



# Succession Planning

## FOR THE RADIOLOGY ADMINISTRATOR

BY JENNIFER KROKEN, MBA

Succession planning. Has it been discussed in your group? Not with regard to the president of the group (which is a little more common) but for the radiology administrator?

Chances are your group has not given much thought to the administrator's successor and the reasons would be sound. Administrators scarcely have enough time to accomplish their to-do lists on a daily basis, let alone intensively train someone to do what they do and know what they know—or to examine when it will be time to turn over the reins and absorb exactly what that implies in terms of knowledge transfer. If you haven't given much thought to what will happen to the group when you leave, it may be time to begin thinking about how to go about not only finding who may fulfill the role but also determining the timeline for doing so.

Succession planning for radiology managers is not something you hear much about but I was fortunate to speak to Wendy Lomers, who executed a succession plan in her former group; Anola Baird, the current practice manager of Synergy Radiology Associates, formerly Memorial Radiology Associates (MRA) in Houston; and Glenda Skinner, the former practice manager of MRA who foresaw the need for a succession plan for the group's administration.

The need for a succession plan in our industry is real but prohibitive in terms of both cost (due to essentially “funding” two high-level managers) and administrator time. However, as shown in part one of this series (*The Leadership Chasm*), the reality is that there are a fair number of practice administrators who are getting out of the game and radiologists may need to acknowledge where their own manager lies in the retirement spectrum, and begin to explore options for eventual replacement.

### Identifying the need

There are a few problems that make succession planning important. The first is that no matter how well written policies and procedures are in place (and they usually aren't), there is usually a tremendous amount of history in the head of the administrative leaders. Since radiologists aren't usually very knowledgeable about what an administrator does and/or must know, it is often difficult for them to anticipate common problems transitioning to new administrative leadership.

In MRA's case, Ms. Skinner was the person in the group who saw the need for a successor and set out to train Ms. Baird to take her place when she was ready to retire. Fortunately for them, Skinner said there was no “sell” that had to be made to the group since they acknowledged her retire-

ment was nearing and had already asked what they were going to do in her absence.

In Ms. Lomers' situation, she was up front with the physicians when she determined that she would not be in her position "forever." She provided sufficient notice and worked with the physician leaders in an effort to seek out a person who would be a good future fit for the organization. The longer notice period required a mutual trust. Ms. Lomers stated that she trusted the group to retain her throughout the extended notice period and that she was confident that the group trusted her to continue with the same level of commitment. Ms. Lomers expressed what all managers realize; we are always under great pressure to keep our overheads low so budgets simply do not "allow for a large cadre of highly educated non physicians" waiting in the wings to take the lead administrator's position. Realizing this, Ms. Lomers' focus throughout her career was on hiring and developing a strong middle management team to reinforce the success of the administrator and the group.

One of the images that comes to mind when thinking of training your replacement is the potential of feeling threatened. This came up in my discussion with Ms. Baird and Ms. Skinner, who had a fascinating approach to their succession plan over the period of 12 years. Ms. Skinner stated that she never felt threatened because she knew she had the group's full support and that not only did she feel comfortable that Ms. Baird would never undermine her, she knew the doctors would not allow it. Obviously, Ms. Skinner had the right person in place for the job and definitely had impressive support from her group to be able to handle a transition plan successfully.

Ms. Lomers also pointed out the importance of getting the "right" people in place because she noted a "self-serving" candidate could feel threatened if there is a plan in place for someone to take their position.

**Takeaway 1: Not only does the right administrator need to be in place to train their successor, they have to be confident enough in their own abilities and, more importantly, have the full support and backing of the group to be able to successfully execute the plan.**

## Plan development

In both practices, the current administrator developed the plan to identify the successor and develop the "curriculum" to make them successful. However, in Ms. Lomers' former group, the possibility of consolidating with another group was also being discussed and therefore assigning management responsibility to the "other group's" manager was being explored in parallel with the search for a possible new manager.

The situation at MRA, while unusual, would provide an excellent example of how to properly train an administrator. There are many managers who are dropped in on the job—sometimes after a sudden departure of a manager—and have to "teach" themselves their position...usually with many ball drops along the way.

**Takeaway 2: There is no better person in position to train someone than the person doing that job. Having a sufficient amount of time to pass along the knowledge of the position to the successor eliminates many errors and "I wish I had known that" moments that can, if severe enough, derail the career of even a seasoned administrator.**

## Unforeseen problems and circumstances

In Ms. Lomers' instance, there was certainly transition uncertainty since the group was exploring two very different options and potential consolidation can be challenging to say the least. The possibility of consolidation also made recruitment of an administrator—that the group might or might not need—especially difficult. The group, however, was up front with the final candidate that consolidation was being explored.

For MRA, neither Ms. Baird nor Ms. Skinner had much to say in the way of unforeseen problems since their transition took place over the course of 12 years.

**Takeaway 3: Commitment to the group's future may be difficult at times so the more quickly a group can agree on a strategic vision, the more successful their administration will be—especially in difficult times of transition or growth.**

## Unexpected benefits

In Ms. Lomers' situation, the group successfully executed its consolidation strategy but not until after a new administrator was selected. This provided additional support during the transition period. In addition, the career long effort to strengthen the middle management team made for an easier transition when the two groups ultimately consolidated.

For MRA, Ms. Baird expressed appreciation for getting the opportunity to slowly acclimate to the life of an administrator which, let's face it, also included her family being involved in the demands of transition. Along the way, Ms. Baird felt she was given sufficient time to garner the trust of the radiologists and was appreciative of the fact Ms. Skinner left nothing out in her training so she felt fully prepared to take on the administrative challenge.

Ms. Skinner also felt she benefited from the transition in that she had a strong attachment to the group but did not

feel like she had to worry about them when she left, which made her retirement more enjoyable.

**Takeaway 4: While not always possible, a slower transition in the case of succession planning is favorable to the group in order to offer a more seamless transition and ensure continuity of leadership through the process.**

### Leadership qualities

All three women were in agreement that succession planning is a good idea and they would not have changed their approaches. One of the most important questions surrounding this topic is that of leadership qualities. What should radiologists be looking for and how do they find it?

Unfortunately, it isn't as easy as hiring an MBA-type. While an MBA can be a valuable offering to a group (especially in the eyes of the physicians), Ms. Baird stressed that while our field is teachable the characteristics of a leader cannot necessarily be taught. Ms. Baird addressed qualities she felt were important to look for in upcoming leaders and mentioned dedication to the group, honesty, trustworthiness, the ability to work well with others, and common sense. Ms. Baird also stressed what she thinks is an important quality—one of loyalty to the group. She hopes a new administrator would not see this position as just a “step up the career ladder” but rather one where they can work as a team with their physicians for their career.

Ms. Baird also felt strongly that while MBAs are in high demand for radiologists, they may not necessarily be the best fit for the group since most of what an administrator learns about radiology is distinctly unique to the profession, learned through doing the job—and through interactions with the RBMA and members of the RBMA.

Ms. Lomers does favor the skills offered by MBA candidates but pointed out that she would not recommend hiring someone, MBA or not, unless they exhibited a strong character. She also pointed out that leadership qualities should not change “with or without succession planning” since the same qualities should be “sought from any candidate.” A true leader will be willing to encourage the development of all around them for the good of the practice, a sentiment echoed by Ms. Baird, who recommends succession planning for department managers as well. She has asked the question of her current managers—“Who do you feel comfortable with (taking your position) and what are you doing to train them?”

Ultimately, “bench-strength” was a common theme in these interviews—all parties agree that the success of the group depends upon the depth of the management team and the managers' willingness to put the group ahead of their own needs.

**Takeaway 5: Core leadership qualities exist—they are not necessarily taught. While resumes are important, they will not predict the success of a manager in a radiology administrator position.**

### Conclusion

Not all groups will have the time or luxury of developing a succession plan for their administrator. However, doing so will allow for a more seamless and less abrupt transition for the group and its employees. Dozens of consulting engagements have taught me that sudden transitions or extreme leadership changes usually result in traumatic events for the group. While radiologists may focus on top level leadership, the seams can get unraveled at a much lower level when employees purposely undermine the success of their new leader.

A planned transition can head off such disruptive events since it allows all parties involved in the transition to adapt to a new leader and their leadership style. All parties interviewed recommended succession planning to anyone considering it—reinforcing that it can strengthen the practice by developing the level of trust required to be a successful administrator.

When asked how they would “sell” the concept to radiologists, MRA leaders acknowledged they were lucky. The group encouraged the plan and allowed it to occur over a long period of time. Since most groups do not fall into this category, it can be helpful to talk to fellow RBMA members who have seen a transition go badly (almost all have) and ask what happened. Usually you'll hear of sudden transitions (not all of which can be avoided) or ill-planned leadership overthrows where the administrator gets unseated in the process.

If a succession plan is not and will never be in the cards, Ms. Lomers' parting advice to executive leaders is that they “should develop every member of their staff to their full potential. This will make any unexpected leadership departure easier to weather but also makes the practice stronger and the leadership's job a lot easier along the way.” This approach can only make a practice stronger—from the inside out. »»



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