

// EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Frontline Succession Is a Business Risk, Not Just an HR Issue

The most consequential succession gap may not be in the boardroom. It may be on the plant floor.

Succession planning is increasingly recognized as a strategic priority across the meat industry. Yet the conversation often begins at the top of the organization: executive leadership, critical corporate roles, and long-term leadership continuity.

The Meat Institute's Workforce Experience Committee, comprised of HR and L&D leaders representing processors across the industry, examined a different and equally consequential question:

Who is prepared to lead the plant when today's frontline leaders move on, and how are organizations identifying, developing, and advancing the people who will replace them?

The answer points to a significant gap. In many plants, the leadership pipeline begins only when a position becomes vacant. Promotion decisions are often driven by performance in the current role rather than demonstrated readiness for the next one. Career paths are unclear, leadership development begins too late, and organizations lack the data to consistently identify and prepare their next generation of supervisors.

The result is not simply an HR challenge. It is an operational and business risk.

The Committee set out to:

1. Define the forces creating the frontline succession gap.
2. Quantify the business risks associated with an underdeveloped frontline leadership pipeline.
3. Equip organizations with practical tools to assess their current state and identify opportunities to strengthen frontline career pathways and succession readiness.

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We give promotions, but we don't teach people how to be a boss, or how to identify talent.

A TALENT LEADER AT A MID-SIZE PROCESSOR

This executive summary provides a high-level view of the research and the resources developed from it. More importantly, it reframes frontline succession as a business imperative, with direct implications for food safety, operational performance, revenue, margin, and workforce stability.

// THE ROOT CAUSE

Why the Wrong Promotion Happens, and Why the Cycle Repeats

For many frontline employees, there is still only one visible path forward: do the job well, then become the person who manages everyone doing that job.

Without defined career paths, objective readiness criteria, and data to inform promotion decisions, organizations naturally gravitate toward their strongest individual performers.

But performance in the current role is not the same as readiness for the next one.

Technical proficiency does not automatically translate into leadership capability. The employee who can consistently run the line, solve production problems, or exceed expectations may not yet have the skills required to coach employees, manage performance, communicate effectively, or lead a team.

That disconnect creates a cycle that repeats across plants:

- **Hiring becomes harder.** Frontline roles compete for the same Millennial and Gen Z talent sought by virtually every industry, while many manufacturers continue to position plant jobs as employment rather than a career. The manufacturing industry is projected to require 3.8 million additional workers by 2033, with nearly half of those roles potentially going unfilled.
- **Turnover erodes the pipeline.** Frontline turnover approaches 40% annually in many organizations. When employees leave before development takes hold, organizations continually restart the hiring and onboarding cycle rather than building institutional capability.
- **Readiness remains difficult to measure.** Being highly effective in an individual contributor role and being prepared to lead others require different capabilities. Yet only 45% of new supervisors receive leadership training during their first year.
- **Promotions default to performance rather than potential.** When readiness isn't clearly defined, the top performer often becomes the default candidate for promotion. Research indicates that organizations make the wrong management promotion decision roughly 82% of the time. The consequences can include a struggling supervisor, the loss of a high-performing operator, and increased turnover across the team.
- **The vacancy cycle begins again.** Approximately half of employees report leaving a job because of their manager. When an individual is promoted without the preparation, support, or capabilities required to lead, the organization can lose both the newly promoted manager and members of the team, and ultimately find itself recruiting for the same position again.

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HR says a person isn't ready. Ops says they are. So we send them up anyway, and set them up to fail.

AN EXECUTIVE AT A LARGE PROCESSOR

The solution is not simply to hire differently. It is to build the pipeline differently.

- **Recruit for potential.** Not simply immediate job fit.
- **Design onboarding around retention and readiness.** Not basic orientation.
- **Develop role-specific capability.** Rather than relying on informal shadowing.
- **Establish visible career pathways.** So employees understand what advancement requires.
- **Measure readiness objectively.** Before making promotion decisions.
- **Develop frontline leaders before the position becomes vacant.**

The goal is to move succession planning from a reactive replacement exercise to a continuous system for identifying, developing, and advancing frontline talent.

// WHAT'S AT STAKE

Food Safety. Revenue. Margin.

Frontline succession stops being an HR issue when its consequences reach the operation.

An underprepared employee can affect food safety, production performance, quality, retention, and ultimately financial results. The business case can be seen in three areas:

Food Safety

Food safety ultimately depends on people executing critical processes correctly and consistently. Two decades of FDA and USDA data point to the importance of human performance in preventing food safety failures. Recalls have increased 20% since 2020, averaging approximately \$10 million each, with 78% attributed to contamination or allergen exposure, the very hazards disciplined training and demonstrated competency are designed to control.

Revenue & Operational Performance

When employees are placed into critical roles before they are fully prepared, the impact appears on the plant floor: increased equipment downtime, additional scrap and rework, lower throughput, and production that falls short of plan.

Workforce readiness is operational readiness.

Hidden Costs

Turnover compounds every other challenge. Replacing an employee can cost more than one-third of annual salary, and at frontline turnover rates, those costs escalate quickly. For a 300-person plant experiencing 40% annual turnover, replacement costs alone could approach \$2 million annually, before accounting for lost productivity, overtime, onboarding time, training, and the loss of experience from the workforce.

The cost of an underdeveloped talent pipeline is not confined to the HR budget. It is embedded throughout the operation.

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So much is embedded in the people. Historically, training is word-of-mouth, following, mentoring. The risk is you pass on the bad habits along with the good.

A WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
LEADER, MID-SIZE PROCESSOR

// FROM RISK TO READINESS

What Organizations Can Do Differently

The opportunity is to build a frontline talent system that connects recruiting, onboarding, development, competency, career progression, and succession planning.

Instead of asking, “Who can fill this opening?” organizations can begin asking: “Who are we developing today to be ready for this role tomorrow?”

That shift changes the economics of the workforce.

It creates a more deliberate approach to identifying high-potential employees, developing the capabilities required for advancement, and creating visible career pathways that give frontline employees a reason to stay and grow.

It also creates greater confidence in promotion decisions, because advancement is based on demonstrated readiness rather than simply being the best person at the job they currently hold.



// WHAT'S INSIDE THE FULL REPORT

Three Layers of Insight and Action

This executive summary provides the headline. The full report takes the analysis further across three areas:

- **The Data.** The research behind the challenge, including workforce demographics, turnover, retirement trends, frontline leadership gaps, and the financial implications of ineffective promotion and succession practices.
- **The Approach & Proof.** A practical framework for strengthening frontline talent, from recruiting and onboarding through development, career progression, and leadership readiness, supported by examples of organizations that have invested in these practices and achieved measurable improvements in retention, operational performance, and internal advancement.
- **The Tools.** Practical resources organizations can use immediately, including a 10-question Frontline Succession Assessment to establish a baseline of current readiness and a Hidden Cost Calculator to estimate the potential impact of turnover, waste and rework, unplanned downtime, and inefficient onboarding.

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We're trying to add structure to a dream. A formal talent strategy has never really existed before now.

A TALENT LEADER, MID-SIZE PROCESSOR

Where to Start

“Nobody funds a problem you cannot see the size of.” Here's where to start closing it, and start growing from it:



The full report: the data, the framework, and proof from processors who've already invested in this.

meatinstitute.org/FrontlineReport



The Frontline Succession Assessment: 10 questions that show where your plant stands today, and what to fix first.

meatinstitute.org/FrontlineAssessment

Both are available to Meat Institute members, and were presented at the Meat Institute Solution Summit.