

Integrated Strategies for Developing Future Leaders



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WISE EXECUTIVES SCAN THE environment of their organizations and identify a few select people who have the talent, commitment and drive to move the organization into the future. These are the people who function well on teams and assume leadership roles. They can be strong solo contributors when the occasion arises. They have demonstrated subject matter expertise and an understanding of the realities of the larger enterprise. They are the employees that organizations want to keep, cultivate and catapult into leadership roles. But, how can HR professionals help accomplish these goals? This article addresses three strategies for developing employees into leaders. HR professionals play a pivotal role in engaging employees and engendering their commitment by thoughtfully implementing a developmental strategy that is both challenging and rewarding.

Key Considerations: Distinctions in Development & Readiness

Before launching into a discussion of the strategies, it is important to make a distinction between two types of development: leader development and leadership development. Leader development focuses on expanding a person's capacity (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2005). This requires a sharp focus on the person as a unique human being, not simply a contributor to the organization's success. It is about personal growth and employee skill enhancement through learning, application, and reflection. Alternatively, leadership development has an interpersonal focus and helps employees build relationships and commitments and coordinate efforts (Day, 2001). This form of development integrates employees within the larger organizational environment and gives them the skills needed to move the enterprise forward.

Whether your efforts to retain your high potentials are focusing on leader development or leadership

development it is essential that employees are developmentally ready. Avolio (2011) defines developmental readiness as one's motivation to lead and to learn. He advises that an employee who is developmentally ready can focus on learning, not just task accomplishment. He further contends that these people have clarity about their own self-concepts. For instance, they are self-aware and conscious of how they enact their roles in the organization and the larger world.

Three Strategies for Developing Future Leaders

1. The first strategy rooted in leader development, Guided Self Discovery, provides a structured method for the employee to come to a deeper understanding of the self as a potential leader in the organization. Many leadership theories call for the cultivation of high levels of self-awareness. Whether your organization advocates for authentic leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership or another approach,

self-awareness is foundational. It enables future (and current) leaders to identify and move beyond their blind spots. It offers opportunities for purposeful introspection.

There are a variety of tools that can be used for Guided Self Discovery. Gallup's Strengths Finder provides a structured framework for exploring innate gifts. Another related approach, also rooted in positive psychology, is Reflected Best Self (RBS) exploration. This enables participants to see their best selves through the eyes of others. Myers-Briggs and DISC assessments give the employee a glimpse of the self as they operate in collaborative contexts. Whichever approach you select, ensure that it is appropriate for your organization and your unique employees. For instance, organizations that advance individual employee work and employee contributions over teams and teamwork may not be well-served by employing Myers-Briggs or DISC. Organizations that are not open to shifting the focus from very traditional forms of corrective performance assessment to a more affirming approach may not value RBS or strength exploration. In short, select the tools that will play best in your environment.

2. The second strategy, Action Learning, engages the limbic system of the brain by asking participants to immerse themselves in an iterative process that begins with reading with the goal to learn about a new concept, approach or strategy. The concept can be directly related to the high potential employee's work or tangentially connected. The objective is to activate the limbic system, the part of the brain concerned with motivation, learning, memory, and emotion. The stage that follows the reading is the application of the new concept. Participants are required to test it in the real world, to apply it to their work or another highly relevant situation. This enables them to expand their repertoire of available solution options. It also provides them additional options to consider in problem-solving. The next stage of the iterative process is reflection. Participants are asked to journal reflections on how the application of the new concept went. They are asked to consider their successes and failures. They are asked to consider not only the tangible outcomes, but also their thoughts, emotions, and responses when testing a new approach. This reflection enables them to develop more keen insights into the self. It circles back to the concepts explored in Guided Self Discovery. Action Learning blends both leader and leadership development by focusing the employee's energy on applying a new concept to an organizational issue, task, process, or project.

3. The third strategy engages your future leaders in the community in which you operate. This strategy, Civic Engagement, asks participants to identify an organization that serves the community, learn about its mission and become involved in one of its projects. The aims of this strategy are two-fold. The first is to get the employee to see beyond self and work to the larger world in which we all function. The second is to build

higher levels of engagement between the organization and the community in which it resides. During the Civic Engagement strategy, employees are responsible for making the connection to the organization of their choice, contributing their talents to a defined project, and educating their employer about the work of the organization they selected. Sample projects may include tutoring at a local elementary school, assisting a nonprofit with its strategic planning process, or conducting ad hoc resource development for an organization in need of particular supplies. Whatever activity the high potential selects, they are encouraged to again return to Guided Self Discovery by journaling about their experiences. This provides them with another opportunity for thoughtful reflection about how they respond to the work of broadening their horizons. Like Action Learning, this strategy links leader and leadership development by providing opportunities for cultivating the self while advancing the aims of the organization.

Closing Thoughts

The three strategies presented provide opportunities for high potential employees to engage in a deep and meaningful way that allows them to stretch, explore new concepts, reflect, and grow into the leaders your organization needs. These employees are also given the opportunity to be involved in the larger world where they build relationships and feel a sense of purpose. While solely focusing on skill development can surely be a part of any approach to retaining top talent, the approach described herein offers a framework for building a level of connection with the employees that allows them to develop as a leader and in their leadership capabilities. They expand the self by actively participating in Guided Self Discovery. They expand their personal and professional competence with Action Learning. Finally, they expand their networks beyond the business world with Civic Engagement. These three integrated components can serve as a strategy for keeping your top talent engaged and inspired while also meeting your organizational goals.

References

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