

Discontinuous Succession: The Absence of Succession Planning in the Bhutanese Civil Service

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ABSTRACT

This review article aims to understand the state of succession planning in the civil service by examining existing literature in the country. The review highlights that the delayed recognition and execution of succession planning in Bhutan have led to challenges, including a shortage of skilled employees, a mismatch between human resource supply and demand, and the departure of experienced personnel from the civil service. The absence of clear guidance and strategic direction for succession planning has hindered its incorporation within government agencies. Given the civil service's alarming attrition rate, the significance of succession planning has become increasingly apparent.

Keywords: Civil service; Succession planning; Communication; Mentoring

INTRODUCTION

The civil service in Bhutan has undergone several reforms and continues to evolve to meet the demands of the changing national and international environments, as well as the expectations of the public it serves (Ugyel, 2015). One of the key elements for the

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development of any organization, including the civil service, is succession planning. This literature review aims to understand the current state of succession planning in the Bhutanese civil service and emphasize the importance of giving due consideration to succession planning as it undergoes transformation to become a vibrant civil service.

Definition of Succession Planning

Previously, the focus of succession planning was primarily on top leaders and chief executive officers, with strategies mainly directed toward preparing one or two individuals to succeed in these top positions when they became vacant for various reasons (Weisblat, 2008). Rothwell (2010) defines succession planning as "a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, to retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and to encourage individual advancement."

Over time, as organizations became more complex, along with accompanying HR issues, the need to provide adequate attention to succession planning in critical positions within lower units emerged. Consequently, the focus of succession planning expanded to encompass positions and individuals from departments and lower units. Lune (2012) describes succession planning as a "systemic, long-term process of determining goals, needs, and roles within an organization, preparing individuals or employee groups for responsibilities relative to the work needed within an organization."

The State of Bhutan's Succession Planning in Civil Service

The Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC), which began as the Department of Manpower in 1973, was established by the Royal Charter in 1981. Since then, it has undergone several Human Resource Management (HRM) reforms, covering policies,

structures, and activities to address the evolving socioeconomic missions of various Ministries and agencies. In 2015, the RCSC initiated five key sets of reforms: the Organizational Development Exercise, the Bhutan Civil Service System, the Performance Management System, Succession Planning and Leadership Development, and Civil Service Well-being (RCSC, 2015).

Despite mentioning succession planning as one of the key reform areas, there is very little evidence available to examine its implementation. This is evident from the limited results when conducting a literature search on succession planning in Bhutan. Globally, too, succession planning, despite its wide adoption in the private sector, has seen a much slower pace of adoption in the public sector. A review of succession planning studies from 1980 to 1993 found that only 5 of the 130 studies conducted during that period involved the public sector (Barkdoll & Nina, 1993). Another study found that only 27 percent of the 214 nonprofit organizations surveyed had a written succession plan (BoardSource, 2017).

While the concept of a succession plan has been acknowledged, the adoption and implementation of succession planning interventions have not gained traction. This is confirmed by the fact that even the RCSC doesn't have a specific succession plan, nor are there any guiding documents on the subject. The author reached out to individuals from several different agencies to find out whether their agency has a succession plan, and the response was negative. In fact, there is very little awareness and understanding regarding the subject in the civil service. This is supported by the findings of one of the few studies on human resources in Bhutan, which reported that of the five key reforms initiated in 2015, employees were least familiar with leadership development and succession planning (Choden, 2018). Interestingly, the same study reported that civil servants indicated leadership and succession planning to be the second most important of the five. Most of the efforts under the succession planning and leadership development reform have

largely focused on leadership development initiatives, with minimal interventions towards succession planning. It has mainly concentrated on developing skills in top executive positions, overshadowing and relegating succession planning to the background. Since 2020, the RCSC annual report no longer reflected succession planning as a separate section, as it did in past reports (RCSC, 2020).

The delay in recognizing the importance of succession planning and the lack of clear directives to implement succession planning have likely resulted in several issues and challenges for the civil service to deliver in line with its vision of “Excellence in service”. There is a shortage of skilled and qualified employees, and a mismatch in the supply and demand of human resources, exacerbated by the loss of already limited experience and skilled employees from critical and leadership positions to corporations and the private sector. Furthermore, the introduction of democracy has also resulted in the exit of several senior-level employees who left the civil service to join politics (Tshewang, 2015), leaving many senior positions vacant for some time. To make matters worse, the recent exodus following the COVID-19 pandemic from the civil service, which saw a fourfold increase in the attrition rate from the civil service in a single year (Dolkar, 2023), has challenged the ability of all sectors to provide timely and efficient services (Dorji, 2023).

DISCUSSION

Employees are considered the most important asset of an organization, influencing the effective use of other assets to achieve better results (Mathis & Jackson, 2010; Fulmer & Ployhart, 2013). In today’s competitive world, talented and skilled human resources are not easily available. Human resources, like any scarce resources, need to be managed effectively to yield the best results. One critical means of managing human resources in an organization is succession planning.

RCSC has taken a step in the right direction by identifying succession planning as one of the key reforms to strengthen the civil service in Bhutan. Succession planning can boost employee motivation, reduce anxiety, and protect against bias during the hiring process. It can also assist in ensuring continuity, involve senior leadership in the assessment of the agency's personnel, emphasize diversity, encourage a re-examination of organizational procedures and structure, and align multiple units within an organization (Gothard & Austin, 2013). However, there is a need for the reform to move from concept to implementation. Employees of civil services have voiced their opinion that there is no succession planning in the Bhutanese civil service, and that it is one of the causes of acute shortages in some key areas (ACC, 2016). There is a lack of clear guidance on how the civil service will undertake the reform, therefore limiting many government agencies from adopting the reform on succession planning. While literature says that there is no one universal approach to succession planning and that it should be customized accordingly to the needs and context of individual agencies (Seniwoliba, 2015), there should be strategic guidance on how the government agencies should unpack the reform on succession planning and customize it to their needs. This is probably one of the reasons why there is limited understanding and familiarity with this reform among the civil servants (Choden, 2018).

Changes are not always welcome and are difficult to implement. Organizations dealing with succession are frequently presented with process challenges (e.g., ambiguous roles and responsibilities) as well as personnel issues (e.g., resistance to process and conflicting expectations for a change) (Gandossy & Verma, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to have a comprehensive communication plan on the reforms, the roadmap, and the goal of reform on succession planning. The lack of a documented strategic plan on succession in government agencies indicates confusion and a lack of understanding of the core concepts of succession planning.

As evident from the literature review above, most of the interventions for succession planning were focused on high-level executives in leadership development. While succession in leadership positions is very important, there is an equal need to extend initiatives to mid-level and lower-level employees. The recent alarming figures on attrition indicating that civil servants across all levels are leaving the system for various reasons (Dolkar, 2023) is a clear indication of the need for succession planning at all levels. An organization with a visionary leader but without willing and skilled employees to translate the vision into action will not go far. Therefore, equal attention should be given to succession planning for employees at critical positions at all levels of the organization. When experienced professionals depart a company, they leave behind not only their ability to perform the work but also their accumulated wisdom. This occurs at all levels and in all departments. Succession planning entails more than just planning for top-level replacements. It also entails considering what to do when the most experienced employees at all levels leave, taking with them precious institutional memory (Rothwell, 2010). Succession planning ensures that essential knowledge and abilities are retained when individuals in crucial roles leave. It allows for the necessary talent and skills to be available when needed. Organizations with succession planning have been found to be better in their post-succession business performance (Patidar & Maldonado, 2016).

On the contrary, organizations without succession planning put themselves at substantial risk of not being able to deliver the expected results and, at worst, becoming derailed. Organizations are also more likely to face an increased frequency of succession events and leadership vacuums, which are fraught with risk and tend to lead to reactive (rather than proactive) decisions (Leland et al., 2012). A survey among CEOs found that in addition to the loss of productivity, the deficiency in succession planning results in a failure to take advantage of new opportunities (Weisblat, 2008). Today, the sustainability and efficiency of many of our sectors are

threatened by the lack of succession planning, especially in crucial sectors like the education and health system. Succession planning needs to permeate through all levels and be ingrained as part of the culture of the organization. Employees at all levels should be made aware and engaged both as recipients and contributors to the organization's succession plan. Succession planning in an organization should consider a combination of strategies such as recruitment, talent management, employee development, retention, and transfer of knowledge at various levels of the organization (Rothwell, 2010).

To have an effective succession planning program, a considerable amount of investment will also be required, and this might be a challenge in a resource-constrained environment. However, some interventions can be taken up with less cost that can significantly contribute to enhanced succession management. Mentoring has proven to be an important tool for employee development and contributes to more effective succession management of an organization (Safi, 2007). In Bhutan, the practice of mentoring was found to be inadequate (ACC, 2017).

Finally, data and research should be utilized to inform the succession planning program. There is limited assessment, research, or even documents available or accessible on succession planning in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Succession planning should be incorporated into the strategic plan of an organization. Therefore, guidelines should be developed and disseminated to assist government agencies in integrating succession planning in line with their organizational goals. This will help make succession planning an integral part of the system.

- Communication is key, and therefore, adequate attention and efforts should be put into disseminating widely the reforms and plans for succession planning. All employees of an organization should be reached with the information and relevant interventions to nurture staff toward succession planning and increase ownership of the succession plans at all levels of the system.
- Mentoring is beneficial to an organization's succession planning, knowledge transfer, and staff retention. Therefore, organizations should invest in and design mentoring programs. The practice of mentoring should be made a part of the culture of the organizations.
- Periodic assessment and evaluation of succession planning need to be conducted to understand the evolving needs and the impact of the programs in place, and to inform the future course of the succession program.

CONCLUSION

The alarming attrition of civil services from the system could undo the achievements and strides that Bhutan has made over many years despite being a small, economically resource-constrained country. The struggle to retain and replace valuable human resources in the civil services is an important and hard lesson learned. Succession planning needs to be ingrained as part of the culture and permeate through all levels of the civil service.

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