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TO: Interested Religious Institute Leaders and Ministry Staffs

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DATE: April 22, 2017

SUBJECT: ***Stewardship and Succession Planning of Ministry Leaders for Religiously-Sponsored Ministries and Offices***

Introduction

Religiously-sponsored schools, social service ministries, and religious congregation initiatives are critically sensitive to how well their leaders are formed in the charism and values of the sponsoring community. When leaders were members of the vowed community, their years of formation took care of that critical dimension of leadership capability. Now that more and more lay colleagues are taking up leadership for these ministries, the fundamental nature of this qualification for leaders is ever clearer – either because of how well the ministry thrives when it is present, or how problematic things become when it is not.

This paper makes the case for adopting some of the talent stewardship and leadership succession planning methods that have been developed in large organizations as a means of supporting leadership succession for ministries that belong to large enough networks.

The notes that follow do *NOT* address charism formation programs themselves; that is a whole other topic, and many larger religious congregations have excellent models. Also, the note does *NOT* address the topic of leadership succession for those who hold canonical elected or appointed roles for community leadership.

Rather, the paper addresses **how to identify and cultivate and bring into leadership** the universe of lay people who have benefitted from experience and formation in a ministry charism, across larger geographies or ministries than might be locally visible.

I will reflect what the need looks like from my vantage point, and then I will outline some of the best practices used by large organizations for what they tend to call “talent management” or “leadership succession planning”. With appropriate adaptations for the ministry setting, I think larger religious institutes, or networks of related religious institutes, have an excellent opportunity to gain significant value from some of these methods.

The Need and Current Gap

I am aware that a key concern for apostolic religious communities is the future leadership pool available for their sponsored or affiliated ministries. This concern is independent of the details of canonical sponsorship structures or legal relationships but it does assume there is an intention to maintain the ministry in the tradition of the sponsoring community.

The ethos at the heart of a religiously-sponsored institution depends on leaders that are not only competent administrators but also persons formed in the tradition, values, and spirituality of the gospel charism of the founders.

When such leaders are already vowed members of the community their formation is a given, part of their preparation for vowed membership, even though each person lives that charism uniquely and not all vowed members are qualified for or temperamentally suited to leading institutional ministries.

As increasing numbers of lay persons take up leadership roles in ministries or offices of religious organizations, the focus on lay formation has been an important focus and will continue to expand. There are now and there will be in the future excellent programs for the formation of Boards of Directors or Trustees, for Chief Executives and Administrators, for faculty and staff and co-ministers and Sponsor Councils, etc.

While the formation of lay leaders is an important factor, it is already receiving attention; therefore, it is **not** the main focus of this paper.

By contrast, I observe that there is little systematic attention currently given across entire Institutes to the identification of leaders of ministries or functions who might succeed current leaders when the time comes for them to move on to another ministry or to step down from a full-time ministry role.

Within the local geographies surrounding religious ministries, there tends to be a strong informal network of relationships among vowed members and usually also with associates and other colleagues. Presumably these local and community networks are functioning to fill local leadership succession needs.

However, it is hard for members and associates in one geographic area, district, or province to know well their counterparts in another area. This is probably also true for the laity who are co-ministers in the offices and institutions operated by the religious institute.

As far as I can discern, there does not appear to be a developed, purposeful, and systematic method at the level of whole Institutes for matching qualified candidates from within the wider network to upcoming openings in valued ministries. And if that is not in place, even less so is there any conversation about how networks of apostolic religious institutes could collaborate in the identification and career development of lay ministry partners.

If this interpretation is correct, then the full potential of those committed to a ministry career is still untapped.

Personal Experience

I experienced the need for such a system first-hand when I served on the Board of a sponsored ministry that was seeking a leadership succession candidate, with a strong preference for someone formed in the charism of the founding community.

What the Board learned is that it proved very difficult to communicate this need effectively across the congregation. The existing communication channels and media that were available to use (weekly email bulletins for the most part and some mailing lists) weren't optimal for surfacing candidates, especially if suitable candidates might be people already fully engaged with their current role and not looking for a new assignment. No central lists, groups, or structures seemed designed to facilitate the task of leadership succession. The identification of potential candidates mainly proceeded in a time-intensive personal-networking; in other cases, search firms are used to fill the sourcing gap. I have a hunch that my experience is not unique.

Two Drawbacks of Informal Processes

Personal networking is good and should certainly remain. It is the selection process in which most people feel confidence. However, in organizations that are very large and geographically-dispersed, personal networking has two liabilities. First, is not efficient enough to carry the full burden effectively, which probably means unpredictable or inconsistent results that depend on local conditions and networks.

Additionally, networking methods via personal trust networks can also inadvertently contribute to a significant reduction in the diversity of the candidate pool, since the information is traveling primarily through networks of kindred spirits. Those who are from different age cohorts, racial backgrounds, or ministry experiences may be missed or overlooked simply because such networks have a life of their own. (It is worth noting also that sourcing of talent via informal personal networks is one of the many invisible ways that systemic "-isms" are unconsciously enacted in our society.)

By contrast, large business and nonprofits including many hospital systems rely on well-developed practices for talent stewardship and leadership succession planning so that the "supply" and "demand" of leaders can be kept in balance and so that the organization is well-prepared with a strong and diverse pool of potential candidates when critical positions must be filled.

Two Blind Sides Need Correcting: "What will be needed?" and "Who is prepared?"

My experience leads me to conclude that the missing variable is useful, current, relevant **information** and a **process** for stewardship and discernment for leadership succession.

At present, Boards and other leaders lack visibility into the depth of the potential leadership pool across a given institute. In similar fashion, qualified and motivated people in current ministries lack visibility into possible future positions that would enable them to continue to contribute to the mission.

This means that both sides of the succession planning process are blind to their full options – the side represented by ministries that now or soon will need candidates for leadership succession, and the side represented by persons formed in the charism who are desiring to work in the mission. The first one is the "demand" side and the second is the "supply" side, to use economic terms.

Best Practices to Consider

There might be value in exploring the implementation of some of the most useful features of leadership succession processes. In my prior career as a corporate Human Resources executive for an international company, I was responsible for implementing global talent management and leadership succession processes which were regarded as industry models. I won't recommend that religious institutes adopt such systems in totality but I will outline three of the most effective practices in case they seem useful in your context.

(1) Annual Leadership Succession Reviews at three levels: local, province, and institute;
(2) A Leadership Succession Data Base
(3) Proactive Planning

By contrast with other projects, leadership succession planning is one that has modest staff support requirements and doesn't entail much expense in physical assets or equipment. Its cost is almost entirely the willingness of leaders to give **time** to an organized process, which will almost certainly save them time down the road when the crises of succession come due.

Best Practice #1: Annual Leadership Succession Reviews

The foundation stone for effective leadership succession planning is a regular process that gets high quality attention from the responsible leaders and Boards. Once in place, it need not be onerous, and in fact, many corporate leaders report that the time they spend in leadership succession planning sessions is the most fruitful of all their activities.

The concept is simple: At each relevant level of the organization, a committee of leadership is accountable to prepare an annual review of two things: people capable of ministry leadership, and key leadership positions. The primary source for the review is the local level, which then feeds forward to province/district or similar if existing, and then to institute level reviews. A once-a-year requirement ensures that all parts of the system work in tandem.
(See process flow chart attached to end of this document.)

Level I Annual Review: Local Ministries

The first level for the annual review happens at each ministry or office or organizational unit itself, and it is the strong base on which every subsequent activity rests. In each school or retreat center or other ministry, every year there would be a report prepared and reviewed in a dedicated meeting by the senior administrator and the appropriate Board committee -- often, the Executive Committee.

The report would answer at least two questions:

> (1) "Which leadership **positions** in this organization are most critical for its sustainable ministry future?" and
>
> (2) "Which **persons** currently working or volunteering at this ministry have the potential and the willingness to be ministry leaders in the future?" This includes both vowed members and lay colleagues or associates, and it could include paid staff, volunteers, and Board members.

The two questions are separate: roles, and persons. Further queries might be made because additional information might be useful to the Board or leadership, such as "How diverse is our organization?" and "What is the estimated timing of future leadership succession needs based on retirement projections?" and "Are there potential successors from within the organization in line for any of the key roles?"

Rich Content

When the report is prepared, it would be more than a list – it would have a commentary that covers additional useful information. For example, if the key roles for that ministry are the senior administrator position and the Board Chair position, the commentary might indicate an estimated time before a potential retirement of the administrator or the known term expiration of the Board chair, whether there is an internal pool of potential successors, and perhaps some of the requisite or desired qualifications for successors.

An organization chart could show how the key positions relate to other positions and how many other ones there are. General background data might include the demographics of the staff and Board (age, race, gender, or other relevant features).

Larger ministries might have a number of positions listed as key for the future, smaller ones may have only one or two.

Personal Contact

Regarding persons listed as having future leadership potential in a sponsored ministry, the report should reflect what the person himself or herself actually is interested in, as well as what kind of potential the administration/Board assesses them to have. (This model does have a place for the discernment of the call experienced by the individual working in the ministry.)

Among other things, an important question to know the answer to is whether a talented committed person in one ministry would be willing to consider working in another ministry if it entailed a geographic move. The question doesn't imply any final commitment on either party's side – it is simply an indicator for estimating possibilities. Of course, including this kind of information in an annual review means that at some point each year, the leaders must have a conversation with those individuals to discuss their ministry career goals and hopes.

Catalyzes Action

Besides being submitted annually as a report to whatever entity has responsibility at the next level up, this local level annual review can be enormously helpful to the ministry itself. It keeps the administration and the Board regularly updated about the sustainability of the people resources for the ministry. It can mobilize action to develop promising individuals. It can inform recruitment practices to increase the staff or Board diversity in age, race, or professional backgrounds.

In each case, the annual review should result in a set of action steps that will address any immediate needs that are surfaced by the review and to build the longer term strength of the people resources of the organization.

Staff Support

The preparation of the information for such a review should be considered a Human Resources task for the organization; given that most smaller ministries do not have a dedicated HR person, the development of the report material would have to be taken up by an appropriate existing member of the administration or with the help of someone from the religious institute staff.

This local stewardship responsibility should not be thought of as a luxury or an option. If a ministry has matured so that it is investing time and care in the proper stewardship of its financial resources, it is ready for a similar level of attentive review to the even more critical resource of people.

Level II Annual Review: Province or District or Community or School System, etc. – If Existing

The second level for the annual review happens at the next-larger level of the system, and there are two purposes for this review: (1) To inform and "calibrate" leaders across a wider span about the status of leadership talent and succession issues; and (2) To add to the data information about positions and people who function at this next level…for example, Sponsor Council roles, or ministry office roles, or new initiatives, and the persons in these roles.

The second level review committee would involve an appropriate group of elected or appointed leaders and Board or advisory persons. It is important that people-review processes engage leaders who allow the group to "skip a level". Why? Because if the people doing the reviewing are exclusively the direct supervisors of the people who might be recommended for a new post some day, they may have a conflict of interest – they will desire to hold on to their best people, of course. A review committee is well-grounded with the addition of some persons from the next level up, who have a primary focus on the good of the whole.

Aggregate and Expand the Picture

The annual review at this level would entail a meeting dedicated to careful examination and discussion of two things:

> (1) The aggregated reports from all of the ministries within the Institute regarding their positions, potential future leaders, and other people-data; and
>
> (2) The key positions and persons with potential who are working at this next larger level, and perhaps most important, what are the current or anticipated needs for people who could step up to new ministry efforts to meet unmet needs.

The purposes of this annual review would be to gauge the depth of the ministry leadership pool, the state of the leadership succession challenges, and other important measures of sustainability and to facilitate the process of connecting potential talent in one ministry with an impending opening in another ministry. It is the last purpose that begins to create the visibility and the ability to source possible candidates across a wider scope of ministries.

In-Person Discussions Valuable

Some committees might prefer to do this review by inviting ministry administrators and Board Chairs to discuss their individual reports with them, in separate meetings or in a common meeting. At least initially, that kind of conversation is helpful because it involves "calibration".

For example, it might be helpful to notice and compare assessment methods if one ministry shows up with a list indicating that 95% of its people are capable of a future ministry leadership role and another ministry comes indicating that 5% are capable of that future potential. Is the first over-estimating its people? Or is the second under-developing its people? Or some of both? There might be no right answers, but the conversation itself leads to increased ability to compare views productively. It also has the indirect effect of telling those involved with the ministries that leadership is as attentively interested in the people side of the ministry as it is in the financial side.

Careful Handling of Private Data

Please be mindful that meetings of this sort – discussing people and positions – are best done in a face to face setting, and should be treated with appropriate confidentiality – recorded in updates to the data base but with suitable privacy for the individuals involved.

As with the local level, the preparation of data and the report at this level will require the time and attention of a staff person in support of the leadership.

Level III Annual Review: Institute as a Whole and/or a Network of Related Institutes

The fullest potential can occur when the Institute as a whole is attending to leadership succession planning, or if a process can be developed for review of openings and talent that engages multiple institutes with similar ministries, such as secondary schools. One way to do this would be for the annual review process to occur in depth in a specially-focused once a year session of an institute committee.

Aggregate and Expand the Picture Yet Again

The input to this institute level of review would be the aggregated reports from each of the intermediate units, plus similar review information on key positions and people with potential who are serving at the level of the institute as a whole.

The product of such an Institute level review process would be an evergreen and annually updated base of information that covers all the key positions in sponsored ministries and offices, all of the people with potential and interest in future leadership in ministry, and some sense of the timing and "pipeline" for leadership succession across the ministries of the institute. The data base should be maintained at the institute level, accessible to each of the levels that contributed to the data. This will return great benefit to them when they are interested in identifying potential candidates for their various openings.

Guides Wider Deliberations

At this widest level of the institute as a whole, the annual review process would be less likely to result in specific people moves but more likely to inform the creative planning and ministry initiatives of the institute and its component districts. For example, an annual leadership succession conversation is an excellent opportunity for discussion of diversity, of ministry maturity, of shared priorities for ministry, of the interests and desires of younger members, of the effectiveness of the formation and nurturing of lay leadership, and other human resources issues.

Point of Special Emphasis: This is *Leadership* Work, not Data Work

The review process depends on gradually building a useful data base, but more important than that, it depends on thoughtful conversations about leadership needs and the qualifications of persons in the ministry. A data base of many names is not in itself the solution – it is the willingness of leadership and Boards to use their judgment to calibrate and discern good matches and future potential. I am emphasizing this because I don't want you to be inclined to dismiss these processes as "technology" or "information systems". There is no doubt that good information will be critical – but it only becomes useful information if persons of good judgment have created it in the first place.

Let me also recognize that many leaders of faith based organizations have a hard time with the idea that you should differentiate positions or people on the basis of criticality for the future. Their instinct is that all people and positions on the team are critical. At the level of community, integrity, respect and teamwork this is certainly true.

But if some *ROLES* carry responsibilities that are extremely important and for which a great deal of discretion is used in selecting the incumbent, then these are examples of differentiations that must be stewarded well by the sponsoring community or Board. Also, some *PEOPLE* on the staff or Board have broader capabilities than others and their gifts can be invested in suitable roles in the future. This is also a stewardship responsibility.

Explicitly differentiating people can be uncomfortable if it feels like one is playing favorites or discriminating unfairly, but this need not be the case.

> (a) The truth is we cannot avoid the automatic internal process of judging people and performance – we ***do*** make differentiations; they should be examined and exposed to the light of conscious reflection.
>
> (b) Leaders should not duck the responsibility to make thoughtful, fair judgments and decisions when such stewardship work is appropriate.

Best Practice #2: A Leadership Succession Data Base

It should be evident from the preceding discussion of the annual review process that a common, user-friendly, accessible data base is the necessary tool for all ministries and Communities to populate from their review processes.

Simple and In Common is Essential

The most efficient approach to this idea of Institute-wide leadership succession is NOT to have each ministry and Community do their own thing, but rather to agree in advance about the basic, simple format that all parts will use in preparing their annual review data. This could be created by an appropriate small team that would set up a format for all the communities/ministries to use.

The database should be maintained and available at the institute level. I'd recommend being strict about uniformity in the basics, but also flexible so that ongoing additions or improvements can be added as they prove useful, as long as they will be added for the whole. There should always be a miscellaneous field for people to attach or include additional information that they find locally helpful but that is not actually required by the common data base.

The key is to avoid "gold-plated over-design" before you start anything, but also to avoid local variations in the core data requirements. Try for **Simple**, and **Shared**.

Use of Codes Can be Helpful

Various kinds of information can be designed into this process. For example, if a particular staff member is being identified as a potential future leader, it is common in talent stewardship systems to assign a code that can indicate how many kinds of roles a person might conceivable be suited for. For example,

> **E**= Executive Director or Senior Administrator; **B**= Board member; **T**= Senior team member.

Another type of code represents how many years until the person would be ready for such an assignment.

> **R**= Ready now; **S**= Ready soon (1-3 years); **L**= Ready later (3+ years). **W**= Well placed (ie not someone to consider for other roles, likely to complete their tenure in this or similar role)

Similar coding can be developed to indicate how long it will be before a critical role might need to be filled (estimated retirement), and whether such a role has anyone already identified as a likely or potential successor.

Once an annual review practice for leadership succession purposes has become familiar and experienced as valuable, it is not uncommon for leaders to expand it as a full review of human resource issues. For example, local ministries and communities might start to include review and action planning for individuals who are not candidates for further leadership but who should be further developed, and individuals whose performance might be problematic or whose roles have become obsolete. A regular context for thoughtful stewardship of people resources can prevent some smaller issues from becoming larger ones.

Best Practice #3: Proactive Planning

Once an organization decides to pay attention as a system to the leadership succession processes within it, and once it has invested the time to put in place a data base and an annual review process, **then** the potential for true proactive people planning comes into being. It doesn't replace any existing structures – but it provides support and improves sustainability.

What larger organizations do, generally, is to ensure that there are periodic people-development meetings (quarterly or monthly) in addition to the one required annual review. These more frequent meetings of senior leaders enable them to work with each other on specific anticipated openings or human resource issues.

However, even without adding anything beyond the annual review process and the resultant information based, the following are some examples of the potential planning opportunities:

Traction on Plans for Local Leadership Succession

Established ministries sponsored by the institute can be supported in going beyond good intentions and/or worries about future leadership succession. Board members can advocate for proactive succession plans, and leadership can broker information about people and offer encouragement across the ministries they steward.

Attentive Transition to Lay Leadership

Established ministries will be helped across the vulnerable threshold that occurs when they are ready to have a vowed member/founder be succeeded by a lay person.

Accurate Prospects for New Ministries

The prospects for new, fragile, and innovative ministry efforts can be more realistically assessed if there is access to knowledge about how many vowed members and how many lay persons might be available and interested in joining the effort.

Increased Communication Power

Avenues will exist for reaching a large base of committed people, especially co-ministers, when a ministry need surfaces.

Clearer Goals for Lay Leadership Formation

The "supply side" list of people who are ready and interested in leadership for ministry will be instructive.

If it is too **small** for the range of key roles that you anticipate needing to be filled in the next few years, then you have a data-based impetus and direction for your leadership formation and recruitment efforts for lay co-ministers.

On the other hand, if your pool of potential lay leaders is surprisingly **large** in light of your ministry openings, then you have a boon to steward well. If this were to be true, it would be liberating to the energies of community leaders, who would begin to have some visibility to the world of people committed to the ministry that goes beyond the vowed membership.

Until you have the data, you have only impressions.

Growth for Persons in the Ministry

The experience of being reviewed annually by a superior for one's potential and further development is usually positive for ministry colleagues. It may cultivate the potential for deeper commitment in persons who have not given it specific thought, and it provides colleagues with a sense of support and belonging to the larger mission.

Stimulus for Organized Board Recruitment

If you decide to include key Board leadership roles in your system, the process may stimulate more organized efforts to recruit strong Board members from local communities. Unless a ministry is regional in nature, Board members are most valuable if they are local to the ministry. On the other hand, institute level board succession planning might be very effectively supported through a data base of local Board members with the potential for further leadership.

More Informed Spiritual and Professional Formation for Vowed Members

The experience of an annual review can create a new and more acceptable method for members to engage with one another and with leadership regarding their own paths in ministry. It is not intended as a method for assigning members – but it can bring the needs of the common mission into view as data to inform the process of discernment that individual members and leaders go through to determine next steps in learning and in ministry.

Summary

- Leadership that is formed in the charism will be increasingly important as lay leaders take on sustaining the charism of religiously sponsored ministries.
- Current methods of leadership succession tend to rely on local knowledge, personal networks, and a few communication channels.
- Networking methods are trusted but not very efficient and may not be able to foster desired diversity.
- Without the right information and a way to access it, ministries are blind to the persons who might be available to fill leader spots, and ministry persons are blind to the ministries that might need their talents.
- Talent stewardship and leadership succession processes used by large organizations could be adapted successfully to address ministry needs.

- Three best practices are worth considering. Other bells and whistles could be added later, but a good start doesn't require much more than time.
- The main recommendation is an annual process of leadership succession review that occurs first at the level of each ministry, then at the intermediate level if it exists, then at the level of the institute.
- An evergreen, annually updated data based is the product of such reviews and provides all parties with access to relevant information when leader roles must be filled.
- The third practice that becomes possible if the first two are implemented is proactive planning for the people dimension in many dimensions of ministry.

Please know that I fully understand the difference between the more organic and communal culture/identity of religious congregations versus those of a corporation or big nonprofit. If the sample diagram I have attached arouses some resistance, please hang in there with it for a little while. Maybe the boxes can become circles ☺. The truth of the matter is that ministries are organizations that have to fulfill certain purposes, so disciplined methods of stewardship are entirely appropriate, and can be implemented with grace and personal warmth.

I wish you good luck!

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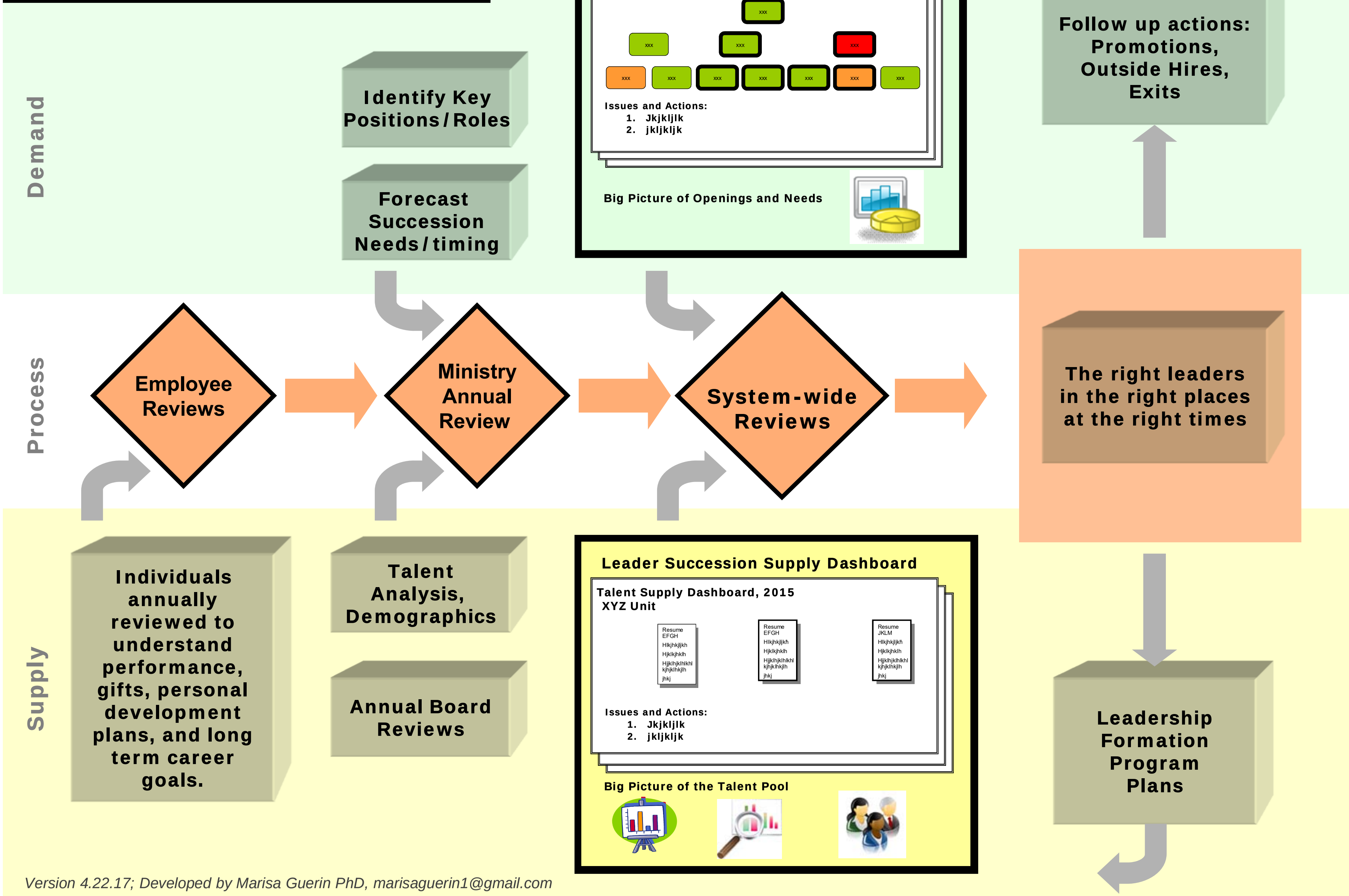
SAMPLE DIAGRAM –
Succession Planning System



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