Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail:
Leadership Succession in Catholic Education
It was a typical Friday afternoon in my university office. The work of the week was winding down. Undergraduate student traffic had slowed. Telephones were silent. Everyone was talking about the beautiful day it was. For March, it was unseasonably warm and sunny. I overheard someone suggest that it would be a great day to get a head start on some spring yard work and cleanup or perhaps take a bike ride. I nodded in agreement, and quickly took to the suggestion, deciding to sneak out a bit early, cleaning up my desk, packing up some work and closing my office door behind me. At that moment, the office telephone started to ring, prompting me to pantomime a quiet good-bye to the office receptionist, waving as I did so. “Bye-bye. I’m not here.”

She returned the wave while taking the telephone call but in an instant her wave transformed into a number one sign as she silently mouthed the words, “Wait. Wait. Bishop.” Just my luck, I thought, as I turned to reopen my office door. Bishops do not call just to chat about their day; something important was up and being a team player, I was obligated to take the call.

The bishop, a friend and colleague of many years, had recently learned that his diocesan superintendent of Catholic schools was leaving. He rehearsed for me the progress he thought the diocese had made with the overall health of Catholic schools during the tenure of the current superintendent. Some consolidations had taken place, a few closures, a lot of updating and renovating, a bold technology plan and the beginnings of a foundation to generate a new revenue stream. The bishop worried that backsliding was inevitable with a change of leadership and asked me directly to suggest names of possible qualified successors to the departing superintendent. I asked a lot of questions, recommended a search be undertaken, and offered to help in any way I could, especially in crafting a position description and circulating it widely among likely candidates.

**Catholic School Needs**

While this is but one recent and isolated incident, similar conversations occur across the country on a regular basis, as superintendents, principals, presidents and diocesan staff move on from their positions, sometime with precious little
notice. While some dioceses report experiencing little turnover among their principals, others replace 20 percent a year. One large archdiocese advertised no less than 25 principalships in 2011, and most archdioceses have hired as many principals in the years 2009-2012. Because of the multiple, pressing demands of school-level leadership and diocesan central office supervision, most Catholic educational leaders have not been intentional in regard to leadership succession planning (Fitzgerald & Sabatino, 2014).

No systematic study of Catholic school principal retention or diocesan superintendent turnover has been undertaken. However, the struggles of bishops, school boards and search committees to identify qualified applicants continue to be a pressing issue for those who find themselves in need of a new leader. As director of a graduate program in educational administration that prepares teachers for leadership positions, I field calls and emails regularly from consultants, search firms, pastors, and bishops, all with the hope of raising the depth of their applicant pool by attracting more and better candidates. Depending on the time of year, these requests arrive daily and often from multiple sources for the same position. The need we have for good leadership is clear.

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Catholic education is not alone in this quest. Turnover and retention rates among teachers, principals and superintendents in public education are a much discussed and seriously studied phenomena. In the state of Illinois, for example, recent studies found that on average, 79.1 percent of all principals stayed in the same school from one year to the next between 2001 and 2008 (DeAngelis, K.J., & White, B.R. 2011), compared to approximately 86 percent of all principals between 1987 and 2001 (Ringel et al., 2004). Of those who left their positions, 40 percent left the school system altogether. With regard to first-time principals, just over 28 percent were leading their schools after six years.

While no one begrudges a professional who consistently works hard and then takes advantage of an opportunity for advancement within the field, organizations can easily backslide in the absence of good...
leadership, and frequent, unplanned changes in leadership can seriously compromise any organization’s ability to fulfill its mission. Schools experience such backsliding with frequent leadership transitions when teachers decide that investing in any serious change efforts or professional development programs is not worthwhile, reasoning that it is better to “wait [principals] out” (Hargreaves et al., 2003, p. 65).

This we know for certain: no one stays at the same institution forever. No one has the same job forever, so one facet of educational leadership we can plan on is the inevitable need to fill every position in the school or diocese at some future point. Given what we know about the importance of leadership, sustaining a school culture, and the pitfalls of frequent transitions, planning for leadership succession would appear to be an important function of current leaders.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION PLANNING?

Leadership succession planning (LSP) is an organization-wide strategy to prepare future leaders by thoughtful engagement of qualified personnel in ongoing mission-critical activities in order to maintain a culture of continuous improvement. LSP is common today in the business world, as industry leaders seek to establish and maintain a competitive advantage. Chief executive officers may arguably transition more than principals, but it is not unusual for such transitions to be followed soon if not immediately by the announcement of a successor, often from within the ranks of the organization or in a closely related division. LSP aims to keep the entire organization on mission and not simply to offer stability in a time of crisis. By assuming that every position and leader will someday need to be replaced, LSP anticipates such eventualities and designs position descriptions and job responsibilities with change, growth and progress in mind.

In one sense, LSP can be considered a fairly simple and straightforward proposition. All leaders need to be attentive to the professional development needs and formational progress of everyone in the organization. A comprehensive, systemic approach to making such professional development available is standard practice in large corporations, but such best practices have yet to make their way into schools and dioceses.

Leadership succession planning takes on many forms in the business, finance and manufacturing sectors, some patterns that emerge can be helpful to schools and dioceses in thinking about such planning. Among the most common strategies, we find:

- The chief executive and senior level managers must understand and support the effort for a comprehensive, organization-wide approach to LSP. Thus, the
diocesan bishop, diocesan-level administrators, boards and school leaders must articulate a shared need and common vision.

- Human resource personnel need to be involved with the critical areas of professional development, ongoing education and performance reviews.
- Critical conversations about essential strategic and tactical goals must be invited, seeking understanding of important mission-related goals, including what knowledge, skills and dispositions the school or diocese will require in five, 10, or 15 years; what individuals will be approaching retirement in those timeframes; what individuals already manifest significant leadership potential; and what professional development needs these individuals have or will have in the proposed planning timeframe.
- Transparency in LSP is crucial, for it must not come to be viewed as a form of institutionalized nepotism or favoritism, but rather as a way of identifying, supporting and strengthening the overall leadership capacity of the school or diocese. Current leaders need to be clear in naming those skills and dispositions required in future leaders, affirming them when they are manifest and calling them forth when they are not. Open processes should be in place for identifying, recruiting and even nominating potential future leaders.
  - The skills of potential leaders must be developed through planned work experiences, job rotation and sharing, special projects and other challenging assignments. Feedback mechanisms are also needed to communicate openly and honestly about progress, success, shortcoming or pitfalls.

In the larger picture of longitudinal success and growth, it makes sense for organizations such as schools and dioceses to plan for a regular and orderly succession of leaders as a way to maximize progress and minimize backsliding. Such a plan works best when it is owned and understood by everyone in the organization and is not seen or experienced as a human resource or executive function only. Replacing key personnel can have major consequences in many areas of an organization’s life. Thoughtful LSP anticipates such vacancies and takes advantage of the opportunity they provide to keep the entire organization focused and prepared for the next leadership transition.

**WHY DO WE WAIT UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE?**

There are many reasons organizations delay any LSP and simply wait for the need to arise and a position
to be vacated. Why do dioceses wait until the superintendent resigns before thinking about who the next superintendent might be? Why do schools wait for the principal to announce retirement before considering candidates for the position, when the entire community sees such retirement on the horizon? Frankly, like many complex organizations, Catholic schools and diocese often have a tendency to deal with urgencies as they manifest themselves, and the day-to-day operations of most dioceses and schools leave little room for strategic planning and long-range thinking. Important guests and visitors need be attended to, the proverbial fires need be extinguished, and competing demands must be balanced and addressed. The tyranny of the urgent, as one author called it, can push aside what is truly important (Hummel, 1994). The steady demands of leadership and ministry, the regular workload that is the responsibility of chief executives, and the occasional crisis often conspire to swallow up all of the time in a leader’s day and then some. Thus, the main reason LSP does not occur is time management—itself, a matter of prioritization.

Another reason that LSP is not common comes from the desire to be fair and circumspect in advancing personnel into new leadership positions. For example, faculty can be suspicious of their peers and colleagues who enter into a leadership preparation program or who are identified as potential future leaders. A significant number of faculty voicing such a complaint can give a principal, board, or superintendent pause about pursuing LSP in a thoughtful way. While the alternative of waiting for an opening to be public is hardly a better way to identify one’s next leader, LSP can be experienced as a threat to some if it appears simply as a way for current leaders to anoint and then appoint their successors. A culture of open communication becomes important at such a point, so that LSP is explained, understood, and operationalized as a way of caring for the overall health and direction of the organization by anticipating future leadership needs.

Diocesan level leadership positions present even more challenges than the school level principalships. Perhaps because such jobs are so demanding, or the qualifications so high, diocesan-based leadership positions such as superintendent of schools are among the most difficult jobs to fill. Some dioceses, by virtue of their size, play it safe by always planning to recruit a superintendent from a smaller diocese with the allure of a more prestigious position and a little more money. Others hope to identify a new superintendent from the ranks of their senior principals when the time comes. Still others rely on the prospects that a national search will bring, or perhaps the services of a consulting firm. As a university-based professor of educational administration in the Catholic school sector, I think there are fair questions to ponder: Where will the next generation of diocesan superintendents come from? How will they be prepared? Who will prepare them? What kind of skills and specialized knowledge will they need to succeed? Failing to answer such questions now amounts to preparing for some serious leadership consequences in the future when transitions occur.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

One large Catholic archdiocese is noted for its comprehensive and thoughtfully designed LSP. The Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia and its Catholic Education Office (CEO) designed the program over a decade ago in response to a noticeable decline in the number of applications for open positions. Back in 2001, the executive director of the archdiocesan CEO shared an insight that could easily be true of many Catholic dioceses in the United States:

In the Archdiocese of Sydney, the number of applicants for principalships of large and complex schools is often disappointing. “Ours is a good school! Why weren’t there more applicants?” is a question frequently heard when selection panels convene, especially from parish priests and parent representatives (Canavan, 2001, p. 73).

Trusting that someone would be available with the requisite skills and experience whenever a leadership
position opened did not appear to be a sustainable model for the ongoing growth of the Catholic school system. A more proactive approach was necessary.

The archdiocese began an internal study to understand more deeply what was keeping qualified teachers from applying for leadership positions. They also looked at relevant literature from other educational and cultural contexts in addition to those employment conditions that were arguably unique to Catholic schools in Australia. For some, the complexity and demands of the position were off-putting. For others, relocation of family, housing costs, and salary and benefits consideration were primary. One researcher hypothesized that generational differences account for much of the variance in the quest for principalships among those born after 1960, concluding that interest in leadership is waning among 40- and 50-year-olds (Conger, 1997). In the end, it became clear that the dearth of leadership was not a challenge limited to education and that what they were seeing was more accurately described as a crisis of leadership development rather than simply the lack of emerging leaders.

In planning what they considered to be an intervention, the archdiocese conceived of LSP as a way that the current generation of school and diocesan leaders can exercise a pastoral concern for the future of Catholic education by making a commitment to identify and prepare the next generation of faith-filled, passionate leaders. Wisely, this intervention was open to the reconceptualization of the role of the principal, focused on the evangelizing mission of Catholic education, and presented as a complement to the current selection and appointment processes already in place. Participation in formal LSP or an informal leadership seminar did not guarantee a future position or even consideration for such a position. Similarly, failure to participate was not an automatic exclusion. The LSP was introduced and begun as a way for the entire organization to work towards the achievement of its stated mission.

The archdiocese identified five pressing needs that served as the inspiration for the LSP it ultimately implemented. The five major needs were: to enhance the long-term evangelization thrust of Catholic schools; to realize their operational goals; to ensure leadership continuity; to identify future leadership requirements; and to develop a pool of potential leaders (Canavan, 2011). In order to meet these needs in a comprehensive manner, a 12-phase LSP was implemented. The steps of the plan included:

1. Clarification of future strategic directions regarding mission, vision culture and changing priorities.
2. Delineation of criteria and competencies for upcoming open positions.
4. Hosting professional development opportunities aligned with personal and organizational needs.
5. Identification of current disincentives to the pursuit of leadership positions and establishment of new incentives.
6. Planned retention and development of high-potential personnel,
7. Encouragement of potential leaders to take personal responsibility for their own career trajectory and professional development,

8. Responding encouragingly to those who feel passed over for immediate advancement and recommending appropriate developmental strategies to inspire ongoing motivation.

9. Inclusion of LSP as a significant job responsibility in the current position description of all leaders.

10. Acknowledgement of differing leadership needs within the organization and among different communities.

11. Creation of a high quality induction program for recently appointed leaders.

12. Open and transparent communication about all aspects of the LSP with stakeholders.

By taking such a broad and engaging systems approach to the question of leadership development, the archdiocese was able to raise consciousness about the pressing needs of its schools and invite multiple constituencies into the mission-driven activities of LSP. While acknowledging that any such efforts aimed at institutional growth and development are rarely successful if implemented rigidly and without respect to local sensibilities, being forthright about emerging leadership needs can serve to animate a school, diocese or organization in ways that might at first seem unlikely.

Once properly established, the information, energy, and focus generated by LSP can bring new life. More than is usually the case, many personnel find themselves engaged in conversation about goals, mission, and vision. Happily, many of these conversations concern strategic future directions, emerging needs, and options regarding institutional priorities. Amidst such life-giving discussions, a dynamic culture emerges which is aimed at continuous improvement. This results in an increased confidence throughout the organization, a sort of public self-efficacy that serves to propel the institution forward in pursuit of its goals and in actualization of its mission. LSP delivered in this manner is accompanied by increased creativity and flexibility that are strong, positive indicators of a successful organization.

CONCLUSION

Too many searches for diocesan superintendents, principals and presidents today result in the lack of an appointment being made within the advertised timeframe. This situation is often followed by a re-advertisement of the position, with associated costs and disappointment for all involved. Appointing the best candidate in the applicant pool even when this person does not meet the stated requirements for the position or does not demonstrate the competencies needed for the job is highly problematic and laden with other significant difficulties.

LSP is a thoughtful approach regularly implemented today as a best practice in the world of business. Catholic schools and dioceses can learn much from this approach by adopting similar strategies and policies to help establish a leadership pipeline for schools, principalships and superintendencies. The demands of leadership today are many, and the days when leaders could simply rely on a religious community or congregation sending another vowed religious sister or brother are gone. The chances of a highly qualified person appearing at just the right time are increasingly slim. A major responsibility of all current leaders is to be thoughtful and prepared for the future, including identifying, retaining and developing the next generation of leaders. LSP is an invaluable tool to accomplish that goal.