

MANAGING PEOPLE

If You're Not Helping People Develop, You're Not Management Material

by Monique Valcour

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Skilled managers have never been more critical to the success of firms than they are today. Not because employees can't function without direction, but because managers play a vital role in talent management. Gone are the comprehensive career management systems and expectations of long-term employment that once functioned as the glue in the employer-employee contract. In their place, the manager-employee dyad is the new building block of learning and development in firms.

Good managers attract candidates, drive performance, engagement and retention, and play a key role in maximizing employees' contribution to the firm. Poor managers, by contrast, are a drag on all of the above. They cost your firm a ton of money in turnover costs and missed opportunities for employee contribution, and they do more damage than you realize.

Job seekers from entry-level to executive are more concerned with [opportunities for learning and development](#) than any other aspect of a prospective job. This makes perfect sense, since continuous learning is a key strategy for [crafting a sustainable career](#). The vast majority (some sources say as much as 90%) of learning and development takes place not in formal training programs, but rather on the job—through new challenges and developmental assignments, developmental feedback, conversations and mentoring. Thus, employees' direct managers are often their most important developers. Consequently, job candidates' top criterion is to work with people they respect and can [learn from](#). From the candidate's viewpoint, his or her prospective boss is the single most important individual in the firm.

Managers also have a big impact on turnover and retention. The number one reason employees quit their jobs is because of a poor quality relationship with their direct manager. No one wants to work

for a boss who doesn't take an interest in their development, doesn't help them deepen their skills and learn new ones, and doesn't validate their contributions. This isn't what departing employees tell HR during their exit interviews, of course. After all, who wants to burn a bridge to a previous employer? Instead, they say they're leaving because of a better opportunity elsewhere. And so what happens is that organizations remain in the dark regarding how much damage their inept managers are doing.

Regardless of what else you expect from your managers, facilitating employee learning and development should be a non-negotiable competency. Google's famous people analytics team examined data from thousands of employee surveys and performance reviews to find out which behaviors characterize its most effective managers. [Coaching](#) topped a list that also included helping with career development. Research by Gallup has yielded similar [results](#). Work groups in which employees report that their supervisor (or someone else at work) cares about them as a person, talks to them about their career progress, encourages their development, and provides opportunities to learn and grow have lower turnover, higher sales growth, better productivity, and better customer loyalty than work groups in which employees report that these developmental elements are scarce.

Remember the Peter Principle? The phrase refers to a process in which employees receive promotions as a reward for being competent in their current jobs, and they continue to rise through an organization's ranks until they reach a level at which they are incompetent. The predictable consequence of this pattern is that over time, an organization becomes heavily staffed by managers who are bad at their jobs. Your organization cannot afford to let this happen.

Becoming a great developer of employees requires managers to expand their focus from "How can I get excellent performance out of my team members?" to "How can I get excellent performance out of my team members while helping them grow?" Savvy managers know that doing well on the second part of the last question helps to answer the first.

The best managers ask, "How can we harness employee strengths, interests and passions to create greater value for the firm?" Systematically linking organizational performance and individual development goals in the search for learning opportunities and better ways to work is a hallmark of organizations where sustainable careers flourish. And this is not a question managers try to answer by themselves; instead, they discuss it regularly with their team members.

Here are several steps you can take to stimulate learning and development:

- Share detailed information with your team about current operations across the firm. Be transparent about the firm's challenges and direction, including such things as changing customer expectations, new vendor relationships, early-stage strategic plans, and top leaders' thinking regarding the potential impact of industry trends and economic conditions. Invite their questions, thinking and suggestions on these issues as well.

- Support the development of internal social networks that span functions and divisions in order to give employees broader understanding of the organization and help them spot opportunities to learn and to add value.
- Instead of a once-annual conversation about career goals at the time of the annual performance review, have frequent short conversations throughout the year regarding employees' career goals and interests, which may not be self-evident. Regular career conversations help employees to refine their goals. With better understanding of their learning goals, you and your employees are in a better position to spot developmental opportunities.
- When planning your team's work, ask employees to identify both how they can contribute and what they would like to learn. This gives employees the primary responsibility for clarifying what they want to learn and for proposing ways to incorporate on-the-job learning. It also helps to avoid having employees volunteer to perform only the tasks that they are already highly skilled at.
- Ask employees to report back periodically to you and fellow team members on what they have been learning and how they are using new skills and knowledge.

Keep in mind that in addition to helping employees develop and pursue meaningful learning goals, regular career conversations also help to mark progress in development. And they serve as a reminder of the organization's commitment to employee learning, which in turn strengthens employee commitment.

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