

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAIN REGION - RESULTS OF A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to explore how the issue of leadership succession is evolving in the North Great Plain region among NGOs working with ageing populations. The research primarily examines current practices in filling leadership positions, organisational attitudes towards succession, and factors that hinder or facilitate organisational continuity. The study was carried out in the framework of a pilot study using quantitative methodological elements. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire, which was completed by a purposive sampling involving a total of 14 pensioner organisations. The research results show that, although the managers of the organisations interviewed generally have many years of professional and practical experience, succession processes are predominantly ad hoc and ad hoc. Organisational planning for leadership change is mostly absent, processes are not supported by formal documents and a strategic approach is rarely put into practice. Responses suggest that the issue of leadership succession is typically only addressed when the organisation is in a crisis situation, such as the retirement or unexpected departure of the current leader. This can be particularly problematic for civil society actors where organisational functioning is highly personalised and the role of the leader is decisive in day-to-day operational and strategic decision-making. The key leadership competences identified by respondents - in particular empathy, effective communication skills and the ability to think strategically - reflect the multidisciplinary and complex nature of the civil society leadership role. This underpins the need for not only management skills, but also a high degree of social and emotional intelligence and long-term planning skills to lead civil society organisations. The results of the research suggest that it is essential to create a supportive organisational and social environment that encourages conscious and forward-looking succession planning. In addition, ensuring the institutionalised transfer of leadership knowledge, experience and organisational values is of particular importance and can contribute to the long-term sustainability and effective functioning of retirement organisations. The study contributes to deepening the research discourse on leadership succession in the country, with a particular focus on the specific operating conditions, challenges and opportunities of rural organisations.*

Keywords: *leadership, succession, pilot research*

JEL Classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The concept of leadership is of central importance to the functioning of organisations, as leadership is a key determinant of the achievement of organisational goals, the effectiveness of resource utilisation and the motivation of employees. Leadership is not only about managing, but also about influencing, inspiring, making decisions and building relationships between members of the organisation, thus ensuring continuity and development.

Closely linked to leadership is the issue of succession, which becomes particularly important in planning for the filling of management positions and in maintaining organisational stability. Succession is not only about refilling positions, but also about passing on knowledge, organisational culture and strategic vision. The study of succession therefore requires a complex approach, including the mapping of leadership competencies, succession development strategies and alignment with organisational culture.

Several lines of research have emerged on the subject, focusing on different aspects. Some approaches focus on the effectiveness of succession strategies for managers, while others analyse the structural and psychological factors of succession planning at organisational level. The common aim of these approaches is to help ensure leadership continuity and contribute to long-term organisational success.

In the present study I present the results of a pilot study conducted in the counties of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok. The aim of the research was to explore the current practice of leadership succession, attitudes and challenges related to leadership succession, with a special focus on middle management level and the specificities of rural institutions.

2. The concept of leadership

Leadership can be defined in many different ways, as there are several approaches. According to Ternovszky (2007:24), leadership is an activity aimed at influencing the behaviour of individuals or groups. Csepeli (2001) considers leadership to be a series of short episodes of communication and interaction. Maxwell (2013:15) interprets leadership as a passion in which others are motivated to contribute to common goals.

Bakacsi et al. (1999) describe leadership as the activity of direct influence, whereby the leader communicates organizational goals and motivates employees to support them. An effective leader is able to influence and collaborate with his or her co-workers. According to Dobák (2002), leadership is the activity of working with employees to achieve goals together.

Tóth (1998) lists a number of characteristics of leadership, such as: the establishment of a division of labour, goal-oriented organisational functioning, the provision of resources (subjective and objective factors), and the ability of the leader to exercise power.

Organisational leadership is a complex activity: it involves strategic planning, the use of resources, motivation and the achievement of objectives. A good leader inspires, communicates, makes decisions and adapts flexibly to challenges. Its core values are integrity, transparency and collaboration.

3. Leadership and management

Leadership, based on the process principle, takes a different approach: it seeks not only to influence but also to motivate and empower members of the organisation to achieve common goals (House-Javidan, 2004). According to Bakacsi (1996:150), leadership is at the heart of mobilising human resources.

Both concepts share the common element of influencing people to achieve goals, but while leadership is a more practical activity, divided into concrete tasks, leadership is more complex, relying heavily on human relationships and cognitive competencies (Balogh et al., 2004).

In my view, leadership is more easily delineated, while management involves deeper human and strategic levels.

4. The succession

Grusky (1960:105) defined succession as "the replacement or substitution of key people", suggesting that succession can lead to changes in key management positions in the life of an organisation. The importance of key managers has also been highlighted by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), who in their resource dependency theory pointed out that "environmental factors influence the selection and replacement of top managers in order to make the organization more effective in adapting to its environment" (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003:226). According to Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), the transfer of top management is a strategic response to environmental opportunities (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003:228). Friedman (1987) interprets the succession process as a decisive moment when a decision is made on the issue of succession (Friedman, 1987:192). Although this definition may seem straightforward, it has raised a number of interpretative problems, as succession as a process was not sufficiently emphasised in the initial stages of research. Several researchers have pointed out that succession cannot be treated as a single event, but that its processual nature needs to be examined in more depth. The process

approach was later introduced in all definitions and drew attention to the need to focus succession research on the process.

One specific line of research on succession became a focus of attention in the early 2000s. In this period, the emergence of succession tasks in organisational functions emphasised the managerial tasks of succession planning and management, which were linked to different organisational development models. As a result, succession planning has become recognised as a key element of organisational functions (in particular of human resource managers). Garman and Glawe (2004:120) provide a broader definition of succession as "a structured process that involves identifying and preparing a potential successor to assume his or her new role". This conceptual framework focuses primarily on the transfer of leadership and the function of succession planning, but also emphasizes the importance of succession succession planning.

According to Rothwell, succession is "a carefully planned, systematic effort designed to ensure continuity in key leadership positions, to preserve and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and to support individual development" (Rothwell, 2003:6). The first step in succession is to identify talent within the organisation, and then, if internal candidates are not suitable, to seek external successors.

Closely related to this is Chand and Bronner's (2008:1) conceptualisation of succession as not simply a process of filling leadership positions, but rather as a process of shaping the future of the organisation. In their view, '... it is necessary to look down the road, identify what obstacles the organisation faces and ensure that the organisation reaches the desired destination'. A key element of both definitions is that succession must be consciously planned and closely linked to the future of the organisation. As a consequence, the current leader of the organisation must make every effort to ensure that the successor can take up his or her new role properly.

The above definitions attempt to describe succession in general terms, emphasising its importance, its process nature, the need for planning and its strategic role in shaping the organisational vision. From the definitions reviewed it is clear that succession is a key and inevitable factor in the life of organisations.

5. Different research directions in the study of succession

The first steps in the study of succession date back to the 1950s. Researchers have become increasingly interested in the factors that influence the transfer of leadership in organisations and how this process affects different aspects of the organisation. In the 1950s, a few less thorough but significant studies (Gouldner,

1954; Gordon and Becker, 1964; Dalton, 1959) emphasised the importance of continuity.

Initial research has been mostly useful in identifying leadership changes, but has typically focused on the transfer of leadership of sports teams and succession at lower levels of management. Brady and Helmich (1984:260) were the first to suggest that although succession has a significant impact on companies, it is surprising that so few researchers have addressed this area. In their view, it affects not only the members of the organisation but also the economic and political environment of society.

In the early stages of succession research, the focus was on establishing three basic theoretical models and then exploring their contradictions. These three basic models are the common-sense theory, the vicious-cycle theory and the ritual-scapegoating theory. In the following, I will present these three theoretical perspectives, as they can be considered as the defining basic models of succession research. Moreover, researchers have spent many years proving the contradictory approaches they generate.

According to common sense theory, poor organisational performance leads to the replacement of the leader (Grusky, 1963). The theory assumes that there is a positive relationship between succession and organisational performance, i.e. that a change of leader can contribute to improving organisational effectiveness. A new leader can bring fresh perspectives, new changes, knowledge and resources that can help increase the profitability of the organisation (Kesner and Dalton, 1994).

The vicious circle theory, in contrast to the common sense theory, emphasises the existence of a negative relationship between succession and organisational performance (Trow, 1960, 1961). Beatty and Zajac (1987) found in their research that leadership change disrupts existing work routines and organisational structures, which negatively affects performance. This process can lead to a permanent downward spiral that further deteriorates organizational performance.

According to the ritual scapegoating theory (Liebersohn and O'Connor, 1972; Fazel and D'Itri, 1997), succession per se does not affect organisational performance. Instead, it is the power of leaders that determines whether they can retain their position. Leaders with greater power are more likely to find someone to blame for poor performance, thereby avoiding their own replacement.

These three fundamentally contradictory findings have provided the starting point for a series of studies (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1980; Wulf and Stubner, 2008; Brown, 1982) that have examined the relationship between succession and organisational performance, a line of research that continues to this day. In the early 1990s, the accumulation of often conflicting findings led practitioners to develop an integrative approach to the topic.

Kesner and Sebor (1994) attempted to create a unified model that would link the different approaches and focus researchers' attention on the different areas of

succession that have been studied to varying degrees. In their attempt to integrate the literature, they summarized the research to date and laid the groundwork for developing a comprehensive model for the future.

According to them, the four main components of succession can be defined as: antecedent factors, the transfer process itself, the post-transfer effects, and specific situational circumstances.

The model was developed along the four main components and is proposed as a unified research model for a more integrated approach to future research. In addition to the integration efforts, it was also pointed out that certain areas have received little or no attention so far. Examples include the nature of the industry, the organisational culture, role expectations in the succession process, the age and type of the organisation, and process factors. In addition, it has been emphasised that, although there has been a large body of research on organisational performance in terms of the justification of the three basic theories, the time has come for a deeper examination of other factors associated with succession (Kesner and Sebra, 1994). Giambatista et al. (2005:963-991) summarised the literature by analysing and summarising the main studies on succession from 1994 to 2005. He divided the literature into three main categories, taking into account the components already mentioned: the preconditions for succession, the consequences of succession, and research on both aspects.

Giambatista et al (2005) also pointed out the main shortcomings of succession theories. Research often lacks theoretical models that provide deeper and more detailed answers to succession questions. Relevant theoretical approaches include organisational learning and adaptation (Rowe et al., 2005), change and inertia (Haveman, 1993; White et al., 1997) and institutionalist theory. Giambatista also stressed that succession, especially leadership transfer, is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). He pointed out that successful succession is only possible if managers have the knowledge to carry out the process (Giambatista et al., 2005).

Another proponent of the integration approach is Bocatto et al. (2010), who summarised the main areas of succession research based on Handler's (1994) literature review.

The review of the main trends in succession research showed that some areas have received more attention while others have remained less researched. Research has focused primarily on process models of succession, the characteristics of ancestor and successor, and the components of effective succession. At present, succession research is moving along two main lines: one focuses on the understanding of succession as an organisational function and its implementation in practice, while the other focuses on the impact of succession on organisational performance.

Succession as an organisational function emerged in the 1980s, when researchers began to look at succession planning as a key factor in successful succession. Since then, the topic has evolved and expanded into succession management, and has even become part of the consulting services of many US companies. Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011) and Kim (2010) provide an overview of research directions in succession planning.

In the 1980s, researchers emphasized the importance of succession planning and its emergence in organizations. During this period, it was not yet clear exactly what elements it should include or what issues it should address. Subsequently, the focus of research has shifted to identifying the determinants of effective succession planning, primarily by exploring the content aspects. Later on, there was a growing emphasis on more comprehensive studies that considered both content and effectiveness, and succession management emerged as an organisational function in its own right. Today, research focuses on analysing the key success factors in succession planning and management, with a particular emphasis on comparing good and failed practices.

A review of the trends in succession research suggests that, while the initial basic models continue to explore the impact of succession on organisational performance, a number of integrative initiatives have emerged to analyse succession more comprehensively. These integration efforts draw attention to the need for a more detailed analysis of the succession process and the impact of different environmental and organisational factors, but this approach is not yet sufficiently emphasised in research. At present, succession research is increasingly focusing on the importance of planning as an organisational function, although in many cases there is still no coherent definition of the basic concepts.

6. Pilot research details - Sampling frame and methodology

The sampling frame for the research was formed by associations, clubs and NGOs working with older people in the counties of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok. The common feature of these organisations is that their activities focus on improving the quality of life of older people, promoting community integration and organising leisure, cultural and health promotion programmes. The research included organisations that are active in their respective areas and have regular contact with the elderly.

The sampling was purposive, as the leaders and members of these organisations have practical experience of their role in local communities and can provide relevant information on leadership succession and succession. Associations for older people are particularly valuable sites for the study of formal and informal leadership roles, as in these communities active members often take on leadership roles out of civic

engagement and intrinsic motivation, thus highlighting how leadership and its transmission are also manifested in non-hierarchical contexts.

The study therefore focused not only on the way leadership is exercised, but also on attitudes towards succession, the importance of succession and the practices of succession in this organisational context.

In the pilot research, data was collected using a questionnaire. A total of 14 organisations participated in the study, selected from active associations and clubs for older people in all three counties concerned - Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok. The questionnaires were filled in voluntarily. A total of 44 questions were asked, covering both demographic characteristics of the respondents (e.g. gender, age) and basic information about the organisations, such as year of foundation, number of members, geographical location and type of municipality. The questionnaire also focused on how organisations approach the issue of succession, their ideas and practices in terms of generational change and succession planning. As the data collection was linked to the preparatory phase of the research, the pilot nature of the survey provided an opportunity to test the questions used, to fine-tune the survey instrument and to test the relevance and interpretability of the themes.

7. The state of leadership development of pensioners' organisations in the Northern Great Plain region - summary of a questionnaire survey

The aim of the study was to explore how pensioner organisations in the North Great Plain region prepare for leadership succession and to what extent they consider this to be a conscious and strategic process. The questionnaire survey collected responses from several counties, mainly Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok, which is a good representation of the rural and small-town civil society in the Eastern region.

The activities of the organisations represented by the respondents are predominantly cultural, traditional, recreational or advocacy, and can therefore be seen primarily as operators of community spaces that strengthen the cohesion of local society. The majority of organisations were established in the 2000s, but there are also communities within the spectrum with a history spanning several decades, indicating a significant difference in organisational lifespans.

In terms of membership, the typical size of organisations ranges from 30 to 75 people, but there are also radically different figures, implying differences in the intensity of organisational operation and the depth of social embeddedness. The demographic background of the respondents is highly homogenised, with the majority of them being women and the majority of them aged over 60. In terms of highest educational attainment, they are predominantly college and vocational

school graduates, indicating both an experience-based management culture and a lower level of formalisation of knowledge-based management.

The responses show that organisational leaders spend a long time in their positions - typically 10-20 years - and through this experience acquire the skills needed to lead. Although many said they had trained themselves, this was often in informal settings - self-study, reading, practical learning. Formal, structured training was much less common, highlighting the lack of, or limited access to, sector-specific management training.

The issue of succession has already been raised by the majority of respondents, mainly due to excessive workload, deteriorating health and the desire to relax. This is particularly relevant in the light of the fact that a significant proportion of managers are now in retirement. At the same time, conscious succession planning is still in its infancy: while the majority of respondents see potential successors, few have started to systematically prepare them. As a result, succession is often contingent, non-institutionalised and lacking in transparency, which carries risks, especially for organisations where a change of leadership is due in the foreseeable future (1-3 years).

The absence of a formal succession plan is a common feature: the vast majority of respondents do not have such a document, but where it does exist, it is limited to senior management positions or general frameworks. This indicates a lack of strategic forward planning and a lack of formalisation of organisational processes. There is a tendency towards internal succession planning, which is a positive trend in terms of commitment and the preservation of organisational culture. However, several responses indicated that the lack of adequate succession and the complexity of succession planning are major challenges.

The expectations of future leaders are clear: empathy, communication and team leadership skills, and strategic thinking are among the most important competences. In addition to these, change management and financial skills are also emphasised. This suggests that respondents are aware of the complexity of leadership roles and the importance of the multidisciplinary knowledge set required.

Preserving organisational culture is a top priority: respondents believe that transitional cooperation between old and new management and mentoring and supporting key people are key to this. Transparency in succession processes is stressed by many, but some argue that certain elements should be handled with discretion, especially in communicating with external partners. This shows that publicity can be a sensitive issue in order to maintain trust and stability.

Among the long-term goals, the most frequently cited are the preservation of organisational stability, growth and the opportunity for innovative renewal. An attitude of integration and cooperation implies a greater openness towards younger generations, which is confirmed by the evaluation of the responses: older managers

tend to recognise that the new generation may prefer different relationships and operational frameworks.

In the final section of the questionnaire, respondents assessed the potential impact of a change of leadership. Although a proportion did not expect significant change, the majority believed that new leadership could generate significant organisational changes or transitional challenges that can only be addressed through careful preparation and appropriate communication.

The research suggests that the leadership of NGOs in Eastern Hungary is experienced and committed, but that there are serious structural weaknesses in the area of succession. Conscious and planned leadership change is not yet an embedded practice, which increases the risk of organisational instability in the near future.

The key to successful succession is formal planning, providing training opportunities and institutionalising the transmission of organisational values and culture. To address these gaps, it would be essential to create a supportive policy environment, including training, advice and financial resources, to help the civil society sector to make generational changes.

8. Summary

This paper focuses on the issue of leadership succession, with particular reference to the results of a pilot study among NGOs working with older people in the Northern Great Plain region. Following a theoretical grounding of leadership and succession, I will present in detail the aim of the research, the methodology and the synthesis of the empirical data collection.

The aim of the study was to explore the extent to which these organisations are consciously addressing the issue of leadership change and the attitudes and practices with which they approach the challenges of generational change. The research was carried out using a purposive sampling and a questionnaire method, involving 14 organisations, mainly in the counties of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok.

The results show that, although the majority of managers have been performing their tasks with a high level of commitment for a long time, the issue of succession is still not an integral part of the organisational strategy. The lack of formal succession plans, the low rate of formal training and the ad hoc nature of the coaching processes point to structural weaknesses. These shortcomings may have particularly serious consequences in a context where the issue of management succession is already becoming relevant in the short term.

The expectations for the future expressed by respondents, such as empathy, strategic thinking or an emphasis on change management competences, clearly

reflect the growing expectations of civil society leadership. The transmission of organisational culture and values, and the emphasis on transparent and planned succession processes, can be a crucial element in ensuring future organisational stability.

The integration of professional succession planning is a prerequisite for the sustainable functioning of pensioner organisations, for which adequate policy and financial support, as well as the strengthening of institutionalised knowledge transfer and training, are essential.

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