

Developing Your Employees

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There is a well-established case for developing your employees. It makes sense for the organization, it makes sense for the team, and it makes sense for the individuals concerned.

From the *organizational* perspective, it is clearly beneficial to make the best of the talent held in your employee base; there is huge competitive advantage in their creativity and imagination. In many industries, the opportunities to gain competitive advantage through pricing, distribution, and service levels are limited. Thus, differentiation may rely on innovations that change the experience someone has with your product rather than the attributes of the product itself.

From the *team* perspective, harnessing the team's collective talent maximizes its effectiveness. It also motivates everyone involved to learn, develop, and increase their contribution.

From the *individual* perspective, development brings new possibilities for career progression as well as personal rewards and recognition for the value that is contributed. Individuals gain a satisfying sense of personal achievement from expanding their own skills and increasing their value to the business.

Fostering a culture that welcomes development reflects well on the managers who help their employees meet aggressive goals. If the art of developing people is performed properly it is a win-win situation, but there are pitfalls to avoid along the route to business success.

What You Need to Know

I've been encouraging a particular team member to develop some skills that are necessary for our collective success but she does not take this seriously. What should I do?

You may have stumbled across a clash of values that prevents this team-member from committing to your objectives. People don't devote much energy to a task unless they believe in it. There may also be a mismatch between your expectations and her interests, aspirations, and/or talents. As a team leader, it's important that you listen openly to your team-member, and learn what motivates her. Then try to find creative ways of tapping into these motivations to meet your own agenda.

Members of my team have requested some training for which I don't see any immediate benefit to the business. I don't want to dampen their enthusiasm, nor do I want to incur unnecessary costs that can't be justified to management. What should I do?

It's admirable that your team seeks development, but you need to direct their enthusiasm toward serving the business needs, not just their own. Ask them to explain the reasons they have chosen this training, and encourage them to identify the benefit it will bring to the business. If this doesn't convince you of the need, try negotiating an alternative that accommodates their needs as well as yours.

I have encouraged my high-potential team members to pursue a valuable qualification via a distance learning program, but one of them misses tutorials and does not submit work on time. How can I encourage more commitment from him?

Even though *you* think the qualification is valuable, your team member may not. The course may not fit his goals or interests, or he may not be suited to a distance learning regimen. People learn in different ways; you may find that this person requires a more hands-on approach. As an alternative, suggest a "stretch" project in another part of the business. The gains may be achieved differently than you envisioned, but they could be just as valuable.

I have been running a training program for my team which I feel has been completely ineffective. The course evaluations, however, suggest that the program is a great success. What's going on?

It is all a matter of perception. Some training programs are enjoyable and are highly rated by participants, but don't necessarily produce the desired outcome. Other courses are more challenging and yield low ratings but ironically do produce the intended result. Are you sure you are measuring the right criteria? Course evaluations are sometimes called "happy sheets" and, as this term suggests, merely provide a measure of enjoyment. Try focusing on "learning outcomes" instead; for example, you could ask your team to list the key concepts they've taken away from the experience, rather than their appreciation of the instructor's style. You may find the results illuminating.

What to Do

Development should not be an indiscriminate activity that generates random skills, but rather a focused program that connects each employee's talents and skills with the business objectives. This is a necessary focus if the planned development is to help people achieve their professional goals. The process must begin with a "diagnosis" that identifies the knowledge- or skill-gaps that threaten the organization's effectiveness or, worse, make it vulnerable to failure or collapse. This process requires that the organization have a clear mission and that all employees buy in to this mission.

Diagnose the Need—An Organizational Perspective

Many indicators can trigger a company's need for employee development. Perhaps the most obvious indicators are financial ones—unmet forecasts, falling share price, spiraling costs, unfavorable cash flow, etc. Other triggers may include increased competitive pressure, diminishing market share, or a new market innovation. Personnel issues such as high absenteeism, a loss of key staff, or poor motivation can also initiate a need to act decisively and fast.

Recognizing the underlying problem(s) is the critical first step. Next, perform an honest and precise appraisal to identify an employee development focus that addresses this problem. Establish goals for early results and develop longer-term initiatives to ensure an ongoing infusion of new talent into the business. Longer-term initiatives could include an improved recruitment process, succession plan, or people policy that allows continual development and the achievement of organizational objectives.

Analyze Training Needs—A Team Perspective

To conduct a meaningful training needs analysis, the organizational objectives must be broken down and translated into functional, departmental, and team targets—all players must understand their role in order to perform it properly. By identifying the gaps in knowledge or skill, you will determine what the team lacks as a whole and can create a development agenda. Keep in mind that in less hierarchical organizations, teams tend to be more mobile, with members joining and leaving according to the requirements of the project. One person can also be a member of several teams, lending their expertise where it is needed most.

Just as each team member must contribute to the collective success of the team; everyone should also be included in the analysis and development solution. It is important to devise roles that leverage the individuals' strengths, and combine to achieve the desired objectives. Those who are particularly talented in one area can be useful coaches to new or learning teammates. Once a project concludes or a target is achieved (or not), bring the team together for a post-mortem—analyze the team's

performance, identify important successes as well as failures, and create a development agenda to prepare the team for future challenges.

Evaluate Performance—An Individual Perspective

On a more personal basis, performance appraisals and “360-degree surveys” (in which feedback is collected from those with a vested interest in a person’s performance) highlight the strengths and development opportunities of the individual. These should be integrated with the employee’s career aspirations, so that he or she is committed to their development plan and has incentive to follow it. If people aren’t motivated to learn new skills or expand their experience, they will impede the progress around them. All parties need to share common goals and provide resources to support others in their development activities. Remember that feedback on development targets should not be reserved solely for scheduled performance reviews, which are often performed only annually. Offering regular positive feedback helps employees learn and adapt continuously.

Identify Development Opportunities

Gone are the days when the only solution to a lack of knowledge, skill, or experience was a training program; the “one size fits all” approach is outdated. Successful businesses today possess a greater appreciation of the individual’s unique talents and their personal desire for development. Creating an effective development plan requires imagination and a high degree of tailoring in order to tap the full breadth of talent required. Consider developing custom training, specific to your company or division. Explore opportunities for work shadowing, job sharing, “stretch” assignments, special project allocation, sabbaticals, coaching, and mentoring. Institute tuition-reimbursement benefits. Allow people to pick and choose the approach that they feel will most effectively build their skills—whether distance learning, higher education courses, e-learning initiatives, etc.

Evaluate Effectiveness

Once you have recognized the importance of development and invested in it, verify your return on investment. This isn’t always an easy task, as much of the benefit is “soft.” For example, what value do you place on a motivated workforce, good colleague and supplier relationships, and customer satisfaction? Some experts believe that it’s possible to estimate the financial value of these results by looking at the cost of *not* having achieved them. Others advocate tightly mapping training objectives to outcomes, estimating the return on investment after accounting for all relevant costs. Whatever your approach, the bottom line is that development initiatives must effectively yield a more successful organization.

Follow Up and Review As Appropriate

Once the indicator which initially triggered your development plan has improved, it is easy to lose momentum and focus. To avoid this, periodically review all development activities against performance targets, and set new objectives to ensure ongoing benefits to the business. Don't allow an effective initiative to fizzle out because early success blurs the original need. Establishing a performance culture creates expectations and develops a language that can be used to maintain momentum. If development plans are taken seriously and discussed frequently, they remain active and effective.

We all collect experiences and learn new things throughout life; development is a natural human trait. We should all make the most of this characteristic and manage it according to our personal goals and objectives. Developing people is easy when you tap into their values and natural enthusiasm. As a manager, it is extremely rewarding to see people thrive and grow under your leadership. Initiate a discussion of development needs or desires with your team members, and leverage their natural interest in personal and professional growth.

What to Avoid

You expect too much of other people

Employee development takes a great deal of time. Inevitably, circumstances arise that impact an individual's personal life. Study requirements may affect an individual's family life, for instance, or force an individual's colleagues or team members to make choices or sacrifices of their own. Avoid overloading employees' development plans, and don't expect them to work unreasonable hours in order to meet job and development objectives. Attempt to combine personal development goals with an employee's job objectives. For example, assign a real-world task such as budgeting or project-planning, rather than leaving an employee to learn these tasks in the abstract. In this way, you can reduce the burden and also generate some immediate value for the business.

You assume you know best

Assuming you know what someone else "needs" and imposing this on them wastes time, money, and energy unless they agree with you. It's important for the employee to take part in the objective-setting and decision-making processes of a development plan if the rewards are to be realized.

You think everyone will be motivated

Once a development culture is established in a business, don't assume that everyone is motivated to learn and willing to put time and energy into a development plan. There will be some who genuinely do not seek additional responsibility or career advancement. If this is the case with an employee of yours, try to determine the rewards they *do* seek from their work, and assign them responsibilities that require competent and consistent performance.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

personal-development.com: <http://personal-development.com>

Society for Human Resource Management: www.shrm.org