



## **ASTD Human Capital – Collection of 4 blog posts by Wendy Axelrod PhD**

### **Part 1: Creating Development Abundance for Your Entire Team: Spread the Development**

The idea of leaders grooming only a select few “stars” in a company is pretty familiar. For the last few decades, the collective wisdom about talent development has been surprisingly (or perhaps not) exclusive.

Many companies have focused on cherry-picking a handful of employees with the highest potential (the “stars”), and then doling out the best development opportunities, perks and promotions to that select group. Companies that follow this path feel that they’re devoting precious resources to the most deserving group of employees, and getting the biggest bang for their buck. The problem is that this approach leaves the vast majority of the workforce sensing little investment, other than encouragement to reach for tools and get developed on their own. What a loss. These employees feel less engaged and are not stretched to take on more challenging work demands leading to bigger results. Yet endless studies show greater business success requires employees who are engaged and challenged.

So, for some, the tides are changing. Many have come to believe that giving special treatment only to their star employees is bad for business. They fear their talented workers are moving on to organizations where they will feel more appreciated and get the development they pine for. Or worse yet, those ignored staffers will stay on, knowing full-well they’re not among the chosen few, and their on-the-job effort will reflect that spirit.

Companies can do much better by embracing the approach of having their managers “create development abundance” as an ongoing dimension of the work place. Smart companies equip managers to continually spread development opportunities across all their people, improving engagement and performance of their entire teams, not just the high potentials. Managers then become crucial as they have their people work with others in gaining skills and immediately apply their development on the job; primary approaches for development that sticks. This ongoing focus on everyone will improve business and contribute to an inclusive and optimal working climate.

This upcoming series of posts will explore three practices that managers can adopt in order to create an environment that will drive a wealth of development opportunities in the workplace for everyone. Stay tuned, the upcoming posts will explore how managers can:

- **Decide there is “enough for all” and act on it**

- **Shift around work assignments to expand development**
- **Selectively use others' challenges for your team's growth**

Is your company equipping managers to create an environment that provides a lot of development opportunities for their people? We'd love to hear about it.

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## Part 2: An "enough for all" mindset

Ever visit a team where the whole department is pushing the bar higher every week; where the entire team is engaged in high action "learning while achieving" mode? You can just *feel* the electricity. Maybe you get that image when you think of Google or SAS (two of 2013's winners for Best Places to Work). Wondering what it would take to replicate this in your company? Well, it doesn't require a total organizational overhaul; rather think about it on a team by team basis. I discovered this when, along with my co-author Jeannie Coyle, we researched Exceptional Development Managers (EDMs). Their departments were beehives of both continuous learning and increased performance.

Exceptional development managers adopt an "enough for all" mind-set and assume that everyone has the capacity and desire to grow and be challenged. It's an approach that is both democratic and generous. They stop thinking about development as a sidebar or special assignments for a few, and instead prioritize development every day for everyone.

Here's an example. After receiving feedback that her high pressured team meetings were mostly focused on sharing information and little else, one of our executive clients worked on re-tooling her department meetings to become far more developmental. She introduced into these meetings short action-related developmental tasks and thought provoking questions. Then, she carried that into her on-going interactions with the team, even outside the meetings. At first, few people knew how to respond. But, it did not take long for everyone in the department to understand that further developing skills was now a standard requirement, and they loved it. They are in learning mode, whether or not the executive is there to spur it on.

EDMs tell their people it is a requirement to grow while they work. Then, they turn their talk into actions. It is not about big initiatives; rather they embed growth into the flow of daily activities. They aim for a high volume of developmental interactions with their team. These can be short, action-item related tasks or questions, including:

- Asking thought-provoking questions at staff meetings.
- Insisting on learning debriefs at the end of projects.
- Having people share learning at meetings.
- Pairing up people on projects who have different skills.
- Acknowledging and praising team members, not just for a job well done, but also for what they learned.
- Creating miniature learning events such as brown-bag lunches.

Just like our successful client, EDMs provide many reinforcements to keep the development going. They willingly take risks, letting go of the reins while their people take on bigger stretch assignments. Yet,

they are always just off stage, in the wings, to monitor and provide feedback and support if employees falter (which they are bound to do). They've developed a positive rapport with each employee which increases employees' willingness to try new things and receive feedback. And, these managers are on a constant look out for assignments and people who will be developmental for their team members.

Managers who use this approach say it is not more work...it is just a different way to manage.

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### **Part 3: Shift around work assignments to expand development**

When I got a call from a former intern who was recently employed at a global company, I just had to ask how work was going. "Not good at all" he said. "They give me the same low level tasks to do over and over. They figure I do them well and they're not going to risk giving any of the more interesting work to me. I thought this job would grow my skills, but it's not. I'm counting the months until it looks legitimate on my resume and then I'll move on." People get bored doing the same jobs day in and day out. That leads to less productive, unhappy employees. This post will focus on how managers can shift work to spark development.

People want to broaden their skill sets and have variety and challenge in their workday. Can managers realistically provide these ongoing opportunities without spending half their day addressing employee development? I found the answer from leaders we call "exceptional development managers" (EDMs) from companies such as Corning, Microsoft, Siemens, Kraft and Marriott. These EDMs have cracked the code for adding lots of development by looking at the total workload of the department and finding creative ways to mix and match people with various tasks. In doing this, managers also help foster a culture of learning and development in their departments while getting the work done.

Many managers are already doing some of this. Here's what your managers can do to more fully implement this approach.

- Commit to making the investment of shifting work around, which means taking risks on assignments and letting go of some of the control for getting tasks done perfectly.
- Know your people and where they need to grow. Be purposeful with the shift-around assignment making sure it delivers meaningful development for the individual.
- Be transparent about: what you are trying to achieve, what will be required of employees and the benefits they will accrue.
- Avoid total overhaul to people's jobs, or taking them too far over their heads. They may feel too challenged or miss what they feel they do best.
- Establish a ground rule for employees supporting each other. Encourage people to reach out to those who have already mastered the skill and for those skilled employees to respond.
- Monitor their progress and have short conversations—sometimes even two or three minutes shows your support, especially to get them over challenging bumps.

For some departments, where everyone has deeply rooted specialties, this approach seems too challenging. Yet, a couple years ago a VP of a pharmaceuticals company whose team's mission included educating key opinion leaders in the global pharmaceuticals industry, proved it could be done. His highly talented team consisted of medical doctors, experts of brain functioning, regulators and marketers; all

of them were working in silos of deep expertise. The VP, knowing that greater integration of the team's efforts was essential for their overall performance, assigned people to new part-time roles in other sub-functions. Each one was provided an expert partner from the team. His staff members, who were quite resistant at first, told me they were amazed at how much they had to offer in their new unfamiliar roles. Their early opposition to shift-around turned into big appetites for more, as they realized how much their new role enhanced their skills, and added to the quality of the team's efforts.

This VP's use of "shift around" provided ongoing development to his deeply specialized team members and served as examples to many other company departments.

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## Part 4: Creating Development Abundance: Leverage Other Departments for Team Growth

Isn't it enough for any manager striving for top performance to stay focused on what their own department needs to get accomplished? Not so for Exceptional Development Managers (EDMs) who are in a continuous mode of developing their people while they get results. Recognizing the huge benefits of growing their people by tucking development right into the work itself (and holding team members accountable for both); EDMs sometimes take on new challenges from outside the department. They assume these outside projects *selectively*, handpicked to give their people the development they need. For example, Sid, a project leader in product development, talked with his team about taking on a particularly broken project with a tight deadline. The team members agreed to tackle it because of the value in both further developing resilience under pressure, and increasing abilities to deal with distraught clients.

Want your managers to apply this approach? Here are some tips to share with them to get over the hurdles:

- Select assignments that require a combination of skills that your people already have (so they can be successful), plus skills they need to learn (essential for upcoming opportunities)
- Discuss with your people not only what is to be accomplished for results, but also for their development, and how the newly expanded skills will get applied in the (near) future.
- Provide cover for your people's ongoing accountabilities. Don't simply make this new assignment a "pile on", relieve some of the pressure they are already carrying (perhaps by assigning their work to others who can learn from doing it)
- Ensure there is support in place—a resource they can tap for advice, as they run into challenges.
- Stay close enough to monitor for major problems, and far enough to allow them to fend for themselves. Greatest development occurs when there are emotions at play—the fear of failure and the victory of independent accomplishment are significant for getting new skills to stick.

Managers will be pleasantly surprised at the new energy people display when they add some projects that extend their team's collective frontier. Their teams will feel more confident and competent and be more involved. And by the way, these managers will develop a reputation for being willing to take on extra work to keep a sharp development edge for their staff, without overextending them.

In this series I touched on how companies help their managers create ongoing development opportunities for everyone, everyday. My clients tell me that they now know that learning is not true development until it is applied. Tucking development right into their people's work makes this process seamless, if managers know how.

Companies who help their managers to "create a wealth of development" as an ongoing dimension of the workplace garner great success. Their employees find new ways to contribute and feel turned on to receiving more complex assignments. The organization attracts new members who are eager to grow and take on challenges. And, managers not only get higher performing teams (every manager's dream), but the satisfaction of developing others, a joy that goes well beyond productivity. One EDM told me: "After a couple decades of managing, once I found out that developing people was my main job, I had a whole new perspective on my career. I absolutely love doing this; I look forward to coming to work every day."

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