

Don't Let the Good Ones Go: Strategies for Retaining Leaders Who Don't Get the Promotion

CEO and C-suite leadership succession is an intricate, high-stakes selection process that demands careful management. HR leaders often cite retaining the internal leaders who are ultimately unsuccessful in their bids for the next role as one of the most significant risks to leadership succession.

Our research finds that these “silver medalists” who were not selected are, unsurprisingly, nearly twice as likely to report a desire to leave their organization (Figure 1). Because organizations assume that this is an inevitable outcome, retention efforts lack thoughtfulness, clarity, and direction -- if they exist at all.

However, this is a missed opportunity. Silver medalists are often seasoned leaders in critical roles, and their departure can be highly disruptive with loss of institutional knowledge, experience, continuity and a ripple effect on leadership, teams and culture.

To help organizations navigate this nuanced terrain, Russell Reynolds Associates has identified eight practical strategies for retaining and engaging silver medalists—across individual development and intentional succession planning.

Figure 1: Turnover intent – Comparing silver medalists against all leaders



Source: RRA H2 2024 Global Leadership Monitor, n=2,611 CEOs, C-level leaders, and next gen leaders; n=47 silver medalists

A **successful candidate** is the individual ultimately selected and appointed to a key leadership role as part of an organization’s succession process.

A **silver medalist** is a candidate who was a finalist in a succession process, but was not ultimately chosen for the role at that time.

Individual development: Demonstrate continued commitment to silver medalists' expertise and growth

Unsurprisingly, our research identified that, on top of being more likely to leave their organizations, silver medalists also experience more feelings of resentment, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction.

Following a succession process,

72%

of silver medalists
felt less loyal to
their organization.

72%

of silver medalists felt
less excited to come
to work every day.

57%

of silver medalists
felt frustrated or
resentful towards
their organization.

Source: RRA H2 2024 Global Leadership Monitor, n=47 silver medalists

To prevent these negative sentiments from eroding team morale and resulting in attrition, organizations must proactively take steps to keep silver medalists engaged. We outline three strategies organizations can use to demonstrate continued commitment to silver medalists' expertise and growth:

1. Discuss alternative career paths through scenario planning

According to Russell Reynolds Associates' H2 2024 [Global Leadership Monitor](#), 68% of silver medalists became unsure about the direction of their career shortly after the succession process ended. To get ahead of this, CHROs and organizational leaders driving a succession process need to front the conversation: "What if this does not happen? What other opportunities within the organization might excite you?" It is important to play out different scenarios on an ongoing basis.

Holistic assessments, such as RRA's [Leadership Portrait](#), can surface a leader's current capabilities and potential, further enabling the development of alternative career paths. Additionally, maintaining an open dialogue gives organizations and leaders greater flexibility and optionality, and can help evolve individuals' ambitions throughout the process.

However, organizations should exercise caution when making promises, whether explicit or implicit, about future roles. Even verbal assurances can lead to an erosion of trust if the organization is unable to fulfill those commitments.

Stories from the field:

Exploring broader aspirations with CEO candidates can reveal new opportunities for organizations. In a recent succession process, one candidate's vision exceeded the organization's readiness for change. To future-proof the firm and address emerging concerns, the organization established a digital and transformation function, appointing the silver medalist to lead it forward.

2. Signal that silver medalists remain promising leaders

Silver medalists often end up reporting to the successful candidate, creating a delicate dynamic. Dynamics like this contribute to our finding that 66% of silver medalists feel that their careers stalled after succession.¹

Organizations can affirm silver medalists' value and potential by providing clear and constructive feedback, recognizing their contributions and offering development opportunities (Figure 2) to signal to them and the broader firm that they remain promising, up-and-coming candidates. This is even more powerful when the successful candidate supports the silver medalist's growth by creating opportunities and pathways for their future advancement.

Figure 2: Developmental pathways should be tailored to candidates' needs and organizational context



Stories from the field:

In CEO succession processes, it is not uncommon for candidates to undergo assessments without receiving any feedback—neither on their strengths nor on areas for development—beyond the processes' outcome. In a CEO succession process of a listed Japanese manufacturing company, one candidate noted that it would have been helpful to understand his development needs for the future, especially as he continues to serve in a key executive committee role.



3. Invest in development exposure to continue to build future role readiness

Silver medalists are more accepting of outcomes when they perceive clear gaps between themselves and the successful candidate. For well-suited individuals who may be the successful candidate's future successor (but require time to build readiness for the role), cultivating a strong relationship with the new leader can help. This includes serving as a trusted advisor, engaging with key stakeholders, and contributing to critical decisions to position them for future succession. Silver medalists are likely to jump at these opportunities, as only 32% of them reported feeling less confident in their decision-making abilities post succession.¹

Finally, transparency around advancement timelines and realistic expectations is essential, along with ensuring the new leader understands the importance of retaining the silver medalist as a potential successor.

Stories from the field:

At a global manufacturing company, the CxO succession process involved assessing both internal and external candidates using a consistent approach. All candidates received feedback on their strengths, development areas, and any leadership gaps identified through the assessment. Although the new CxO was ultimately appointed from outside the organization, the silver medalist was to be developed with an eye towards becoming the CxO's successor in the medium to long term.

Enhance the process: Intentional succession planning reduces overall turnover

To reduce C-suite turnover and strengthen leadership continuity, organizations should view succession planning as a strategic investment. Shifting from simple replacement to a focus on development, transparency, and candidate experience builds a robust pipeline of future leaders. The following practices illustrate how succession planning can become a true competitive advantage.

Succession can become a retention risk if not done right: When succession practices are informal and unstructured, leaders are 22 percentage points more likely to consider leaving the organization.²

1. Adopt developmentally-focused succession planning

Having a much longer succession planning process—at least 18 months for C-suite leaders and ideally [a five-year time horizon for CEO succession](#)—allows organizations to approach succession as a leadership development program. This broader focus emphasizes growth rather than simply selecting a replacement. A process centered solely on selection and “chosen” individuals can risk disenfranchising others.

In contrast, a developmentally-focused approach uses assessments to uncover leadership insights and creates highly individualized development pathways. Regular, structured check-ins reinforce a commitment to investing in the entire C-suite, fostering a sense of collective development among senior leaders. This inclusive process can also reveal future leaders who may not have been initially identified.

Stories from the field:

At a global manufacturing company, yearly talent management reviews are conducted as part of a leadership development program to nominate potential successors and refine their development pathways. Development takes the form of continued education, job rotation, geographic relocation, added assignments and responsibilities, and more. As a result, the organization enjoys a strong reputation for career development and retention is high.

2. Be transparent about the role's success profile

A forward-looking success profile outlines the leadership qualities, capabilities and experiences needed to guide an organization into the future. It is shaped by industry trends, strategic priorities, stakeholder expectations, and organizational culture, ensuring leaders can drive lasting value and transformation.

Organizations should clearly define the success profile of the role, emphasizing the necessary attributes for where the organization is headed. They should clearly articulate these requirements in job specifications, scorecards, or conversations, and ensure transparency about any gaps in leadership competencies or job experience.

Stories from the field:

A professional services firm was looking for a replacement for their retiring CEO and had designated an internal candidate as successor and interim CEO. The internal candidate had a strong background in the organization's core strengths. However, the board wanted someone with strengths in their growth business but did not communicate this to the candidate. Eventually an external CEO was appointed, and the internal candidate left the firm partly due to the lack of transparency.

3. Select succession candidates for the right reasons

We often find candidates in succession processes for a multitude of reasons—self-selection, nomination, recognized potential, or even as a retention strategy. Regardless of whether they are a designated successor or dark horse, there must be compelling and legitimate reasons for their inclusion. Once it becomes evident that a candidate is not the right fit, the succession committee should promptly remove them from the process to preserve long-term relationships built on trust that will be difficult to repair once lost.

Stories from the field:

In response to calls for greater diversity, a woman leader with a narrower management scope was introduced in an urgent succession process. While her potential was clear, the assessment revealed an experience gap that limited her immediate viability with the board and external stakeholders. The organization aligned around current vs future expectations to address these concerns; while this leader wasn't the immediate answer, she now has a clearly defined development roadmap within the longer-term succession plan.

4. Pay attention to details in the candidate experience

Missteps such as an extended waiting period or accidental exposure to process updates, can negatively impact the candidate experience.

To improve, ensure:

- In-person presence for key moments
- Proactive oversight of timing, sequencing and coordination among stakeholders e.g., CHRO, chairman, board
- Consistency in messaging and information flow
- Timely feedback between interviews

Stories from the field:

The CEO of a privately-owned firm planned to transition out of the role, inviting interested partners to join the succession process and undergo succession-oriented assessments. When the search was expanded to external candidates, an internal candidate learned of the change late in the process, at the same time as the board. This led to frustration, decreased trust in the process, and reduced openness to feedback when they were not selected.

5. Plan for potential turnover

Supporting silver medalists may also involve open, mature conversations around external career opportunities that better serve their interests. In some cases, executive turnover may be desirable if retaining an individual could hinder alignment with the new CxO's agenda or destabilize leadership. Maintaining a strong talent bench behind internal succession candidates helps minimize the impact of their departure and ensures business and leadership continuity during times of change.

Stories from the field:

Failing to promptly and clearly transition key internal candidates can prolong uncertainty and slow down the new CEO's ability to set direction. In a CEO succession process at a technology company, the continued presence of a leading, but ultimately unselected, candidate created ambiguity and power struggles within the leadership team. This not only undermined the authority of the new CEO but also led to divided loyalties, hampering strategic alignment and the company's ability to move forward decisively.

Questions to guide succession planning and retention

Choosing the right strategy to manage succession and retain silver medalists requires balancing business priorities with individual aspirations. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; the best approach depends on the unique needs of both the organization and the candidate. When planning for succession, consider the following key questions:

1. How transparent and clearly communicated are your selection criteria, advancement timelines, and expectations for future leadership roles?
2. How well do you understand the aspirations, motivations, and development needs of successor candidates, and how do these align with your organization's long-term plans?
3. What meaningful opportunities—such as high-impact projects, expanded leadership responsibilities, or increased visibility with senior stakeholders—can you offer silver medalists to demonstrate your continued investment in their growth and future with the organization?
4. How do you balance the evaluation and development of succession candidates who are ready now versus those who may be future leaders, and what strategies do you use to manage and support both groups effectively?
5. Is your talent pipeline robust enough to support business and leadership continuity in the event of planned or unanticipated turnover?

Bringing silver medalists into plans for your organization's future

Silver medalists are often among the organization's highest-performing leaders. Retaining these individuals preserves both institutional knowledge and the strength of the leadership bench, with an emphasis on sustaining their engagement and motivation—not just their continued presence.

By adopting intentional strategies such as developmentally-focused long-term succession planning and thoughtful communication, organizations can reduce turnover risk and retain silver medalists as valuable contributors to the organization's future success.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impact the turnover intent of executive leaders who were silver medalists in a formal succession process. After reviewing the academic literature and interviewing **15** RRA consultants, **eight** strategies for de-risking the turnover of silver medalists were identified. To collect data for this study, H2 2024 Global Leadership Monitor participants were asked to indicate if they participated in a formal succession process within the last 2 years. Respondents who answered yes were funneled into this study's questionnaire (n=227). Upon completion of data collection, statistical analyses were used to assess the relationship between survey items and turnover intent. Following the survey, we then spoke with **eight** leaders who were silver medalists to better understand their candidate experience.

Authors

Zoe Chan is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Board and Leadership Advisory practice. She is based in Toronto.

Tsutomu Mito is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Leadership Advisory practice. He is based in Tokyo.

Randy Octuck is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Assessment and Development Commercial Strategy and Insights team. He is based in San Francisco.

Peter Pickus leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Assessment and Development Commercial Strategy and Insights team. He is based in North Carolina.

Keiko Shimada is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Leadership Advisory practice. She is based in Tokyo.

Sharon Tan is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Assessment and Development Commercial Strategy and Insights team. She is based in Singapore.

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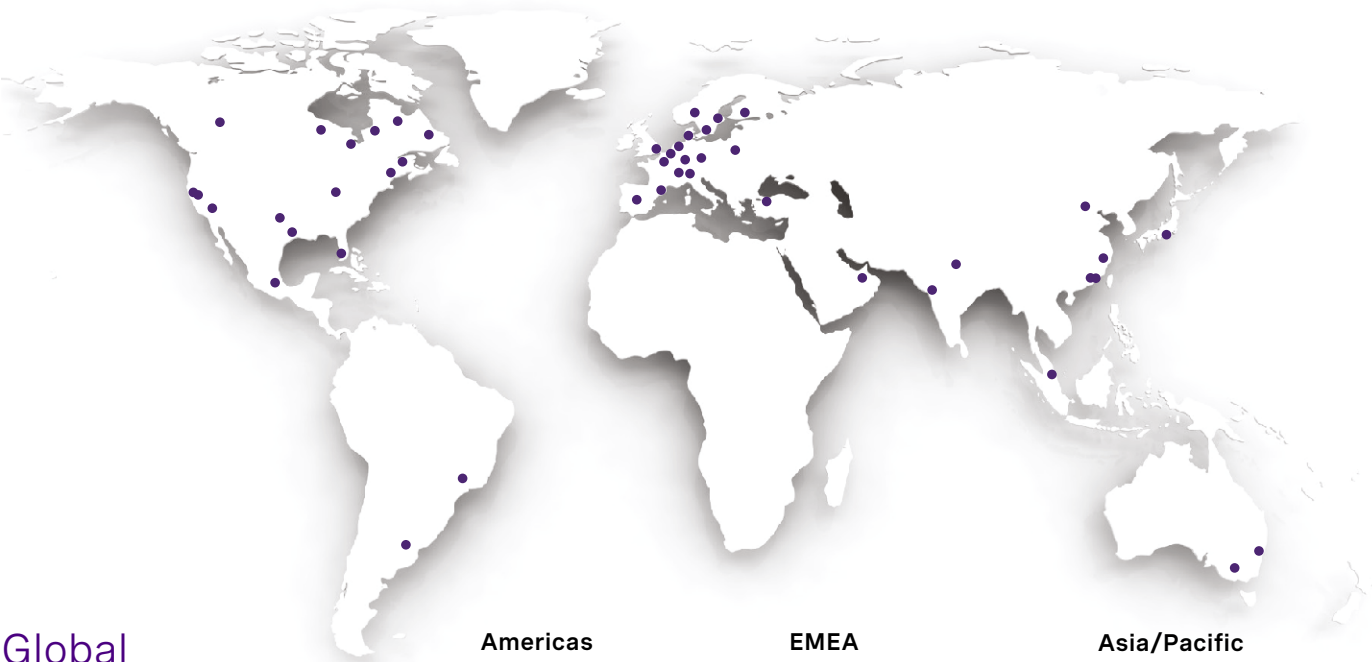
¹Source: RRA H2 2024 Global Leadership Monitor, n=47 silver medalists

²Source: RRA H1 2024 Global Leadership Monitor, n=1,108 C-level leaders and next gen leaders

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