

BASICS of individual development planning

IT'S all about behavior change

Development has not occurred unless behavior changes and the changed behavior enables the work to get done better or quicker. Consider:

- You can take a class on how to use a spreadsheet software program. Unless you apply what you learn in class back on the job, make more proficient use of the software, and complete tasks involving the software more quickly or accurately than before, development has not happened.
- You can attend a workshop on making presentations. Unless you do something noticeably different in your next presentation, your audience sees a noticeable improvement, and more of your audience takes the actions you request in your presentation, development has not happened.
- You can read a book about leadership. Unless you act differently on the job, those around you perceive that you are, in certain ways, a more effective leader, and your efforts to get things done through others prove to be more fruitful, then development has not happened.

A development plan is a document that specifies

1. what it is an employee is attempting to develop
2. for what purpose the development effort is being made
3. how the employee's behavior change will be measured
4. what the employee will do to achieve the desired behavior change
5. the support needed to make it all happen
6. how progress will be followed up

A development plan should be a written document because major development efforts typically do not work if they are just talked about. Employees need to make their plans visible (write them down) and commit to execute the plans (at least in front of their immediate supervisor and, ideally, in front of a wider public). Otherwise the plans will fare no better than a New Years' Resolution.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Employees are responsible for their own development. What does this mean? Seizing opportunities to learn new things, talking to your supervisor about what upcoming changes are likely to occur (in job responsibilities, technology, organizational structure, etc.) and the skills that will be needed, practicing new skills in your current job, pursuing developmental tasks while maintaining outstanding performance in the current position.

Supervisors are responsible for providing support for their employees' development efforts. Why should they provide support? To engage employees in their work, hold on to top performers, keep employees producing results to meet unit goals, and develop employees for the agency's future needs.

DISTINCTIONS

We speak of development plans, career development plans and corrective action plans. What is the difference?

- **Individual Development Plans** — Written by or for employees who wish to better utilize their strengths, develop their skills in order to take their performance to a higher level in their current job, get ready to take on greater responsibility, and prepare to move into another position. The plan should focus on a specific competency or skill to be enhanced, or area of knowledge to be acquired.
- **Career Development Plans** — Long-range plans that identify employees' career interests and goals, in light of the organization's needs, and their strategy for acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to achieve their goals. The career plan periodically spawns Individual Development Plans for developing specific skills that contribute to achieving the longer-term career goals.
- **Corrective Action Plan** — Drafted by supervisor for employees whose performance is deficient that is, does not come up to standard. It consists of short-term measures an employee can take to raise their level of performance to meet expectations.

PICK one, just one

It is usually best to concentrate on one development plan at a time. People who draw up five or six development plans and attempt to work on all of them simultaneously usually discover that their efforts are so diffused that they end up not carrying out any of the plans well and, thus, fail to develop at all.

So the advice is, if there are several development opportunities, pick one and only one, and concentrate all efforts on it.

To choose the one development opportunity to work on, consider the following factors:

- **Impact** — By working on which of the development opportunities would you and your agency benefit the most? Rate each opportunity high, medium or low with regard to its impact.
- **Doability** — Which development opportunity, if fashioned into a development plan and worked on, will most likely result in behavior change? Rate each opportunity high, medium or low.

Choose the development opportunity that is most likely to have an impact and to be doable.

TYPES of developmental experiences

Some types of developmental activity are better than others for fostering individual growth. What kinds of activities produce the best developmental results?

The following developmental activity types are listed roughly in order of their effectiveness. The activities at the top of the list are the most potent ways to develop and those at the bottom of the list, the least powerful.

- **Challenging assignments** — First-time assignments in which you lead a project, conduct research, open an office in a new location, create a new unit to meet a legislative mandate, or work on a deadline project.
- **Other people** — You work with, or shadow, an expert, receive support from an influential mentor, work for a difficult boss, deal with difficult co-workers, or supervise an especially talented employee.
- **Action learning** — Participating in learning programs that focus on addressing real situations and applying solutions back on the job.
- **Off-the-job experiences** — Chairing a committee for a volunteer organization, conducting fund-raising for a school, or planning a church picnic.
- **Coursework** — Attending training seminars, taking formal courses, completing e-learning programs. This is a good way to learn basics and to network with others, but on-the-job application does not automatically follow.
- **Books** — Reading books, articles and web-based white papers on a topic related to your development need. This is a good source of information, but not always reliable or consistent with your agency's approach, and on-the-job application is lacking.

The secret ingredient of the developmental activities that produce results the ones at the top of the above list is **challenge**. These activities push, provoke, prod, stretch and drag you perhaps kicking and screaming out of your comfort zone and into new territory. One or more of the following elements¹ of challenge are usually embedded in the most effective development activities:

- There is risk of public failure
- Aggressive, take-charge leadership is required
- You must work with new (or many) people
- You experience increased personal pressure
- You must influence people without using authority
- You are dealing with the unfamiliar
- Your performance is closely watched by people whose opinions count
- The assignment involves major organizational change
- There is a strategic component to your assignment
- You have to interact with a very good or very bad boss
- There is a missing piece to your assignment that is not at first apparent

Supervisors can help their employees construct effective development plans by incorporating some of the above elements in their development activities.

Special assignments are not always available, or possible. But employees may be able to design their own in-place development activities with minimal support from their supervisors that incorporate one or more of these elements.

WHAT supervisors can do to support employee development

There is a paradox: One of the biggest influences on whether employees successfully carry out their development plans is the active support and involvement of their supervisors. However, the ingredient that is most often missing in employee development is supervisory support. When supervisors are actively involved in their employees' development, what does that involvement look like? Supervisors can play one or more of five different roles²:

- **Development strategist**— In this role, supervisors clarify performance expectations (step one of performance management), help employees write individual development plans, and ensure that employees have the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their work.
- **Solutions enabler** — Supervisors teach new skills and procedures, help employees apply new skills and knowledge in their work and give advice based on their own experience.
- **Learning experience architect** — Supervisors provide developmental experiences and make sure projects and special assignments are learning experiences.
- **Opportunity broker** — Supervisors in this role help employees find training, pass along development opportunities and let their employees know about job openings.
- **Honest appraiser** — Supervisors give feedback on employees' strengths and weaknesses and assess their progress as they execute their development plans.

HOW to overcome obstacles to development

The most frequently encountered obstacles to development include not enough time, lack of managerial support and flat-out resistance to change. There are some things employees can do to overcome these obstacles:

- **Do something every day** — With most development plans this is not a problem. Opportunities arise every day to engage in the new behavior, try it out, and practice in real time on the job.
- **Set aside time** — If you cannot find the time, figure out why. Identify something that currently takes up time that is of less importance than the success of your development plan, and slip a development action in its place. Let something else slide and give one of your self-development activities a high priority for a change.
- **Set incremental goals** — Use your development plan timeframes as the basis for incremental goal setting. Take the measure of your progress on Day 5, for example, and set a goal to improve upon it by Day 10.
- **Go public** — Let people know you are striving to make a change and that you are serious about it. Now, failing to make the changes you wish to make will incur the wrath of dozens, rather than just disappointing yourself. And succeeding will delight dozens, as well as yourself.
- **Seek support** — Seek it from someone willing to give it, even if it is not the boss. Ask your subordinates, coworkers, clients, a trusted friend, a wise colleague, even your spouse. "Contract" with them so they understand specifically what you

- are trying to do and can brainstorm with you and arrive at a mutual agreement as to how they can help.
- **Stay on purpose** — Keep your purpose top of mind, and stay on it. Imagine your self-development purpose (your plan's headline) figuratively burned into the cells of your cerebral cortex. Every time you open your eyes, you see, superimposed over the real world in front of you, your purpose spelled out in bright, glittering letters. It is always there. You cannot miss it. In every situation you find yourself, your developmental purpose is at the top of your mind. You act in accord with this purpose, spewing new behaviors, consistent with your developmental purpose, every step of the way.

References

1 Based on research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership.

2 Corporate Leadership Council, "Leadership Fundamentals of Coaching and Development," 2004.

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