

The Cornerstone Program: A new approach to succession development in higher education

Institution: The University of Virginia

Problem/challenge: The University of Virginia recognized that a significant percentage of faculty and staff would be eligible to retire in the next 24 to 36 months. The University decided to take a proactive approach and incorporate staff succession development into its five year strategic plan. “Succession development” is different than “succession planning.” Succession development is the process of identifying and developing employees (at all levels) who have the potential to fill key positions in the organization. This increases the availability of experienced and capable employees who are prepared to assume key roles.

Solution/intervention: Instead of building a program and then finding people who “fit” the parameters of the program, we asked VPs and Deans to identify their high potential employees. This allowed them to look at all levels of their organization – both broadly and deeply. The pilot program was built to be one year long, and included a 360 feedback assessment, mentoring from an executive outside their normal work area, traditional learning utilizing existing leadership development programming and a project. Mentoring was key; while asking for nominees, we also asked executive-level leaders for a commitment to mentoring (at least 4 times during the 12 month period). Selected participants were met with one-on-one after completing a statement of interest and a mentoring interest questionnaire. The meetings provided an opportunity to get to know the participants better, which helped in the mentor matching. The final Cornerstone Program participants (n=25) represented 11 units and four schools. The mentor pool represented 13 units and three schools. Lessons learned include to hold a mentoring orientation session, obtaining project ideas from leadership rather than participants, and plan for the departure of some participants.

Key words: Succession development, mentoring

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Further information: <http://www.virginia.edu/leadershipexcellence/our-offerings/succession/>