

Workforce Planning: Does your company have the bench strength to sustain top performance?

In sports, a team's success is linked to its bench strength - the players on the bench who can seamlessly jump in and replace a player who is pulled due to injury or some other reason. Professional football teams don't go into games with only one quarterback and baseball teams have players on the bench in case someone goes on the disabled list. It should be the same in business, where bench strength refers to the capabilities and readiness of potential successors to move into key professional and leadership positions. It is critically important because organizations continuously go through turnover, restructuring and changes in business strategy.

Whenever a key person leaves - whether in leadership, management, or line operations - the organization should have a ready successor or a plan for replacement that will avoid business interruption. "Knowing where to build a bench lineup in your organization requires a systematic effort to ensure continuity, retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and encourage individual advancement," says Anne Hayden, vice president of human resources for MRINetwork. "That means identifying positions that are critical to the company's competitive advantage or are specific to your industry niche, and those with lengthy learning curves or reliance on experiential learning."

Hayden offers these suggestions to ensure that your team is ready when it's time to call on your bench:

Set your strategic direction. Start with your current mission. Is your company able to achieve its stated goals and objectives with your current team? Consider carefully your one-, three- and five-year plan and assess the talent you have on board in light of those plans. Your organization needs a game plan outlining processes, deadlines and directions for completing tasks. Ideally, departments should identify critical functions and have a game plan for each. Fostering strategic thinking in your people can help them increase their effectiveness in their current roles, while also preparing them to take on more responsibility in the future.

Make knowledge sharing routine. Encourage participation in projects, teams, task forces and committees. Develop a methodology for cross-functional training, which really pays off when a key player is absent, making it easier for other team members to step in. These tactics have the added benefit of providing your team with fresh perspectives and encouraging process improvement. Additionally, when routine knowledge sharing becomes part of the company's culture, it breaks down silos and employees learn from others across the company, resulting in a stronger, more cohesive workforce. This will be especially important as we approach a labor market that is increasingly comprised of Millennials who seek mentorship and

knowledge transfer from senior colleagues. Millennials will be most attracted to employers that can demonstrate a culture of collaboration and the opportunity to interact with different people at various levels in the organization.

Develop succession plans. Succession planning is especially important not only because of senior leadership that will eventually retire, but also because your most valued employees make up the group most at risk of leaving for another opportunity, particularly in today's candidate-driven market. This process may involve both hiring fresh talent, and identifying and nurturing high-potential employees. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your current organization, including the available talent pool. Put in place a formal evaluation

process that allows all levels to communicate their interests, strengths and areas that need improvement. This will help you to understand your bench strength - or lack of it - and determine whether critical positions have one or more persons ready to successfully assume the role and responsibility of each position.

Don't go it alone. If you have to look beyond your organization to find qualified talent, consider engaging a search firm that specializes in your niche. This will give you access to their roster of potential candidates

and to passive candidates you cannot easily reach on your own. Be prepared for more competition for the best people. Scrutinize your current hiring practices and procedures and overhaul them if they are cumbersome and prolong the hiring process. It's also important to be interviewing top talent even when you don't have a specific need. This will ensure that you aren't starting from scratch when the need arises. You may even find that you want to create a position for a potential leader before the need is critical.

Clearly, building sustainable bench strength must be part of an organization-wide talent management program with career planning woven into the process. It sets the growth course, makes employee transitions less stressful, mends gaps and develops future leaders for success. It is an ongoing, dynamic process that helps an organization keep pace with changes in the business, industry, and overall marketplace.

"To stay ahead of the game, current leadership must continually have its finger on the pulse of business needs and make talent pipeline management part of the company culture," says Hayden. "They must concentrate on developing a strategy for an ongoing, flexible talent management process. By doing this, organizations can ensure they have the right talent in the right place at the right time with a committed bench of players that will keep them on top of their game for seasons to come."

