

Why Employee Development Is Important, Neglected And Can Cost You Talent



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It's hard to think of an important aspect of management more neglected than development planning: helping your employees shape the future direction of their careers. Yet for a variety of reasons, this valuable activity is often ignored... or handled as a bureaucratic exercise... or an afterthought. Companies pay a high price: the loss of top young talent.

I know when I was in management I didn't spend as much time as I should have on the development of my own employees. I *did* spend some time, but in retrospect I wasn't as consistent and thorough as I should have been. And I'm sure it would have been helpful over the years if my own managers had spent more time with me.

These long-held but general impressions were confirmed recently when I happened across a *Harvard Business Review* study from last July. The article, "Why Top Young Managers Are in a Nonstop Job Hunt" by Monika Hamori, Jie Cao and Burak Koyuncu, described a study based on analysis of international databases of over 1,200 young high achievers, and concluded that many of the best and the brightest are *not* receiving the career development support they desire. The article stated:

"Dissatisfaction with some employee-development efforts appears to fuel many early exits. We asked young managers what their employers do to help them grow in their jobs and what they'd

like *their employers to do, and found some large gaps. Workers reported that companies generally satisfy their needs for on-the-job development and that they value these opportunities, which include high-visibility positions and significant increases in responsibility. But they're not getting much in the way of formal development, such as training, mentoring and coaching – things they also value highly.*”



Photo: Wikipedia

Why is employee development a chronic problem, and why should it *not* be? Based on several decades of my own management experience, following are three reasons why development planning is often ignored... and three reasons why that's a costly mistake.

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Why is development planning frequently ignored?

1) **We tend to focus most on the here and now.** So many businesses are in a constant frenetic state of upheaval, reorganizations and trying to do more with less. In this environment, managers naturally tend to be most focused on essential day-to-day operations and less interested in longer-term activities perceived as having less certain payback.

2) **Some bureaucratic exercises are done but not acted upon.** When I was in corporate management, we spent a fair amount of time trying to fit employees into nearly incomprehensible matrices with too many descriptive boxes ("Intergalactic Star," "Diamond Amid Coal," "Wolverine Tendencies," "Wicked Lot of Problems" and so on – my own fanciful categories). The problem was, the exercises were so confusing and time-consuming that we were satisfied just to complete them, and seldom did much constructive with the data.

3) **There's just no time for it.** This is (as those younger than I often put it) the "lamest" excuse of all. There's *always* time for important activities. If you believe that development planning is a valuable managerial function, just make it a priority and carve out the minutes and hours for it.

Why development planning makes good business sense.

1) **People care if you take a genuine interest in their future.** Emphasis here on "genuine." Development planning should be something a manager takes a real personal interest in – not an HR-driven mandate. (Note: I *am* a strong believer in the value a good solid HR organization brings to a company. But I'm also opposed to making the simple needlessly complex.)

2) **It helps builds loyalty, and loyalty increases productivity.** The logical corollary to point #1. Taking an honest interest in someone builds loyalty. Loyal employees are more engaged. Engaged employees are more productive.

3) **Good talented people naturally want to advance, and appreciate meaningful support in the process.** As the HBR study showed, capable ambitious young employees *want* training, mentoring and coaching. They want to gain skills. They want to become more versatile and valuable to an organization. Many years ago my company invested heavily in my MBA, and it always meant a great deal to me. Who doesn't appreciate thoughtful support that helps you advance your own career? But the flip side is, if one company doesn't provide it, enterprising employees will go elsewhere for it.

One final thought: *Development planning doesn't have to be elaborate or costly.* At its core it's mostly a matter of good managers *taking the person-to-person time to understand their employees...* recognizing their skills and needs... and guiding them to fill in the gaps. If it's

done well, the payoff can be substantial in terms of long-term loyalty. If it's not, the costs can be substantial in terms of long-term talent.