

Testing Leadership Strength in Real-Time



Kathy Acierno Baron

VICE PRESIDENT

Vice President Kathy Baron talks about the implications of the pandemic on CEO succession planning.

Q. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected CEO succession planning?

A: Organizations have had to pivot strategy and operations very quickly during this crisis and it has tested every management team. Even those boards that haven't had to enact an emergency or temporary CEO succession plan have had the opportunity to observe prospective CEOs and other key executive candidates under extreme pressure.

The qualities of an exceptional leader include vision, decisiveness, resilience, adaptability, tenacity, empathy, and communication abilities; all of which have been put to this extreme test. Many boards and management teams have seen potential successors rise to the occasion, demonstrating these attributes. In other organizations it has exposed areas of the company and individuals where further development is clearly needed in order to strengthen the leadership bench. The pandemic may have also highlighted individuals who simply do not have the temperament to lead and succeed as CEO.

Q. How can the board utilize this unexpected visibility into their talent pipeline?

A: Of course, one of the board's primary and fundamental responsibilities is to hire and manage the CEO role. To do this effectively, directors must have a clear picture of the leadership talent that's available internally, both for a strategic successor and to plan for emergency or temporary situations. Now would be the time to ask questions about potential candidates for the CEO role and understand how they have performed during the crisis. It's also an opportunity to understand the talent pipeline among the entire c-suite, as well as other critical positions.

Leadership under normal, stable conditions is very different than under pressure. Boards have been given new insight into the organization's leadership bench and this examination shouldn't be overlooked.

About the Author

Kathy Acierno Baron is a vice president with Pearl Meyer, where she specializes in talent management issues, including executive leadership development, succession management, and coaching. She was previously the director of workforce planning and talent mobility at Harvard University and an executive coach in Harvard's leadership programs. Kathy was responsible for aligning and leveraging talent acquisition to internal talent mobility and connecting external and internal talent pipelines. She also spent more than 15 years at Avery Dennison Corporation, most recently as the director of leadership and organizational development, where she designed and delivered succession management systems, employee retention strategies, leadership and team development programs, as well as high-potential development programs. She has coached more than 100 executives and senior

leaders and is certified to administer and interpret a multitude of assessment instruments for both individual and team development.

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