

Cracks in Our Future: The Monster Under the Bed

By Jack Hug, APFA Fellow

The need is clear; the facilities management profession has a creeping crisis. Many people believe we are living through a crisis today but it is slow moving so its critical impact does not capture our priority attention. Facility managers on many campuses are too slow in tackling the challenges and even slower yet in taking the essential integrated actions required to solve this creeping crisis; namely, the actions necessary for succession planning, replacement management, and leadership development.

In every region, facility managers and other professionals are talking about the changing workforce, how difficult it is to find and retain competent people for all parts of the organization, and especially how daunting a task it is to find replacements for leadership positions. Facility managers are belatedly waking up and realizing that they have very little bench strength and backup personnel for critical positions. More and more they routinely scramble to find replacements when essential positions become vacant.

This exodus is resulting in a serious talent shortage, substantial knowledge drains, leadership gaps, and, in numerous cases, profound loss of critical institutional memory. Also gone will be those extremely valuable personal networks; the critical relationships that every successful facilities organization enjoys; both internal and external that are vital to getting things done. This is the *monster under the bed* that will likely grow into an even bigger *ogre* before we can do enough to stop it. This is the living nightmare: that one day we will wake up are all alone—sitting at the top of the organization managing alone because we failed to develop other leaders.

Retirement is looking attractive again for many, and in the months and years ahead, we can expect to see the number of retirement elections increase. The demographics guarantee it. It's just a matter of time. On the national stage, more than 70 million baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are eligible to retire between now and 2023, and during this same time period only 40 million people will enter the workforce. No one knows the specific numbers for retirement eligible staff in higher education facilities departments, but it's a fair bet that the number of those eligible for retirement during this same time-frame is substantial. The many institutions that have not performed a demographic study of their facilities workforce will be in for a surprise.

THANKS FOR EVERYTHING, BUT I'M LEAVING

This context and reality of the workplace is now forcing institutions to recognize that a workforce transition of significant proportion is taking place. Reality bites and hits home when a simple analysis of the workforce determines the likelihood of who is moving out; who (potentially) is moving up; and who is moving in. Collectively, these multiple moves will have a significant and profound impact on the organization's capabilities. There is a noticeable absence of any significant amount of well-planned and disciplined process for succession planning, replacement planning, and leadership development.

During the early 1990s this was particularly true in the State of California which was experiencing a pretty serious recession the belt-tightening resulted in layoffs, multiple years of early retirement incentives, and wiped out layers of middle management positions. Consequently these actions severely depleted the talent pool. During those years, planned management development slowed drastically or stopped totally.

Although the economic circumstances are not the same today as they were in the 1990s, (some say much worse at least in California) many of the same belt-tightening strategies are being deployed today across our campuses. These strategies include layoffs, furloughs, early retirement incentives, and the cutting or elimination of travel and training expenditures. It amounts to an unintentional reduction of institutional commitment to the development of future leaders. Furthermore, one

of the most serious unintended consequences is a decrease in *ready-now* replacements to fill critical skilled positions, including many leadership positions.

Leaders and skilled technical workers can not be developed overnight. It takes years of experience, practice, and study. Not to mention the need to find those who have the desire and the will to work hard over a period of a lifetime, to manage, and accept the obligations and sacrifices that go hand-in-hand with being a facility management leader today.

A SOBERING REALIZATION

The need for leadership talent is one thing to be concerned about. But also sobering is the realization that there are many more critical needs for pending replacement of large numbers of people who over the years have developed deep smarts, wisdom, expert or master status in a particular trade, profession, domain or functional area. So many of us have benefited and enjoyed success partly because of others in the organization who achieved the “go-to-guy” status. It is only fair to acknowledge that many facility management organizations have considerable expertise in functional areas, domain experts, skilled trades and requisite specialists.

But in many instances we have also fallen into the trap of developing domain experts—people who are too good at what they do for us to risk upsetting our comfort, and therefore we have not done enough to encourage their broader leadership development opportunities. This happens even though we instinctively know that managing a functional area or a single business unit of a facilities department is markedly different than having responsibility for leading and managing an entire facilities management organization.

The point is that leaders of the magnitude and quality needed in our facilities departments today are not immaculately conceived and it takes years of experience to develop leadership competencies. Relevant progressive experience remains the primary basis for developing leaders. Just as there is no such thing as a free lunch, there is no

such thing as a free employee fully loaded with all the skills and abilities necessary. An investment and commitment is required from both the individual and the facilities department. Top management priority and commitment to leadership development is needed. Campus facility management departments clearly are behind the curve.

LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

John Gardner, in his book *On Leadership*¹ was on-point when he wrote, “To exercise leadership today, leaders must institutionalize their leadership. The issues that leaders are facing are too technical and the pace of change too swift to expect that a leader, no matter how gifted, will be able to solve personally the major problems facing the organization over which she or he presides.”

Stop and think for a moment about what happens on most campuses. We design a facilities organization to provide services and to solve facility problems—we select a

leader who has the capacity to preside over and to strengthen the organization. Some leaders no doubt are quite gifted in solving problems themselves, but if they fail to multiply their leadership, or fail to develop other leaders for potential replacement of themselves and leaders for other critical position throughout the organization, then their departure leaves the organization crippled. They have failed to create and strengthen the organization that will survive them. We should all be concerned that far too many facilities organizations are totally dependent on a single individual at the top, and at essential and critical operating and skilled service positions.

Today, facility managers across the nation are admitting to themselves and to others just how difficult and challenging the job of a Senior Facility Officer really is. The pace and quantity of change; how things are growing increasingly complex, how the job today demands a host of new skills and

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abilities; and how the need for a continual replenishing of knowledge has increased because as we are faced with a fresh menu of new success factors are all being discussed. This is an important and encouraging dialogue. It is time indeed to acknowledge the harsh reality that much of what many of us learned occurred in a world that no longer exists. It's time for facility professionals to hold themselves accountable for not only

their own continuous learning but also for the timely identification of leadership potential, and for the active development of others.

AN UNDERSTOOD PATHWAY

There is a need for an "understood pathway" in our facility departments for the purpose of providing clarification to the frequently asked question: "How do I get ahead in this organization?" The APPA training,

education, leadership development and certification programs, along with its annual conference, and regional meetings, provide a practical framework for outlining clarity of a facilities management context-specific pathway for future facility leaders. It is a pathway that has gained currency with many campus leaders. It begins with the Supervisor's Toolkit, a leadership foundational cornerstone; then onto the Institute for Facilities Management, a significant ascent up the ladder; and then the climb through the four tracks of the Leadership Academy, all the while honing a deeper understanding through experience on the job. The summit or the peak—leadership mastery—is a tough slog and requires life-long hard work and continued practice of both the art and the skills of leadership.

Given the mysteries of leadership development, one cannot make any confident generalizations about leadership development. Given the many paths that one can take, it is unlikely that we will ever succeed in devising the single program of training and development with certainty that will turn a promising youngster into a leader. We can, however, improve the production of a substantial cadre of potential leaders. A larger talent pool, from which the next generation of leaders will emerge.

Being *APPA active* and an engaged professional is one sure way to add to our capacity to lead, and will augment our ability to develop future leaders. Truly, leadership development is a process that extends over many years. Those bold enough to venture in, through partnership with the profession, will be able to slay the dreaded *monster under the bed*. Collectively for the profession, this is a *call to action* for us to improve and accelerating the development of talent in our facilities management organizations before it is too late. ☛

NOTES

1. John W. Gardner, *On Leadership*, 1990. The Free Press, A division of Macmillan Inc. New York, New York 10022.

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