



Brian Duggan, C.I.M., CHRP

## Mentoring Emerging Leaders: *One Potential Succession Strategy for Small Business*

Succession planning is a timely and relevant concern for leaders in all types of organizations. For small business owners the global economy and competition for a shrinking talent pool make the challenge of ensuring that there are competent leaders to assume specific 'mission critical' roles a strategic imperative. In a small business, the obligation and responsibility to keep a competitive advantage, reduce costs related to turnover, and maintain a bottom line focus, belongs to the key leadership. The scope of this issue is wide: in 2009, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business reports representing 105,000 businesses with less than 500 employees ([www.cfib-fcei.ca](http://www.cfib-fcei.ca)). This number is just a portion of the small businesses that exist in Canada, making the discovery and implementation of solutions to leadership succession a vital aspect of sustaining the significant economic impact of small businesses.

### EMERGING LEADERS

One typical method of ensuring succession is to develop competent leaders from within your business. Coming from within, 'emerging leaders' can be defined as present employees who are prepared and positioned to take on wider or more significant leadership roles. Indeed, businesses position themselves to identify and develop leadership at all levels when there is a culture of leadership - in other words, when every employee is encouraged and supported to 'lead' at their own level. The strategic development of a leadership culture will result in the emergence of leaders who are competent to take on more significant roles. The decision to develop an emerging leader needs to be made in light of other strategic factors, such as the diversity of your team; a need to bring in fresh ideas from outside; and the availability of the right competencies within your organization.

### MENTORSHIP

Strategies used for leadership succession and a decision to develop 'emerging leaders' can be supported by developing and implementing a process of

'mentorship'. Mentorship takes many forms, can be formal or informal, focused on skills enhancement or resolving management problems, provided by someone within or from outside an organization. Traditionally mentorship involves the passing on of knowledge and experience to a younger or less experienced person. Mentoring has qualities of coaching in that it is meant to assist a person to find solutions to issues and to build the capacity to function on a different level. The adage of Marshall Goldsmith, "what got you here won't get you there" (2007) is fitting. If we want to take on new roles, we need to 'unlearn' some habits in order to learn new, more effective ones that will sustain us at a new level. This truism can be applied to both personal and organizational growth.

The process of mentoring is, at its core, a relationship. On the organizational level, best practice includes executive and corporate wide support; clear developmental goals; alignment with the company's strategic objectives; adequate resources for education and training and an evaluation process to identify and manage gaps and process challenges.

On the individual level, the mentor and the protégé (i.e.



emerging leader) will need to have the inner competencies that demonstrate the desire to succeed, grow and develop; the focus and intention to meet organizational goals; a commitment to do the work, spend the time, try new approaches to old issues; a sense of service to others; and, of course, an ethic of leadership that is recognized among employees and peers.

Within organizations, success factors in leadership development that must exist alongside a mentorship initiative include a well defined and communicated vision and mission; and a lived set of corporate values. Successful organizations can tell you their 'leadership credo' and what makes them unique from their competitors. A living organizational leadership culture is a recruitment and retention strategy. Alignment with corporate culture, when recognized and developed early in the employee's career, can help to identify potential emerging leaders.

Mentoring emerging leaders, when aligned with strategic objectives, is a viable approach to bringing leadership value to small business. Mentoring recognizes the value of our only real competitive advantage – our

people. It ensures that leaders at all levels have corporate knowledge and embrace corporate culture; it fosters learning and development; it builds organizational capacity; it is known to facilitate the attraction and recruitment of new talent and it enhances the retention of existing talent; mentoring aligns career success with organizational success and it assists emerging leaders to take on more significant roles effectively and efficiently.

Small business leadership, a key aspect of organizational and economic sustainability and a significant driver in our economy, can be enhanced and perpetuated by mentoring emerging leaders. Mentoring, a common business activity, when focused on emerging leaders, provides an opportunity to develop your organizational culture and pass on the leadership torch to future generations.

*Brian Duggan CIM, CHRP is the President of Marathon Human Resources Consulting Group Limited ([www.marathonhrcg.com](http://www.marathonhrcg.com)) and the President of the Mainland Nova Scotia Branch of the Canadian Institute of Management.*

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I look forward to hearing from you!

*Sheila Sproule*  
Editor

