Strategic Leadership Development and Mentorship as a Succession Planning Strategy: A Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry

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Abstract
Leadership transitions can disrupt organizational continuity when successors have not been intentionally prepared through structured development. This qualitative pragmatic study examined how business leaders integrate strategic leadership development, mentorship, and sponsorship into succession-planning systems across public, private, and nonprofit environments. Ten industry leaders with direct responsibility for succession planning participated in the research. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, publicly available organizational documents, and industry publications. Data were analyzed through an iterative coding process and using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach. Findings revealed a comprehensive developmental system in which leaders connected talent identification, transparent knowledge sharing, experiential learning, mentoring relationships, and access to consequential opportunities. Participants emphasized that mentorship and sponsorship were most effective when embedded within a strategically aligned leadership pipeline rather than functioning as informal, isolated relationships. Groves's succession-planning framework provided structural grounding for understanding how organizations integrate development with future leadership needs, while the Howard–Sheth model offered a behavioral lens explaining how employees interpret developmental opportunities through perceptions of fairness, transparency, and access. The findings offer a practical model for strengthening leadership readiness, enhancing organizational resilience, and expanding equitable access to advancement. Implications for practice, positive social change, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Succession Planning, Leadership Development, Mentorship, Sponsorship, Leadership Pipeline, Knowledge Transfer, Organizational Competitiveness

1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly recognize that leadership continuity is not a periodic administrative task but a core component of long-term sustainability. Retirements, unexpected departures, evolving capability demands, and competitive labor markets can expose organizations to significant operational and strategic risk when successors are not intentionally prepared. Traditional approaches that rely on replacement charts or informal nominations often fail to develop leaders with the judgment, contextual understanding, and stakeholder relationships

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required for complex roles. As a result, many organizations struggle to convert leadership potential into demonstrated readiness.

Leadership development and mentorship have long been associated with talent growth, yet their strategic integration into succession planning remains inconsistent across sectors. Although research highlights the value of linking development to future leadership needs, much of the existing literature focuses on conceptual models or program descriptions rather than on the practical strategies leaders use to operationalize these systems. This gap is consequential: without clear insight into how development, mentorship, and sponsorship function in real organizational environments, succession planning may remain fragmented, inequitable, or disconnected from strategic priorities.

The study contributes novel insights by demonstrating how leaders operationalize succession planning in practice and highlighting the interplay between structural design and employee interpretation. The study examined how business leaders across public, private, and nonprofit settings integrate leadership development and mentorship into succession-planning systems. The novelty of the study lies in its dual focus on structural integration and employee interpretation. Structurally, the study explores how leaders design developmental pipelines that include talent identification, experiential learning, knowledge transfer, mentoring relationships, and access to consequential opportunities. Behaviorally, the study investigates how employees interpret these opportunities through perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accessibility, and it is an area that has received limited attention in succession-planning research.

Two theoretical perspectives guide the inquiry. Groves's succession-planning framework provides a structural foundation for understanding how leadership development can be embedded within organizational systems. The Howard–Sheth model, although originating in consumer behavior, offers a valuable lens for examining how individuals interpret organizational signals and decide whether to participate in development. Together, these frameworks illuminate both the organizational mechanisms that produce leadership readiness and the perceptual factors that influence employee engagement.

Using a qualitative pragmatic inquiry research design, this study draws on semistructured interviews with ten industry leaders who directly oversee or implement succession planning. Their accounts revealed how development and mentorship are enacted in practice, how leaders navigate implementation challenges, and how these strategies contribute to leadership continuity and organizational competitiveness. By focusing on real-world practice rather than theoretical ideals, the study provides actionable insight for organizations seeking to build credible, equitable, and strategically aligned leadership pipelines.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Foundation

Succession planning has evolved from a narrow focus on identifying potential replacements to a broader developmental process aimed at ensuring leadership continuity. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that organizations must cultivate leaders who possess not only technical

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competence but also strategic judgment, contextual understanding, and the ability to navigate complex stakeholder environments. This literature review synthesizes research on succession planning, leadership development, experiential learning, mentorship, sponsorship, and employee interpretation of developmental opportunity, establishing the foundation for the present study.

2.1. Succession Planning as a Developmental System

Contemporary succession planning extends beyond replacement charts and emergency coverage. Rothwell (2016) described effective succession planning as a systematic process for ensuring the continued availability of talent for key positions. The process requires organizations to identify critical roles, anticipate capability needs, assess talent, close developmental gaps, and evaluate readiness over time. Bano et al. (2022), in a systematic review of succession planning practices, likewise emphasized that effective systems connect talent development with organizational needs rather than responding only after a departure.

Groves (2007) provided the principal conceptual foundation for this study by integrating leadership development and succession planning. In this view, succession planning is a strategic, continuous process supported by mentoring, coaching, action learning, assessment, and senior leaders' involvement. The framework is important because it shifts attention from naming successors to producing them. Talent identification becomes the beginning of a developmental cycle, not its endpoint. Leaders assess potential, provide appropriately challenging experiences, observe performance, give feedback, and adjust development in relation to future organizational needs.

This integration also connects succession planning to organizational resilience. A strong pipeline gives an organization options when leadership conditions change. It reduces dependency on a single incumbent, makes internal knowledge more transferable, and enables transitions with less disruption. Hafnidah et al. (2025) found that leadership succession affects organizational resilience and that the value of succession practices depends on organizational context. The implication is that development must be deliberately tailored: organizations need future leaders who understand both transferable leadership principles and the systems, stakeholders, and risks of their own environment.

2.2. Leadership Development, Experiential Learning, and Knowledge Transfer

Leadership development is multidimensional. Formal courses can introduce concepts and common language, but future leaders also need opportunities to apply those concepts under realistic conditions. Rotational assignments, stretch projects, cross-functional teams, acting roles, and participation in strategic decisions enable employees to develop judgment and demonstrate readiness. These experiences also allow the organization to distinguish performance in a current role from capacity for a more complex one.

Knowledge transfer is a central succession function because much of an incumbent leader's value is tacit. Strategic history, stakeholder expectations, informal influence networks, and lessons

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from past decisions may not be captured in procedures. Chitamba (2025) emphasized organizational memory as part of leadership continuity. Developmental relationships can preserve this memory by creating repeated opportunities for dialogue, observation, reflection, and feedback. Transparent leaders further support knowledge transfer by explaining the reasons behind decisions and showing employees how operational tasks connect to the larger organizational picture.

Leadership development may also influence employee engagement. Bialek (2022) emphasized that structured leadership development programs cultivate high-potential employees by providing intentional learning experiences, coaching, and developmental opportunities that strengthen their organizational commitment and prepare them for expanded responsibilities. However, a program's mere existence does not guarantee this response. Employees must view the opportunity as relevant, accessible, and credible. If selections appear opaque or development fails to lead to meaningful responsibility, the same program can produce skepticism rather than commitment.

2.3. Mentorship and Sponsorship in Leadership Pipelines

Mentorship supports learning through a relationship in which a more experienced person provides guidance, feedback, perspective, and psychosocial support. In succession planning, mentors help emerging leaders understand the organization, identify developmental needs, and prepare for expanded responsibility. Mentorship can accelerate learning because participants receive contextualized feedback rather than relying exclusively on trial and error. It also facilitates knowledge continuity by connecting generations of leaders before transition pressure arises.

Sponsorship is related to, but distinct from, mentorship. A mentor advises; a sponsor uses influence to advocate for a person's visibility, access, or advancement. Participants in this study described both functions. The distinction matters because an employee may receive excellent advice while remaining excluded from the assignments through which readiness is demonstrated. Strategic succession systems, therefore, need both developmental support and access to consequential opportunities.

Informal mentorship can be valuable, but exclusive reliance on informal relationships creates risk. Mentors often gravitate toward individuals within familiar networks, and employees with less access to senior leaders may be overlooked. A strategic approach establishes clear objectives, selection principles, role expectations, and feedback processes while leaving enough flexibility for authentic relationships. Structured access does not require rigid interpersonal matching; it requires the organization to ensure that developmental opportunity is not determined solely by proximity or similarity.

2.4. Employee Interpretation of Developmental Opportunity

Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior served as the study's second conceptual lens. Although developed to explain consumer decisions, the theory provides a useful behavioral

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analogy for understanding how employees process organizational signals. Employees do not respond mechanically to a leadership program. They interpret communication, prior experiences, social influences, observed outcomes, and perceived opportunity. These inputs shape attitudes toward the program and willingness to participate.

Applied to succession planning, mentoring, training, sponsorship, and transparent communication function as organizational stimuli. Employees evaluate whether selections are fair, whether leaders genuinely support development, and whether participation can lead to meaningful advancement. Positive experiences can strengthen confidence and engagement; inconsistent or opaque experiences can inhibit participation. The behavioral lens complements Groves's (2007) structural framework. Groves explains how an organization can design an integrated pipeline, while Howard and Sheth help explain why employees may embrace or resist that system. Although originally developed for consumer behavior, the Howard–Sheth model is appropriate for this study because it explains how individuals interpret organizational stimuli and make decisions based on perceived fairness, credibility, and prior experience. Succession planning involves similar interpretive processes: employees evaluate whether development opportunities are accessible, whether leaders support advancement, and whether participation leads to meaningful outcomes. Using Howard–Sheth, therefore, adds a behavioral dimension that complements Groves's structural framework, enabling a more complete understanding of why employees embrace or resist leadership-development systems.

The combined framework suggests that effective succession planning requires two forms of coherence. Structurally, development activities must connect to critical roles and organizational strategy. Experientially, employees must perceive those activities as credible and accessible. Leadership readiness is therefore not produced only by curricula and assessments; it also depends on relationships, communication, and the meaning employees attach to opportunity.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a dual-framework conceptual foundation that integrates a structural perspective on succession planning with a behavioral perspective on how individuals interpret developmental opportunity. Together, these frameworks illuminate both the organizational mechanisms that produce leadership readiness and the perceptual processes that shape employee engagement in development and mentorship.

3.1. Groves's Integrated Succession-Planning Framework

Groves (2007) provides the primary structural foundation for this study. His model positions succession planning as a continuous, strategically aligned system that integrates leadership development with future organizational needs. Rather than treating succession planning as a reactive process triggered by vacancies, Groves emphasizes proactive identification of talent, targeted developmental experiences, mentoring relationships, coaching, action learning, and senior-leader involvement.

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Three elements of Groves's framework are particularly relevant to this study:
Integration of Development and Succession: Leadership development is not an isolated HR activity but a core component of succession planning. Developmental experiences—such as stretch assignments, cross-functional work, and exposure to strategic decisions—are intentionally aligned with the capabilities required for future leadership roles.

Structured Developmental Relationships: Mentoring and coaching are positioned as essential mechanisms for transferring tacit knowledge, strengthening judgment, and accelerating readiness. Groves highlights the importance of intentional, strategically aligned mentoring rather than informal or ad hoc relationships.

Organizational Alignment and Accountability: Senior leaders play an active role in assessing talent, providing developmental opportunities, and ensuring succession systems remain aligned with organizational strategy. This alignment supports continuity, resilience, and leadership preparedness.

Groves' (2007) framework is well-suited to this study because it explains how organizations can design developmental pipelines that convert potential into readiness. It provides a structural lens for analyzing the practices leaders described, including talent identification, experiential learning, mentorship, sponsorship, and knowledge transfer.

Figure 1. Groves' (2007) Integrated succession planning framework

Notes: Groves' (2007) Integrated succession planning framework

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3.2. Howard–Sheth Model of Buyer Behavior as a Behavioral Lens

Although originating in consumer behavior, the Howard–Sheth model (1969) offers a valuable behavioral perspective on how employees, as consumers, interpret developmental opportunities within succession systems. The model explains how individuals process stimuli—such as communication, observed outcomes, and prior experiences—and form attitudes and decisions based on perceived credibility, fairness, and accessibility.

Applied to succession planning, the Howard–Sheth model highlights several perceptual mechanisms:

Interpretation of Organizational Signals: Employees evaluate mentoring programs, sponsorship opportunities, training initiatives, and developmental assignments based on how these opportunities are communicated and enacted. Perceptions of transparency and fairness influence whether employees view development as meaningful or symbolic.

Influence of Prior Experience: Past interactions with leaders, exposure to decisions about advancement, and observed patterns of access shape employees' expectations and willingness to participate in development.

Decision-Making Under Uncertainty: Employees make decisions about engagement—such as whether to pursue mentoring or accept stretch assignments—based on perceived likelihood of advancement and trust in leadership intentions.

Using the Howard–Sheth model in this context provides a novel contribution to succession-planning research. While Groves explains how organizations should structure developmental pipelines, the Howard–Sheth model explains why employees may embrace or resist those systems. This dual perspective is essential for understanding the effectiveness of succession planning, as structural design alone cannot guarantee participation or readiness.

3.3. Integrating the Two Frameworks

Together, Groves' structural model and the Howard–Sheth behavioral model create a comprehensive conceptual foundation for examining succession planning as both an organizational system and an employee experience.

Structurally, organizations must design pipelines that include mentoring, sponsorship, experiential learning, and knowledge transfer aligned with future leadership needs.
Behaviorally, employees must perceive these opportunities as credible, accessible, and connected to advancement.

This integrated framework supports the study's focus on how leaders operationalize development and mentorship in practice and how these practices influence leadership readiness, organizational continuity, and equitable access to advancement.

4. Method

4.1. Research Design

The study was conducted using a qualitative pragmatic inquiry research design. Pragmatism was appropriate because the research question concerned strategies that leaders use in practice across differing organizational contexts. Pragmatic inquiry permits attention to participants' experiences while maintaining a problem-centered focus on useful action (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Rather than testing a predetermined causal model, the study sought to understand recurring practices, the reasoning behind them, and their implications for business leaders.

4.2. Participants and Sampling

The participant group consisted of 10 business leaders and organizational decision-makers from public, private, and nonprofit settings. Eligibility requires direct responsibility for implementing, overseeing, or contributing to succession planning or leadership development. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants whose experience aligned with the research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants represented different organizational environments, allowing the analysis to identify common strategic patterns without suggesting that succession planning takes a single form in every setting.

Participants were assigned the pseudonyms Participant 1 through Participant 10. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality protections were applied throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

A sample of 10 industry leaders was appropriate for a qualitative pragmatic inquiry focused on depth rather than breadth. Criterion-based purposive sampling ensured participants had direct responsibility for succession planning, making them information-rich cases. Data saturation was reached after six interviews, when no new information was provided. Subsequent interviews, four of them, confirmed data saturation and thematic stability, aligning with Guest et al. (2020), who found that saturation in focused qualitative studies often occurs within the first six to twelve interviews.

4.3. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semistructured interviews. The interview protocol included six open-ended questions addressing participants' roles in succession planning, strategies used, implementation challenges, mitigation approaches, measures of effectiveness, and additional insights. Follow-up probes were used to clarify meaning and obtain practical examples. Semistructured interviews provided consistency across participants while allowing them to explain strategies in their organizational contexts.

Publicly available documents, leadership development reports, company materials, and industry publications were reviewed as secondary corroborating evidence. These materials were not treated as substitutes for participant accounts; they provided contextual support and an additional basis for assessing whether the reported practices were consistent with broader professional discourse. The data from the secondary documents contributed to the triangulation of all collected data. Member checking was used by sharing interpretive summaries with participants to confirm that the analysis represented their intended meanings.

4.4. Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and coded, along with the data from the secondary documents, through an iterative process supported by ATLAS.ti. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Recurring concepts, including leadership training, mentoring relationships, pipeline development, coaching, talent identification, transparency, and collaborative decision-making, were compared within and across interviews. Codes were grouped into categories and refined into themes that addressed the research question.

4.4.1. Code Development and Refinement

Initial codes were generated inductively from repeated transcript review. Codes captured discrete concepts such as “transparent communication,” “stakeholder learning,” “sponsorship access,” and “experiential assignments.” These codes were refined through constant comparison, merged when overlapping (e.g., “mentoring feedback” and “developmental coaching”), and separated when conceptually distinct (e.g., “talent identification” vs. “strength-based development”). Code groups were then organized into categories such as developmental practices, relational leadership, and pipeline access, which informed the final themes. Examples of code-to-theme progression were documented to maintain analytic transparency.

4.4.2. Evidence of Saturation

Evidence of saturation included the stabilization of codes after Interview 6, repetition of concepts across participants, and the absence of new themes in Interviews 7–10. The codebook remained unchanged during the final four interviews, indicating that additional data confirmed rather than expanded the thematic categories.

4.5 Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through member checking, data source triangulation, repeated transcript reviews, and a transparent coding process. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through documentation of analytical decisions and comparison of emerging themes with the conceptual framework and relevant literature. Data saturation was reached after Interview 6, at which point 23 cumulative codes had been identified. Interviews 7 through 10 produced no new codes and confirmed thematic consistency. Guest et al. (2020) and Saldaña (2021) noted that such patterns signal when a sample is adequate for a focused inquiry.

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4.5.1 Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity was addressed by acknowledging the researcher's professional background in leadership development, which could influence interpretation. To mitigate bias, the researcher maintained reflexive memos, used member checking to validate interpretations, and compared emerging themes against the conceptual framework rather than personal expectations. These practices ensured that findings remained grounded in participant accounts.

5. Findings

Strategic leadership development and mentorship were the most prevalent themes in the broader study. All 10 participants discussed leadership development as essential to succession planning, producing 28 coded references. Seven participants specifically emphasized mentorship. Their accounts showed that development was not one discrete program; it was an interconnected set of practices through which leaders identified potential, transferred knowledge, broadened experience, assessed capability, and enabled access to future opportunities.

Figure 2. Participant Demographic and Professional Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Leadership Role/Position	Industry/Sector	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Female	Business Owner / Consultant	Consulting / Legal Operations / Staffing	Not stated
Participant 2	Female	Project Director / CEO and Founder	Higher Education / Grant Administration / Nonprofit Leadership	8 years in private sector; total experience not stated
Participant 3	Male	Operations Manager / Executive Leader	Operations / Technology–Network Operations	Not stated
Participant 4	Female	Founder / Inventor	Sustainability / Plant-Based Plastics / Entrepreneurship	Not stated
Participant 5	Female	Manager of Training	Nonprofit / Workforce Development	Not stated
Participant 6	Female	Certified Surgical Technician / Informal Leader	Healthcare / Surgical Services	Not stated
Participant 7	Male	Quality Analyst	Healthcare / Quality Management	Not stated
Participant 8	Male	Senior Strategy Director	Nonprofit / Higher Education	Not stated
Participant 9	Male	CEO / Founder	Entrepreneurship / Professional Speaking, Coaching, and Authorship	Not stated
Participant 10	Female	Consultant / Human Resources Leader	Private Equity / Healthcare / Human Resources	20 years

5.1. Transparent Knowledge Sharing and Strategic Context

Participants described transparency as a developmental practice. Emerging leaders needed more than instructions for completing current tasks; they needed to understand why the work mattered and how decisions related to organizational goals.
Participant 1 explained:

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Within my teams, I usually make sure we have the type of knowledge I have. I am usually very open and transparent about what is going on with the company... making sure that the team is not just focused on getting tasks done but also on understanding the bigger picture.

This account illustrates intentional knowledge transfer. By sharing strategic context, the leader helped employees develop systems-level understanding and see relationships between operational activity and organizational direction. Such transparency can also reduce the concentration of knowledge in a single incumbent. Succession preparedness improves when several employees understand the organization's priorities, history, constraints, and decision logic.

Participant 9 similarly emphasized the importance of communicating organizational vision and leadership expectations. Together, these responses suggest that strategic communication is not merely a change-management activity; it is part of leader development. Future leaders learn to think beyond task completion when incumbents consistently expose them to the larger context in which choices are made.

This finding is consistent with previous succession-planning and leadership-development literature emphasizing knowledge transfer as an important mechanism for preserving organizational continuity and preparing employees for future leadership responsibilities. For example, Groves (2007) found that best-practice organizations created organization-wide forums that exposed high-potential employees to multiple stakeholders and used managers directly in developing future leaders. Similarly, participants in the present study described sharing organizational information and the "bigger picture" with emerging leaders, demonstrating that exposure to broader organizational context is an important component of succession preparation. Prior scholarship also suggests that exposing emerging leaders to strategic information enhances their understanding of organizational systems, rather than limiting their development to technical or task-specific competencies.

5.2. Relational Leadership and Stakeholder Understanding

Participants framed leadership readiness as both relational and technical.
Participant 2 stated:

"I focus on building relationships and understanding the diverse, unique needs of the people I serve—that is what makes this effective." The response indicates that emerging leaders must learn to interpret stakeholder needs, build trust, and adapt leadership practice to the people affected by organizational decisions.

This relational emphasis broadens succession criteria. Technical expertise may qualify an employee for consideration, but readiness for leadership also involves communication, empathy, influence, and the ability to understand multiple perspectives. Mentors can help develop leaders make sense of stakeholder dynamics by discussing difficult interactions, modeling judgment, and

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providing feedback after consequential encounters. Such learning is difficult to obtain through classroom instruction alone.

These findings align with previous leadership-development research, which demonstrates that effective leadership requires interpersonal and relational competencies in addition to technical expertise. For example, McCauley and Palus (2021) found that relational leadership development emphasizes collective identification and action on leadership issues rather than the development of individual competencies in isolation. Similarly, participants in the present study emphasized building relationships, understanding diverse stakeholder needs, and considering multiple perspectives, suggesting that leadership readiness depends partly on an individual's ability to work effectively through relationships. The findings extend this literature by illustrating how stakeholder understanding can become an explicit component of succession preparation rather than being treated as proficiency developed only after an individual assumes a leadership position.

5.3. Talent Identification and Strength-Based Development

Participants described talent identification as a deliberate process grounded in knowing employees' competencies and potential.

Participant 3 explained:

“The first step was to identify, first, the talent within my team. I try to make sure that I get to know everybody individually, understand their competencies, and know what they are good at.”
Rather than relying solely on general performance ratings, this approach required direct knowledge of individuals' strengths and thoughtful alignment of capability with opportunity.

Participant 6 also linked leadership development to recruitment, emphasizing technical ability, trainability, and growth potential. These findings suggest that succession planning begins before an employee enters a formal leadership program. Hiring and talent-review practices shape the pool from which future leaders can emerge. After identification, employees need differentiated development that builds on strengths while addressing gaps related to future roles.

Strength-based identification should not be confused with prematurely labeling a small group as the only possible successors. Participants' broader accounts emphasized exposure, observation, and development. A pipeline remains more resilient when organizations create multiple opportunities for employees to demonstrate their capabilities and to revisit readiness as strategy and performance evolve.

This finding is consistent with previous succession-planning research emphasizing the early identification of high-potential employees and the alignment of individual competencies with anticipated organizational needs. For example, Church et al. (2021) analyzed data from 9,784 participants in PepsiCo's Leadership Assessment and Development program and distinguished employees' assessed leadership potential from their current performance in assessing high-potential status and subsequent promotion. Similarly, participants in the present study described identifying employees according to their competencies, strengths, trainability, and growth potential, indicating that current job performance alone may not provide a complete assessment of future leadership readiness. However, the participants' emphasis on continually observing and reassessing talent supports a more developmental approach than succession systems that rely primarily on fixed high-potential classifications or annual performance evaluations.

5.4. Experiential Learning and Collaborative Decision-Making

Participants emphasized experiential learning as essential for converting potential into demonstrated readiness. Leaders described providing stretch assignments, cross-functional projects, acting roles, and opportunities to participate in strategic decisions.

Participant 7 described a collaborative governance model:
"We involve staff and community members in decision-making, which exposes emerging leaders to different viewpoints and accountability expectations."

Experiential learning allowed leaders to observe how employees frame problems, solicit input, handle conflict, and follow through on commitments. These experiences also provided concrete material for mentoring conversations and performance feedback.

Analytically, experiential learning functions as a bridge between structural development (assignments aligned with future roles) and perceptual engagement (employees seeing development as meaningful and connected to advancement).

The findings support previous leadership-development scholarship identifying experiential learning, stretch assignments, and challenging work experiences as important mechanisms for developing leadership capability. For example, Allison and Green (2013) described a leadership development program in which stretch assignments enabled prospective supervisors to broaden their project management and interpersonal skills while receiving experiential learning, mentoring, coaching, and classroom instruction. Similarly, participants in the present study described using stretch assignments, cross-functional projects, acting roles, and participation in decision-making to allow emerging leaders to practice leadership responsibilities before formally assuming higher-level positions. The present findings further suggest that collaborative decision-making strengthens experiential development by exposing potential successors not only to leadership tasks but also to competing stakeholder perspectives and organizational accountability.

5.5. Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Access to Opportunity

Mentorship emerged as a central mechanism for preparing employees for expanded responsibility. Participants described mentoring relationships that provided guidance, feedback, confidence-building, and contextual understanding.

Participant 10 stated:

"I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities."

The concise distinction captures two necessary pipeline functions. Mentoring helps an individual learn; sponsorship helps that individual gain access to settings in which learning and readiness can become visible.

Participants' descriptions suggest that mentorship supported knowledge sharing, confidence, professional navigation, and leadership skill development. Sponsorship extended development by connecting employees to assignments, networks, and opportunities for advancement. This finding is consequential because development without access may not change a succession pipeline. Employees need occasions to apply their capabilities, and decision-makers need credible evidence on which to assess readiness.

These findings are consistent with previous research distinguishing mentorship from sponsorship, particularly scholarships, displaying that developmental guidance alone may be insufficient to produce advancement without access to influential networks and visible opportunities. For example, Ayyala et al. (2019) found that sponsorship differed from mentorship in that it focused on specific career opportunities and involved established, well-connected individuals who advocated for protégés and facilitated their advancement. This finding closely reflects Participant 10's distinction between mentoring employees and "sponsoring them for opportunities," demonstrating that developing leadership capability and providing access to advancement opportunities are related but distinct succession-planning practices. The participants extend this literature within succession planning by demonstrating how mentorship and sponsorship can operate together: one develops leadership capacity, while the other creates opportunities for that capacity to be demonstrated and recognized.

5.6. Networking and Pipeline Expansion

Participants noted that leadership pipelines extend beyond internal talent pools. External networking with peer organizations, professional associations, and community partners helped leaders practice benchmarking, identify emerging capability needs, and expand access to potential candidates.

Participant 8 explained:

"We made sure to meet with similar organizations to find out really what 'talent' they had in their pipeline."

This practice demonstrates that strategic talent identification can include external relationships and benchmarking. Networks with peer institutions, professional associations, and community organizations may help leaders understand emerging capability needs, identify potential candidates, and avoid insularity.

External networking reduced insularity and provided insight into evolving leadership competencies across sectors. It also supported diversity in pipelines by exposing leaders to

broader talent pools. Analytically, networking strengthens pipeline adaptability and competitiveness, ensuring that succession systems remain responsive to changing environments.
This finding is consistent with and extends prior research on the role of professional networks and social capital in leadership development. Cullen-Lester et al. (2016) argued that leadership development should extend beyond employees' individual knowledge, skills, and abilities to encompass social capital, professional networks, and the capacity to build relationships that provide access to information and resources. Consistent with this perspective, participants in the present study described networking with peer organizations, professional associations, and community partners as a means of gaining insight into talent and emerging leadership capability needs. However, the present findings extend this scholarship by demonstrating that external networking can serve a broader strategic function within succession planning. Specifically, participants used external relationships not only to expand access to potential talent but also to benchmark leadership pipelines, assess emerging competency needs, and gain insight into practices beyond their own organizations. Building on Cullen-Lester et al. (2016), these findings indicate that external networking may support leadership development while helping organizations identify emerging trends, assess talent needs, and develop succession pipelines that are more adaptable, competitive, and diverse.

6. Implications for Professional Practice

The findings support a practical succession-development cycle composed of six interconnected stages. Organizations begin by defining future leadership requirements, identifying the critical roles, and clarifying the strategic, relational, and technical capabilities those roles will demand over the planning horizon. This forward-looking approach prevents development from being anchored solely in the incumbent's profile.

Talent identification should draw on multiple forms of evidence, including performance, learning agility, stakeholder skills, aspiration, trainability, and demonstrated judgment. Leaders benefit from creating multiple opportunities for employees to demonstrate their potential and from periodically revisiting assessments as organizational needs evolve.

Development plans should be individualized and multifaceted. Formal learning is most effective when combined with mentoring, coaching, cross-functional work, stretch assignments, acting responsibilities, and exposure to strategic decisions. Each developmental activity should address a clearly defined readiness gap aligned with future leadership requirements.

Mentoring should be paired with sponsorship to ensure both capability development and access to opportunity. Mentors help employees reflect, learn, and grow, while sponsors help qualified individuals gain visibility and consequential assignments. Program leaders should monitor whether access to sponsorship and high-impact work is distributed consistently rather than concentrated within familiar networks.

Knowledge transfer must be institutionalized rather than left to chance. Incumbents should explain decision logic, stakeholder relationships, strategic history, and lessons learned. Practices

such as shadowing, after-action reviews, transition documentation, and communities of practice complement interpersonal mentoring and reduce reliance on any single individual.
Readiness and program outcomes should be evaluated regularly. Organizations can assess capability growth, bench strength, internal placements, time to readiness, retention of high-potential employees, and participant perceptions of fairness and access. These insights should be used to adjust assignments, mentor preparation, and selection practices rather than to report activity.

Across the entire cycle, senior leadership and governance support are essential. Succession development requires time, visibility into strategy, access to consequential work, and accountability for talent outcomes. When development is treated solely as an HR initiative, operating leaders may view participation as optional, and employees may struggle to see how development connects to real advancement. Leaders should incorporate pipeline reviews into strategic and risk-management discussions and make talent development an explicit responsibility of those who supervise others.

The distinction between confidentiality and opacity also warrants attention. While individual assessment information may require protection, organizations can still communicate how leadership capabilities are defined, how development opportunities are accessed, and how employees can express aspirations. Such transparency strengthens the perceptual credibility emphasized by the Howard–Sheth framework and may increase participation in development initiatives.

7. Implications for Positive Social Change

Strategic mentorship can expand access to knowledge, relationships, and experiences that enable leadership advancement. When these resources are available only through informal networks, capable employees may remain outside the succession pipeline. A more structured approach can increase visibility for individuals who have had less access to senior leaders while preserving individualized developmental relationships.

The social value extends beyond promotion. Developing a broader group of employees can increase confidence, professional mobility, and participation in organizational decision-making. Organizations may also benefit from leadership teams that better understand diverse employees, customers, and communities. Although this article focuses on leadership development and mentorship, the broader study's themes indicate that development must be connected to intentional inclusion, governance accountability, and continuous evaluation if organizations seek equitable and effective pipelines.

8. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample consisted of ten leaders selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Although this approach ensured that participants had direct experience with succession planning, the perspectives captured reflect those of a relatively small group of leaders. The goal of the study was to be analytic depth rather than statistical generalization, but the limited sample size may constrain the breadth of experiences represented.

Second, participants came from diverse organizational contexts—including public agencies, private corporations, and nonprofit organizations—which strengthened the range of perspectives but also introduced contextual variability. Organizational context may influence the transferability of the findings. Succession practices may differ significantly across sectors due to variations in governance structures, regulatory requirements, resource availability, and organizational culture. These contextual factors may influence how developmental strategies are implemented and how employees interpret opportunities. As a result, the transferability of findings may depend on the similarity of organizational environments.

Third, the study relied primarily on leaders' accounts of succession practices. Although leaders provided rich descriptions of developmental strategies, mentoring relationships, and sponsorship decisions, the perspectives of employees, mentees, HR professionals, and board members were not included. These additional viewpoints could offer insight into how developmental opportunities are experienced, how fairness is perceived, and how succession decisions are interpreted across organizational levels. Future research incorporating multiple stakeholder groups could deepen understanding of perceptual dynamics within succession systems.

Fourth, while secondary documents were used to support triangulation, the availability and depth of these materials varied across organizations. Some participants had access to formal leadership development documents, while others relied on publicly available materials. This variability may have influenced the extent to which document review corroborated interview data.

Fifth, although reflexive practices were used to mitigate researcher bias, the researcher's professional background in leadership development may have influenced interpretation. Reflexive memos, member checking, and an audit trail helped ensure that findings remained grounded in participant accounts, but complete elimination of interpretive bias is not possible in qualitative research.

Finally, the study's qualitative pragmatic design emphasizes practical insight rather than causal explanation. The findings illuminate how leaders operationalize succession planning but do not establish causal relationships between specific practices and leadership outcomes. Future research using mixed methods or longitudinal designs could explore how developmental strategies influence readiness, advancement, and organizational resilience over time.

9. Conclusion

This study examined how business leaders across public, private, and nonprofit organizations integrate leadership development, mentorship, and sponsorship into succession-planning systems. The findings demonstrate that effective succession planning is not a static HR procedure but a dynamic, strategically aligned developmental process that prepares individuals for future leadership roles through intentional learning, relational support, experiential practice, and equitable access to opportunity.

The study's unique theoretical contribution lies in its integration of Groves's structural succession-planning framework with the Howard–Sheth behavioral model. This dual-framework approach reveals that leadership readiness emerges not only from well-designed developmental systems but also from employees' perceptions of fairness, transparency, and access. By highlighting the interplay between structural coherence and perceptual credibility, the study advances a more holistic understanding of how leadership pipelines function and why employees choose to engage in them.

The study also offers practical contributions by illustrating how leaders operationalize succession planning in real organizational environments. Participants described concrete strategies—such as transparent communication of decision logic, structured mentoring and sponsorship, targeted stretch assignments, collaborative governance, and external networking—that translate conceptual models into actionable practices. These insights provide organizations with a practical roadmap for building leadership pipelines that are both effective and equitable.

Finally, the study underscores the broader social value of intentional succession systems. When organizations expand access to developmental opportunities, they strengthen leadership diversity, enhance organizational resilience, and contribute to more inclusive workplaces and communities. Succession planning becomes not only a mechanism for leadership continuity but also a pathway for advancing equity and positive social change.

Taken together, the findings suggest that organizations seeking to maintain competitiveness and continuity must invest in developmental systems that are strategically aligned, relationally grounded, experientially rich, and perceptually credible. By doing so, they can cultivate leaders who are prepared to navigate complex environments, support diverse stakeholders, and sustain organizational success over time.

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