Succession Planning

Preparing for the Transitions in our Professional Life

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ABSTRACT: As one thinks about the transitions and career moves in one's professional life, succession planning may be something to consider. Succession planning may also be utilized for short term absences such as vacation or sabbaticals. Whether one leaves all the responsibilities until one returns or cross-trains someone to do the tasks or do some of the tasks while "gone" needs to be contemplated. Feelings of obligation to the organization may determine how much energy is spent in the process. The session will look at identifying and developing skills within the library staff and mentoring the staff not only for the library but for future jobs they may have. Succession planning also involves preparing supervisors and administration in order to help manage the transitions and changes that will inevitably arise when staff leave or have a new position within the organization. The session ended with a time for discussion.

It is important to see my context in order to understand my remarks. I retired last summer after working at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque (Iowa) for 26 years. I was the director of the library and associate professor. I had one paraprofessional for 36 hours per week, and approximately 36 hours per week of student workers. Usually, the paraprofessional lasted for about three years since it was an entry-level position. I had a six-month sabbatical every three-and-a-half years. I would need to find someone to be either a sabbatical replacement or divide up the tasks between the staff person and students. I usually took my sabbatical in the spring because by then the tasks had become routine for the students. The topic for this session came about through my reflections on my career and on the situation when I retired.

Succession planning is leadership development, systematic, and ongoing. One of the classics on succession planning or executive continuity is Walter Mahler and William Wrightnour's *Executive Continuity: How to Build and Retain an Effective Management Team* (Mahler and Wrightnour 1973). It is old but has good material. In addition, a good blog entry on succession planning was published in 2021 in Atlassian's *Work Life* blog. Author Kat Boogaard gives a good summary of succession planning (Boogaard 2021).

For me, succession planning was developing leadership skills with the paraprofessional staff and students, as well as teaching them various library tasks. I used the free version of a project management software for assigning tasks and responsibilities to the paraprofessional and students. They were all considered staff and were assigned responsibilities. We also had an extensive document system with procedures for all the tasks and responsibilities. Helping staff know what their responsibilities are, how to do a good job, and feel successful in performing them are all important for leadership development.

Mentoring the staff is also an important component of leadership development. I was talking with someone recently who mentioned that it is hard to teach someone who doesn't want to be taught. The relationship with the person is important in creating the atmosphere necessary for good learning to take place. It also may be the case that COVID-19 pandemic experiences have taught people to learn by themselves rather than from another person. Helping that person realize through relationship that there are different ways of learning may be effectual in that case. Mentoring provides the relational element.

There are three scenarios involved in mentoring. Though the actual mentoring may be similar, the amount of time invested may vary according to how long the replacement will be.

- The first scenario is when you are leaving and need a replacement. The mentoring would include teaching everything that you do. (You may not want to announce that you are retiring or in the job market! It is possible that once the announcement is made, you will be seen as a lame duck.)
- The second situation in mentoring is when you need

someone to fill in for the short term. This would be the case in which you are taking a long vacation or a sabbatical or other paid time off. You will need to decide what you want to have someone else do. When I took sabbaticals, there were some tasks that I still did. In the case of vacations, I was never away long enough for this to matter: either I did the tasks before I left or after I got back.

- The third scenario is mentoring to help someone grow into a possible future position. There have been student workers who later became librarians because of their job in the library. The skills they learned and the support and encouragement they felt helped them in the discernment process.

Another classic management book is Peter Drucker's *Managing Oneself* (Drucker, 2008). In it he asks several questions that we should ask ourselves to help us understand ourselves. When we understand ourselves and use that to help others understand themselves, we can begin to help in leadership development.

The first question is "What are my strengths?" (Drucker 2017, 4). Drucker believes that we may not always know our own strengths and suggests that feedback analysis may be an important tool in discovering what they are.

His second question is "How do I perform?" (Drucker 2017, 12). He first asks in relation to this whether we are a reader or a listener (Drucker 2017, 14). Readers are those who need time to think about an answer or give a presentation. Listeners can understand a situation and reply to what is needed at the time. In understanding how one performs, Drucker also asks the question "How do I learn?" (Drucker 2017, 17). Some learn through writing. Others learn through talking. If we think we learn through one way but actually learn through another, we may mess up. Also, it is important to know whether one is a loner or works with people (Drucker 2017, 21). (Drucker has several other questions that help a person to figure out how they perform.)

The third question is "What are my values?" (Drucker 2017, 24). This is an important one. If what is important to us is not what is important to the company or institution, we will not succeed. This

does not just include ethics. It includes the way in which things are done as well. Mission and goals may differ between the person and the organization, which may create problems if not recognized.

The fourth question is "Where do I belong?" (Drucker 2017, 33). This question deals with discernment of vocation and the type of organization that is the best fit.

The final question is "What should I contribute?" (Drucker 2017, 35). There are two aspects involved in this question. The first one concerns what we actually contribute to the organization. The next deals with what we want to contribute to the organization. Sometimes these two things match up and we feel content in where we are. However, if our worth is not valued or we do not feel appreciated then there will be dissatisfaction. Drucker then talks about using these questions to understand our relationships. In our mentoring then, we need to understand these so that we can actually help the person develop leadership skills.

Succession planning not only involves leadership development; it is systematic. In my former position, the paraprofessional position was entry-level so I either encouraged them to find better jobs or they left because they found better jobs. I encouraged them to learn new skills and different skills than they came with. I wanted them to learn things that they could then use in their next position. Recently I was talking with the supervisor of someone who had taken a better position elsewhere. The supervisor thanked me for training the person so well. That may not have helped our organization, but it did help the profession. There was a case in which a person who worked in our library later started a library in a small town to which she had moved. The town had no library. With the skills she learned in our library she was able to start a library. She got funding and a space from the town to do so.

Succession planning should be an ongoing activity. If not to develop people for our position, it is helpful to develop people for the library position or adjacent types of vocation. If you are thinking about transitioning to a new job, it is helpful to begin before you even are thinking about it. And perhaps if it is ongoing, no one would know that you are thinking of leaving.

In a Father's Day sermon given on June 16, 2024, by Michael Ohno at Anaheim Revive Church, Ohno talks about how a father can mentor a son. He mentions there are three important steps in mentoring: "the foundation of relationship is being loved and known;" "the father teaches and models for the son;" and "the father trusts and empowers the son" (Ohno 2024). As I listened to the sermon, I thought about how leadership development through mentoring follows those three steps. The relationship with the person is important and the mentee should understand that the mentor respects and appreciates the mentee. The third step of trusting and empowering is key to the mentoring relationship.

We turn now to the idea of preparing supervisors and administrators. When I was planning on retiring, I wanted to influence what happens in the library after I left. There were some important projects that I wanted to see continued in the library.

In talking about influencing supervisors and administrators, I want to pull together several threads. The first thread comes from a presentation that Chris Rosser and Michael Hanegan did for the Atla Board of Directors to help the board understand AI better. The presentation on Wednesday, Jun 19, 2024, talked about *en no shita no chikara mochi* which translated from Japanese to English means "The strong one under the floor." Rosser and Hanegan talked about the library as being the strong one holding up the floor of the educational institution. However, those above the floor do not see what is beneath it. The administration and faculty do not see that the library is holding them up. Becoming more visible to the administration and faculty is important. (See also Hanegan and Rosser, 2023.)

Another thread is from an *In Trust* podcast with Amy Kardash and Frank Yamada, "Leadership, Innovation, and What's Ahead in Theological Education" (Hufman 2024). Frank Yamada used the term *churn* several times to describe the situation in theological education because of the number of schools that have new CEOs or Academic Deans in the last six years. Most have no experience in administration. Some of these have not come out of an academic institution and do not understand the role of the library. They do not see that the library is holding the institution up.

How do we mentor administrators, especially new ones, to understand theological libraries? How do we effect change or achieve

goals? Ultimately, effecting change is the issue behind understanding and navigating institutional politics. As we consider this issue, it is important that we realize that one of our goals is not for our own power; rather it is that we can further the goals of the wider organization. The mission of your library is less important than the mission of your school, and the library's mission should be in support of the seminary's mission. That said, it is important that sometimes change or achieving goals can help the organization (Ebertz 2013).

We will basically look at three perspectives on understanding and navigating institutional politics. There are multiple perspectives to consider in understanding and navigating institutional politics: we have to consider the formal and informal organization of both the library and the broader institution. The library's formal organization may have a head of the library: the library director or dean. The institution has a president or rector at the top of the organizational chart. There is a hierarchy. Everyone knows to whom they report and who reports to them. Someone is the boss. There is structure. The relationships are set. We know where we belong. We know who has the formal power.

The informal organizational chart may look totally different. The Administrative Assistant has lunch every day in the refectory with three people. The four of them share what is going on and have built relationships with each other. The VP of Finance always eats in her office. There is no hierarchy. There is no formal structure. Relationships can change. Someone may feel left out or even powerless in the informal organization. Let's look at some of the dynamics of formal versus informal power.

If you are the director of the library, you have formal power within the library. "Formal power is the power granted by an organization to whomever is in charge or responsible" (Ebertz 2013, 396). There may be specific decisions associated with this power. For example, a library director may have the responsibility to make decisions about purchasing periodicals. However, most library directors would likely agree that they lack formal power within the theological institution. In most seminaries or theological institutions, in fact, the library director has very little formal power at all. So in a sense there is both the inside and the outside of library politics. In one situation you have the formal power; in the other you do not. Similar principles

apply to both situations. The difference is in how you affect that change or achieve goals.

Informal power, on the other hand, is the power granted by others in the organization and is built on the relationship with others within the organization. It can be someone that others trust or respect, or be someone who is very competent. Sometimes a hint of this can be seen when something new is suggested at a meeting. Who do people glance at? In other words: "others see the person as a leader" (Ebertz 2013, 396). Those with informal power can influence certain decisions that are probably not given to them through formal means. The informal organizational chart helps to examine the flow of information and examine the strength of each person's network relative to the others. For example, a library director may not be able to put a new procedure in place if the influencers in the library are not in agreement with the changes. For example, if you are implementing a new ILS, you will want to get the library staff on board with the change to the new ILS. This is to help those with informal power to get on board.

To effect change and achieve goals the informal power wielders (influencers) need to be brought on board. So, if you are at the top of the formal organization and you want to effect change, you will need to influence the influencers. I was on an ATS accreditation visit once where a student talked about the president as being hierarchical, monarchical, and whimsical. The president forcibly pushed his agenda through and did not have the support of the students, staff, and faculty. The mission of the school was in jeopardy because the one at the top did not understand the importance of the interplay between formal and informal power.

Trust and transparency are important virtues. Influencers will follow formal leadership they can trust. Being transparent means that the influencers do not wonder what the real agenda is. Similarly, team building is important. When those who report to you feel that they are a part of the team, they are more likely to trust you. The influencers know that they are a part of the process and are not powerless.

One thing to note here is something I've thought about because of my experience. I notice that some of my relationships are stronger with certain students and not with others. I've wondered whether

I am playing favorites. As I shared this with others for advice, I was told that it is human nature that we may trust some more than others. The thing is not to have some feel disenfranchised by that. What this means is that all should feel that they have equal access and are not powerless.

I had a conversation once with a seminary president who was retiring. I was told by a friend that I should look at the president's dissertation. The president had written on Paul's confidence expressions in 2 Corinthians. It seems that Paul "asserts his confidence in the Corinthians" as a way to encourage them to further good works. I asked our president how his dissertation affected his leadership style. He had not thought about it but wondered whether confidence and grounded hope was a way in which he influenced the administration and faculty. Perhaps that is another way in which we can influence the influencers.

If you are looking at the broader institution where you do not have formal power, how do you become an influencer? You will probably laugh at me, but when I was in high school I read Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936). To me some of the things he mentions, if they are done with honesty and transparency, are not all that bad. Trust and transparency are important in gaining influence. We must be who we really are and not try to dupe others. Knowing those in different levels of the formal organization is also important. Those in custodial positions can be just as important as those in managerial positions.

I think sometimes who we are can get in the way of becoming influencers. My Myers-Briggs may say that I am an INTJ. But as I mentioned earlier, I am a functional extrovert. What this means is that I have learned how to be outgoing when needed. I have learned to enter into conversations that my introverted self would resist if I didn't push myself. It's Sheryl Sandberg's "sit at the table" reference in *Lean In* (Sandberg and Scovell 2013, 27). I find it easier to sit on the side than to take a seat at the table where the discussion is happening.

Things do not always work the way we want no matter how hard we try to influence the outcome. They hired an interim after I retired. It was someone I recommended. This was a positive way that I influenced. However, the position description for the new library

director was created after I left. The position was downgraded to a staff position rather than remain a faculty position. Sometimes things go our way and sometimes they don't. Succession planning may be a good way to make sure that our responsibilities are carried on by someone else, but it may not always mean that things will remain the same after we leave.

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