



A LEADER'S 'CRASHLESS' COURSE: HELPING EMPLOYEES **DRIVE** CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Career development just might be the most simultaneously pressing and ignored leadership priority in business today.

Study after organizational study confirms what any employee on the street can tell you: career development is getting far more lip service than lift off in most organizations. Yes, there are sophisticated systems and software. And of course, processes and paperwork are plentiful. But, these inanimate tools can't, and don't drive genuine development results.

Managers and leaders recognize the problem, too. They experience the same

anemic attention to their own careers that employees report. For the most part, leaders know that development is important. They even know that it can drive critical business outcomes by activating engagement, discretionary effort, and greater levels of motivation. But, when asked why they don't give it more attention, there is resounding unanimity: managers and leaders simply don't have the time.

Who's going to argue with that? The workplace is busier and more congested than ever before and leaders bear the brunt of much of it. Their already overflowing platters of priorities are the consistent recipients of additional

mandates, requirements and activities. Their time and attention are sliced paper-thin. Unfortunately, career development is a casualty, being forever moved forward on to-do lists until too frequently it falls off altogether.

None of this needs to be a death sentence for career development. It just means that we need to reframe the task to fit within today's workplace. And, we need to reframe the roles that managers and employees alike must play to make it happen.

TURNING OVER THE KEYS

Given the events of the last several years as well as societal changes that have

engendered a “do-it-yourself” bias, most people have come to understand that the old employment contract no longer exists. Organizations don’t “owe” anyone a job or career; employees must actively manage their own futures.

Employees understand they can’t continue to be passive consumers of career development services, waiting for the organization or a boss to chauffeur them from position to position. They appreciate that they aren’t going to get anywhere following an institutional lead. They must set the pace, co-creating opportunities, experiences and results. They must drive their own career development.

Yet, while this conceptual awareness exists, employees don’t always have the support or skills to be able to turn on their engines and begin the journey.

At the same time, managers are grappling with their responsibilities relative to career development. While they might not have loved it, leaders knew what it meant to manage someone’s career and, it’s looked a lot like keeping a close hold on the keys. For decades, leaders have felt that it was their job to orchestrate the development of others. They’ve spent their careers trying

to make decisions and arrangements on behalf of others, and have determined the best courses, experiences and connections to help employees succeed.

The time has never been more right for leaders to reframe their role in development. What’s required for leaders to act as facilitators rather than doing the heavy lifting? To guide awareness without dictating action? To sit in the passenger (or even the back) seat, offering perspectives and options rather than turn-by-turn directions?

This kind of career development demands one central thing: employees must actually learn how to drive.

HELPING EMPLOYEES LEARN TO DRIVE THEIR OWN CAREERS IS A LOT LIKE HELPING SOMEONE LEARN TO DRIVE AN AUTOMOBILE

BEWARE: STUDENT DRIVER

Anyone who’s ever learned to drive likely remembers the terror associated with the responsibility and the comfort of having someone in the passenger seat who knew what to do and how to maneuver.

Whether we recognized it at the time or not, it was a relief to have that extra hand ready to guide our own on the steering wheel. That reminder about how close we were to the curb or that the upcoming stop sign was a good cue to move our foot toward the brake. Support from the passenger seat was essential to the learning process, but we had to actually do the driving for ourselves.

Helping employees learn to drive their own careers is a lot like helping someone learn to drive an automobile. Rather than turning the key in the ignition and putting their own feet on the pedals, managers need to guide employees to the car, help them open the door and invite them to get in on the driver’s side. Managers then need to slip into the passenger’s seat, buckle up and get ready to provide the level of support required of each employee to succeed.

Typically “new career development drivers” need to address five key priorities, which managers and leaders are uniquely qualified to help them explore and learn:

- **Learn the rules of the road**
To successfully navigate their own careers, employees must understand the organizational landscape including

DIY NATION

The do-it-yourself trend has taken hold across industries and within organizations throughout the United States.

- The Home Depot concept enables people everywhere to engage in a hands-on fashion in their own home improvements.
- Grocery stores have been able to contain expenses by developing systems that allow shoppers to check themselves out without assistance.
- The Internet should get the “teacher of the year” award because users across generational divides turn to it for instruction on how to perform tasks they might previously have hired out.
- Systems and services that were previously “done for” employees (like registering for benefits) are efficiently handled by employees themselves.

In many ways, we’ve turned into a do-it-yourself nation. We appreciate the autonomy, independence (and in some cases the cost-savings) of these self-directed approaches that have become part of the cadence of life for many.

So, why not career development? Taking on more responsibility for this critical and personal task is not anathema to most employees. They want to own it. They want to drive their development. They just don’t — in many cases — know how to get into the driver’s seat and start the ignition.

structures, politics, how opportunities present themselves and how to avail oneself of those opportunities. Managers and leaders are in the ideal position to offer this sort of insight and grounding.

- **Become familiar with what's under the hood**

All effective career development begins with self-reflection and self-knowledge. Through conversation, leaders can encourage employees to look inward at who they are, what they love, where they excel, what they use to do, what's important to them, and more.

- **Understand when and how to idle, change lanes & accelerate**

New drivers must quickly learn that on today's organizational highway, progress means moving in many different directions. Sometimes, it's accelerating forward to greater levels of responsibility. Sometimes, it's changing lanes and making lateral moves to broaden knowledge and capacity. Sometimes, it means putting the car in reverse to move backward in an effort to retrench. And, sometimes idling right where one currently is can be the best way to grow and develop. But, new career drivers frequently need some help understanding the multidirectional nature of the workplace, and the perspective of managers and leaders can powerfully ignite this understanding.

- **Navigating From Point A to Point B**
Getting anywhere requires setting a destination and mapping out a course. That means identifying learning goals and experiences that will advance career objectives when it comes to career development. This does not come naturally to many employees. They benefit tremendously from having leaders who can help them crystalize their direction and consider in-job experiences that can be done during "peak traffic times" of their workflow.

- **Brake and slow down when necessary**
Driving isn't always about moving. In fact, perhaps the most important skill a new driver must master is stopping. It's

easy for employees to get caught up in the activity of development. But, true learning comes from reflecting on those activities and experiences, extracting new insights and awareness, generalizing lessons and determining how to apply them for greater effectiveness. Leaders can point out the stop signs and help new drivers learn to take the pauses required for greater success.

DRIVING INSTRUCTORS WANTED

Teaching someone to drive is a process. It requires an upfront investment of time, energy and commitment as you structure the learning, engage in conversations, and facilitate new insight and skills. But over time, as the new driver develops competence and confidence, you'll find that you have to do far less. As their navigational savvy and expertise improve, you may move from the passenger seat to the back seat

and ultimately, out of the car entirely, providing support and encouragement from the sidelines as needed.

Leaders who work themselves out of this driving instructor role by effectively preparing others to drive their own development not only contribute to the success of individual employees, they also build a sustainable development culture and set the whole organization on the wide-open road to success.

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HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN SUPPORT THE DRIVE

Employees need to drive their own career development; and managers have a key role in helping them learn how to ultimately do this well. But that doesn't mean that the organization is off the hook. In fact, best-in-class organizations are distinguishing themselves by offering a full array of systems and support to enable employees to take greater ownership and responsibility for their own development. Practices range from very simple requiring little time or effort to more elaborate. Some that employees are giving high marks include:

- **Career coaching:** Assigning specially prepared leadership resources who are not the employee's direct supervisor to act as short-term career development thinking partners.
- **Mentorship:** Encouraging formal ongoing mentor/mentee relationships designed for mutual growth and benefit.
- **Competency systems:** Developing comprehensive maps of the skills and competencies required for all positions, so employees can assess themselves and their gaps as a basis for career development.
- **Experience-based learning:** Focusing beyond classes to expand the possibility of development through in-role experiences and activities that employees and their managers can independently drive.
- **Training and development:** Enhancing skills through a range of traditional, immersive and microlearning strategies that encourage managers and employees to test-drive new approaches and expand their capacity.
- **Self-service resources:** Making available online tools and even hardcopy guidebooks, such as "FYI: For Your Improvement" by Lombardo and Eichinger, that allow employees to accelerate their development independently by building on solid models and pursuing focused action.