

Power to the People! Why Employee Development Benefits the Organization as Much as the Employee

By D.J. Kalamas

In today's constantly changing business environment, companies can no longer rely upon traditional venues for gaining a competitive edge. Nearly all companies have access to the same or similar technologies, can employ people with appropriate skill sets and can creatively manage financial resources, leaving few companies with a significant advantage in the marketplace. As D. Quinn Mills of the Harvard Business School notes, "The only sustainable advantage that any organization is going to have in the future is the ability of its people."

The capacity to develop human resources is, and will continue to be, increasingly key to organizational success. The inherent value of having a highly skilled and committed workforce has been widely recognized, especially in the last 30 years or so. However, we need to go one step further.

To be successful in the long term, companies must create a climate that encourages employees to continuously develop themselves, become better performers and take ownership for the organization's success (or failure).

Peter Drucker has long contended that one of the primary tasks of any manager is to help his or her people develop themselves, both as employees and as individuals. He also feels that all development is self-development. Managers cannot force people to develop themselves; they can only set the stage.

An institutionalized, comprehensive and strategic development plan can reap substantial benefits for both the organization and the employee. Employees who are skilled in the process of self-development are more likely to be independent learners and thinkers who are knowledgeable about the organization, less likely to exit, better able to respond to changing market conditions and more positive about their jobs. They become more valuable to their companies.

Developmental needs are often approached in a piecemeal, reactive fashion. Employees are sent off to training programs, consulting companies are employed, "leadership" training programs are implemented and motivational speakers are brought in. These types of efforts, although well-intentioned, often do not address deep-seated organizational problems linked to employee skill levels, job knowledge and attitudes. They tend, instead, to be focused upon readily apparent, immediate developmental issues, representing attempts at short-term solutions. Employee development is a complex issue, and a truly effective developmental plan that can substantially improve organizational performance will be complex and long term.

Any comprehensive developmental effort must be based on a vision—a picture of what your organization will look like in the future. A realistic vision that employees can buy into and embrace is an essential component of effective leadership. In addition to a clear vision, a realistic picture of your organization's workforce and an assessment of the internal and external forces that might affect it in the future are critical. You must have an understanding of potential threats to workforce productivity that may ultimately impact organizational performance or even organizational survival.

A good starting point is to revisit your company's vision statement, mission statement, organizational goals and organizational strategies. Solid data about where you are and where you want to be as a company will help you and your employees create more effective developmental plans that integrate employee needs with organizational needs and improve the odds that your plans will contribute to maximized organizational functioning.

Here are some additional steps to consider:

- Enlist the aid of your Human Resource Department to create a cross-functional team charged with exploring developmental opportunities—education, training, coaching systems, mentoring programs and career planning systems.

- Institutionalize employee development. For employees to become true life-long learners, the organization's culture must support employee efforts aimed at self-development.
- Train managers in the art and science of employee development
Reward managers who consider employee development to be a significant element of their jobs.
- Ensure that Human Resources is a full-fledged player during the strategic planning process.
- Analyze your workforce. Look at current skill and knowledge levels, along with employee attitudes toward the company and toward self-development. This will give you a sense of people's capabilities. Completing analyses of the internal and external environments as they relate to your workforce will provide valuable planning data—resources currently allocated to development, labor market conditions and the quality of Human Resource management systems.

The ROI from a well-designed and implemented strategic development plan can be significant. Both individual and organizational performance will be enhanced and your competitive position will be improved.

Remember: the power to be a superior performer lies within us all. It has only to be tapped.

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