

Succession - a process with constructive and destructive competition

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Succession is an ongoing process everywhere in life. On a large scale it is necessary for the survival of mankind and on a small scale for the survival of a family or a business organisation. We all have to face the fact that one day we will leave our work and somebody else will take over. It could be in connection with retirement, because we have been offered a better job, because we have failed somehow, or because whole work units are closed down. All of these situations involve various sorts of competition whether on an individual or an organisational level.

The aim of this presentation is to explore conscious and unconscious elements involved in the process of succession. One main element is the degree of control; if you can allow space for and prepare for your successor or if you have no control whatsoever of what will happen to your work or who will be your successor. In general, the person leaving wants the best possible successor. However, there is some evidence indicating that this is not always the case. This may be due to fear of competition, a need to feel appreciated and remembered, or a fear of losing power. Combinations of these factors tend to create difficulties.

An Internet search leads mainly to royal families and their more or less violent histories of succession, also to apostolic succession and the election processes of presidents. In all these, fierce competition and rivalry play an important part. A few references to career planning programmes in business organisations could be found, but only one describing both the process of leaving and of succession, and this concerned strategies for business owners. How to deal with competition as a naturally integrated element is neglected. More systematic research seems also to be lacking. This is noteworthy considering the amount of planning and money involved in most succession processes.

The process of leaving your job and taking over after someone else is complex and involves strong conscious and unconscious feelings, not only of competition and rivalry but also of

gratitude and envy. Other feelings frequently present are ones of being deserted and being chosen, and of loss and gain. All of these are probably unavoidable in the process of succession.

We all know and hear about people who are offered new jobs or become unemployed, but underlying conscious and unconscious issues are seldom described. These changes in our working life often tend to affect the whole life situation for those involved. When people retire, they not only leave their jobs and younger people take over, they also change their way of living. When you are forced to leave, your self-esteem, social relations, and ability to cope etc. are all affected.

The presentation is based on the assumption that the process of succession in working life can be described as consisting of three main parts: to resign and leave, to turn over to somebody else and to step in and take over. The focus of a process of succession can be on all three parts in a more or less balanced way, depending on the degree of control. However, the emphasis can be on mainly one part, depending on the context. Some case illustrations are presented and discussed. The starting point for the presentation is that I found very little systematic knowledge about this type of process when leaving my post as principal of a university college, and wanted to prepare for my leaving and allow space for my successor.

Key words: Succession, to leave, to turn over to someone else, to take over, degree of control, coping capacity potential space.