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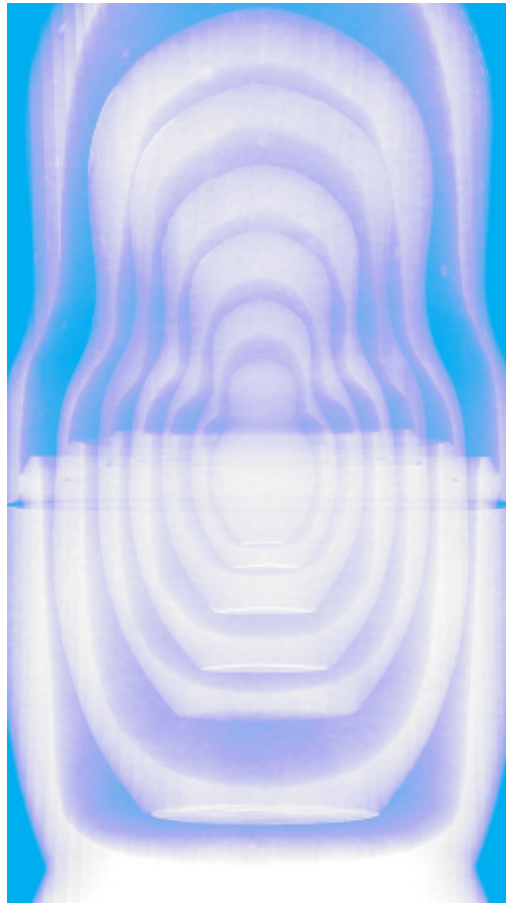
by Ben Dattner and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic

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Once upon a time, there was an enlightened organizational leader who spoke candidly about his upcoming retirement. “I am afraid about the next phase of my life” he would say, continuing “I’m not sure what my life is or will be without my job, without my career. How will I spend my time? How will I face the fact that I am replaceable, that the world can and will go on without me? How will I derive a sense of identity, power, agency and meaning once I am retired?” He would even add, “I married my spouse for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, but not for lunch. How are we going to spend all that time together?”

Through deep self-reflection, this leader found answers to these questions, made peace with the turning of the great wheel of being and becoming, designated a talented successor whom he readied to take the reins of power, and retired. Then he, his spouse, his successor, and his organization all lived happily ever after.

Unfortunately, in the real world of work this is basically a fairy tale. Most organizations are packed with leaders who can't come to terms with the idea of retirement. Based on research one of us (Chamorro-Premuzic) has conducted with his firm, Hogan Assessments, and the consulting and coaching work the other of us (Dattner) has done, we have identified four all-too-common succession scenarios. In each, the personality of the needs-to-retire leader can help illuminate and explain what is happening.

Having no successor or succession plan. Some organizational leaders simply deny the reality that they need to retire, so they fail to designate a successor. They refuse to discuss their plans and go about their business as if they will remain in their role until the end of time. This pattern is commonly seen in executives with low levels of adjustment, the psychological term for being calm and even-tempered. Low-adjustment people are likely to experience more [dread and anxiety](#) at the possibility of having to make a major life adjustment, and are also less likely to trust that anyone can fill their shoes. To get over this, the leader will need to reframe accomplishment as being about his or her long-term legacy rather than being about short-term results or extending his or her tenure.

Leaders may also struggle with succession planning simply because they're bad at planning, period. They might be "big idea" people who struggle with execution in other areas of their work and life. Leaders who are [less organized and disciplined](#) may need additional encouragement and support throughout the entire process.

Regardless of the reason for leaders' hesitancy to designate a successor, organizations need to have iron-clad and exception-free succession policies wherein every senior executive has at least one successor ready, or at least almost ready, at any given time.

Going through the motions of designating a successor. While leaders who do not make any pretense of creating and implementing a succession plan can be challenging, leaders who pretend to be on board with succession but who are actively or passively resisting the transition process can be even more difficult. As meta-analytic reviews have shown, [leisurely](#) (a more polite term for "passive aggressive") leaders act on the surface as if they are complying with the mandate to identify and groom a successor, but come up with myriad excuses as to why they can't do so. Sometimes they even interview multiple internal and external candidates to "prove" that they are trying to find a successor, but then find reasons why no given candidate is good enough. They may suggest that it would take more than one person to replace them, or they may make offers only to candidates whom they know won't accept, to provide further "cover" for not hiring anyone. This kind of leader thinks to him or herself, "If I'm not replaceable, I won't be replaced, and then I can retire at a time, and in a manner, of my own choosing."

Stakeholders need to pay extra attention to leisurely leaders, making sure to monitor their progress and to hold them accountable for both their efforts and for results. Organizations need to tell leaders, "If you're not replaceable, you will actually be more likely, not less likely, to be replaced sooner and on our terms rather than later and on yours."

Designating the wrong successor. Leaders who are encouraged or induced to designate a successor may pick the wrong person, and certain kinds of leaders are particularly susceptible to doing so. **Bold leaders**, who are naturally more self-centered and narcissistic, often pick staffers who are less qualified or talented than they are so that they won't be upstaged. For example, Sir Alex Ferguson, the legendary Manchester United coach, famously recommended David Moyes as his successor despite the fact that he had never managed a big club or won a trophy. The team's subsequent results reflected Moyes' inexperience and lack of preparation.

It is also quite common for bold leaders to pick people whose main skill is their ability to “kiss up” and provide admiration, so they can remain influential even once they are no longer officially in control. Bold leaders are more concerned with their own self-esteem and social standing than they are with organizational outcomes, so they may unconsciously pick potential successors who will fail, either retroactively proving how indispensable the bold leader was or necessitating that the bold leader never actually leaves and is required to periodically step back in to save the day when the inevitable crisis occurs. Or they may pick a successor simply based on the successor's similarity to themselves rather than based on actual competence. Organizational stakeholders need to have a voice and a vote in who the successors for key roles are, in order to prevent leaders from using the wrong criteria and standards in making their decisions.

Undermining or discrediting the successor. When a leader either consciously or unconsciously undermines his or her successor, there are several possible causes. One is simply low agreeableness – obviously, to designate, develop and coach a successor, it's important for a leader to have a good degree of **interpersonal sensitivity** to provide the support that is necessary in a high-stakes succession situation.

But excessive diligence can also cause problems — leaders who are prone to being excessively diligent will **micromanage their direct reports** and won't let their successor find his or her own way. Enlightened leaders know that saying “that's not how I would do it” is not helpful, while “here are the specifics of what you need to achieve” is.

Another root cause for undermining behavior can be skepticism. Leaders who are overly **skeptical** may create negative, self-fulfilling prophecies, sometimes called the “**Set up to fail**” syndrome. Unfortunately, in our experience, male leaders often have particular difficulty with female successors, who are often required to work much harder than a male successor would in order to prove their readiness and capability at a much higher standard of performance. Boards need to monitor succession across the organization to make sure that there is a level playing field and that women and members of minority groups are not asked to jump through additional hoops to get the brass ring.

In order for everyone to live happily ever after in the real world, key stakeholders such as the board chair, the Chief Human Resources Officer, investors or others need to say to the leader, “We empathize with you and understand how fraught and challenging retirement and succession

planning can be. We will do everything we can to provide the tactical and emotional support that you need during this time. We honor your talents and value your service, and, by passing on the baton and gracefully exiting, you will leave on a high note, with your legacy secure.”

Knowing the particular personality traits that may be driving destructive behavior can help both the departing C-Suite leader and the members of the board to find a happy solution – both for the executive, and the company he or she is leaving.

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