

DEVELOPMENT PLANS: Making Them Work

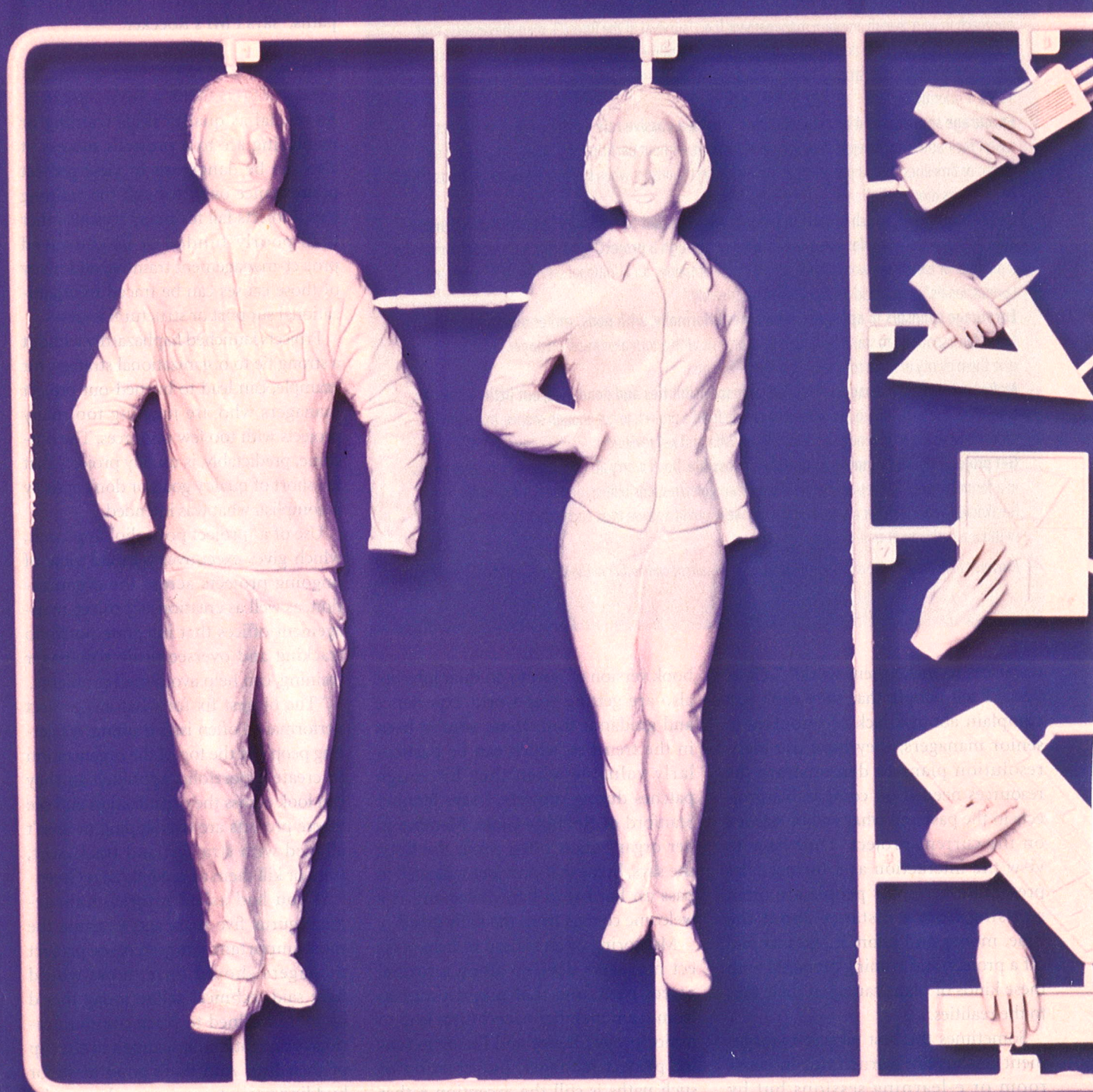
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Soft Skills, Hard Truths





DRIVING True Development

Everyone agrees that creating development plans is a critical component of any truly effective performance management effort. Yet time after time, development plans have all the staying power of a New Year's resolution. What goes wrong? Why are they so hard to generate, and even harder to execute?

A few reasons are obvious. First, most development plans extend over too long a period of time, which often consigns them to the realm of good intentions. Second, they often focus on the trivial. Faced with having to create or recommend a development plan for a subordinate, managers too often do little more than pick up a course catalogue from a commercial seminar provider or the local community college. Also, many development plans are so vague that measuring their success or failure is impossible. George may say he values diversity after taking the required course, but how can you be sure? ►

BY DICK GROTE

Mostly, though, development plans fail because those implementing them don't understand how people grow, and don't have a solid workable process for creating plans that are likely to generate change or follow-through.

Most of the factors that influence a person's ultimate effectiveness are firmly established before they begin working. Basic genetic endowments, early family and school and other experiences, as well as influential teachers, coaches or priests, have long since exerted their influence.

Before they are hired, employees have also long been developing in ways that have nothing to do with specific plans or directives. Since 1982 the Center for Creative Leadership, a nonprofit leadership development educational institution in Greensboro, N.C., has been studying the ways in which successful executives acquire their skills. Through interviews with several hundred managers who analyzed and identified the factors that resulted in their own growth, the Center has identified five broad categories of experience that result in true personal development. Plans that really drive growth will include experiences from several of these categories.

Being given a challenging job was the single most important source of development these managers identified. Challenging jobs force rapid growth and learning. Dealing with crises, starting up an operation from scratch, fixing troubled operations—these situations require individuals to learn quickly. Challenging jobs or assignments

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are the best teachers, and they provide the most lasting lessons.

On the other hand, experiences off the job can have the same effect. For example, activities such as community service can yield opportunities to acquire and practice leadership skills that a regular job can't offer.

Bosses are another sure-fire source of growth. When you ask a group of people how many of them remember their first boss, almost everybody will. Bosses, particularly an employee's first boss, have an enormous impact on employees' development. Notice that I didn't say "good bosses." We learn as much from bad bosses about how we *don't* want to act, as we *do* from good bosses about how we do want to act.

We also learn from hardships. This may sound redundant after the first category, but it's not. Hardships teach us about our limits rather than our abilities, and they allow us to learn and demonstrate our resilience. Making mistakes, getting stuck in dead-end jobs, surviving serious illness, being denied a well-deserved promotion: These are the events that cause us to look inward, reflect, and change. Of course, they're not really experiences one can plan for, but they are caches of experience that can be mined for insight and lessons.

Finally, training programs are a standard ingredient in management-development activities. But they're valuable less for what is learned directly than for the opportunity they present to build self-confidence by sizing oneself up against one's peers. The CCL found that managers value coursework for its opportunities to trade tips, pick up different problem-solving methods, and compare abilities and knowledge with other participants.

How Does Training Fit Into Development?

Cross-stitch this onto a sampler: *Training isn't development.* It's one component (an important component) of a complete development plan, but if a plan has nothing in it except a mandate to attend training programs, it's not really a development plan at all.

In fact, training should never be scheduled as one of the first activities in the plan. At the very beginning of a development process, people usually don't know what they need to learn. Instead of kicking off with a class, start by identifying the objectives. What, as a result of a training program, will the person be able to do that she

>> Where to focus

To focus development efforts in a more productive direction, look to these areas for ideas.

Strengths: Development activities can focus on one of two areas: improving areas of deficiency, or enhancing existing strengths. Research on successful development programs consistently comes to the same conclusion: People and organizations benefit more from building on strengths than from shoring up weaknesses. In *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press, 2001), author Marcus Buckingham says, "Most organizations take their employees' strengths for granted and focus on minimizing their weaknesses. But this isn't development, it is damage control." Based on your own knowledge of skills that you are particularly adept at, or information from past performance appraisals, you can identify a strength to be enhanced further to produce superior performance.

Damage Control: Damage control is sometimes essential. Don't overlook the possibility that your shortcomings demand developmental attention. Efforts to shore up weaknesses may only result in a move from -6 to -2, but doing so may be necessary to stay on the team.

Achievement Orientation and Impact and Influence competencies: Several research studies confirm that there are two competencies that regularly predict success in organizational life better than any others: Achievement Orientation (anticipates obstacles to a goal, takes calculated risks, sets measurable goals) and Impact and Influence (ability to persuade, convince or influence). Development of these two areas should always be high priorities, since they are confirmed predictors of success.

Performance appraisal feedback: What did your last performance appraisal say? What were the significant strengths and areas for improvement noted? These are prime sources for targeting development efforts.

Information from others: Other people with whom you interact are terrific sources of insight. If you have a trusted friend in the organization, ask him what suggestions he might make for your development.

360-degree feedback data or employee survey results: If your organization uses a 360-degree feedback process, the information it provides will be one of the best sources for suggestions on development efforts. If your company conducts employee satisfaction surveys, the results may clarify where you and other managers need to do more work.

The organization's core competencies: If your company has identified competencies that senior management expects everyone to display, they're a primary source of development ideas. Which of the competencies have you come closest to mastering? In which of them are you least competent? Those are the top two target areas for development efforts.

Personal goals and aspirations: It's your life, it's your career. Where do you want to go with it? What do you want to be when you grow up? What do you need to do to take you where you want to go?

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can't do right now? It isn't what she'll learn or appreciate that matters; it's what she'll do differently afterward. Start with some initial data about what the person is doing now so that you can formulate worthwhile behavioral objectives. Then you can decide what training will help the person move toward those objectives.

When considering the fit between the objective and a possible course, think in terms of application. Learning new ideas, techniques or approaches won't do any good if they're not going to be applied. Find out as much as you can about the course. Then you and your employee should ask yourselves, both before and throughout the course, "How will I use this back on the job?"

When you select an instructor-led program as part of the plan, you should contact the instructor in advance to make sure that the personal learning objectives in the development plan will be met in the course. This also provides two additional benefits that enhance the learning experience. It will encourage the trainer to meet your employee, and increase the likelihood that the program will deliver what the trainer promised.

Make sure that you also consider what alliances the training program might allow the employee to build. Since he will have opportunities to interact with others, build networks and learn from other participants as well as the instructor, it will be important for you to remind him to look for those opportunities and act on them.

Finally, new skills decay if they're not immediately used. Find opportunities for practice. One way to do this is to require the employee to teach the main points, key concepts or critical techniques to a group of colleagues immediately upon their return from the course. This will also help the person to engage more meaningfully with the content; anyone who attends a training program knowing that she's going to have to serve it back up to colleagues later will be a far more active participant in the learning process. As part of this, a scheduled post-program assessment session is sensible. The manager who schedules a post-session briefing or requires a one-page summary of key points learned (and, more important, actions to be taken) will both maximize the dollars spent on training and significantly increase the probability that real development will occur.

Clearly, from the points above, you can see that a manager always has a significant role in shaping a subordinate's development plan. While the individual is primarily responsible for his or her own development, the manager's responsibility doesn't end with recommending areas for consideration. The manager also needs to recommend—sometimes strongly—that the employee pay attention to certain areas first.

The most common mistake people make in creating development plans is to make them too ambitious and too general. Here, the manager's role is to communicate the value of specificity and the importance of short-term goals. Ask questions like, "How will you actually do that?" or "When do you think you'll have that done?"

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>> Assignments That Develop

The tasks, assignments and activities that a person performs on the job can also serve as developmental experiences. By assigning specific projects to subordinates, a manager can provide a developmental experience to a subordinate while the person is also meeting his core job responsibilities. Research by The Center for Creative Leadership, a nonprofit leadership development educational institution in Greensboro, N.C., indicates that a particular assignment can be a good developmental opportunity if it has most of these characteristics:

- Both success and failure are possible and visible.
- It requires aggressive, "take charge" leadership.
- It involves working with new people.
- It requires influencing people, activities and factors over which the individual has no direct control.
- It involves a variety of tasks.
- The work will be closely watched by people whose opinions count.

Here are some examples of special assignments that have a high probability of promoting real development:

- Plan an off-site meeting or conference.
- Go to a college campus as a recruiter.
- Run a company meeting or department picnic.
- Run a project with another department.
- Manage the visit of a VIP.
- Summarize a new trend, process or technique and present it to others.
- Teach someone how to do something you're skilled at.

Ultimately, the responsibility for developing a systematic, logical plan is the subordinate's. But once it's created, the manager's appropriate role is to review it. Ask questions, make suggestions for improvement and provide advice. Then it's time to fund the plan, to provide whatever resources necessary for the subordinate to carry the plan out.

The most obvious way for a manager to facilitate execution of the plan is to create developmental opportunities for the subordinate. Provide challenging work, ongoing feedback on performance, and recognize the employee when he or she accomplishes important tasks. But another, less obvious way is to hold the person accountable for successful completion of the development plan, just as they're held accountable for completing other job duties.

Creating a Plan That Works

There are eight components to an effective development plan. The best way to construct a workable plan is to write down your answer to each of the following questions.

What is the specific skill that you're going to

acquire or enhance? This is the knowledge, skill or competency area to be developed. The more specific your description of this item, the easier it will be to tell at the end whether the employee has actually developed it.

What difference will it make to the organization? Don't waste development efforts on skills that don't have a payoff for your company. Think about why it's important to your company that the employee develop a given competency or increase his or her skill in a given area.

What difference will it make to the employee? The clearer your subordinate is about why an improvement in a given area will provide a specific personal payoff, the less likely they will be to abandon their efforts when obstacles present themselves.

What measures will be used? Without measures, you'll have a hard time determining whether there has been a significant improvement in any area. Consider whether these measures can be quantifiable, or whether you'll be satisfied with comments and reactions from colleagues.

Where are we starting? This is a baseline assessment. At this stage, you'll collect data about how often the developmental areas under consideration arise in the individual's job, and how she handles it when it comes up. This can help confirm that the developmental area is a good one to concentrate on, and it may also generate ideas about how to generate improvement. It will also help with the previous question. By collecting baseline data, you know where you are and it will be easier to see later on that development really has happened based on the measures you've chosen.

What resources will be required? The resources required are frequently, but never exclusively, financial. If the individual needs to attend a training program or educational experience, the funds will need to be allocated. If the individual needs to purchase a book or computer software to learn skills, somebody will need to write the check. If an offsite visit to another operation is required, somebody will have to spring for the trip.

But often the most important resource required for the execution of most development plans is time. So consider what will be needed to complete this plan, in terms of money and in terms of how much time will have to be devoted to it. Where will this time come from, and how will you prevent the plan from interfering with daily duties?

THINKING IN TERMS OF AN "ANNUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN" IS A MISTAKE. A YEAR IS FAR TOO LONG.

Failing to budget the needed time will be just as detrimental to the plan as failing to write a check for a course.

When will the plan be completed? Thinking in terms of an "annual development plan" is a mistake. A year is far too long. Construct development plans so that something significant can be done in a quarter—90 days. If your development goal will take more than three months to complete, it is *too big*. Break it down into component parts or pick one important area within the overall area to work on. Often development plans don't accomplish much because we don't break them down into manageable chunks. If you think through what you will need to do in order to develop a particular skill or competency on a week-by-week basis, you are much more likely to complete the plan, because you will have a clear road map of the action you need to take.

Creating and executing effective development plans is the task that is most quickly put aside in the crush of operational necessities. But if you build on strengths, set short-term goals, and use the job as the primary focus of all development efforts, and if you treat a development plan like a project—with timelines, measures and milestones—genuine development is possible for every person in every organization. ■

Dick Grote is chairman and CEO of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas. His next book, Forced Ranking: Getting the Truth into Performance Management, was published in April by the Harvard Business School Press.

Grote Consulting Corporation
2591 Dallas Parkway, Suite 300
Frisco, Texas 75034

972-335-6644

www.GroteConsulting.com