

# LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCES

## Improvement Guide for:

- Provide Experiences That Develop
- Ensure Projects Provide Learning

### Introduction

Employees learn more through their day-to-day work than they do in formal training courses. Just as importantly, of the three manager-led development activities that have the greatest impact on employee performance, two of them—providing experiences that develop and ensuring projects are learning experiences—fall into this category. Helping employees learn through experiences, though, is easier said than done. This guide is designed to offer tips and guidelines for creating and implementing on-the-job learning experiences for your employees.

### Establish Healthy Relationships

#### To Remember:

- *The messenger matters as much as the message.*

Your attempts to develop employees through experiences will have little impact if conducted in the context of an unhealthy relationship. If you are viewed as inconsistent, unfair, or if an employee is dissatisfied with you in general, your attempts to develop your employees will likely fall short. The first step in playing a constructive role in employee development is establishing healthy relationships with your direct reports. For more tips on how to accomplish this, please see the guide entitled, [\*Establishing Healthy Employee Relationships\*](#).

### Provide Experiences That Develop Employees

#### To Remember:

- *When feasible, assign projects to employees which will help them achieve their development goals.*
- *Create or pass along “stretch roles” for your employees.*

Beyond helping employees find relevant training courses, managers can assist their employees in meeting their development goals by providing them with work experiences that provide learning opportunities within and outside of their jobs. Among these are on-the-job experiences. Employees can improve their skills or leverage their strengths as they learn on projects or tasks that are part of day-to-day work. Assigning projects which encourage development of targeted skill areas can aid employees significantly in the attainment of their development goals.<sup>1</sup> In essence, you should partner with your employees to “mine” their jobs for projects/activities that will facilitate their development. For example, an employee that is struggling with project management may benefit from managing an aspect of a team project on his/her own.

Additionally, you can either pass along existing or create new opportunities for your employees to develop through the use of stretch roles. These stretch roles can further develop an aspect of a skill or strength that an employee may not have otherwise.



### TO THINK ABOUT Examples of Stretch Roles

Examples of these types of experiences include:<sup>2,3</sup>

- Filling in for a manager on vacation
- Mentoring or onboarding a new employee
- Representing the team at a cross-functional meeting
- Managing a particular project from start to finish
- Making a temporary lateral move to another part of the organization
- Helping launch a new business, initiative, or program
- Helping turn around a struggling business
- Presenting the team's work during a meeting
- Serving as a liaison between two or more functions
- Working on a challenging project or initiative
- Developing a new product or service
- Interviewing potential employees
- Teaching a process or course to the team or others
- Running a team meeting or briefing session

### Ensure Projects Are Learning Experiences for Employees

#### To Remember:

- *Meet with your employees throughout a project's life cycle; discuss challenges and guide your employees as they discover ways to overcome them.*
- *Feedback is a valuable learning experience; after a project's completion, discuss with your direct reports the positive, the negative, and the key lessons learned.*

Most learning occurs on the job.<sup>4</sup> Research indicates that peer networks and on-the-job experiences account for a larger share of employee learning than classroom training.<sup>5</sup> This means that managers must look beyond their organizations' training catalogues to develop their employees.

Assigning projects is one way to strengthen a developmental area. However, assigning projects geared to meet employees' development objectives by itself is not enough. In essence, experiences do not promote learning in the absence of reflection. By not communicating with your employee throughout the course of a project's cycle to discuss and guide to resolution any obstacles to completion, you put the project at risk and pass up an opportunity to develop or strengthen your employee's skills.

Once a project is completed, you should provide your employee with honest feedback, discussing what went right, what went wrong, and what lessons were learned.<sup>6</sup>

By reinforcing these lessons, you are decreasing the chances that the same mistakes will be made on a future project, and you are ensuring that employees capture the lessons of the experience.

### Research Methodology

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### TO THINK ABOUT Questions for Post-Project Discussions

A framework for this type of post-project, or "after action," review can include variations on the following questions:<sup>7</sup>

- **What were we trying to do?** Describe the objectives of this project and the goals the team hoped to accomplish.
- **What were the actual results?** Create a consensus around the results achieved.
- **What were the differences between the results we wanted, the results we achieved, and how did this gap occur?** Identify points during the project that caused the undesirable results.
- **What do we do next time?** Create a plan for a future similar project incorporating the lessons learned and what needs to be changed. This can also serve as a project plan for other teams engaged in similar projects.

<sup>1</sup> Brian L. Davis, et al, *Successful Manager's Handbook*, Personnel Decisions International (1996) pp. 400-01.

<sup>2</sup> William Rothwell and Rich Wellins, "Mapping Your Future: Putting New Competencies to Work for You," *T&D*, 58, no.5 (1 May 2004). (Obtained via Factiva.com)

<sup>3</sup> Davis, et al, *Successful Manager's Handbook*, pp. 400-01.

<sup>4</sup> Kristine Ellis, "Mind the Gap," *Training* (1 January 2002). (Obtained via Factiva.com)

<sup>5</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Emerging Mandates for the Learning and Development Function*, Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board (2002), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, "Mind the Gap."

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Kinni, "Getting Smarter Every Day," *Harvard Management Update* 8, no.2 (February 2003). (Obtained via EBSCO)

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# ON-THE-JOB COACHING

## Improvement Guide for:

- Give Advice from Your Own Experience
- Help Apply New Skills/Knowledge
- Ensure Projects Provide Learning
- Teach New Skill or Procedure

### Introduction

In coaching your employees, you not only provide your employees with personalized, in-the-moment learning, but you also serve as a catalyst for improving the performance of your team. This guide is designed to assist you as you seek to provide your employees with on-the-job coaching.

### Establish Healthy Relationships

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By reinforcing these lessons, you are decreasing the chances that the same mistakes will be made on a future project, and you are ensuring that employees capture the lessons of the experience.

### Give Advice from Your Own Experience

#### To Remember:

- *Your experiences can benefit your employees.*
- *Be open to lessons your employees have to teach about processes or projects.*

Good managers pass along the lessons of their own experiences to their employees. This type of advice can prove beneficial to employees, particularly if they are new to the organization. Some examples of advice include talking about a time you struggled, a similar project that you worked on, or a similar challenge that you faced. This advice should be delivered with some humility, as the goal is to be empathetic with the difficulties your employees may encounter.

It is equally important to listen to and learn from your employees, particularly as they may be more knowledgeable about certain aspects of a project.<sup>5</sup>

## Help Your Employees Apply New Skills or Knowledge

### To Remember:

- The chances that an employee retains new skills or knowledge acquired during training increases if he/she views the training as critical to his/her development.
- If you do not provide opportunities for your employees to apply skills or knowledge acquired during training, they will most likely lose them.

There is a difference between sitting through a course and actually learning. Employees need to know how or why particular training solutions—whether they are classroom or on the job—are relevant to their daily work. Employees who join their managers in analyzing their training needs, identifying the types of training best-suited to meet those needs, and creating performance goals are more likely to apply skills or knowledge they acquire in training to their everyday jobs.<sup>6</sup>

**The key to ensuring that employees keep newly-acquired skills is to give employees opportunities to use them.** Unfortunately, most employees do not get those opportunities. By following up with your direct reports either through formal or informal feedback or coaching, you can ensure that the skills they acquire in training are applied and retained.<sup>7</sup>

Ideally, employees should attend training immediately before they will need a skill: this provides a tangible need to learn the skill and means it will be applied and reinforced immediately.<sup>8</sup> For example, having your employee participate in a class about customer service strategies right before he/she begins a project in this area increases the chances those new skills will be applied. Furthermore, by designating the acquisition of a particular skill as part of a development plan (rather than attendance at a training course), you are encouraging your employees to apply these skills.<sup>9</sup>

## Teach Your Employees a New Skill or Procedure

### To Remember:

- Teaching your employees can help strengthen your relationships and fulfill immediate skill needs.

Managers are often called upon to teach their employees new skills or procedures, either because the need is immediate, the skill is specific to a particular team, or because there is no other training solution available.

When teaching an employee, identify the goals you hope the lesson will achieve and create a standard to ensure the skill or knowledge was actually learned.<sup>10</sup> For example, if an employee has to create an organizational report, you can teach the procedure, and then have the employee do it alone to assess whether the process was learned. This type of personal coaching, which can include tips, “how to” guidelines, or different methods of accomplishing the same end, can positively impact your relationship with your employees.

Specifically, coaching your employees demonstrates that you value their performance, that you are invested in their success, and that you are competent in the work in which your team engages.<sup>13</sup>

### Research Methodology

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<sup>1</sup> Kristine Ellis, “Mind the Gap,” *Training* (1 January 2002). (Obtained via Factiva.com)

<sup>2</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Emerging Mandates for the Learning and Development Function*, Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board (2002), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, “Mind the Gap.”

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Kinni, “Getting Smarter Every Day,” *Harvard Management Update* 8, no.2 (February 2003). (Obtained via EBSCO)

<sup>5</sup> Author Unknown, “How Managers Get the Job Done,” *Harvard Business Review* 73, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 1995), p.11. (Obtained via EBSCO)

<sup>6</sup> Amalia Santos and Mark Stuart, “Employee Perceptions and Their Influence on Training Effectiveness,” *Human Resource Management Journal* 13, No.1 (1 January 2003). (Obtained via Factiva.com)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Davis, et al, *Successful Manager's Handbook*, pp. 412-13.

<sup>9</sup> Santos and Stuart, “Employee Perceptions and Their Influence on Training Effectiveness.”

<sup>10</sup> Davis, et al, *Successful Manager's Handbook*, pp 412-13.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, “Mind the Gap.”

<sup>12</sup> Hazman Shah Abdulla, “Performance Management,” *The New Straits Times* (8 January 2000).

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# IMPROVING THE FORMAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW PROCESS

## Improvement Guide for:

- Explain Performance Evaluation Standards
- Feedback on Performance Strengths
- Feedback on Performance Weaknesses
- Feedback on Personality Strengths

### Introduction

Most organizations require that managers provide their direct reports with formal performance reviews on either a semi-annual or annual basis. For many managers, these reviews are viewed with a certain amount of anxiety, particularly if they include feedback on performance weaknesses.

It is important to view reviews not as mandatory hour-long exercises, but as unique opportunities to improve the performance of your direct reports, and thus your team. In short, your employees should leave their reviews with a clear idea of their strengths, a plan for mitigating or improving their weaknesses, and above all, a desire to implement the changes you both discussed. In order to reach this goal, you need to think of formal reviews as a process that begins before “review season” starts. Remember, the message that you impart is only as effective as the messenger; to improve performance, you must invest time in building healthy employee relationships well before the formal review process begins.

This guide is intended to provide you with tips to plan for and conduct formal performance reviews that will improve employee performance.

### Before the Review

#### • **Point 1: Establish Healthy Employee Relationships<sup>1</sup>**

##### **To Remember:**

- *The messenger matters as much as the message.*

The aspect of the review process that has the greatest impact on employee performance is the employee’s perception of your relationship. If you are viewed as inconsistent or unfair, or if an employee is dissatisfied with you in general, your feedback—**regardless of quality or intent**—will likely have little impact. It is therefore imperative that you establish healthy relationships with your direct reports. For more tips on how to accomplish this, please see the guide entitled, *Establishing Healthy Employee Relationships*.

#### • **Point 2: Clearly Explain Performance Evaluation Standards**

##### **To Remember:**

- *Clearly and explicitly state performance criteria to your employees **before** you begin assessing their performance.*

One of the themes repeated throughout this document starts here: nothing in the formal review should be surprising to your employees.<sup>2</sup> At the very least, they should know the exact criteria you will be using to gauge their performance. Clearly communicating employee

performance goals, either during the previous formal review or during an informal pull-up meeting, reduces the “surprise” factor and increases the likelihood that the review will be perceived as fair. Employees will not feel the hard work they are doing is wasted and will have a better idea of the topics you’ll be addressing.

#### • **Point 3: Provide Immediate, Informal Feedback Throughout the Year**

##### **To Remember:**

- *Informal feedback provided over the course of your employee’s tenure decreases the chances that aspects of the formal review are surprising to the employee.*

The very nature of the review process timeline—once or twice a year—makes providing informal feedback a necessity. No manager can afford to wait five to ten months to reinforce performance strengths or to correct performance lapses. In fact, immediate feedback on its own has a positive impact on employee performance.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, providing informal feedback throughout the year means that your employees will not be surprised during their formal reviews. That goes a long way to solidifying the impression that your assessments are consistent and fair.

Source: Learning and Development Roundtable research.

## The Actual Review

### • Point 1: Plan the Review

#### To Remember:

- If not already required, ask employees to complete self-reviews and read them before you deliver their assessments.
- Rehearse conversations and key messages before reviews take place.

Good reviews are rarely thrown together at the last minute. Ideally, they include not only manager input on employee performance but employee self-ratings as well. Having these completed ahead of time and reviewing them gives you a good idea of which parts of the conversation will be easy (i.e., where you agree) and where there may be some difficulty.<sup>4</sup>

Rehearsing the conversation is also important, particularly for the section where you are providing feedback on performance weaknesses. Preparation time is time well-spent: how an employee reacts to feedback will be dependent on the relationship you share and also on **how well** you deliver the feedback.<sup>5,6</sup>

### • Point 2: Provide Feedback on Personality Strengths

#### To Remember:

- Commenting purely on personality strengths is simple flattery; to make this feedback more meaningful, tie it to performance strengths.

While it is nice to be able to provide your direct reports with feedback on their personality strengths, they should be referred to in terms of performance. For example, instead of telling employees they have strong interpersonal skills, tell them that these skills are an asset because they help them excel at customer service or work well within their teams.

**Important Note:** It is very difficult to discuss personality weaknesses, and managers should proceed with caution if it is necessary to do so. Discussing personality weaknesses can be viewed as insulting and hamper your chances of the employee taking corrective action. If you must discuss personality weaknesses, it is imperative that you provide specific, concrete examples of how those weaknesses negatively affect performance.<sup>7,8</sup>

### • Point 3: Provide Feedback on Performance Strengths

#### To Remember:

- Provide specific examples of strengths “in action.”

For many managers, this is the easiest part of any formal review. People like to hear they are doing well. However, it is important to be as specific as possible; in other words, “good job” is not particularly good feedback. By providing tangible evidence of how strengths have positively affected performance, you can reinforce these important employee behaviors. By making this activity the centerpiece of the review process, you can help preempt negative reactions that may emerge when the time comes to discuss performance weaknesses.

### • Point 4: Provide Feedback on Performance Weaknesses

#### To Remember:

- All managers walk a fine line when delivering feedback on performance weaknesses. Done effectively, it can improve performance; overemphasized, it can damage it.<sup>9,10</sup>
- When providing this type of feedback, avoid judgmental words and phrases like “poor performance” or “weakness”; instead, present these issues in the context of developmental opportunities.<sup>11</sup>
- Do not assume you understand the reason for a performance weakness; allow the employee to discuss why he/she is performing in a particular way.<sup>12</sup>
- Set realistic performance goals; by creating goals that are out of reach, you can negatively impact employee performance.<sup>13</sup>
- Offer a plan for correcting these weaknesses and stick to it.<sup>14</sup>
- Prepare for negative reactions.<sup>15</sup>

For many managers, the most anxiety-inducing part of any performance review is delivering feedback on performance weaknesses. Yet **when done effectively**, providing feedback on performance weaknesses can have a very positive impact on employee performance. Still, except in extreme cases, **performance weaknesses should not be the emphasis of the review**. When presenting feedback on performance weaknesses, be selective and ensure that you are prepared to deliver your messages well.

Present this type of feedback as an opportunity for your employees to come closer to their career goals. To that end, frame these weaknesses as obstacles that you need to overcome together. This is not just rhetoric—your employee’s improvement in these areas will positively affect your team. Discuss and set with your employees performance objectives in these areas. It is important to set attainable targets for improvement; setting unrealistic goals and expectations can negatively affect morale—employees will feel that they are being “set-up to fail.”

Obviously, each employee is going to react differently to feedback on performance weaknesses. You can greatly increase the chances that your employees will emerge from their reviews better performers than when they entered. Always remember the following: establish a healthy relationship with the employee, prevent this type of feedback from serving as the centerpiece of the review; frame these behaviors not as weaknesses but as obstacles you and the employee must overcome; set realistic performance objectives; and conclude your evaluation not on a negative note but on a positive one. By following these guidelines, you can greatly increase the chances that your employees will emerge from their reviews better performers than when they entered.

#### Research Methodology

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Source: Learning and Development Roundtable research.

- <sup>1</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development*, Corporate Executive Board (2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Peter W. Kennedy and Sandy Grogan Dresser, "Appraising and Paying for Performance: Another Look at an Age-Old Problem," *Employee Benefits Journal* 26, no.4 (December 2001). (Obtained from Factiva.com)
- <sup>3</sup> Corporate Leadership Council, *Building the High Performance Workforce: A Quantitative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Performance Management Strategies*, Corporate Executive Board (2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Author Unknown, "Tips for Conducting Performance Appraisals," *All Business*, <http://www.allbusiness.com/articles/content/15085.asp>
- <sup>5</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development*.
- <sup>6</sup> Jean-Francois Manzoni, "A Better Way to Deliver Bad News," *Harvard Business Review* 80, no.2 (September 2002). (Obtained via EBSCO)
- <sup>7</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development*.
- <sup>8</sup> Corporate Leadership Council, *Building the High Performance Workforce: A Quantitative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Performance Management Strategies*.
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- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*
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# ESTABLISHING HEALTHY EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS

## Improvement Guide for:

- Leadership and Vision
- Relationship Health
- Trust and Respect
- Loyalty and Commitment

### Introduction

If you fail to establish healthy relationships with your direct reports, you stand little hope of playing an effective role in their development. Further, studies indicate that the single most important, non-financial driver of employee retention is the relationship a manager shares with his/her direct reports. In employee development, the messenger is as important as the message: managers who maintain poor employee relationships are less likely to be effective at employee development.

In short, the most powerful lever for improving the performance of your direct reports and reducing the likelihood that they will leave your team is the improvement of the relationships you share with them.

### Guidelines

#### To Remember:

- *It is not about your individual performance anymore; it is about your ability to drive the performance of others.*
- *Every employee is different.*
- *Communication is key.*
- *Friendships do not always translate into good managerial relationships.*

**4) Friendships do not always translate into good managerial relationships:**<sup>4</sup> Managers on friendly terms with their employees can be very effective at developing their employees. However, managers who establish firm friendships with members of their teams are advised to proceed with caution. Establishing loyalties that transcend the workplace not only can create the perception that you are not a fair broker with other members of the team, it can make conversations about performance expectations or actual performance, project assignments, or improving team dynamics especially difficult.

All of the factors discussed in this guide—leadership and vision, relationship health, trust and respect, and loyalty and commitment—are positively affected by successfully engaging in principles concerning the manager-employee relationship:

**1) It is not about your individual performance anymore; it is about your ability to drive the performance of others:** Many managers achieve their positions through the individual performance they demonstrated before they entered the management ranks. However, the skill set required for individual achievement differs from that required for management. While the job of the employee is to perform to the best of his/her ability, the job of the manager is to drive performance through others.<sup>1</sup>

**2) Every employee is different:** Each of your direct reports has a different strength, a different weakness, and a different working style. Each most likely wants something different from a manager.<sup>2</sup> When you create a blanket management style, you may fail to maximize the potential performance of your direct reports and may create employee resentment.<sup>3</sup>

**3) Communication is key:** By clarifying objectives, providing formal and informal feedback, and engaging in open and honest dialogue with your team, you can improve the relationships you share with your employees.

### Leadership and Vision

#### To Remember:

- *Managers who are supportive, enthusiastic, and provide recognition for jobs well done have a greater chance of being perceived as good leaders.*
- *Communicating a vision is only effective if it is realistic; promoting the impossible can cost a manager credibility.*

Your leadership and the vision you communicate to your team play important roles in your ability to effectively develop your direct reports.

Characteristics of good managers are team-focused: creating and enabling on-the-job learning experiences, generating enthusiasm, recognizing the efforts of both the team and individuals, and providing support for your direct reports.<sup>5,6</sup> In short, managers with strong leadership abilities recognize that it is not about them, it is about their teams.

Leaders also clearly communicate their visions—either for the company or the team—to their direct reports. A vision must be above all realistic,<sup>7</sup> as it adds to a manager’s credibility. By communicating a realistic vision for the individual members of your team and the team itself, you provide context for the day-to-day work in which your employees engage.

Your efforts to actively lead your team and clearly explain your vision are more likely to be successful if you maintain healthy relationships with your direct reports.

### Relationship Health

#### **To Remember:**

- *Managers who tailor their management style to individual employees have healthier relationships with them.*
- *Providing open lines of communication in which you speak as well as listen can create employee good-will.*

Every employee, like every manager, is different. Some employees are better performers when they receive constant feedback, others perform best when they are granted significant autonomy. As your job is to maximize the performance of your team, the onus is on you to adjust (within reason) your management style to fit the needs of the individuals on your team. Figuring out the right managerial tactics for the right employee does not have to be a mystery. By asking your employees outright or eliciting feedback on your own performance, you can gauge exactly what your employees need in their manager.<sup>8</sup> **Caveat:** Adjustments to style should never result in (or be perceived as) unfair treatment. Managers must balance the benefits of individualized style with the necessity of consistency and fairness.

Creating open lines of communication can also improve your employee relationships. Although providing informal feedback, recognition, clear project parameters and expectations, and organizational or team goals is important, so too is actively listening to your team.<sup>9</sup> Receiving and acting upon employee feedback, acknowledging and/or implementing employee ideas, and seeking solutions to employee problems reinforces your credibility as both a leader and an advocate of your team.

### Trust and Respect

#### **To Remember:**

- *Trust and respect are earned, not granted.*

The key to earning employee trust and respect is to take the unknown out of your relationships—if your employees are unsure of your expectations, perceive you do not value their contributions or disapprove of their performance, or are unclear about the parameters of a project on which they are working, the chance of earning their trust or respect is slim. Additionally, your credibility is the foundation of your employees trust and respect in you: any actions that damage your credibility will have an adverse affect on the relationships you share with your employees.<sup>10</sup>

### Loyalty and Commitment

#### **To Remember:**

- *Employees with managers who are very effective at employee development are more likely to stay with and be committed to their organizations, put forth greater discretionary effort, and are more adaptable and dependable.<sup>11</sup>*

Manager quality has a greater impact on employee retention than any other non-financial factor.<sup>12</sup> You can earn the loyalty and commitment of your employees when you provide steady leadership, clearly communicate your vision, treat your employees fairly and consistently, and earn your employees’ trust and respect. In short, by serving as an advocate of your employees either within or outside of the team, your employees are likely to become your advocates as well.

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- <sup>1</sup> Susan Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!" *Canadian Chemical News* (1 November 2003). (Obtained via Factiva.com)
- <sup>2</sup> Tim Reisenauer, "Four Ways to Shrink Wrap Your Business," *Everett Business Journal* (1 March 2001). (Obtained via Factiva.com)
- <sup>3</sup> Amanda Wells, "Staff Loyalty May Be a Relic of the Past," *Infotech Weekly* (25 June 2001).
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- <sup>6</sup> Author Unknown, "Management—Taking a Lead," *The Grocer* (12 May 2001). (Obtained via Factiva.com)
- <sup>7</sup> John Humphreys, "That Vision Thing," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 45, no.4 (Summer 2004). (Obtained via Factiva.com)
- <sup>8</sup> Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!"
- <sup>9</sup> Max E. Douglas, "Servant Leadership: An Emerging Supervisory Model," *Supervision* (1 February 2003). (Obtained via Factiva.com)
- <sup>10</sup> Armstrong, "How to Be a Good Boss...and Still Get Results!"
- <sup>11</sup> Learning and Development Roundtable, *Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development*, Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board (2003), p. 35.
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# CONSTRUCTING INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND ASSESSING PROGRESS AGAINST THEM

## Improvement Guide for:

- Create IDPs
- Ensure Necessary Skills/Knowledge
- Help Employees Find Training
- Provide Experiences That Develop Employees
- Pass Along Development Opportunities
- Pass Along Job Openings
- Assess Development Progress

### Introduction

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) serve as powerful tools not only for developing your employees, but also for demonstrating that you are committed to their development. IDPs benefit employees by providing developmental road maps to follow for acquiring skills needed in current and future roles; for managers, IDPs often serve as the foundation of efforts to develop employee skills that are critical to team performance.

The best IDPs are living documents that can change during the course of their implementation. Good IDPs share some common characteristics: 1) they are created after a careful assessment by both employee and manager of the employee's strengths and weaknesses; 2) they leverage an employee's strengths and focus on improving one or two weaknesses; 3) they contain a plan for an employee to meet development goals with assistance from his/her manager; 4) they explain the standards upon which the achievement of these goals will be measured; and 5) they provide a timetable for revisiting and reassessing these goals.

Perhaps most importantly, the success or failure of an IDP often hinges on the relationship you share with your employee. In other words, the messenger matters as much as the message.

This guide is intended to provide you with tips to create and implement IDPs and to assess your employees' progress against the goals they set out to achieve.

## Creating the Plan

### • Point 1: Establish Healthy Employee Relationships<sup>1</sup>

#### To Remember:

- *The messenger matters as much as the message.*

The success or failure of IDPs hinges less on the contents of the plan as it does on the type of relationships that you maintain with your direct reports. If you are viewed as inconsistent, unfair, or if an employee is dissatisfied with you as a manager, your assessment of an employee's performance—**regardless of quality or intent**—will likely have little impact. It is therefore imperative that you establish healthy relationships with your direct reports. For more tips on how to accomplish this, please see the guide entitled, *Establishing Healthy Employee Relationships*; to learn tips for providing effective feedback, please see the guide entitled *Improving the Performance Review Process*.

### • Point 2: Create an IDP

#### To Remember:

- *Ideally, IDPs are created with the input of both the manager and the employee.<sup>2</sup>*
- *An IDP should concentrate on ways to leverage strengths as well as improve areas where employees are not as strong.<sup>3</sup>*
- *Focus on developing no more than one or two areas where the employee needs to improve.<sup>4</sup>*
- *Development goals must be achievable.*
- *Include a plan for action that will assist the employee in achieving his/her development goals that includes an implementation timetable.<sup>5</sup>*
- *Make clear how results will be measured.<sup>6</sup>*

An IDP is, for the most part, exactly what its name implies: a plan for development unique to a particular employee. There are three important guidelines to remember in the creation of an IDP:

- **Incorporate Employee Input.** There are two important components to a development plan’s success: employee input and employee buy-in. Employees typically know their career aspirations, the areas in which they perform strongly, and the areas that require improvement. Managers learn these aspects after observing, assessing, and discussing with the employee his/her performance. Creating an IDP without employee input can hamper employee buy-in and decrease the chances of the plan improving performance.
- **Leverage employee strengths while mitigating or improving one or two areas where the employee may not be as strong.** Managers may select these areas of focus after assessing the needs of the team or the organization and aligning employee-development goals with those needs. IDPs often focus on the skills and knowledge employees need to fulfill their current jobs as well as those they will need to perform at the next level. Finally, goals must be achievable: expecting employee performance to turn 180 degrees is not only unreasonable, it can discourage the employee. Creating a plan for incremental improvement, on the other hand, makes goals attainable and increases the likelihood of employee buy-in.
- **Create a plan for meeting goals.** That said, IDPs should not consist only of a “laundry list” of training courses. These plans should include a mix of development opportunities: specific training courses, on-the-job experiences, stretch roles, and potential mentoring relationships. The plan requires that the manager assists the employee in meeting his/her goals, that the employee fulfills an agreed-upon timetable for completing these development opportunities, and that the employee understands the standards for measuring results.
- **Point 3: Ensure Your Employees Have the Necessary Skills/Knowledge for Future Roles**

**To Remember:**

- *While it is critical to assist your employees in gaining the skills and knowledge required to perform their current duties, it is also important to assist your employees in the acquisition of the skills needed for their next roles within the organization.*

Obviously, managers can improve the performance of their employees by ensuring they have the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their current jobs well and by differentiating between which skills are “nice to have” and which are “need to have.”<sup>10</sup> However, by providing the opportunities to develop the skills your employees will need as they move along in their careers within your organization, you are not only increasing the skill-set of your team as a whole but also demonstrating that you are committed to employee development.<sup>11</sup> Part of an IDP’s construction requires identifying these skills by engaging in frank discussions with employees about their career ambitions and then assessing current areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. It further requires periodic assessment of how the skills and knowledge needed to optimally perform a particular job evolve as the organization changes.<sup>12</sup>

- **Point 4: Help Your Employees Find the Training They Need**

**To Remember:**

- *Examine formal and informal training options to identify the best methods for your employees to meet their goals.*

Do not assume that employees can find the development opportunities that they need. Part of the manager’s role in the development process is to help identify training options to assist employees in meeting their development goals. While part of this process takes place during the construction of the IDP, some of it also occurs across the IDP’s life cycle. Providing employees with information regarding formal courses, as well as identifying other opportunities for development—such as stretch roles, on-the-job development, and mentoring programs—helps employees move quickly from “development planning” to “development action.”<sup>13</sup>

Implementing the IDP

- **Point 1: Provide Experiences That Develop Employees**

**To Remember:**

- *When feasible, assign projects to employees which will help them develop.*

Beyond helping employees find relevant training courses, managers can assist their employees in meeting their development goals by providing them with work experiences that provide development opportunities within and outside of their jobs. Among these are on-the-job experiences. Employees can improve their skills or leverage their strengths as they learn during projects or tasks that are part of their day-to-day work. Assigning projects which encourage the development of target skill areas can aid employees significantly in the attainment of their development goals.<sup>14</sup> In essence, you should partner with your employees to “mine” their jobs for projects/activities that will facilitate their development. For example, an employee that is struggling with project management may benefit from managing an aspect of a team project on his/her own.

Additionally, you can either pass along existing or create new opportunities for your employees to develop through the use of stretch roles. These stretch roles can further develop an aspect of a skill or strength that an employee may not have otherwise.

- **Point 2: Pass Along Relevant Development Opportunities**

**To Remember:**

- *Depending upon your employees current responsibilities, they may have little opportunity to develop the skills needed for current or future jobs within the company. Passing along opportunities to develop these skills outside of the job description enables an employee to improve a skill set which benefits both the employee and the team.*

During the life cycle of an IDP, opportunities may emerge for employees to gain experience in roles beyond their delineated job responsibilities. These “stretch roles” provide opportunities to further develop skills or strengths that employees may not otherwise be able to access. The emphasis when passing along development opportunities is on acceptable risk: providing a development opportunity that does not “stretch” an employee does not help him/her attain development goals, while providing an opportunity that places the employee out of his/her depth creates unacceptable risks for both the employee and the organization.



**TO THINK ABOUT**  
**Examples of Stretch Roles**

Examples of these types of experiences include:<sup>15, 16</sup>

- Filling in for a manager on vacation
- Mentoring or onboarding a new employee
- Representing the team at a cross-functional meeting
- Managing a particular project from start to finish
- Making a temporary lateral move to another part of the organization
- Helping launch a new business, initiative, or program
- Helping turn around a struggling business
- Presenting the team’s work during a meeting
- Serving as a liaison between two or more functions
- Working on a challenging project or initiative
- Developing a new product or service
- Interviewing potential employees
- Teaching a process or course to the team or others
- Running a team meeting or briefing session

• **Point 3: Pass Along Relevant Job Openings**

**To Remember:**

- *Passing along job openings to qualified members of your team sends the message that you are committed to long-term employee development.*

As noted in the introduction, an IDP not only focuses on skills necessary to succeed in an employee’s current job, it also focuses on building a skill-set that will help an employee succeed at the next level of his/her career path. By passing along relevant job openings that link to career aspirations within the organization, managers send a message—not just to the employee informed of the opening, but to the rest of the team as well—that they care about the long-term development and careers of their employees and the success of the organization as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Assessing the Development Plan

• **Point 1: Assess Your Employee’s Development Progress**

**To Remember:**

- *IDPs are living documents: they change as employees’ skills change or as organizational goals shift.*
- *As such, IDPs should be revisited and amended regularly.*

An IDP should include a timetable for the employee to engage in training to achieve goals and for the employee and manager to meet and discuss the employee’s progress against the plan.

While some managers revisit the IDP during the formal review process, more frequent meetings may be appropriate, particularly if an employee appears to be struggling to achieve the goals set forth in the IDP.

Regardless of when you deliver feedback or the type of feedback you deliver, it is important to remember that an IDP is a living document. Employees rarely perfect their skills in the time between performance reviews. It is important to amend the IDP when changes occur in an individual’s responsibilities or goals, when the organization’s or team’s goals change, or when parts of the plan, such as the types of training solutions recommended, are no longer options.

**Research Methodology**

The information presented in this guide is based on a thorough review of professional and academic literature. Given the diversity of perspectives on these topics, this guide is designed to summarize for managers the existing research available on this topic, rather than to impart a particular point of view accepted by the Roundtable.

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- <sup>7</sup> Susan Plawsky, "How to Give Performance Reviews that Really Boost Performance," Dahlstrom & Company, Inc., <http://www.dahlstromandcompany.com> (2 August 2004).
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- <sup>13</sup> Rothwell and Wellins, "Mapping Your Future: Putting New Competencies to Work for You."
- <sup>14</sup> Brian L. Davis, et.al., *Successful Manager's Handbook*, Personnel Decisions International (1996) pp. 400-01.
- <sup>15</sup> Rothwell and Wellins, "Mapping Your Future: Putting New Competencies to Work for You."
- <sup>16</sup> Davis, et.al., *Successful Manager's Handbook*, pp. 400-01.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp.400-01.

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