Succession planning and management practice in Washington State local public health agencies: The current situation and recommendations for better practice

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Abstract: Strong organizational leaders make it a priority to ensure their organization grows its future leaders and that leaders are ready to lead the challenges of tomorrow, not today or yesterday. This mixed methods study examined succession planning and management practices (SP&M) in local public health agencies (LPHAs) in Washington State using a web-administered survey and semi-structured interviews in three exemplary LPHAs.

A systematic literature review identified 25 SP&M best practices, which formed the basis for the study. The two main impetuses for LPHAs to implement SP&M programs were: 1) Discovering the large percentage of employees able to retire in the very near future after profiling their workforce by length of time to retirement, and 2) Requirements for a workforce development plan to achieve national accreditation. It also found that 85% of LPHAs selected high potential-high performers (HP-HP) for development, 76% sent HP-HP to formal technical and management/leadership training, and 70% used cross-functional team projects and 67% used stretch assignments to develop their employees. Many of these SP&M programs were informal in nature and lacked transparency, creating a potential environment for bias and inequitable access to opportunities. Barriers to implementing SP&M were: too many other competing demands for time, believing the LPHA's workforce was too small for a SP&M program, and concerns that there would be union barriers. Semi-structured interviews noted the importance of having a top local public health official that championed the need and modeled its importance.

A plan for change to increase the number of LPHAs implementing SP&M programs is included, using Kotter's 8 steps to transforming organizations. The plan recommends creating urgency by focusing on retirement profiles in one's LPHA and emphasizing the need for workforce development plans in accreditation. It advocates using national associations and the public health training centers to assist LPHAs in developing SP&M training programs.

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