working in Forward-Thinking Organizations

Across sectors, some organizations are reframing leadership development to strengthen continuity and engagement:

- ☆☆ **Career Path Programs** that align individual aspirations with organizational goals, outlining the education, experience, and exposure required for advancement.
- ☆☆ **Mentorship Programs** connecting senior leaders with emerging talent to build trust and visibility.
- ☆☆ **Stay Interviews and Engagement Conversations** that identify issues before they result in turnover.
- ☆☆ **Stretch Assignments and Cross-Functional Projects** that allow emerging leaders to demonstrate capability in new contexts, working alongside other leaders.
- ☆☆ **Collaborative Leadership Programs** across sectors or regions, expanding networks and shared knowledge with external organizations, including professional associations.

Each of these approaches reinforces the same principle: development and mobility are vital to organizational resilience.

Integrating Leadership Development into Culture

Developing leaders should not feel like a separate initiative. It should be part of how the organization operates every day.

“Management by walking around,” for instance, remains one of the simplest yet most effective ways to set cultural tone. When leaders visibly engage, ask questions, and address issues directly, they model accountability and care. For virtual teams, this may mean being present in digital channels, team calls, and using informal check-ins to replicate in-person visibility.

Likewise, measuring leaders not only by results but also by how many people they develop reinforces a culture of stewardship.

“Strong succession planning is about more than filling roles. It’s about cultivating readiness. When organizations invest early and consistently in leadership development, transitions become a natural evolution, not a disruption.”

— [Tony Case, PhD](#)
Senior Associate, KBRS



From Career Ladders to Career Lattices

Leadership pathways are no longer linear. The next generation of leaders is motivated not only by title or salary, but by purpose, impact, and experience.

Organizations must design development pathways that reflect this reality, ensuring they are broad, flexible, and aligned with individual motivations and life stages. Helping employees see how diverse experiences contribute to long-term readiness is part of creating sustainable leadership capacity.

The Leadership Imperative

Succession planning, leadership development, and strategic alignment are three parts of the same system. Each depends on the other to ensure continuity, culture, and performance. Succession planning also serves as a key component of enterprise risk management, ensuring leadership continuity during times of disruption.

When boards, executives, and HR leaders collaborate on leadership strategy, and work together to support transitions with intention and care, they create organizations where leadership change feels seamless, not disruptive.

Ultimately, leadership continuity is the highest form of organizational resilience.

It's not just about who comes next. It's about how well we've prepared them, supported them, and connected their growth to the future we want to build.