

Developing Individuals: A Line Manager's Role

Although individuals have a responsibility to take ownership of their own development, line managers can also play a key role in providing direction and helping people to reach their potential. This article looks at some of the responsibilities that you have towards developing your team members, and offers some suggestions for possible development activities.



Why development is important

Your team members may be competent at their everyday work, but their potential skills and abilities will not just be limited to the tasks and activities that form their core job roles. It is usually the case that individuals have more to offer you, your team, the organisation, and themselves.

Part of your responsibility as their manager is to keep your team happy, engaged and motivated. Investing time and effort in their development is an excellent way to achieve this.

Developing individuals in your team has many advantages:

- **Business benefits.** Applying new skills and knowledge in the workplace should result in more effective processes, added value through technical or subject-matter expertise, and an increased talent pool that can be utilised for projects.
- **Motivation.** If people in your team feel that you, and the organisation as a whole, are investing time and effort into their development, they are likely to be motivated to perform to the best of their ability. Through this motivation will come a positive working attitude, and a willingness to engage with business aims and objectives.

- **Staff retention.** Similar to the above, investing in an individual's development will make them feel valued. Valued employees are more likely to stay with an organisation.
- **Confidence and personal satisfaction.** Mastering a new skill will doubtless breed confidence. In turn, you will find that this confidence should result in a willingness to take on workplace challenges, offers of support and help to others, and suggestions of improvement ideas. From this should emerge pride and satisfaction in their work.

What are your responsibilities?

Managers have two key responsibilities: to ensure that their function's outputs are met efficiently, and to keep their team happy and productive. Successful people development can often involve a successful marriage between the two.

1. Your organisation

From your organisation's perspective, it is important to understand that development should be relevant to its business objectives. Although individuals will have personal interests, development activities supported by your company should be of real benefit to it. Be clear on what the organisation wants to achieve, and identify ways in which your team can support this other than just 'getting the day job done'.

An example of this is examining a process in your area. Currently, it may be effective, but could it be made even more efficient? Would this revised process involve upskilling or developing members of your team to play a role in this change? If so, an ideal development opportunity has just presented itself.

Development should not be solely focused around business objectives, however. Career development and advancement should also be a factor. Employees are not as loyal as they once were – if they are not offered the opportunity to advance internally, they may look externally.

If a team member shows talent, it is worth having a discussion with them about their career aspirations and discussing their development areas in line with where they want to be.

2. Your team members

Carefully consider your individual team members' talents and interests. If you feel that a particular aptitude is being shown by someone, could this be utilised in the business? If so, think about the steps that need to be taken to implement this. For example, is training required, or is being given the opportunity to develop 'on the job' under supervision sufficient? It is a good idea to record these development ideas as you have them.

If a team member expresses an interest in a development area, you owe it to them to listen to what they want to pursue and why. This request needs to be evaluated in terms of:

- What is the development request?
- Is it worthwhile?
- Is this person suited to it?
- Is it a request that can realistically be met?

Do not feel obligated or pressured into agreeing to support the request if you feel the person is not suited to it, or it won't provide value to the organisation. That said, when you have a discussion with a team member about development, or they have begun a development activity, you have a responsibility to:

- **respect** all requests for development - you don't want to dishearten anyone by dismissing them out of hand
- give **advice** when it is asked for, or arrange for someone else to provide it if you're not the best person to do this
- present the **opportunity** for development where possible
- offer **support** when it is needed
- **encourage** people on a regular basis to keep them motivated and engaged

As noted in the above section, also bear in mind their career aspirations. If a team member does not feel that they can advance within an organisation, they may not be loyal to it. If an employee is an asset to the business, then you should be working with them to ensure that they do want to move on.

Think beyond formal courses

The traditional idea of developing someone is to send them on a formal training course. While this is a very valid way of acquiring new skills or knowledge, it is not always possible, or even necessary.

Formal training courses can be expensive, and the return on investment (i.e. valued gained for cost spent) may not be worthwhile. Certainly, this is a form of development that should be seriously considered. However, you should also give some thought to the following activities:

- **On-the job training.** Where learning is achieved through performing new tasks and activities, normally under the supervision of an experienced colleague.
- **Job-shadowing.** This involves spending time with another member of staff to learn about their role and what it involves.
- **Delegation.** Where individuals are given the responsibility for delivering a task or output. Depending on the activity that is delegated, this can be an excellent way to develop planning, decision-making, problem-solving and leadership skills.
- **Reading materials (e.g. books, journals).** Reading about a subject matter is often the best way of finding out about it, but this is probably not suitable for more practical subjects.
- **E-learning.** Many topics can now be studied online, which offers convenience as the resources are normally available 24/7. In a similar vein, distance learning means that study materials are sent directly to the learner and, depending on the course selected, can often be studied at their own pace.
- **Coaching.** A form of one-to-one support aimed at developing a person's skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves.
- **Mentoring.** Similar to coaching, but takes a longer-term approach to facilitating personal and career development.
- **Secondments to other departments.** Involves sending individuals to different areas of the organisation for a period of time to perform a job role relevant to that department. Gives them the opportunity to learn how other departments work, and to acquire skills and knowledge they wouldn't get from working in your team.
- **Project working.** Gives individuals the opportunity to work with other departments on defined objectives and outcomes. Can encourage learning about other aspects of the organisation, and develop skills such as planning, strategy,

communication and team working.

- **Blended learning.** When the focus is not just on one development activity, but on a variety, e.g. a mix of different activities are used to develop skills and abilities. This can cater for different learning styles and circumstances, and can prevent the learning process from becoming stagnant.

If you are unsure of the best way of developing a member of your team, have a conversation with your organisation's learning and development department (if applicable). They should be able to provide you with information regarding what is available, and what is the most appropriate method. Alternatively, it might be worthwhile to have a discussion with your own department manager to solicit their development ideas.

What about team members who do not want to be developed?

For every person who wants to be developed, there are those who are not interested – they are happy to do their job and go home. So long as they are performing their role effectively, there are no real issues with this. However, in today's changing workplace, it is unrealistic that they will not have to undertake some form of skills training at various points.

As demand increases for processes and procedures to become slicker and more efficient, these team members may find that it is necessary for them to undertake learning activities (e.g. training on a new computer system). It is your job to make sure that they understand why this is necessary, and what the end benefits to them are (e.g. a quicker way of dealing with customer transactions).

Of course, you can always involve these team members in developing others, if they are willing. If they are performing a role successfully, and that role presents a development opportunity for another person in your team, you could ask them to provide on-the-job training. It's important not to force anyone to do this, but it can help people feel valued, even if they do not want to actively take part in development activities of their own.

One final point

Developing your team members can also be a rewarding experience for you personally. Watching people grow in ability and confidence can be very exciting, especially if you have had a direct part to play in helping them decide, or had direct involvement in, their development activities.

Certainly, carefully planned, monitored and evaluated development can only bring positive benefits for you, your organisation and the individuals involved.

Image Credit: Flickr [David Goehring](#) (accessed 25 September 2014).