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Research Article

THE ROLE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SUCCESSION PLANNING AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

Leadership continuity depends on more than identifying replacements for critical positions. Organizations also need succession systems that recognize qualified talent across different backgrounds and prepare future leaders to respond to varied employees, customers, and communities. This article reports a focused analysis of diversity and inclusion findings from a qualitative pragmatic inquiry involving 10 business leaders with succession-planning responsibilities. Semi structured interviews, public organizational materials, and industry sources formed the evidence base. Interview data were examined through iterative coding and thematic analysis. Intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines emerged as a major theme, with 24 coded references across nine participant accounts. Participants connected inclusive succession planning with transparent communication, stakeholder awareness, reviews of leadership representation, competency-based assessment, community participation, expanded recruitment networks, mentorship, and sponsorship. Their accounts indicate that organizations create diverse leadership outcomes through decisions made throughout the pipeline, including who receives information, development, visibility, and advocacy. Groves' succession-planning framework explains how leadership development can be integrated with continuity planning, while the Howard-Sheth theory of buyer behavior provides a lens for understanding how employees interpret the credibility and accessibility of advancement systems. The findings support an inclusive succession model designed to strengthen leadership depth, stakeholder responsiveness, organizational resilience, and long-term competitiveness.

Keywords: Succession planning, Diversity and inclusion, Leadership pipeline, Organizational competitiveness, Inclusive leadership, Talent development, sponsorship.

INTRODUCTION

Succession planning influences the people who will exercise authority, the knowledge that will inform future decisions, and the relationships an organization will carry into its next leadership period. A process built primarily around familiar candidates can maintain operational continuity while narrowing the perspectives available to the organization. Incorporating diversity and inclusion into succession planning broadens the search for leadership potential and gives more employees meaningful access to the experiences through which readiness is developed and evaluated. Diversity refers to variation in identity, culture, professional experience, geography, and perspective. Inclusion addresses whether those differences carry influence and whether employees can obtain information, development, and fair consideration. These concepts must be examined together. A workforce may be diverse while its leadership pipeline remains restricted if strategic assignments, mentoring relationships, sponsorship, and promotion discussions continue to circulate within established networks. An inclusive succession system evaluates representation and the opportunity structures that determine whose potential becomes visible. Inclusive leadership pipelines have strategic consequences. Organizations must interpret changing labor markets, customer expectations, community needs, and operational risks. Leadership teams with varied experiences may recognize information that a more homogeneous group would overlook, but the organization benefits only when its decision processes permit those perspectives to matter.

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Cook and Glass (2014) showed that leadership representation is shaped by institutional arrangements rather than individual effort alone. Zhang et al. (2023) linked succession planning with firm performance. Their work supports examining pipeline design as both an opportunity system and an organizational capability. This article is a focused scholarly publication derived from the author's doctoral business research study examining effective succession-planning strategies for developing diverse leadership teams and sustaining market competitiveness (Miller, 2026). The original doctoral study identified four primary themes: (a) strategic leadership development and mentorship, (b) intentional diversity and inclusion within leadership pipelines, (c) organizational alignment and governance support, and (d) measurement and continuous improvement. This article explores the second theme in greater depth, addressing the research question: What effective succession-planning strategies do business leaders use to ensure a diverse leadership team while maintaining market competitiveness? The analysis focuses on key strategies related to representation, stakeholder awareness, equitable leadership development, recruitment outreach, mentorship, and sponsorship. Participant quotations presented throughout the article are drawn from the original interview dataset and are attributed using the confidential participant identifiers established during the doctoral research to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Succession Planning as a Strategic Leadership Process

Succession planning has evolved beyond reactive replacement planning. An effective system identifies critical roles,

anticipates future capability needs, develops potential successors, and evaluates readiness before a leadership vacancy becomes urgent. Rothwell (2016) presented succession planning as an ongoing process for sustaining the availability of talent. Bano et al. (2022) similarly identified the integration of talent development and organizational priorities as a central best practice. These perspectives frame succession as a strategic capability rather than an administrative list of possible replacements.

Groves's (2007) succession planning theory provided the principal structural lens for this study. Groves integrated leadership development with succession planning through practices such as mentoring, coaching, action learning, talent assessment, and senior-leader engagement. The framework shifts the question from "Who is next?" to "How is the organization intentionally producing multiple qualified future leaders?" This shift is particularly important for inclusion. If the pipeline is developed continuously, organizations have more opportunities to identify overlooked talent, diagnose developmental barriers, and broaden access before a final selection decision. Leadership continuity and organizational competitiveness are closely connected. Vacancies in critical roles can interrupt strategy, weaken stakeholder confidence, and increase the loss of institutional knowledge. Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021) described succession planning as a sustainability concern, while Chitamba (2025) emphasized the connection among succession, leadership development, and organizational memory. An inclusive pipeline can add resilience by increasing the depth and variety of leadership options available during transition.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Leadership Opportunity

Leadership diversity is often measured by who ultimately holds senior roles, but representation is the cumulative result of earlier decisions. Recruitment sources determine who enters the talent pool. Performance criteria determine whose work is recognized. Developmental assignments influence who gains experience. Mentorship and sponsorship affect who receives guidance and advocacy. Talent reviews determine whose potential becomes visible. Inclusion must therefore be built into each stage of succession planning rather than assessed only after appointments are made.

Cook and Glass (2014) demonstrated the value of examining leadership representation through institutional structures. Their work suggests that organizational norms and opportunity systems can shape advancement patterns even when formal policies appear neutral. In succession planning, informal nominations and reliance on familiar networks may narrow the pipeline without an explicit intention to exclude. Structured criteria, multiple sources of evidence, and deliberate outreach can reduce this risk. Diversity is also broader than demographic variation. Participants in this study discussed cultural awareness, geography, community representation, technical expertise, and professional experience. These dimensions can strengthen leadership teams by introducing different information, interpretations, and stakeholder relationships. Paredes-Saavedra et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of team effectiveness, a useful reminder that diversity creates organizational value when leadership practices enable members to contribute and coordinate. Representation without inclusion may increase variety in the room but not variety in the decision.

Inclusion as a Competitiveness Capability

Organizational competitiveness depends partly on the quality of strategic interpretation. Homogeneous leadership groups may share assumptions that speed agreement but limit the range of alternatives considered. More varied leadership perspectives can improve environmental scanning, stakeholder understanding, and the evaluation of complex problems. Orsini and Sunderman (2024) linked leadership representation and organizational competitiveness, while Zhang et al. (2023) examined the relationship between succession planning and firm performance. These studies support treating pipeline composition as a business issue rather than a peripheral workforce initiative.

The value of diversity is not automatic. Inclusive leadership processes must convert different perspectives into usable organizational knowledge. Leaders need to invite contribution, manage disagreement constructively, and ensure that influence is not limited to historically dominant voices. Succession planning can support this capability by developing future leaders in collaborative settings, exposing them to unfamiliar stakeholders, and evaluating their ability to lead across differences. Competitiveness also includes legitimacy and responsiveness. Public and nonprofit organizations must understand communities, while private organizations must respond to changing customers, labor markets, and partners. Leadership teams that reflect or meaningfully engage these constituencies may recognize needs earlier and communicate with greater credibility. Participants' emphasis on community representation and culturally responsive leadership highlights this practical relationship between inclusion and organizational relevance.

Fairness, Access, and the Employee Interpretation of Succession Systems

Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior provided the study's behavioral lens. Although originally developed to explain consumer decision-making, the theory is useful for understanding how employees process organizational signals. Employees observe who receives development, how advancement decisions are communicated, and whether stated values align with outcomes. These inputs are interpreted through prior experiences, social influences, and perceptions of fairness. Applied to succession planning, transparent criteria, inclusive outreach, mentoring, and visible developmental pathways function as organizational stimuli. They can communicate that leadership opportunity is credible and accessible. Conversely, secretive nominations or repeated selection from the same networks may signal that participation is unlikely to matter. These interpretations can influence whether employees pursue development, share aspirations, remain with the organization, or disengage from the leadership pipeline.

The behavioral framework complements Groves's (2007) structural theory. Groves explains how to construct an integrated development and succession system; Howard and Sheth (1969) help explain how employees experience that system. An inclusive pipeline must succeed on both dimensions. It must distribute developmental opportunity in ways that prepare the capabilities the organization needs, and it must be perceived as sufficiently fair and credible to sustain employee participation.

METHOD

The underlying study employed a qualitative pragmatic inquiry design to explore succession-planning strategies used by business leaders in practice (Miller, 2026). A pragmatic approach was appropriate because the research focused on a real-world organizational problem and sought findings that leaders could apply to improve succession outcomes. Pragmatism also supported comparisons across diverse organizational contexts without assuming that a single succession-planning model would be effective in every setting (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). The present article draws on the original interview dataset to provide a focused examination of diversity and inclusion within organizational succession pipelines.

Participants and Sampling

Ten business leaders and organizational decision-makers participated in the original study (Miller, 2026). Participants represented public, private, and nonprofit organizations and had direct experience implementing, overseeing, or contributing to succession-planning and leadership-development initiatives. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to identify individuals capable of providing rich, experience-based insights regarding succession-planning practices (Palinkas *et al.,* 2015). Participants were assigned identifiers ranging from Participant 1 to Participant 10 to protect confidentiality. All participants received information regarding the study's purpose and procedures, and informed consent was obtained before participation. The diversity of organizational sectors and settings enabled the identification of recurring practices while preserving attention to contextual differences across organizations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured interviews guided by six open-ended questions (Miller, 2026). Interview questions explored participants' roles in succession planning, strategies used to identify and develop future leaders, barriers to implementation, approaches for addressing those barriers, methods for evaluating effectiveness, and additional questions regarding succession-planning practices. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and elicit illustrative examples. The interview protocol promoted consistency across interviews while allowing participants to describe how succession-planning practices functioned within their organizations. To strengthen contextual understanding, interview data were supplemented with public company information, leadership-development reports, organizational documents, and relevant industry publications. These sources provided additional context and opportunities to compare participant perspectives with organizational and industry evidence. Interpretive summaries were returned to participants for member checking to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the findings and ensure that participant perspectives were represented appropriately (Miller, 2026).

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy before analysis. The researcher used ATLAS.ti to organize and manage the coding process. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, including the phases of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. For the diversity and inclusion theme examined in this article, the analysis focused on participant discussions concerning leadership representation, equitable advancement opportunities, recruitment outreach, stakeholder and community engagement, mentorship, sponsorship, and the identification and development of leaders from diverse backgrounds (Miller, 2026). Comparisons across organizational settings were used to identify recurring strategies and contextual variations in implementation.

Trustworthiness

Several procedures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. These included member checking, triangulation through secondary data sources, repeated review of interview transcripts, comparison of findings with the study's conceptual framework and relevant scholarly literature, and maintenance of a detailed audit trail. Collectively, these strategies supported credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Evidence of data saturation emerged during the coding process. The cumulative code count reached 23 by the sixth interview, and Interviews 7 through 10 did not yield additional codes. Instead, these interviews reinforced the existing thematic structure, indicating that sufficient depth and breadth of information had been achieved to support the study's findings (Guest *et al.,* 2020; Miller, 2026; Saldaña, 2021).

FINDINGS

The second major theme in the study was intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines (Miller, 2026). Nine participants contributed directly to the theme, producing 24 coded references. Their accounts located diversity within a sequence of succession decisions rather than within recruitment alone. The practices they described included examining current representation, searching beyond familiar networks, applying relevant competency standards, incorporating stakeholder knowledge, and providing access to mentoring and sponsorship. Table 1 below depicts the demographics of the participants including gender, leadership role, industry and years of experience included in the research.

Participant	Gender	Leadership Role/Position	Industry/Sector	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Female	Business Owner / Consultant	Consulting / Legal Operations / Staffing	17 years
Participant 2	Female	Project Director / CEO and Founder	Higher Education / Grant Administration / Nonprofit Leadership	8 years
Participant 3	Male	Operations Manager / Executive Leader	Operations / Technology–Network Operations	10 years
Participant 4	Female	Founder / Inventor	Sustainability / Plant-Based Plastics / Entrepreneurship	8 years
Participant 5	Female	Manager of Training	Nonprofit / Workforce Development	7 years
Participant 6	Female	Certified Surgical Technician / Informal Leader	Healthcare / Surgical Services	18 years
Participant 7	Male	Quality Analyst	Healthcare / Quality Management	18 years
Participant 8	Male	Senior Strategy Director	Nonprofit / Higher Education	32 years
Participant 9	Male	CEO / Founder	Entrepreneurship / Professional Speaking, Coaching, and Authorship	3 years
Participant 10	Female	Consultant / Human Resources Leader	Private Equity / Healthcare / Human Resources	20 years

Note: Participant demographics

Transparency and the Inclusion of Employee Perspectives

Participant 1 connected inclusion with open communication and shared organizational context: I'm usually very open and

transparent with what's going on with the company . . . making sure that the team understands the bigger picture.

This approach enables employees to understand organizational priorities and contribute informed perspectives rather than merely execute assigned tasks. Transparency can strengthen inclusion because access to strategic information affects an employee's ability to demonstrate leadership judgment. If only a small inner circle understands the larger context, other capable employees may never receive the knowledge necessary to be recognized as ready.

Participant 1's account also illustrates the behavioral dimension of succession planning. Open communication signals that employees are trusted as contributors. Through the Howard–Sheth (1969) lens, this organizational input can shape perceptions of leadership accessibility and encourage engagement in developmental opportunities.

Culturally responsive and stakeholder-centered leadership

Participant 2 emphasized that effective leadership depends on understanding diverse stakeholders: "Understanding the people that you're serving and their unique needs and the diversity of the people that you serve . . . that's what makes this effective." This account positions diversity as an operational source of knowledge. Future leaders need the capacity to recognize different stakeholder realities and adapt organizational responses accordingly. The finding expands succession criteria beyond technical competence. A successor may understand internal processes but remain unprepared to lead if unable to interpret the needs of employees, customers, or communities. Inclusive leadership development should therefore expose emerging leaders to stakeholder groups, community contexts, and perspectives different from their own. Mentors can deepen this learning by helping employees reflect on assumptions and evaluate the consequences of decisions across groups.

Diverse teams as sources of strategic perspective

Participant 3 described a geographically and culturally varied team: "Fortunately enough, my team is diverse. . . . I have a UK-based team, and I also have a team that is offshore . . . teams scattered around the world." The response illustrates how leadership pipelines increasingly operate across geographic and cultural boundaries. Developing leaders in such environments requires the ability to communicate across differences, integrate distributed knowledge, and avoid assuming that one local perspective represents the entire organization. The strategic value lies not in geographic variety alone but in the use of that variety. Leaders must create structures through which dispersed employees can influence decisions. Cross-functional projects, global assignments, rotating facilitation, and collaborative talent reviews can enable different forms of expertise to become visible. These mechanisms can also provide evidence of who is capable of leading in complex environments.

Representation reviews and the examination of barriers

Participant 4 described a deliberate review of leadership equity: "Looking at where we are currently right now . . . how equitable are we when it comes to our leadership . . . and if we don't have that diversity, then asking ourselves why." Participant 5 emphasized reviewing the leadership pipeline for alignment with organizational diversity goals. These accounts demonstrate that representation data are most useful when they prompt diagnosis. A numerical disparity does not by itself explain whether the barrier lies in recruitment, developmental access, performance evaluation, sponsorship, retention, or final selection. Leaders need to examine where talent leaves or stops advancing and compare outcomes across groups. The question "why" converts representation from a reporting exercise into a succession-planning inquiry. Such reviews should be connected to action. If employees from some groups receive fewer stretch assignments, leaders can redesign assignment practices. If talent reviews rely on vague notions of executive presence, decision-makers can define job-related behaviors and require evidence. If advancement depends heavily on informal sponsorship, organizations can broaden access to advocates and strategic exposure.

Competency-based identification and trainability

Participant 6 emphasized capability and growth potential: "What is your skill set? Are you trainable? Because everything is hands-on. . . . I need the best person that has experience." The response highlights the need to preserve meaningful standards while expanding the pipeline. Inclusion does not require lowering leadership expectations; it requires ensuring that criteria are relevant, consistently applied, and not distorted by familiarity or unexamined preference.

Competency-based systems can support inclusion when organizations specify the capabilities required for future roles and provide multiple ways to demonstrate them. Evidence may include current performance, learning agility, stakeholder influence, strategic thinking, and ability to grow. Trainability is especially significant because succession planning concerns future readiness, not merely current mastery. Employees who have not previously received exposure should not automatically be interpreted as lacking potential.

Community participation in governance

Participant 7 explained, "My current leadership team consists of a board of 12 members . . . comprised of staff at the clinic as well as members of the community itself." Incorporating community members into governance enabled organizational decisions to reflect perspectives beyond the formal staff hierarchy. This practice demonstrates an expansive form of inclusion in which stakeholders participate in the structures that guide leadership and strategy. Community participation can also shape succession requirements. When governance includes people directly affected by organizational services, future leaders may be assessed partly on their ability to listen, communicate, and respond to community priorities. This expands the definition of readiness beyond internal administrative competence and connects leadership continuity to public legitimacy.

Intentional outreach and network expansion

Participant 8 described targeted recruitment outreach: "We were very intentional during the interview process to ensure our resources reached diverse organizations . . . for example, the Urban League and other community organizations." Participant 9 similarly discussed using a diverse sphere of influence to identify people with appropriate skill sets.

These accounts show that a diverse candidate pool is unlikely to emerge from unchanged recruitment channels. Intentional outreach expands the networks through which talent becomes visible. Partnerships with professional associations, community organizations, educational institutions, and peer organizations can reveal candidates who may not be reached through conventional referrals.

However, outreach is only the entry point. Organizations must connect recruited talent with development, strategic exposure, and transparent advancement criteria. Otherwise, diversity may increase at lower levels without altering the succession pipeline. Inclusive recruitment and inclusive development are mutually dependent.

Mentorship and sponsorship as access mechanisms

Participant 10 stated, “I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities.” This distinction is central to inclusive succession planning. Mentors provide guidance, feedback, and perspective; sponsors use influence to connect individuals with visible assignments and advancement opportunities. An employee may be well advised yet remain outside the succession pipeline if no decision-maker advocates for access. Mentorship and sponsorship can counter uneven access to informal leadership networks, but only when programs reach beyond employees already known to senior leaders. Organizations can establish transparent eligibility, prepare mentors and sponsors, monitor assignment distribution, and evaluate whether developmental relationships produce capability growth and opportunity. These practices help translate inclusion from intention into observable succession outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study indicate that inclusion affects succession planning through the cumulative decisions that create and signal leadership readiness (Miller, 2026). Strategic information, stakeholder exposure, representation reviews, competency standards, community participation, recruitment networks, mentorship, and sponsorship all influenced who could enter and advance through the pipeline. Addressing representation only when a position becomes vacant is therefore too late. At that point, prior decisions have already distributed the experience, visibility, relationships, and knowledge used to judge candidates.

This interpretation is consistent with Collins and Critchlow (2026), who described leadership development as equity infrastructure composed of leadership philosophy and representation, inclusive leadership competencies, visibility practices, and mentorship and sponsorship systems. The present study extends that analysis into succession planning. Participant 4's call to examine "how equitable are we when it comes to our leadership" reflects the need to treat representation as an organizational responsibility rather than an outcome left to individual ambition. Participant 8's intentional outreach to the Urban League and other community organizations illustrates how that responsibility can be translated into a wider candidate pipeline. Together, these accounts show that equity infrastructure begins before promotion decisions and must connect recruitment, development, exposure, and advancement.

Collins and Critchlow (2026) also distinguished visibility from advancement. Visibility can make underrepresented talent more recognizable, but it does not by itself provide access to consequential work or decision-makers. This distinction helps explain Participant 10's statement, "I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities." Mentorship supports learning and confidence, whereas sponsorship requires a leader to use influence to open doors. The current findings therefore support formal sponsorship as part of succession governance. If advocacy remains dependent on informal relationships, employees outside established leadership networks may receive advice without gaining the experiences through which readiness is judged.

The findings also converge with Hughes and Critchlow's (2026) qualitative study of retail leaders. Their six themes included strategic recruitment and hiring, leadership commitment and visibility, overcoming resistance, strategic use of data, advocacy for diversity, and diversity as a driver of organizational success. Participant 8's recruitment outreach closely parallels their strategic recruitment theme, while Participant 4's representation review parallels their emphasis on using data to identify barriers and monitor progress. Participant 7's description of a board that included clinic staff and community members further demonstrates how stakeholder participation can move inclusion beyond internal workforce measures and into governance.

Hughes and Critchlow (2026) recommended structured development pipelines that include leadership training, mentorship, and sponsorship for underrepresented employees. The present study provides additional detail about how such a pipeline is experienced by employees and interpreted as credible. Through the Howard-Sheth (1969) lens, employees observe who receives development, how opportunities are communicated, and whether stated commitments correspond with advancement decisions. Participant 1's emphasis on openness and helping employees understand "the bigger picture" shows why information access is part of inclusion. Transparent criteria and visible development pathways can encourage employees to pursue leadership opportunities; repeated reliance on closed networks may communicate that participation will not change the outcome.

The results also clarify the relationship between inclusion and competitiveness. Participant 2 explained that effectiveness depends on "understanding the people that you're serving and their unique needs and the diversity of the people that you serve." Participant 3 described a geographically dispersed team whose members brought perspectives from the United Kingdom and offshore locations. These accounts suggest that leadership diversity expands the knowledge available for decisions, but inclusion determines whether that knowledge is heard and used. This conclusion is consistent with Hughes and Critchlow's (2026) finding that diverse leadership can strengthen customer responsiveness, innovation, employee engagement, and organizational legitimacy when diversity is integrated into strategy and accountability.

Competency and inclusion were complementary rather than competing principles in participants' accounts. Participant 6 asked, "What is your skill set? Are you trainable?" and emphasized experience and hands-on capability. This focus supports the use of job-related standards, but it also highlights the need to distinguish current exposure from future potential.

Employees who have not received stretch assignments or senior-level access may appear less prepared because the organization has not provided comparable opportunities to demonstrate readiness. Groves's (2007) integrated framework supports addressing this problem through continuous development, assessment, mentoring, and senior-leader involvement rather than relying on a single nomination decision. The two added studies sharpen the practical meaning of the current findings.

Collins and Critchlow (2026) showed that inclusive culture, leadership competency, visibility, and formal support systems must operate together after diverse talent enters an organization. Hughes and Critchlow (2026) showed that recruitment, executive commitment, data, advocacy, and structured development can increase diverse representation and strengthen organizational success. The participants in the present study connect these insights to succession planning by showing where they belong in the leadership pipeline: diverse outreach expands entry, transparent competencies guide assessment, equitable development builds readiness, sponsorship creates access, representation reviews reveal barriers, and stakeholder participation tests whether leadership remains responsive to the people the organization serves.

Accordingly, competitiveness should be assessed through more than immediate financial performance. A diverse and inclusive leadership pipeline may strengthen bench depth, employee retention, stakeholder trust, adaptability, and continuity during transition. These benefits require measurement. Organizations should examine who enters the pipeline, who receives developmental assignments and sponsorship, how readiness ratings are distributed, who advances, and whether leadership transitions improve employee and stakeholder outcomes. Connecting these measures to operating reviews and leader accountability can prevent diversity goals from remaining separate from the succession system that determines future organizational direction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The findings support an inclusive succession-planning cycle with seven connected practices.

1. Define future-oriented leadership capabilities. Organizations should identify the strategic, technical, relational, and cross-cultural capabilities future roles will require. Criteria should be job-related, observable, and periodically updated.
2. Map representation throughout the pipeline. Leaders should examine applicant pools, development participation, stretch assignments, talent-review outcomes, readiness ratings, promotions, and retention. Stage-by-stage analysis helps locate barriers hidden by aggregate numbers.
3. Expand talent-identification channels. Candidate identification should draw from multiple leaders, performance evidence, employee aspirations, community or professional partnerships, and structured talent discussions rather than relying exclusively on informal nominations.
4. Distribute developmental access. Mentoring, coaching, cross-functional work, strategic meetings, rotational assignments, and acting responsibilities should be connected to capability gaps and made accessible through transparent processes.
5. Pair mentorship with sponsorship. Guidance should be supplemented with advocacy and access to consequential opportunities. Organizations should monitor whether sponsorship and visibility are concentrated within familiar networks.
6. Include stakeholder perspectives. Community members, employees, customers, or other relevant stakeholders can inform leadership capability requirements and, where appropriate, participate in governance or selection processes.
7. Measure inclusion and competitiveness outcomes. Organizations should track bench strength, time to readiness, internal placement, retention, employee perceptions of fairness, stakeholder responsiveness, and post-transition performance. Measures should guide improvement rather than function only as compliance reports.

Accountability should rest with operating leaders as well as human resources. Managers control many of the assignments, relationships, and visibility that create readiness. Senior leaders and governing bodies should regularly review pipeline health, ask where disparities arise, and require evidence that development decisions support organizational strategy. Organizations should also distinguish appropriate confidentiality from unnecessary opacity. Individual assessment details may require protection, but employees can still be told how leadership capabilities are defined, how developmental opportunities are accessed, and how to communicate career aspirations. Clear information helps employees make informed decisions about participation and strengthens the credibility of the succession system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Inclusive succession planning can broaden access to leadership resources that have often been distributed through informal relationships. Transparent development, mentorship, sponsorship, and outreach can enable capable employees from underrepresented or less-connected backgrounds to acquire experience and demonstrate readiness. This may improve professional mobility and expand participation in organizational decision-making.

The potential social benefit extends to the stakeholders organizations serve. Leaders who understand varied communities may be better prepared to recognize unequal effects, communicate across differences, and design responsive policies or services. Community participation in governance can further strengthen accountability by connecting leadership decisions with lived stakeholder experience. These benefits require sustained attention rather than symbolic representation. Organizations should evaluate whether diverse leaders possess real influence, whether advancement pathways remain open, and whether inclusive practices improve stakeholder outcomes. When diversity and inclusion are embedded within succession planning, leadership continuity can support both organizational competitiveness and more equitable opportunity.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The original project involved 10 purposively selected leaders and was designed to produce contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization (Miller, 2026). Participation

across several sectors supported comparison but did not permit industry-specific conclusions. The evidence primarily reflects the views of people responsible for succession and leadership-development activity. Employees at other pipeline stages, including those who were overlooked or unaware of the process, may evaluate its fairness and accessibility differently. Future research should include employees at multiple pipeline stages, human-resources professionals, board members, mentors, sponsors, and external stakeholders. Comparative studies could examine how inclusive succession practices differ by organizational size, sector, geographic scope, and leadership level. Longitudinal research could assess whether changes in outreach, assignment access, mentorship, and sponsorship lead to measurable differences in readiness, advancement, retention, and post-promotion performance.

Mixed-method studies could test relationships among perceived fairness, transparency, developmental participation, organizational identification, and intention to remain. Research should also distinguish diversity of identity, professional background, thought, geography, and stakeholder experience rather than treating diversity as a single construct. Further investigation of sponsorship is especially important because advocacy and access may explain advancement outcomes that mentoring alone does not. Finally, future work should evaluate how inclusive pipeline practices relate to competitiveness. Potential outcomes include innovation, decision quality, stakeholder trust, responsiveness, transition performance, and organizational resilience. Establishing these links would help organizations move beyond representation counts and understand the conditions under which inclusion produces strategic value.

CONCLUSION

Succession planning determines whether an organization will have prepared leaders and whether those leaders will bring sufficient knowledge of the workforce and stakeholders they serve. The focused analysis of Miller's (2026) study revealed 24 coded references to intentional diversity and inclusion across nine participant accounts. The strategies included transparent communication, attention to stakeholder needs, examination of leadership representation, relevant competency criteria, community participation, expanded outreach, mentorship, and sponsorship. The central conclusion is that diversity contributes to competitiveness when inclusion is embedded throughout the succession process. Organizations cannot wait until a vacancy occurs and expect a broad, ready candidate pool to appear. They must intentionally expand talent identification, distribute developmental access, transfer strategic knowledge, and examine where barriers affect advancement. Mentorship supports learning, while sponsorship connects prepared employees to the opportunities through which readiness becomes visible. Groves's (2007) succession planning theory explains how these practices can be integrated structurally, and the Howard–Sheth (1969) theory of buyer behavior highlights how employees interpret their fairness and credibility. Together, the frameworks demonstrate that inclusive succession planning must be both strategically designed and authentically experienced. Organizations that achieve this integration can strengthen leadership depth, stakeholder responsiveness, organizational resilience, and long-term competitiveness while creating more equitable pathways to leadership.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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