

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 133 · WORKSHEET

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Leave It Stronger

The most important test of your leadership is not what you build, but what happens the day after you leave. Emma Walmsley handed GSK to Luke Miels and stayed through the transition, and she argues succession is a responsibility that starts on day one. Disney shows the cost of getting it wrong and the shape of getting it right, and this episode gives you three jobs and four steps to leave it stronger.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Walmsley's Line — and the Handover Behind It

Emma Walmsley, who led the drugmaker GSK for nearly nine years and now takes over at HP, said something about leaving that every leader should steal. She said that as a chief executive, you hope to leave the company you love stronger than you found it, and to prepare for seamless succession. She added that she was proud to have done both. Then she did something rarer than saying it. She handed the company to Luke Miels, a leader she had worked alongside for years, and stayed on through the transition to support him.

2. Succession Starts on Day One

Walmsley was direct about succession in a way most leaders avoid. She argued that succession is not something you work out at the end. It is a responsibility that starts on day one. Not when you are tired. Not when the board asks. Day one, when you still have all the energy and all the options.

3. Why Leaders Put It Off

First, planning your exit feels like planning your own irrelevance, and nobody gets promoted by imagining themselves gone. Second, naming a successor creates rivals. The moment you pick one person, everyone else starts calculating what they lost. Third, there is a quiet belief underneath it all, that nobody can do this quite like you can, so naming a successor feels like lowering the standard. Every one of those reasons is understandable. Every one of them is also how a company ends up with a gap at the top.

4. Disney, Twice

Look at Disney, twice. The first handoff went from Bob Iger to Bob Chapek, and it was rushed and poorly supported, with the old leader still in the room and the new leader without real room to lead. It ended with Chapek out and Iger called back to stabilize the company. That is what a succession looks like when it is treated as an announcement instead of a process. Then look at what Disney did next time. They named Josh D'Amaro as the next chief executive weeks before the transition, giving him time to be seen in the role, and they elevated Dana Walden, the other leading candidate, into a bigger creative role as President and Chief Creative Officer. Same company, same stakes, completely different discipline.

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5. Three Jobs, Not One Name

First, build the bench, by giving people real decisions before they get the title. Second, name the successor early enough that they can be tested, coached, and seen, while you are still there to help. Third, care for the room after the decision, especially the runners-up, because the announcement that keeps one leader and loses two others is not a successful succession. It is a slow resignation letter from the people you most needed to keep. And when you do hand over, hand over decisions, not just advice. Advice keeps you in the room. Decisions move the room to someone else. The test is simple: in the final stretch, are the hard calls still coming to you, or are they starting to go to your successor, with you in the background?

The picture: if you were away for a month, who runs your situation? Not who covers your inbox. Who makes the calls your team currently waits for you to make? If you cannot name that person, you do not have a succession problem in the future. You have a single point of failure right now.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name your one-deep bench.** For each responsibility your team depends on you for, write down one name who could carry it for a month. Not a team. A person. Where you cannot name one, you have just found your most urgent gap.

Responsibility one — who could carry it:

Responsibility two — who could carry it:

Where I cannot name one (my most urgent gap):

- [ ] **Step two — hand that person one real decision this week.** Not a task. Not a draft for your approval. A decision, with the outcome attached, that they own end to end. You can coach them before and debrief them after, but the call has to be theirs, or the bench is just a list of names.

The person:

The real decision they will own:

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- [ ] **Step three — draw the lanes for the handover.** Tell your successor, and your team, what is still yours to decide and what is now theirs. Ambiguity is what turns a helpful predecessor into a hovering one. Clear lanes let you support without steering, and let them lead without looking over their shoulder.

Still mine to decide:

Now theirs to decide:

- [ ] **Step four — plan the runners-up conversation before you need it.** If you pick one person, decide now what the others get. Scope, a title, a path, a real role that keeps them in the room. Do not let announcement day be the first day you think about the people you did not pick. That is how you lose the bench you just built.

The person I did not pick:

What they get (scope, title, path, role):

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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