



Who's Hosting Now? Where Sony Went Wrong in Their Jeopardy! Succession Plan

“The secret to happiness, of course, is not getting what you want, it's wanting what you get.

– Alex Trebek

Jeopardy! is one of the world's most popular quiz shows. It's also a recent case of succession planning gone wrong. The show's long-time host, Alex Trebek, died in November of 2020, at which point Jeopardy! announced that they had made no plans for his replacement.¹ How could such a grand organization not have had the time to plan for succession? The answer isn't that they didn't have time, it's that they didn't take advantage of the time they had available.

→ THE PROBLEM

Before his death, Alex Trebek was the host of Jeopardy! for 37 years. He was a familiar and largely beloved host, known for his confidence and consistency. In March of 2019, however, Trebek had some bad news to share. He announced in a video that he had been diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer.¹ A year and a half later, Trebek passed away. What was Sony doing during those months? One would think they'd been given enough reason to launch a full-scale succession planning process, developing internal candidates, hunting for external talent, and onboarding the final successor. Not so. Instead, Trebek hosted the show until he was physically unable to do so.² Then, Sony made a plan. The company decided that their best bet was to go with Ken Jennings, a former contestant who held the record for longest winning streak.³ Jennings had no hosting experience but Sony's executives were confident he would grow into the role. Unfortunately, that plan went sideways.



→ WHAT HAPPENED

Shortly before Jennings was to take on the role as Jeopardy!'s host, old tweets resurfaced in which he'd made insensitive remarks. As a result, Sony decided to open the floor, giving big names like Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, and CNN anchor Anderson Cooper a chance to host the show. Jeopardy! executive producer and former stand-up comedian, Mike Richards, also threw his name in the hat. Sony's executives felt he looked the part and had the right amount of charm, so they decided to give him the job. That's when another round of scandals much worse than Jennings' tweets began to surface. Stories of old lawsuits from Richards' producing days emerged, alongside accusations of pregnancy and gender discrimination. The consensus on social media was that Jeopardy's succession planning process had been rigged, and when misogynistic and anti-Semitic jokes from Richards' old podcast came to light, he resigned as host and removed himself from the succession planning process.⁴ Now, Sony is scrambling to fill another set of guest hosts, and fans are hoping they'll soon have a consistent captain at the head of their favorite game show, as they did when Alex Trebek was at the helm in the past.

→ HOW THEY GOT THERE

Sony made a couple of mistakes in their succession plan (or lack thereof). Chief among their mistakes was that they had neglected the process entirely. Sony had, in fact, already been given a warning to prepare for succession when Mr. Trebek suffered a heart attack in 2012. Sony began by creating a short list of replacements, including Matt Lauer and Brian Williams, however, after Trebek recovered, the organization discontinued their succession planning process.⁴

ABOUT ALEX TREBEK

Alex Trebek was born in Sudbury, Ontario, and attended the University of Ottawa.⁶ After completing a degree in philosophy, Trebek started his career as a newscaster for CBS.⁵ He landed his first role on television in 1973 as the host of NBC's game show "Wizard of Odds." Several jobs later he became the host of Jeopardy!⁶ He won eight Emmy Awards for Outstanding Game Show Host, was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and received a Guinness World Records® record for Most Game Show Episodes Hosted by the Same Presenter (before his death, Trebek hosted more than 8,000 episodes of Jeopardy!).⁶ In 2017, Trebek was also named an officer of the Order of Canada (the country's second-highest civilian honor), and he is one of very few celebrities who received a star on both the Hollywood Walk of Fame and the Canadian Walk of Fame.⁶



A second mistake Sony made in their hasty succession plan was to select candidates that were unprepared. Sony's original succession candidate, Ken Jennings, was a former contestant, not a host. After old tweets resurfaced and knocked him out of the running, Sony's next succession planning go-to was Mike Richards, Jeopardy's executive producer. Neither Jennings nor Richards had any experience as hosts, and since Sony didn't have a succession plan in place neither had received any training or preparation to step into the role.

Finally, Sony did not use an objective and transparent decision-making process. When Sony first began their "Celebrity Host" campaign, the organization made it seem as though viewer votes would ultimately decide the next host of the show. That promise was abandoned when Mike Richards was selected internally by the organization's executives. Here, Sony violated the basic principles of trust and transparency that give consumers confidence in their brand. Will Jeopardy! be able to recover and retain their loyal fans as they undertake a second round of their "Celebrity Host" campaign? Only time will tell.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. HAVE A PLAN** Like many organizations, Sony found itself hiring for replacement, rather than truly planning for succession. Succession planning is an ongoing employee development process. It requires the investment of time and energy to train multiple candidates, ensuring that your company has a strong leadership pipeline feeding into its critical roles.
- 2. SCREEN YOUR CANDIDATES** No matter what your industry or profession, it's important that you involve employees — especially those like Aaron Rodgers who bring unique perspectives and expertise. There are many benefits to involving employees in decision making processes, including greater motivation, engagement, and performance, as well as a stronger commitment to the organization and its leaders.
- 3. USE AN OBJECTIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS** When Sony selected Ken Jennings as Richards' successor, they were going for a familiar face. As a former contestant who holds the record for longest streak, Jennings was popular with the audience. Sony hoped that he could become the next "Alex Trebek," another inconspicuous and lovable host. Jennings' popularity, however, fell away almost immediately when his old tweets — largely insensitive and offensive — came to light. Selecting a successor based on popularity was not a robust decision-making approach. Instead, candidates needed to be selected based on success profiles for the role, and objective measures of their performance and potential.



→ HOW SIGMA CAN HELP

Sony made some mistakes in their succession planning process. But you don't have to! If you would like to learn more about succession planning, and how your organization can prepare for tomorrow, check out [SIGMA's Succession Planning Launch Series](#) or [Succession Planning Training](#). You're also welcome to [contact us](#) if you would like to speak with a consultant – we're always happy to chat! ■

FIVE FUN FACTS ABOUT JEOPARDY!⁵

1. When filming Jeopardy!, a week's worth of episodes were filmed in one day, meaning Alex Trebek changed his suits five times a day!
2. Utah software engineer Ken Jennings holds the record for 74 games won in a row (2004).
3. Jeopardy! has won more awards than any other game show in the U.S.
4. Jeopardy!'s theme song was originally written by show creator Merv Griffin as a lullaby to help his son to fall asleep.
5. Trebek watched his own show every night (unless there was a Lakers game on).

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