

## 5 steps to implementing effective leadership intern program

*Test drive potential candidates to find best and brightest to fill roles*

BY KYLE COUCH

**W**hat's an organization to do? On the one hand, the cost of recruiting, hiring and training an outside executive to fill a role in an organization can be well into the six figures. On the other hand, as the belief goes, promoting the best technical expert into a leadership role can be the worst thing for her and, often, her team.

As many organizations turn their attention back to employees following the economic downturn, succession planning and talent mapping are coming back into focus. While many firms make superficial attempts to deal with this critical process, others dig deep and employ new, novel methods for moving the best and brightest up the ladder. One of these methods is a leadership intern program.

When most people think about intern programs, the focus tends to be on entry-level positions and apprenticeships. However, when it comes to the upper ranks of an organization, it makes sense to test drive potential candidates.

Truth be told, a person's interest and desire to become a people leader do not necessarily translate into his ultimate success in that role. Therefore, preparing him for the demands of the role, before he actually takes it, may be of mutual benefit.

If an organization finds itself struggling with talent management, especially with emerging leaders and "ready now" leadership candidates, a leadership intern program

may be just the answer.

### 5 things to keep in mind

There are a number of considerations to keep in mind in the development and implementation of the program:

- Approach — what is the purpose of the program?
- Candidate selection — who will participate in the process?
- Role — what roles will they test drive?
- Time frame — how long will the process last?
- Monitoring — who will be responsible for ongoing feedback?

**Approach:** Leadership intern programs can be structured in a number of ways. In a more traditional approach, the program is initiated in conjunction with a leader's exit strategy for retirement or promotion. In these cases, an intern assumes the role on a given date to ensure a seamless transition. A more progressive approach involves programs being initiated for discreet terms for a pool of potential leaders. In this case, the goal is to ensure there are sufficient leaders, ready to move whenever the need arises. This also allows organizations to test out a number of candidates before they are needed. If some are not right for the position, their career paths can be adjusted.

**Candidate selection:** Google has often been praised for how it operates internally. While many of its practices are widely reported on, one element is still under the radar. It essentially has a pick of the litter when it comes to talent and it hires at will. However, once a candidate is on the payroll, she is asked if she wants to be on a

technical or leadership track. This ensures Google does not violate the first rule of succession planning — if the person doesn't want to move up, don't move her up.

Therefore, when selecting future interns, be sure they want to participate in the program. In addition, when selecting candidates, ensure the selection criteria are transparent and established upfront to ensure a sense of fairness.

**Role:** Truly proactive organizations routinely plan for the future. However, within a leadership intern program, it is unlikely a vice-president of sales would voluntarily step out of his role to allow a more junior employee to practise. Most organizations can choose to use, or create, a discreet role for the interns to fill during the program, such as vice-president of special projects or continuous improvement. The key is to find roles that allow candidates to feel the various pressures of leadership without the added risk of having them occupy critical seats.

**Time frame:** Typically, a leadership intern program lasts anywhere from a fiscal quarter to one full year. Depending on the level, a longer time frame would allow for "mid-course" corrections and effective coaching and feedback. The objective is to ensure the candidate has enough time to perform the duties of a leader, including identifying areas of strength and weakness within her group, developing plans to correct or enhance and following through.

**Monitoring:** Ongoing feedback is important. To maximize effectiveness, it's best to have at least two points of con-

tact for each intern. As candidates are often in over their heads at first, having a mentor helps them deal with challenges and gain confidence through the process. Ideally, this individual is a veteran leader who has the ability to provide sound guidance and advice to the candidate. There must also be a mechanism to provide feedback on a candidate's performance and assessments of his progress. Organizations with a defined list of leadership competencies have a leg up here. The second advisor would likely be a member of the human resources group and have a tailored report card to use in assessing the candidate throughout the process. This individual would also be tasked with terminating the process if it is determined the candidate is not suited for the role. In both cases, it is important the candidate repeatedly be given feedback throughout the process.

The goal of any leadership intern program is to help an organization get to the next level. While many development interventions focus on front-line staff and middle management, this sort of program will help an employer focus on the growth of senior leaders.

This path will not only ensure a full and targeted leadership pipeline, it will help continuously develop the best and brightest by giving them the challenges they seek.

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