

TIPS ON BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Developmental planning is central to most performance management processes and has been practiced for decades. However, the majority of the plans we've seen fail to impress on several levels. They miss the mark on identifying relevant and meaningful targets, offer too little structure for action and accountability, and usually have weak linkage to existing reward systems. Given the importance of a well crafted plan for any serious endeavor, we offer the following guidelines.

- The starting point for developmental planning is a clear and honest sense of one's needs. This can come from self-insight, a manager's feedback or something far more comprehensive, like a 360° assessment. Regardless, the individual doing the planning must understand how their leadership behavior is "translating." In addition, he/she has to buy into the idea that progress is not only possible, but desirable.
- One way to frame developmental planning is to have the individual look beyond their responsibilities to the kind of challenges they will be facing in the future. Although most people are fairly content with their existing skill set, they'll usually agree that future demands will likely call for new and refined skills. This framing often proves to be a valuable motivator...."If you continue doing what you've been doing, will it be good enough to get you where you need to go?"
- Developmental planning is almost never useful if it doesn't directly involve the participant's manager in the process. He/she usually has a big vote in what is focused on, and how changes in behavior might be rewarded or recognized. Most developmental plans sit on shelves gathering dust because there is no accountability from the manager to follow up or act on what has been proposed. Minimally, the developmental plan should be shared; more aggressively, it should be built with the manager's counsel early on in the process.
- Keep the plan simple, focused, and relevant. The best thinking suggests that a single, well-chosen developmental target is far more likely to be acted on than a complex set of plans or initiatives. Planning might be built around the question, "What simple thing should I be doing to better leverage my skills and role to drive optimal business value?"
- Acting on the right target is likely to have a cascading or ripple effect on other developmental needs. For example, the manager who commits to communicating more frequently and effectively with his staff is likely to improve his marks for engagement, and may well end up enhancing the perception of both his delegation and even performance feedback.
- Developmental planning should always have a behavioral component. Leadership is observed, and if someone is to be seen as progressing, in almost every case, behavior actually needs to change. In this sense, a good developmental plan is highly tactical and even engineered in day-to-day activity.
- There's a lot of wisdom in sharing the developmental process with one's peers and one's staff. These stakeholders can help the leader by monitoring his or her progress, coaching them along the way, and even reinforcing progress. Further, the more this is shared, the more obligated the individual is to actually do something.

- Almost always, development involves pushing past one's comfort zones, and at least dabbling in areas outside of one's experience. So-called "stretch assignments" can be very powerful in development because they place an individual into a new environment that requires them to draw on not only the previous experiences, but grapple with real risks and new choices. Learning occurs in the struggle or tension inherent in this space. As Ron Heifetz would say, it's an "adaptive challenge" that teaches one new lessons. And this always requires a certain degree of stress.
- Monitoring and measuring progress is an additional component to effective developmental planning. Nobody should build a plan without initially considering how they will evaluate their success, and in what ways they will measure the perception of change. This doesn't always have to be complicated; sometimes progress can simply be noted by a manager, but we believe in a pre- and post-measurement process to do justice to the impact of a developmental plan.