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# CITY & TOWN



## Succession Planning: Preparing for our Future

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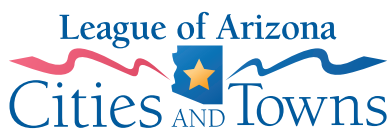
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## WHEN A (SUCCESSION) PLAN COMES TOGETHER

Succession planning is one of the most important aspects of municipal governance, and the town of Clarkdale takes it very seriously. When I became mayor nine years ago, one of my first meetings with the town manager was to discuss succession planning. We understood that the combined institutional memory, experience and network of our key employees is one of our most valuable and irreplaceable assets.

At that early meeting, we discussed the possibility that an unexpected event might deprive Clarkdale of a key person, leaving the town with a huge gap that would be difficult to fill. We knew that, without a proper succession plan, this could set us back months or even years. We knew that our staff is a huge part of our town's capital — every bit as important as our buildings, streets and parks. In fact, you might argue that an experienced and well-connected administrator is harder to replace than any infrastructure.

Think of how long it takes to train new people, to bring them up to speed on what got you where you are and to introduce them to the network of other professionals who will make their job more efficient and effective. After considering these things, I think it's clear that a succession plan that incubates replacements, especially for key people like department heads and managers, is just as important as your capital improvement plan or contingency planning for infrastructure failure.

Almost as important as your succession plan is a plan of continual improvement whenever you lose an experienced employee. In Clarkdale, we see any employee's departure as an opportunity to improve. While we hate to see good people move on, we always look for someone who can take us a step or two beyond where we were.

So, for a smooth-running, efficient and continuously improving city, don't put off succession planning — it's one place where a little forethought will yield handsomely!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doug Von Gausig'.

Doug Von Gausig  
League President  
Mayor, Town of Clarkdale



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## INDISPENSIBLE SERVICES VERSUS INDISPENSIBLE INDIVIDUALS

Back in the mid-1990s, as the first wave of “baby boomers” were starting to retire, you could hardly pick up a trade magazine about government business without seeing a prominent article about succession planning. Often, the articles were written in a breathless, fatalistic tone and implied that, within a few years, the collected wisdom of decades of best practices would be lost forever unless we immediately undertook a major study and developed a complex training and organizational plan.

I wonder how many of those plans are still sitting on a shelf somewhere, dusty and unopened.

The fact is that succession planning is not a single event; it is an ongoing activity that should be focused on maintaining the high quality of services cities and towns provide to the public, not focused on any specific individual or class of individuals.

None of us is individually irreplaceable, but our services are. People depend on the consistency of municipal services and the

high quality of life they enjoy because we are doing the job efficiently and consistently, not because one particular staff member is listed on the employee roster.

This topic reminds me of a story I heard back in a college class; here’s how I remember it. Joseph Pulitzer, the famous publisher, bought the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newspaper back in the late 1800s, and, on his first day of ownership, he assembled all the paper’s department heads in his executive office. He told them he wanted a list of all the indispensable people at the newspaper on his desk by 4 p.m. that same afternoon. The managers scrambled to all the various departments of the newspaper — accounting, advertising, typesetting, press operators, etc., and pulled together a list just before the deadline and placed it on Mr. Pulitzer’s desk. He took a quick glance at it and said, “All these people are fired as of now. I don’t want *any* indispensable people working at my newspaper.”

Whether true or not, this story points out one indisputable fact: essential work will continue to get done, whether a specific individual is there or not. It is our responsibility to do our jobs to the best of our ability, to maintain the highest professional standards and to train others to do our job in case we are not there. The continuity of excellent service is our lasting legacy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Strobeck". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Ken Strobeck  
Executive Director

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# WORKING TOGETHER, ARIZONA CITIES CAN

by Brian Dalke, City Manager, City of Goodyear, Arizona

How prepared is your community to face the onslaught of the retiring baby boomer generation? How does it intend to fill the voids left by key leadership positions and highly skilled employees? Recently, with the help of 12 West Valley cities, including my own, I conducted a survey on the practice of succession planning and leadership development in our corner of the Phoenix metropolitan area. The results reinforced the problems facing cities across America.

Researchers state that more than 40 percent of the nation's labor force is comprised of employees born between 1946 and 1964, referred to as baby boomers. The next age group is the Generation X employees, born between 1964 and 1977, which has 30 million fewer individuals available to fill the vacancies of the retiring baby boomers.

Succession planning is putting the right people in the right place at the right time. In cities across the country, government employees are aging, with nearly two-thirds of them 40 years of age or older. Yet, according to the recent survey I conducted, succession planning has not been a top priority for local government managers. Top-level managers focus on more critical issues such as budget constraints, employee and labor relations, community infrastructure and development, constituent complaints, problem-solving, and elected officials' needs.

This leaves little time or energy to consider succession planning strategies and programs. So we resort to a "just-in-time" or "talent-swapping" approach to fill our vacancies. It is troubling as a city manager to see firsthand how these approaches may be solving a short-term need but are not helping us grow a skilled, capable and dedicated workforce for the future.

How did we fare in our 12-city West Valley survey? Half of the responding cities indicated that one-third to one-half of their top executives, directors and

above, are eligible to retire in the next five years. Sixty-seven percent responded that one-third to more than three-quarters of this same group could retire in the next six to 10 years; however, 42 percent reported no succession planning underway. The survey also revealed the top two reasons for loss of employees were "talent-swapping" and retirement.

There were some encouraging responses that showed efforts to grow the in-house talent pool. On the list of leadership development activities, these all scored high: training for all employees, tuition reimbursement and funding professional association memberships. The door is partway open, so how can we open it all of the way?

When it came to leadership development — doing things like evaluating an employee's potential as a future leader

on performance reviews or offering/funding internships — the numbers were low. In addition, we found less-than-impressive marks when it comes to reaching out to colleges and universities to recruit new talent.

At least we are not alone. The Colorado Municipal League conducted a succession-planning study of 60 public sector executives throughout Colorado in 2006. Again, the results were poor.

Two-thirds rated the Colorado cities' efforts as poor to fair, while 68 percent reported looming future retirement rates. Almost three-fourths said there were higher priorities than preparing their workforce for future key positions! A lack of funding was cited but was not as big of a problem as it can be when it comes to managing other city priorities against limited budgets.





# BEAT THE ODDS OF THEIR RETIRING WORKFORCE

Similarly, the University of North Carolina conducted a study on succession-planning practices of the municipalities in North Carolina. Only 10 percent have formal workforce planning programs, yet 63 percent identified workforce planning as a need.

No wonder we have to swap employees to fill openings! The pool is too shallow. We have some work to do, according to these findings.

The impact of the Great Recession has decimated city and town budgets. As a result, the number of mid- and top-level positions has been reduced, which has decreased the promotional opportunities for talented employees. It would be one thing if we could just offer more pay and benefits to solve this problem. Talent

needed to fill these positions can easily work in the private sector demanding upward of 25 percent higher salaries with better benefits. These are two areas that governments sometimes are unable to deliver because of budget limitations or the public's opposition to competitive salaries for public workers.

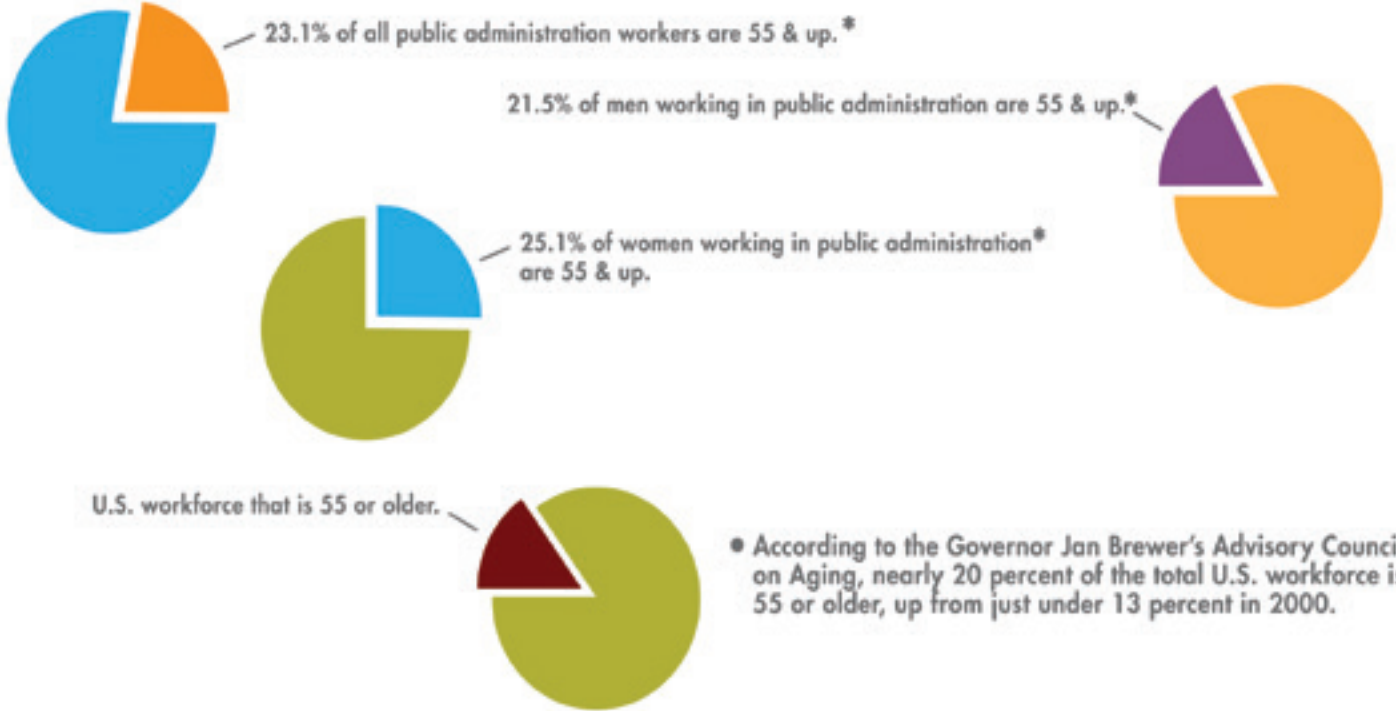
In addition, local government positions increasingly require greater knowledge, education, experience and skills. It is estimated that two-thirds of local government positions require this enhanced knowledge. We have slashed training, education and internship dollars in order to balance the budget. There is a need to restore training budgets.

Younger generations do not view government service as a noble cause, as their

parents and grandparents once believed. Many of them are turned off by lower-paying positions, layoffs, furloughs and unethical actions of government officials nationwide. The public's view of public employee pension plans creates uncertainty, as does the impact of political and media scrutiny on public employees. The list goes on and on.

The odd thing about this problem is that we all admit it exists, and we all know it can be our downfall. Anecdotally, we all seem to understand the benefits, too. There is no disagreement that growing an organization's talent through succession planning sends a very powerful message to the members of the workforce that they are highly valued and considered the city's biggest asset. Likewise, there is full sup-

## AMERICA'S AGING WORKFORCE



\* (Source: "Employed persons in nonagricultural industries" from the 2011 Current Population Survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

port for the notion that “promoting from within” boosts employee morale, enhances organizational culture and gives people a reason to work harder for the chance to climb the ladder.

In Goodyear, we have embarked on a comprehensive effort to embrace succession planning and the fundamentals that will get Goodyear off the hamster’s wheel of hiring outside the city every time someone leaves. We have turned our focus and energies to the people already working at City Hall with plans and programs aimed to develop their talent and ability to lead in the future.

The original survey of West Valley cities does not explain why we believe succession planning is a problem but can’t seem to make it a priority. It does not tell us what to do next. It was meant to start a conversation. It was meant to show us, even if only focused on a group of cities with common interests politically and socially, how we are doing when measured against industry standards. It was meant to get all of us to begin working on a solution.

Filling positions at the expense of a colleague in the Valley or elsewhere doesn’t help anyone, because surely I will eventually lose people to other com-

munities in need. As they say, what goes around comes around!

Where do we go from here? Expand the survey to the rest of Arizona cities. Review the results. Develop strategies to share precious training resources throughout the state. Openly share best practices that help this great state of Arizona develop a workforce that provides high-level services to our communities for years to come.

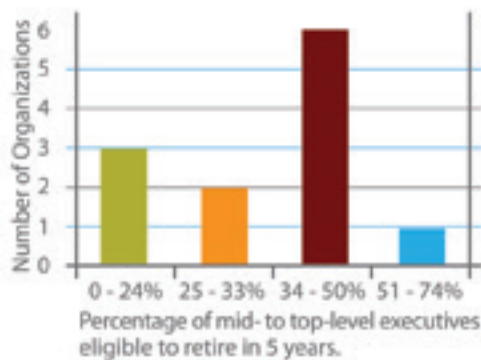
We will always see people moving from city to city for new opportunities. However, by working together and planning to succeed, we will beat the odds we face with our retiring workforce. ■

## GOODYEAR STUDY OF SUCCESSION PLANNING EFFORTS IN AZ 12 cities and towns participated



Number of full-time, regular positions in organization:  
Mean: 454                      Median: 258

Number of mid-to-top-level executives (directors and above) in organization:  
Mean: 12                      Median: 12



(Excerpt from Brian Dalke’s “Succession Planning and Leadership Development Pilot Survey”)



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# Preparing for Change: **Cultivating the Next**



As the baby boomer generation nears retirement, it is imperative that city and town managers begin to cultivate the next generation of skilled staff members to assume leadership and management positions in our municipalities. In addition, as leaders of their local communities, elected officials must explore how they might encourage and train the next generation to fill the important positions that make our cities and towns unique and vibrant. Two organizations in Arizona that are actively cultivating the next crop of leaders are the Arizona Town Hall and the Flinn-Brown Civic Leadership Academy. More information on both organizations is included below.

## **Flinn-Brown Civic Leadership Academy: A Resource for Future State-Level Leaders**

Civic leadership is a perennial topic among citizens and policymakers for some good reasons. Problems change. Elections happen. The tried and true stops working. A “black swan” shows up. It makes sense for every community and state to ask continually: What is the environment for civic leaders? How can we ensure civic leadership is well matched to changing, complex circumstances?

The value of reflecting on challenges, what civic leadership means now, what the best leaders do, and how to develop them in the public, private and nonprofit sectors is always high because the demand for great civic leadership never goes away.

In 2010, the private Flinn Foundation created the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership and asked the Thomas R. Brown Foundations in Tucson to help sponsor its flagship program, the Flinn-Brown Civic Leadership Academy. Two years later, more than 100 Arizonans from a wide variety of places, walks of life and political



perspectives are participating, while many more have expressed an interest in being part of the initiative. These Arizona-based philanthropies created the academy to help prepare and support future state-level civic leaders who want to serve — whether full-time or part-time, paid or unpaid — as an elected official; a state government executive; a policy advisor; or as a member of a state board, a commission or an advisory council. Through the many activities of the academy, fellows develop a better understanding of Arizona’s public-policy issues, politics and perspectives. The experience sets them on the path to having the knowledge, skills and commitment to help address Arizona’s long-term issues. The academy includes a series of intensive 12-daylong seminars during a three-month period, development of a personal plan for state-level civic leadership, advising during about a six-month period and long-term follow-up support.

The success of the Flinn-Brown Civic Leadership Academy in expanding the cadre of future state leaders will be seen in the coming years. At the same time, fellows have already been legislative candidates, appointed to state-level boards and active in planning civic careers. The potential is clear, according to Brad



# Generation of Local and State Leaders

Vynalek, a fall 2011 fellow: “There is no better comprehensive statewide leadership training than the Flinn-Brown Academy. It teaches proactive leadership, using substance and policy know-how to advance the cause we call Arizona.”

See [www.azcivicleadership.org](http://www.azcivicleadership.org) for more information.

## The Future of Civic Leadership: Arizona’s Youth Town Hall

There has been much discussion among those in leadership positions about what the future holds. We lament the decline of memberships in civic organizations and the rise in communication by social media. We complain about generational shifts in institutional loyalty and the ever-present intrusion of electronic devices. We lecture to our youth about why they must act more like us, even as the world rapidly changes in ways we never contemplated.

What we seldom do is listen, especially to those who will no doubt fill the leadership roles of tomorrow. This past October, there was an opportunity to reverse the traditional roles — a chance for the next generation of leaders to tell current leaders what they think about civic leadership. It happened as part of a statewide Youth Town Hall that included hundreds of high school and college students from around the state. Here’s what they said:

1. Collaboration and respect are essential for true civic leadership. Civic leaders must be open to listening to others and collaborating with people from all backgrounds.

2. It’s time to move beyond political division and move forward together.
3. True civic leaders should listen to other people, not insult them.
4. We should start with what is “right” in Arizona and use it as a foundation for moving forward. Focusing on the negative keeps people from wanting to become involved in civic leadership.
5. Social media may have its downsides, but it is also a powerful communication tool that can quickly disseminate useful information.
6. Mentoring and hands-on opportunities within the schools are essential for developing future leaders.
7. Good civic leadership is not just about the traditional top-down model. One small action, whether reaching out to a neighbor or posting a link on Facebook, can have a ripple effect that creates permanent change.
8. Civic leadership is a lifelong process. It starts with us and it starts now.

If the gathering last October was any indication of what is developing in our midst, we need not worry about a lack of future leaders. Instead, we may want to reexamine how the models of civic leadership are changing as rapidly as our communication devices. ■



# WINDOW TO THE PAST: Casa Grande City Hall



Casa Grand High School, 1921



Casa Grand City Hall, now

Completed in 1921 at a cost of \$135,000, this Spanish-Colonial-style building was constructed in response to the growing population in Casa Grande. The building included an indoor swimming pool and auditorium. It served as the Casa Grande Union High School's main campus until 1997, when a new campus was built north of town.

The building was renovated in 1999 to serve as City Hall. The renovations preserved most of the original features of the building. The large, two-story building has a red clay tile roof, a decorative plastered and arched entry portal, arched window openings and ironwork balconets.

In 1999, the Casa Grande City Council received a Governor's Award for Organization of the Year for its creative adaptive reuse of Old Main for City Hall. ■

  
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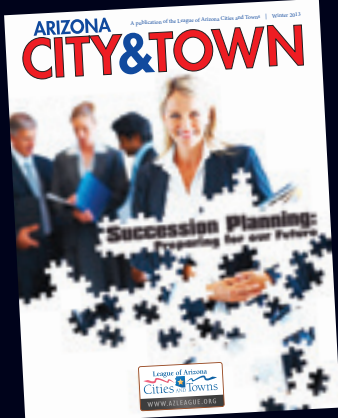
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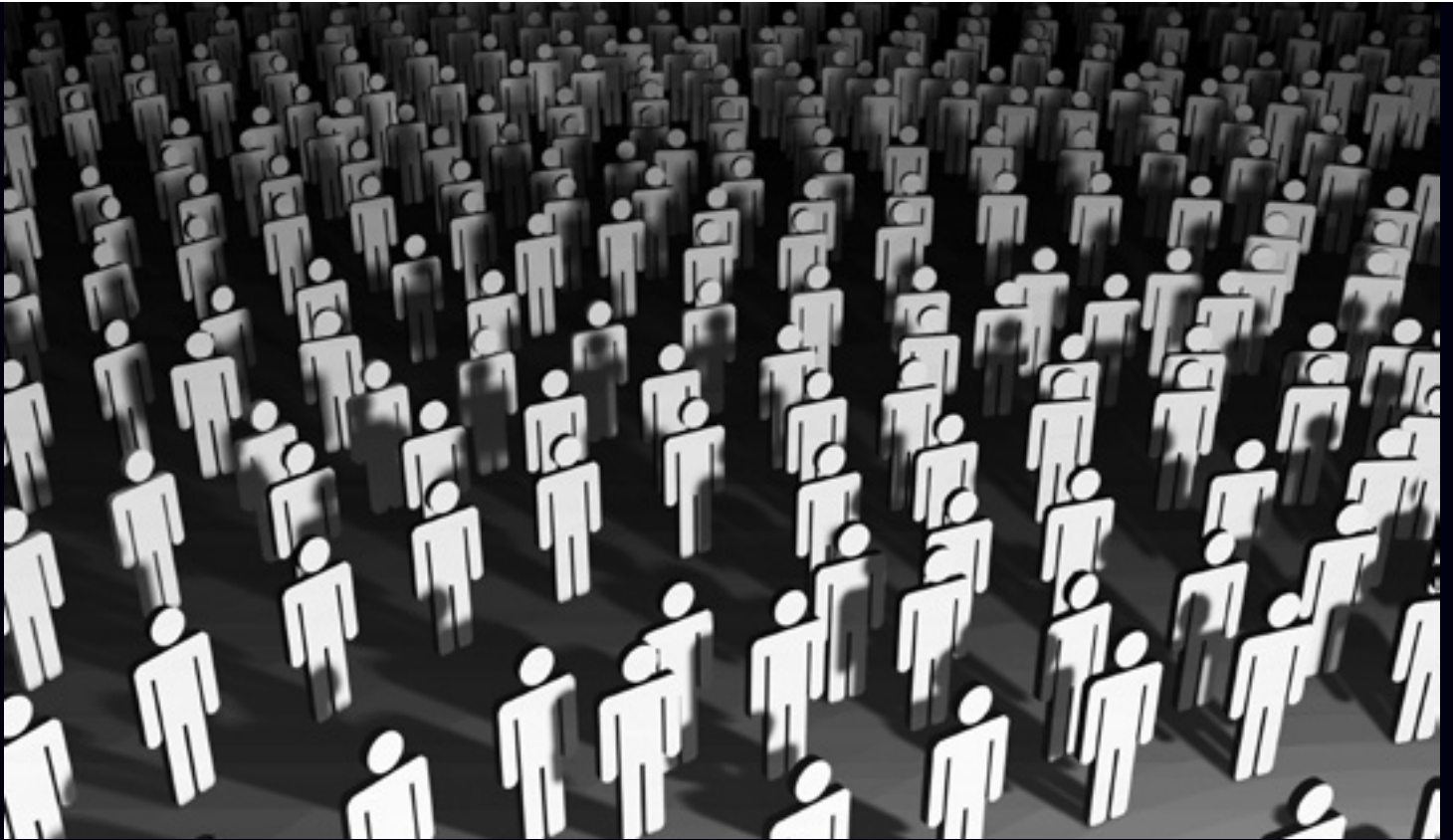
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