

On-the-Job Talent Development Programs

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Abstract

To remain vital and effective in the future, organizations must establish a talent development program for staff members. A practical way to do so is by utilizing an on-the-job talent development program available to all staff members. This compares to the very formal and highly selective talent development program conducted by some organizations. A foundation for this on-the-job talent development approach is meaningful work experiences for staff members that heighten their emotional and intellectual connection to the job, stretch their talents, motivate them to be their best, and enhance work environment satisfaction. This on-the-job talent development approach emphasizes learning new knowledge, skills, and insights regarding how staff members can grow on the job, with a focus on attributes needed to keep the organization competitive in the future.

Keywords: on-the-job talent development, meaningful work engagement

1.0 Introduction

“Talent development is all about developing the skills of the talent in the organization, and continually to grow the individuals within that organization” (Oakes, 2016, p. vi).

To be successful, organizations must systematically design, integrate, and proactively implement activities that build and sustain a high-performance workforce by developing the *talents* of each staff member (Berger & Berger, 2018). Lawler (2017) observes that developing strategic talent management practices is a critical and challenging task for organizations that must be done well to maximize human capital. These talent management practices must extend the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other unique characteristics of staff members so they can be their best now, and in the future. As Rothwell (2010) notes, “The future is bright for those [organizations] who devote their time and attention to talent management. People have become key to competitive advantage. It is talent that sets competitive winners apart from the losers” (p. 293).

2.0 Context of On-the-Job Talent Development Approach

“Leaders don’t grow in classrooms” (Clark, 2016, p. 250).

This article focuses on organizations that philosophically have a mindset that talent development should emphasize: (1) a focus on current staff members, (2) the assumption that most staff members have talents that can be developed, and (3) integration of developmental experiences into on-the-job activities and efforts of each staff member. This means that frontline supervisors are key to talent development. This *on-the-job* approach to talent development does not negate the use of supplemental talent development activities through “in-person” workshops, conferences, on-site training, and digital learning such as micro-credentialing. Recruiting employees who have the talents needed for job openings that occur is also compatible with this approach.

The on-the-job talent development approach differs from the very formal, elaborate, and selective talent development programs utilized by many large organizations. For example, the philosophy of Charan, Barton, & Carey (2018) is based on the process of targeting the “critical 2 percent” (“best” top talent in the organization) for intensive, concentrated talent development (p. 6). Some organizations address the talent issue by utilizing comprehensive recruitment efforts often focused on attracting top talent from other organizations to work for them. Parkin (2018) supports this approach by noting the role of “hiring great talent” (p. 269) and stating that “every open position within an organization is an opportunity to upgrade the performance [through talent acquisition] for a role” (p. 286). The on-the-job talent development approach presented here does not discount the role of the *critical 2 percent* or exclude hiring *the best talent* possible for vacant positions in the organization.

The on-the-job approach adheres to the 70/20/10 approach of learning in the context of talent development. The 70/20/10 approach “is based on the philosophy that the most effective way to learn and develop new skills or behaviour is to apply and practice it on-the-job in real work situations” (Caplan, 2013, pp. 86). The 70/20/10 learning approach means:

- “70 per cent [of learning] from actual and on-the-job experiences, tasks and problem solving—this is the most important aspect of any learning and development plan;
- 20 per cent in learning from others, for example through feedback and from observing and working with role models, or from coaching and mentoring;
- 10 per cent from formal training” (Caplan, 2013, pp. 85-86).

3.0 The Role of Meaningful Work Engagement in On-the-Job Talent Development Programs

Engagement means that staff members express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally while performing their work responsibilities (Kahn, p. 78; cited in Ray, Dye, Hyland, Kaplan, & Pressman, 2016). Engagement is exemplified by staff members having a “heightened emotional and intellectual connection with their job, the organization, manager, and coworkers that in turn influences them to apply additional discretionary effort to perform their work effectively” (The Conference Board, p. 78; cited in Ray, Dye, Hyland, Kaplan, & Pressman, 2016).

Engagement is facilitated by factors such as growth opportunities, trust in leadership, and an enjoyable, positive work environment. Of utmost importance is for staff members to be engaged in *meaningful* work in order to be effective and develop their talents. It is crucial for organizational leaders involved in talent management development to understand that meaningful work is defined in large part by the staff member—not by the supervisor. This does not negate the supervisor from demonstrating the critical contribution of a staff member performing a given assignment and prompting the staff member to internalize its importance and give meaning to it.

3.1 8 Elements that Strategically Drive a Culture of Staff Member Engagement

1. Alignment of organization and engagement strategies
Intertwine the organization’s purpose and specific objectives with the concept of staff member engagement for talent development. Establish, with a staff member’s input, how engagement is a win-win proposition—the organization becomes more effective, and the staff member develops talent, enhances job productivity, and enjoys work.
2. An organizational philosophy that emphasizes a core purpose
The organization’s mission, vision, culture, and values are consistently integrated to aid staff members in understanding the meaning and contributions which their work makes to the organization. The organization’s lead management personnel assist staff members by providing the resources and work environment needed to effectively support performing the work and creating an environment for staff members to be their best.

3. Formal programs and policies that drive the engagement agenda
Coupling making staff members' engagement in work a priority with policies and consistent actions by leaders helps establish a culture of engagement. The aforementioned must be accompanied by programs and training (the "10" in 70/20/10 learning philosophy) that focus on effective work engagement processes. Supervisors must consistently emphasize engagement and assist staff members in attaining maximum meaningful work engagement. Staff members, as well as teams, need to be formally recognized for modeling engagement. The commitment to creating an environment that encourages staff members' work engagement, and accompanying actions, must permeate the work culture.
4. Open, proactive leader-driven communications about engagement
An ongoing coherent communication strategy is in place that emphasizes open dialogue between staff members, supervisors, and executives that is transparent, interactive (i.e., two-way and "multiple-ways"), and continually focuses on assisting staff members to maximize work engagement. The communications aim to be viewed by staff members as reflecting a sincere commitment by the organization's leadership to help them exude work engagement, enjoy work, and have a job environment in which they can "be their best."
5. Workplace and organizational structure that promotes collaboration and inclusion
Effective implementation of diversity is a key component of inclusion and aids collaboration. Inclusion and collaboration prompt staff members to feel a part of a work unit and team, which in turn enhances meaningful work engagement. Being perceived as an integral player in the work unit and team improves job satisfaction, which facilitates a sense of importance for a staff member's contributions in producing meaningful work. The physical structure of the workplace should accommodate the environments of collaboration as well as privacy for individual work.
6. A regular cadence for assessment and follow-up
Follow-up is conducted to receive feedback from staff members regarding their perceptions of meaningful work engagement. Supervisory personnel must be attuned to assessing the meaningful work engagement of staff members individually and for team assignments, especially regarding involvement and inputs. Suggestions are solicited from staff members for enhancing the environment for meaningful work engagement. Flexibility exists—and is utilized—to make workplace adjustments based on the aforementioned efforts.
7. Leaders who are expected and empowered to build engagement
Executives and management personnel at all levels are expected and have the latitude to take actions to foster staff members' meaningful work engagement. Enhancing meaningful work engagement is a priority of the organization's leadership and is integrated into standard operating procedures. Regular discussions—formally and informally—take place among the leaders to exchange ideas for enhancing staff members' work engagement. An accountability process is in place to assure that leaders meet their expectations individually and collectively throughout the organization.
8. Demonstration of the business impact of engagement
Staff members meaningfully engaged in their work are expected to result in: (1) enhanced motivation toward work and job satisfaction; (2) higher quality work; (3) a payoff to the organization by having a significant impact on productivity and work quality; (4) strong commitment to the job, team, unit, and organization; and (5) enhanced talent development for current applications and future human capital needs. An organization's meaningful work engagement efforts for staff members should be a "win/win" situation—both the organization and staff members benefit and are "better off" because of it (Ray, Dye, Hyland, Kaplan, & Pressman, 2016, pp. 81-88).

3.2 The Use of Stretch Assessments

Stretch assessments are non-traditional on-the-job developmental work experiences for staff members that intentionally challenge and "stretch" their knowledge, skills, and talents to the maximum, but are within their grasp (Gotte, 2016, p. 228). Such assignments can be a series of experiences—one progressively building on another—so that, holistically, their effective completion benefits the organization and the staff member's talent development. Stretch assignments require a supervisor to give enough latitude so the staff member's talents can be stretched by her/his self-initiative, innovation, and creative problem-solving.

The supervisor also needs to be diligent in observing the staff member's performance and stepping in with feedback and coaching before failure occurs.

3.3 Ideas for Ingraining Talent Development into the Daily Work Culture for All Staff Members¹

Chen and Hutchinson (2017) advocate creating a “caring and performance-oriented” work culture that constantly emphasizes learning—and sharing—new knowledge and skills for the on-the-job talent development of all staff members (p. 55). They advocate that an overarching learning strategy goal should be “to provide an environment that offers every team member the opportunity to learn, grow, succeed, and bring their best self to work” (Chen & Hutchinson, 2017, p. 56). This strategy includes staff members constantly challenging existing practices for ongoing improvement, and enhancing their talent development through sharing experiences—both good and bad—within their unit and across work units (the “20” in the 70/20/10 learning philosophy). DuVernet (2017) supports this philosophy when she states, in the context of organizations creating a *learning culture*, “People are encouraged to improve their knowledge, skills and abilities, or KSA’s, in order to better themselves for the organization” (p. 52). She stresses that the emphasis on learning must permeate the work culture in order to maximize talent development

There needs to be a constant focus on *new learning* for staff members to make improvements and to keep the competitive edge of the organization (Chen & Hutchinson, 2017). Anders (2012) stresses *learning for tomorrow* (p. 11). Technology usage should also be emphasized as a tool for work improvement and talent development. It is important that technology usage is not merely a whim of a supervisor, a novelty, or representative of a distracting personal interest of staff members.

Micro-learning, in increments as minimal as 5 minutes, meshes well with some aspects of technology-driven on-the-job talent development. Microlearning means “making learning [only] as long as necessary. Cut out extraneous details and only focus on the most relevant and pertinent information” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). The heart of microlearning is understanding “how long it will take to teach [learn] the most critical parts of the concept” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). Microlearning is also facilitated through the quick “accessibility across devices, particularly mobile devices. Integrating the use of these instruments with microlearning paves the way for a more enjoyable learning environment” (Otmanboluk, 2017, p. 8).

Staff members’ talent development should occur constantly “on-the-job,” as opposed to activities taking place off the work site (the “70” in 70/20/10 learning philosophy). This eliminates the off-site delivery of the “transfer of training” learning principle issue because there is no need to transfer learning. Learning and talent development are automatically integrated into the “real world” work environment when occurring on the job.

3.0 Assessing Staff Member’s Talents through the Clifton Strengths Management Approach

4.1 Strengths Management

The strengths management philosophy is a natural fit with the on-the-job talent development approach. Regarding strengths management, Rath (2007, p. 20) notes that:

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 \textbf{Talent} \text{ (a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving)} \\
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 \textbf{Investment} \text{ (time spent practicing, developing your skills,} \\
 \text{and building your knowledge base)} \\
 \hline
 \textbf{Strength} \text{ (the ability to consistently provide near-perfect} \\
 \text{performance).}
 \end{array}$$

As Drucker (1966) observes, “The effective executive [manager] makes strengths productive. He knows one cannot build on weaknesses” (p. 71). The general well-being and feelings of gratification for staff members are enhanced by meaningfully pursuing and engaging their strengths in the work environment (Seligman, 2002).

It is important for staff members to distinguish between their patterns of behavior and predispositions (preferences) and what constitutes their authentic strengths. Patterns of behavior represent what staff members have previously done, which may not be their strengths. Strengths are those activities in which they exhibit “consistent, near-perfect performance” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 21).²

4.1.1 The Clifton Strengths Management Self-Assessment (StrengthsFinder 2.0).³ StrengthsFinder 2.0 by the Gallup Organization is beneficial for staff members in identifying their talents and can serve as a basis for strengths usage and development. The main application of StrengthsFinder 2.0 is in the work domain, but it has also been applied to other environments. The self-assessment of 177 items is delivered online and usually takes about 30-60 minutes to complete.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 provides specific information on five signature themes referencing four domains: (1) executing, (2) influencing, (3) relationship building, and (4) strategic thinking. A theme is defined as “recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior” (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007, p. 4). Including the five signature themes identified by the StrengthsFinder 2.0, there are 29 other themes of lesser intensity for a given staff member’s StrengthsFinder 2.0 results. In totality, 34 themes represent the raw talent of a staff member which serve as a basis for intrapersonal strengths development. The 34 possible themes anchored to the four domains are:

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| 1. Executing: | achiever, consistency, focus, arranger, deliberative, responsibility, belief, discipline, and restorative |
| 2. Influencing: | activator, competition, significance, command, maximizer, “woo” factor, communication, and self-assurance |
| 3. Relationship Building: | adaptability, empathy, individualization, developer, harmony, positivity, connectedness, include, and relator |
| 4. Strategic Thinking: | analytical, ideation, learner, context, input, strategic, futuristic, and intellection |
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Each theme has a narrative description. For example, staff members who are exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive (Asplund, et al., 2007). The number of items measuring themes is from 4-14, with reliability coefficients ranging from .50 to .76. (Theoretically, the range can be from .00 to 1.0, with the higher range being more desirable.) The five signature themes listed for a staff member through the StrengthsFinder 2.0 identify talent areas can be further developed as strengths to enhance productivity. These themes also inform the staff member on probable strengths which he/she can utilize on the job. These signature themes are identified based on the intensity (i.e., high to low rates) of a staff member’s responses.

Gallup makes video and print information for each of the 34 themes available for staff members utilizing the StrengthsFinder 2.0. Gallup also has other development support services available, such as coaching. These services are fee-based (Asplund, et al., 2007). Rath’s (2007) *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book is an excellent supplemental source for managers to use in understanding how to apply the information from the instrument’s results.

A limitation of StrengthsFinder 2.0 is that it is a *self-assessment*. If used in a talent development program, it should be accompanied by a 360-degree assessment process. Because it is a self-assessment, it does have the built-in advantage of being perceived by the staff member as a credible information source.

5.0 The Use of Individual Development Plans

The output of the StrengthsFinder 2.0 needs to serve as input to be merged with competencies developed by the organization. These competencies represent what is needed by staff members in order for them to be productive at the present time and to sustain the organization’s effectiveness in the future. A needs assessment must be done for each staff member that identifies the positive match between recognized talents, strengths, and competencies. If the organizational leaders want to build on the talent strengths of a staff member, the focus should be on identifying on-the-job experiences related to each competency. In collaboration with the staff member, the supervisor establishes an individual development plan specifying on-the-job meaningful, engaging work activities, including stretch assignments, for talent development. The staff member and supervisor also identify supplemental off-the-job training experiences and activities which will enhance talent development (Gay & Sims, 2006 p. 5).

6.0 Closing Thoughts

An on-the-job talent development program allows all staff members to partake in a practical and cost-effective way to enhance the knowledge, skills, and abilities for present and future organizational needs. Individual development plans that match staff members' highly rated talents via the StrengthsFinder 2.0 with competencies established by the organization are essential. Creating a work environment that epitomizes meaningful work—including stretch assignments—will maximize staff members' engagement, aid their talent development, increase productivity, and contribute to the future human capital needs of the organization.

7.0 Footnotes

¹ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018). Components for talent development of staff members. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 6(1), 1-10.

² Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2017). Managers effectively applying strengths management and emotional intelligence. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(7), 1-5.

³ Based in part on Bartz, D. & Bartz, D.T. (2017). Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management for managers. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 5(1), 1-10.

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