



Leader to Leader

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Make Talent Your Business by Wendy Axelrod and Jeannie Coyle

The Know-Do Gap

Many leaders are stalled in a *know - do* gap? They might have the concrete intelligence that points to a superior outcome (the *know*), but current momentum (the *do*) keeps them on their familiar course. Take the case of talent development. Even though talent development is a proven driver of high performance organizations (that outperform competitors in revenue growth, market share, profitability and customer satisfaction) the know-do gap seems to be an expanding chasm.

Here's what we know. First, many leaders believe that their line managers are the primary lever for significant employee growth. It makes sense. Managers continuously communicate with employees, delegate work, identify resources to get the job done, and guide employees' performance. Second, decades of research confirms that most development happens by learning through work experience. Yet many managers rely heavily on training and Human Resources to get the development done.

We *know* managers are in the right place and could significantly help in the effort to develop talent. Yet for the most part we do not equip them or ask them to *do* the job. Actually, research shows fewer than 12% are held accountable for developing employees. Instead managers are required to focus on this quarter's numbers and by default leave the development on the sidelines. That's a shame, particularly when many companies are spending millions on training, high potential programs and succession planning while getting limited return. McKinsey—in a 10 year follow up to the 1997 *War on Talent*—notes that the heavy investments to date in talent management processes have proven to be insufficient, superficial and wasteful.

In Search of a Solution

We noticed this gap first hand in our own client work. In one large insurance company, we were brought in because extensive, high end talent management tools were failing to deliver the substantial talent development the leadership expected. During focus groups, our team learned the company's managers were champing at the bit to make their mark on talent development. These managers were unsure what to do and how to connect with the company's sophisticated efforts. And, though they wanted to take part, no one was expecting or asking them to play a significant role in talent development.

What's to be done to close the gap here and in other places? We found out. We did our own research, conducting in-depth interviews with people described as “exceptional development managers” (EDMs) and “exceptional developmental employees.” While our research participants represented their own views, they came from great firms such as Corning, Adidas, Microsoft, Siemens, Marriott, and Kraft (28 companies in all). The research objective: to understand exactly what EDMs did and how they propelled employees' capabilities for the long haul—capabilities that matter most to business results such as handling sensitive client interfaces, influencing others to accept change and leading diverse project teams.

A Manager Who Grows People Like Crazy

Lori is a good example of an EDM. A manager at a large consulting firm, she views developing people as an integral part of her job. She deliberately staffs high impact project teams with people who have diverse skills and learning needs. For example, you are likely to find professionals who possess great client interface skills mixed with those who are technically competent but not so good with clients. As people implement the project, they are expected to help each other close skill gaps.

Lori gets a good read on people and develops trusting relationships. She knows just how far to push them, but stands in the wings to steer them clear of career-limiting mishaps. The high trust she has built allows her employees to open their minds and hearts to exploratory conversations in which she provides hard hitting feedback. In some of these conversations she makes sure they understand how to navigate the complex organizational environment, helping them deliver the full impact of their work with clients. Plus, she directs them on how to tap others in the work environment who might help deepen particular, complex skills.

Lori infuses the environment with learning and growth for everyone, not just a few, and her staff loves it. Her people have developed comprehensive skills that can take them well beyond their current responsibilities. She is a true talent magnet. Is it more work for Lori? Not really—it is just *different* work, a new blend of management work that is deliberate, resourceful, and continuous when it comes to developing talent.

Lori's approach embodies all of the five practices that we uncovered in our research. Here's a deeper look at each of them with examples from other EDMs we encountered

1. Make everyday a development day: Focus people on results and development simultaneously using stretch work and continuous and daily support to help them develop more and get bigger and better results.

Consider the example of Juan Carlos. He takes risks with people by giving them the latitude and explicit requirement to learn. He thoughtfully picks the right new experience to tuck into the crevices of their work—with just the right degree of stretch. He is close by every day and thus in a position to see and seize on developmental moments—asking thoughtful questions and providing on-the-spot observations that get people thinking differently. And when it comes to staffing teams, he is purposeful in the way he shapes assignments in team projects to allow for peer coaching while insisting the team make progress in both results and learning. Juan Carlos says, *“It is a matter of seamlessly merging results and development and making it an everyday occurrence.”*

Like Juan Carlos, EDMs expertly “make everyday a development day” by perfecting four key actions.

- Tuck development into work.
- Create the right stretch.
- Seize developmental moments.
- Leverage team learning.

2. Tap the psychological side of development: Create a trusting relationship that makes it safe for employees to hear and act on feedback, take risks and become more aware both of what's driving them and what impact they are having on others.

Often, smart people think they know the answers. And when it comes to the toughest things—like how to influence others—it is a challenge for them to develop the self awareness needed to improve.

But Ravi is smarter. He models the guts to hear and act on the truth about *himself* as others see it. He even transparently shares how he adjusts his own inner struggles (for example, “I was angry, but realized I could rise above that and find a win-win”). This openness gives him the platform to cultivate relationships of high trust with his employees.

Getting to know his people and building trust gives Ravi a few advantages. He is in a position to help them look at their own emotions and behaviors during very difficult situations. The trust opens employees' receptiveness to his questions and feedback. And, he can make good decisions on how far out to push people. Often, the scarier the experience the more development it packs. One of his direct reports says, "*The greatest development I ever had came when my manager really pushed me out on the ledge . . . but quietly had my back the whole time.*"

Ravi truly demonstrates the key behaviors for "tapping the psychological side of development":

- Start with yourself (to develop self knowledge).
- Cultivate trusting relationships.
- Help people "see" themselves during key interactions.
- Connect dots between emotion and learning.

3. Connect people with development partners: Open up the door to help people connect with a rich network of people that holds the expertise they need to learn. Then teach them how to get the most from the relationship—but be there to help employees transfer that learning to their work.

Having a mentor is good, but having a good boss and mentor is not enough. Like other EDMs Linda connects people to several development partners, knowing full well she doesn't have to do all the development herself. She relishes the wonderful multiplier effect of hooking people up with the right source of learning at the right time, which also lightens her load.

She found she needs to help people understand the value of this approach so they don't just stick close to home but venture out to find the right partners. Then, she shows them how to make crystal clear what skill they need to learn, so they can narrow the search for willing and capable partners. Linda then provides employees specific guidance for structuring the relationship for mutual satisfaction and best learning. And she's there on the scene to help people make sense of and apply what they learned.

Linda covers all the bases that are part of "connecting people with development partners":

- Green light and motivate people to partner up for development.
- Give people a compass to find the right partners.
- Teach people how to get the most learning from partners.
- Invest in a network of development partners.

4. Teach skills to navigate organization politics: Help people map the political terrain and enter it prepared to not only survive but thrive, producing results that stick while reducing the time managers spend clearing up political missteps.

Political naïveté has killed more good ideas and careers than we care to recall. Many smart people avoid the very notion of what they consider "dirty politics." But Kim is an EDM who knows that politics is about the power to positively make things happen. He says, "I've gotten really good at spotting when people don't 'get it' and have lots of ways to help them embrace the importance of mastering politics." He takes a learn-by-doing approach and helps them map the political terrain they are traversing. Then he works with them to put strategies and skills in place to get through the terrain with results, not injuries. One technique he often uses to is to rehearse people for delicate presentations or discussions with powerful players. He says "I try to make my staff the Indiana Jones of the political jungle!"

Kim uses the masterful steps that comprise "teaching people to navigate organizational politics."

- Adjust assumptions about organization politics.
- Help map the political terrain.

- Coach people to build politically smart approaches.
- Plan and rehearse handling of complex situations.

5. Shape your environment to drive development: Weave development into the very texture of the organization making it an ongoing expectation and abundant reality—not just for high potentials, but for all. Master ways to manage the interface between your organization and the broader organization to increase the value of development tools while minimizing constraints.

Consider the case of Ellen, an EDM who is master weaver of development environments. She is adept at doing lots of small things regularly that create the demand for learning and then applies just the right touch (after action reviews, questions to spur next steps, and so on) to make it stick. But it is the volume and consistency of these actions—applied abundantly to all staff, not just high potentials—that creates a self-sustaining environment, rich with development. And she is quick to talk about how new accomplishments were made possible via the development.

Ellen is also a savvy activist when it comes to managing the risks of interfacing with the broader environment. She lives in a company that exhorts managers to develop people, but truth be told, the culture does not accept the risk of failure that comes with learning from experience. We were a bit surprised by the tales from the front line of managers like Ellen, of dealing with these risks. One told us, “*People have no idea how bloodied I get standing up for their development (in the face of pressures for short term results).*”

Ellen’s approach reveals the key components of “shape your environment to drive development”:

- Create development abundance.
- Shine light on learning.
- Manage the interface with the broader organization.

A Leader’s Call to Action: Make Talent Your Business

We’ve taken a look at the practices of managers who have become exceptional at developing talent and truly make it their business. Now, imagine the benefits of having an organization full of EDM’s. Your company would attract and retain spirited employees who love striving for higher levels of performance. Your managers would continuously prepare employees for more complex and changing work, expanding your company’s capabilities to innovate and stay in front of competitors. So, how can you and other leaders grow the supply EDM’s? Our call to action: start with these five practical actions.

1. *Reset managers’ expectations about their role.* Eradicate the philosophy that attaining results drives out all other objectives. Instead, communicate by word and deed that continually growing the business means striving for a double ribbon at the finish line—both results and development, seamlessly integrated as part of daily management.
2. *Develop managers so they, in turn, can intentionally develop others.* Invest in approaches to: amplify learning from their work experiences; orchestrate their peer mentoring and access to others; and, where appropriate, provide expert coaching.
3. *Retool use of tools.* Bury the myth that the tools are **the** answer on their own. Encourage managers to leverage the best aspects of structured programs (for example, development planning, 360 feedback, coaching programs). Allow managers situational leeway to match the tool to the right person at the right time.
4. *Walk the talk.* Adapt the EDM practices for yourself as the leading edge to re-shape the culture to value development integrated into everyday actions—not just for the select few, but for everyone.

5. *Measure results.* Add three questions to your employee engagement survey to measure how well employees are developing through experience with hands-on help from managers.

Better talent development equals better bottom line results—with intervening benefits for the business (talented employees attracted and retained, managers better positioned to address change, and much more). With these actions you can go a long way to closing the know-do talent development gap in your company.

Wendy Axelrod is a managing partner of Talent Savvy Manager, LLC and a sought-after consultant, speaker, and executive coach whose clients have included Merrill Lynch, Novo Nordisk, Merck, Duke Energy, Aetna, Deloitte, Vanguard, Occidental, Sanofi aventis, , Northup Grumman and DuPont. Previously an HR executive for Sunoco she has spoken at the conferences of the Organization Development Network, IQPC, HR People and Strategy and American Society for Training and Development. She serves on a number of non-profit boards, often leading their mentoring and leadership development programs. She and Jeannie Coyle are coauthors of “Make Talent Your Business: How Exceptional Development Managers Develop People While Getting Results.”

Jeannie Coyle is a managing partner of Talent Savvy Manager, LLC and has been working to help companies develop the leadership skills, business acumen and organizational culture to their business for 30 years. She has worked with the senior management to align the people side with business strategy execution at organizations that include 3M, Nike, Time warner, SC Johnson, American Express, GE Capital, Pacific Gas & Electric, the New York Times, Kaiser Permanente, and Wells Fargo. She has been a board member of the Human Resource Planning Society for two terms and a member of the executive committee for seven years. She teaches in the MBA programs of Marylhurst University and Portland State.