



Building Bench Strength - Lessons Learned

In the process of working as talent scouts for various client organizations, the consultants at Epsen Fuller & Associates have learned a number of lessons about building bench strength:

It is not an exact science: Some organizations don't do as much executive development as they should because of fear that executives will take the training and walk. "Organizations need to accept that development is not an exact science," says Tom Fuller, General Managing Partner. If your *Business Leadership Program* can yield over time roughly 40 percent moving to more senior jobs, 30 percent leaving the organization, and 30 percent staying in the company, performing important work at the same level in the organization, "Organizations need to accept that this is going to happen," he said. "GE identified seven successors for Jack Welch. They knew only one would get the job."

Pay attention to initial hires: If the company is going to live with its employees longer, it needs to look for the leadership qualities from the first interview. The commitment to development is also a strong attraction for new candidates. Develop a "robust selection process," including a behavioral evaluation based on its leadership model.

Sometimes you need to hire outside for new skills: When the Sarbanes-Oxley Act requirements demanded new capabilities in risk management, many clients hired outside the company to bring in these skills quickly. At the same time, they added risk management to their core organizational capabilities and management education programs.

Engagement of top leaders is essential: The initiatives for building the bench strength begin with the Chief Executive Officer and the Chairman. In certain Wharton Executive Education programs, the chairman and chief executive — and on occasion non-executive directors — are actively involved in supporting and participating in the classroom sessions. "Do not underestimate the importance of the chief executive and board," Wharton Professor Begbie said. "Executive support and sponsorship has such a powerful impact on clearing the inevitable barriers you come up against and it sends a powerful message to people who participate in programs. Don't go into this without full commitment. If you don't have the full commitment of the chief executive, you should probably be a company that just buys talent."

It takes time: "Don't underestimate the time it takes," Fuller said. "It takes a number of years to set up, especially if you take a strategic focus and integrate other parts of the experience and performance management."

Find a good partner: Get yourself a good partner or partners to work with," he said. "Building good relationships with search firms, key business schools, and taking a proactive approach to talent scouting will all go a long way to building bench strength."