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Are Development Plans a Waste of Time and Money?

The title of this article is a question that Marc Effron, President of The Talent Strategy Group, basically answers with a definitive "yes" in his piece, "Delusions of Employee Development."

In that article, Effron cites a statistic – 23% of human resources professionals rated development planning as being effective in their organization (*"The State of Talent Management 2011," New Talent Management Network*), and then goes on to make two indictments: HR is delusional about how managers will approach development planning; and the assumption about employees is equally unrealistic.

His solution is to radically reduce your expectations.

A good first step is to set just one development goal, rather than several. Effron also suggests differentiating your development investment using a "Talent Philosophy" (allocating your resources toward your highest potential employees). I agree with this but have a different twist on it, which I will discuss later in this article.

I like that Effron put the onus on managers by making them responsible for setting the development goal. He also advocates imposing significant rewards and consequences for managers in how they assist their staff in accomplishing goals.

I can imagine your reaction to that paragraph. *Are you suggesting that managers spend a significant amount of their precious time helping employees accomplish their development goals?* Yes, I am. After all, what more important strategy is there for managers than developing the capabilities of their people?

I agree with Effron's point that it is, indeed, delusional to continue to think managers and employees are going to be committed and invested in accomplishing development plans. But why haven't the commitment and investment been there, and why won't they be there moving forward? I think it comes down to three factors: motivation, commitment and consequences.

Only certain types of employees are intrinsically and extrinsically driven to continually improve in their work and rise in their profession. Some employees see work as a means to an end - they do their job and will give you their best, but they have other interests and obligations beyond the eight-hour workday.

Another group of employees prefers not to put in the work to accomplish goals for a five-percent increase when they can get a three-percent increase without doing so.

Effron notes four other changes to achieve realistic employee development, in addition to reducing expectations, which I agree with, and differentiating your investment. I agree there, too, although Effron doesn't include a way to measure potential, like E•A•S•I–Consult's® Burke Learning Agility Inventory®.

Those remaining changes are:

- *Managers should set development goals for their people*. I agree, along with having consequences for goal not met.
- *Double-down on experiences*. Effron espouses what he calls "experience maps," which is a little different from "career ladders," in that if you want to work in a function, it shows you the jobs/experiences you need. But that approach won't work if someone is going to move across functions. I am a fan of competencies as the way to have that conversation; Effron is not.
- *Create development plans in talent review meetings*. I have no problem with that. I think competencies and learning agility dimensions need to be strengthened and can add to the specificity of the conversation.
- *Make managers accountable for development*. Amen.

So, what has changed the way people like Effron and I think about development? It's the recognition that you aren't going to develop everyone, so don't try and boil the ocean.

Until about 20 years ago, development took place in training classes. In his book, "The Lessons of Experience," Mike Lombardo determined, through research, that people learn best on the job, not through training programs.

Effron reiterates that by encouraging organizations to sell their learning management systems, stop sending employees to classes en masse and put the cost-savings into on-the-job development. I mostly agree with Effron, but there is some limited training that, if done with on-the-job work, can be effective.

About the Author

David Hoff is the chief operation officer and executive vice president for leadership development at at E•A•S•I–Consult®. *E•A•S•I–Consult works with Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and mid-sized corporations to provide customized Talent Management solutions. E•A•S•I–Consult specialties include individual assessment, online employment testing, survey research, competency*

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