

The Big Crew Change: How to Break into the Succession Plan

PART 2

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To truly break into the succession plan takes an enormous amount of focus, dedication, commitment and motivation for anyone looking up the career ladder.

The following article is the second in a two-part series. In part one of this series, we pointed out how the construction industry is neglecting field leader education and discussed possible strategies for tackling this important issue. In this article, we show how field leaders can start breaking into the succession plan by building their leadership skills and capabilities in the face of the big crew transition.

Senior leadership often discusses succession planning exclusively among a select group of people. Plans are formulated and the top two to three levels of leadership begin the grooming process over several years. For anyone who is not privy to those conversations, succession can seem like a vague and mysterious concept. Figuring out how to even be considered as a part of the succession plan seems like a feat in and of itself, let alone developing the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities needed to potentially lead a division or the organization in the future.

In today's competitive talent environment, it is critical to set a clear path for developing and growing high potential field leaders. Strategic organizations are reconsidering their traditional view of succession planning, where only the top two to three leadership layers are a part of the plan. They are starting to

include the level that has the most profound impact on the bread and butter of construction organizations — the projects.

The New Definition of Leadership

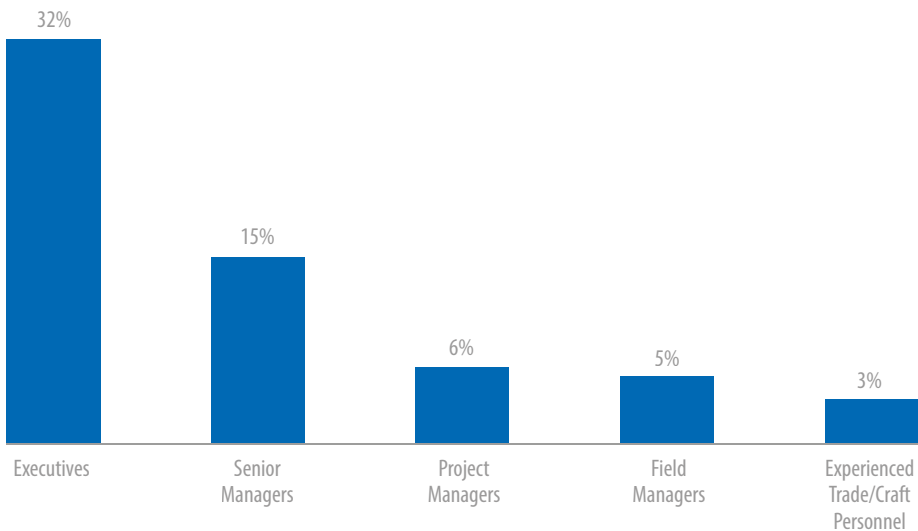
When it comes to succession planning, most construction organizations focus on C-suite positions and often overlook leadership positions at lower levels. According to FMI’s latest Talent Development Survey,¹ just 6% of construction firms have succession plans in place for field leaders, compared to 32% for executives (Figure 1). Traditional succession planning models show that these ratios are the norm across any industry. This leaves a huge gap and an even bigger opportunity for companies to develop leadership programs and succession plans at the middle-management levels, particularly for field supervision.

Right now, project managers, superintendents and foremen are seeing the biggest leadership gaps. They may have heard rumblings about a succession plan in passing, but are often left out of the conversation. Whether this is intentional or not, many of them often ask FMI questions like: “How do I become part of my firm’s succession plan? Is there anything I can do to help myself become a better leader?”

Rather than wait for the offer to receive development, leaders often

EXHIBIT 1 CONSTRUCTION FIRMS FOCUS PRIMARILY ON SUCCESSION PLANS FOR EXECUTIVES

For which of the following positions does your company have a well-defined succession plan?



want to build their own leadership skills proactively. There is a lot of unease over this topic. This anxiety comes from the leaders who are ready to retire as well as from the other end of the spectrum — the leaders who are keenly aware of their skill deficiencies. This angst leads to hesitancy for everyone who is considering retirement and promotional opportunities. Some of that hesitancy is based on misconceptions and stereotypes about the ascending generation (see FMI's Quarterly article "*Debunking Millennial Myths*"), or simply because executives don't know how to create a deep enough strategy to develop their field leaders — an effort that requires more than just basic training.

So, how does our industry begin to develop this talent layer? Leadership development tactics vary based on the needs of each individual, but there are some tried and true methods for building technical and operational skills.

According to FMI's research and observations, the most common tactics are job and task rotations or the EDIP (Explain, Demonstrate, Imitate and Practice)² approach, where tangible skills are learned and practiced on a daily basis.

On the job training, technical expertise and operational experience are what form our field leaders. So where is the gap? Soft skill development is simply not a prevalent topic of conversation on projects. That doesn't mean field leaders are not open to learning soft leadership skills or that they are not able to use the skills once they've learned them. FMI's Center for Strategic Leadership (CSL) notably observes that leadership development at the field level "sticks" more often than at the senior and executive leadership levels. It's an interesting concept to consider. Field leaders are hungry for learning and development, *and* they are in the perfect position to practice new skills. They can incorporate newly acquired knowledge and skills into their daily routines and they receive feedback from their crews and other colleagues around them — all in real time. This scenario is what FMI would call a "perfect storm" for leadership development (in a good way) because these are ideal environments in which leaders can grow their abilities immensely.

Finally, it is important to note that today's field leaders have different expectations than their predecessors a decade ago. They are expected to manage and lead teams and projects. Both of these responsibilities require very different skill sets and competencies but are necessary to deliver in tandem. Simply put, managing includes Planning, Organizing and Controlling

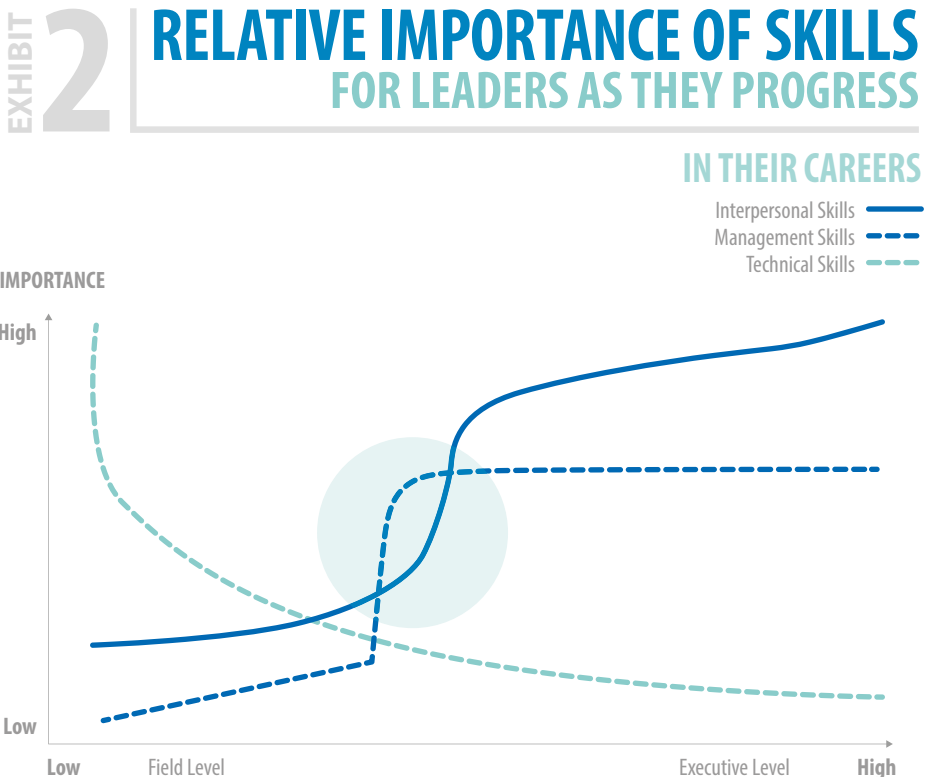
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(POC) the resources on your team and project. Leading includes Setting Direction, Aligning Resources and Motivating and Inspiring (SAM) the project team. As field level workers progress from their field roles into a management role, interpersonal and leadership skills become significantly more important.

As outlined in the Relative Importance of Skills diagram in Figure 2, a field employee requires a high level of technical skills and a lower level of management and interpersonal skills. As they move into management roles, the importance of their skill set shifts because their technical skills become less relevant while their interpersonal and managerial skills become more so. Consider this: The area in the middle of Figure 2 is where the majority of the construction industry's field leaders currently reside. They have to balance all three types of skills at the same time, all while keeping their projects on schedule and on budget. Unless you have training, coaching, mentoring or other development, this can be a very scary and intimidating place to be as a construction worker.

A Simple but Effective Place to Start

If you are wondering what you can do to break into the succession plan at your organization, FMI's Center for Strategic Leadership has a simple but effective place for you to start your leadership journey. The emphasis is on



the word start because formal training programs (i.e., FMI's Field Leadership Institute), mentoring and coaching are also effective development tactics to consider.

According to the U.S. Army's Be-Know-Do (BKD) model, character, competence and action are the three qualities shared by great leaders. Effective leader development for anyone in a leadership role, including field soldiers and field construction workers, focuses on the leader's character and values ("Be"), their competencies ("Know"), and their decisions and actions ("Do").

As you begin to think about yourself as a leader, consider the questions below. What is your worldview on each topic? What does success look like? Why?

BE — The "BE" component focuses on the leader's character and gives him or her the courage to do what is right, regardless of the consequences or current circumstances. As such, aspiring and up-and-coming leaders should be tuned into their own personal core values, as well as those of their organizations. Questions they can ask themselves include:

- What kind of leader do I want to become? Why?
- Where do I want to be as a person, employee and leader at the end of my career?
- What actions should I take now to help me get there?
- What actions should I stop doing that are holding me back in my career?
- What are my personal values? Why?
- Who do I look up to as a leader? How can I surround myself with more people like that?
- What can I learn from the strong leaders around me?

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The Army, for example, relies on seven core values as a common understanding for what it means to be a contributor to the armed forces. Many construction organizations have a set of core values as well. It's important to honestly ask yourself if you are personally aligned with those values. Clarity on your own personal values and personal mission statement will help you answer that question. Listed below are the Army's seven core values:

- Loyalty
- Respect
- Honor
- Personal courage
- Duty
- Selfless service
- Integrity

KNOW — This is about the knowledge and skill sets that leaders need to be competent in their respective roles within the industry. The Army has categorized their necessary skill sets into four areas (listed below), but the same principles can be applied to the construction industry. First, identify what each category means to you and your current situation. Provide examples for yourself. Then rate yourself on a scale of 1–10 (1 low, 10 high). How well are you doing in each of these areas? Where are the priorities for your knowledge, skill and ability development?

The Army's four skill areas include:

- Interpersonal skills
- Technical skills
- Conceptual skills
- Tactical skills

It is important to note that leaders' mastery of the knowledge and skills required for their roles is essential to the success of the *organization as a whole*. Questions they should ask themselves as they move into field leadership roles in construction include: What do I need to know for...

- My job?
- The business?
- Contracts (buying and selling processes)?
- Negotiations?
- Project profitability?
- Where am I now versus where I need to be to reach my goals?

DO — Leaders combine everything that they believe in and know when providing direction and purpose to others. The following three actions listed by the U.S. Army's model all relate to different things a leader can do in order to progress themselves, their business or their team.

- Influence
- Operate
- Improve

Depending on where you are in your career, the actions under DO may mean something completely different to you compared to your older or younger colleagues. Questions field leaders should ask themselves include:

- Where are my leadership skills deficient?
- How can I influence others in a more effective manner?
- What areas of my own personal operations and the team's operations can be more effective?
- Where can I improve as a leader and on our projects?
- What actions am I proud of? How can I continue to focus my energy there?

Using this simple but effective model, field leaders can very accurately pinpoint:

- Where they stand right now;
- What skills, education, experience, and/or training they need to be able to lead effectively; and
- What steps they need to take to be able to achieve their career goals.

Succession management doesn't have to be limited to one or two organizational layers. Whether you are a senior leader or an aspiring leader in your organization, developing the mid-level managers and field-level talent will be a true game changer for your business and for the industry as a whole. To truly break into the succession plan takes an enormous amount of focus, dedication, commitment and motivation for anyone looking up the career ladder. It's doable and attainable, but it will require you to proactively build your leadership skills, openly receive coaching and mentoring from those around you and to continue to clarify the path for your leadership journey. As the saying goes, "The world is your oyster!" [Q](#)

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¹ Talent Development in the Construction Industry. 2015 FMI Industry Survey.

² See part one of this series: *The Big Crew Change: How to Empower Your Next Generation of Field Leaders*. Ethan Cowles. FMI Quarterly, Issue 1. 2016