

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? SUCCESSION PLANNING

Steve Jobs, facing the grim reaper, did it meticulously, for the sake of the Apple of his eye. It is part of the fabric of political, dynastic and corporate systems the world over, yet lots of firms – many of them in the family business sector – come unstuck at points of leadership transition. A pipeline of humans to the key nodes of the organisational machine should ensure that not a beat is lost when managers die, go mad, get fired or just fade away – the system will feed as it moves. That's the theory. But firms are not machines and human impulse has a way of derailing the practice. Plans turn out to be too rigid for a rapidly changing world. The secret chart in the HR managers' office, showing all the destined understudies, is subverted by people with power. A new boss comes in and rewrites the rules. The problem is that succession planning is often both too short term and too long term. The only way to make it work is to shift perspective, to one about people's career journeys within a context. If we did, then we could think about an N+2 model – the next job is just



a stepping stone to the one after that. Such leapfrog thinking can get people up the ladder fast – if we want – and we can stop torturing others with short-term hope and long-term delusion.

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