Employee Development Isn’t Just About Leadership Planning

Does development still lead to the C-suite?

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In the not-so-distant past, when you said the words “succession planning,” people assumed you were talking about a leadership development pipeline flowing directly to the C-suite.

In recent years, however, many employers have come to realize such pipelines can be too narrowly focused – excluding employees who don’t seek a management track, but who possess highly technical skills or valuable knowledge. As a result, the succession planning concept has been evolving to encompass broader employee development programs for all key functions.

Focus on core skills, not positions

One alternative to the traditional concept of succession planning (where individuals are identified and groomed for key positions) is to instead focus on development plans that build core skills across the organization.

With this model, companies determine which critical skills are required to meet the needs of key projects and programs now and into the future. They then design employee development and recruitment programs around building and maintaining those skills, making sure to fill any gaps.

To begin the process, a company would identify the essential skills and activities in various departments that maximize employee contributions to company goals, asking:

- What are the priorities and responsibilities?
- Who in the department is able to perform those tasks now?
- Is there anyone who could perform those tasks in the future?

When putting this into place at your company, you may want to employ objective skills tests, or have an impartial third party conduct the skills assessment to avoid the bias of evaluating a potential successor’s similarity to the current leader.

During the assessment, you might find that you have employees who are willing and

ready to engage in cross-training or informal mentoring to enhance their skills. Just as valuable, you may discover a skills gap that could be addressed by formal training for current employees, or by recruitment efforts aimed at hiring someone who possesses those skills.

For example, if your marketing team has a deep understanding of your customer base but doesn't know best practices for marketing via social media, you could send a particularly web-savvy employee to social media training. If the campaign will be extensive, you could consider hiring a social media expert.

Regularly and proactively conducting this type of functional talent review will help you maintain an up-to-date talent inventory so you are always ready to fill key department functions (regardless of roles) when business changes occur.

Moving up may start with moving over

As you are looking to fill functions and accommodate business changes, remember that many skills are transferable from one job to another. To have a ready understanding of all skills available within your organization, you may want to keep your talent inventory (employee name, department, list of core competencies, and stages of development) housed in a searchable database.

When a new project comes up, you can search current employees by skills, regardless of departments and specific job functions, allowing you to better consider cross-functional teams and even lateral job transfers. Note that a lateral move into a different department may allow an employee to build and broaden skills that will eventually enable a move up the more traditional ladder.

In an ever-changing business environment, companies are breaking down silos as management recognizes the need for nimble, flexible employees. But you won't be prepared to participate in this marketplace if you don't know what talent you have, or if you're only focusing on developing a few hand-picked individuals. Rather than taking a narrow approach, look at skill sets and develop your workforce potential as a whole.

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