

How to Develop People

The following text is largely adapted from the “Developing People” chapter of *Managing to Change the World: The Nonprofit Manager’s Guide to Getting Results*

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t need fancy professional development programs, formal mentorships, or large investments in staff training in order to develop your staff’s skills and performance. In fact, in our experience, the results of these programs often do not justify the amount of energy that goes into them. Rather, the best staff development stems naturally from strong, hands-on management – because serious learning and development happens when staff members pursue ambitious goals, are held to high standards, and reflect and receive candid feedback about what is and is not working along the way.

WHEN TO DEVELOP PEOPLE – AND WHEN NOT TO

From a purely practical perspective, you should spend time developing people because it will get you better results: it will make your staff more effective in both the short-term and the long-term, and it will make your organization a more attractive place to work (thereby helping you attract great people, who in turn will produce strong results). But because it’s also a nice thing to do for your staff and many of us are drawn to management partly because we love seeing people develop, sometimes as managers we forget that developing people is not an end in itself. Rather, because it is a means toward the end of producing results in pursuit of your mission, you should be strategic about when and how you spend time on staff development, balancing that time and energy with other priorities.

You should keep three principles in mind when deciding when to invest time in staff development:

1. Invest in your best.
2. Know what you can change and what you can’t.
3. Distinguish between development needs and serious performance issues.

Invest in your best

Paradoxically, your best staff members are usually the ones who will grow the most. Strong performers are often more driven, and so their desire to take advantage of development opportunities is higher. They also tend to be generally skilled people who are able to take a small amount of assistance and put it into practice, whereas others may struggle to apply the help. Because of this, the pay-off from spending energy on your strongest performers will greatly exceed the results from energy you spend on your lowest performers.

Know what you can change and what you can’t

You can build staff members’ knowledge and improve very specific skills, but it is very hard to change talents and basic inclinations. You might teach someone to use a particular software program or to deliver an effective Powerpoint presentation, but talents (like good writing, critical thinking, or being able to connect well with other people) and inclinations (like having a strong sense of responsibility or pursuing goals relentlessly) build up over a lifetime and tend to be deep-rooted and difficult to develop.

For instance, you might have a regional director who frequently gives presentations about your program to external audiences. She is enthusiastic and knowledgeable but lacks polish and tends to read directly from the slides on her Powerpoint. In her other work, she is very strong and, among other things, has raised significantly more money than her peers. This is a case where public speaking training – whether a formal program like Toastmasters or informal role-playing with you – could pay off, helping her become a more confident and skilled speaker.

In contrast, if you have a legislative analyst who is shy and uncomfortable interacting with others, you might be able to get her to speak up a bit more, but she's probably never going to excel at networking and building coalitions.

Distinguish between development needs and serious performance issues

Fortunately, the meat of the shy legislative analyst's job is analyzing legislation and writing briefs – activities that don't require a lot of interaction with others. While it might be nice if she were more outgoing, her shyness doesn't interfere with her ability to do her job well. But in other cases, the behavior in question will impact the staff member's ability to do her job at the level you need. In situations where the employee's basic talents and inclinations are at odds with the requirements of the job, don't allow development to become a distraction that prevents you from dealing with core performance issues.

For example, a media director needs to have good judgment when talking to reporters and needs to be able to represent the organization's positions clearly and compellingly. Perhaps your media director has been on the job for five months and has shown poor judgment in several cases – in one, speaking to a reporter calling about a delicate public issue without first consulting anyone and making comments that inflamed the situation, and in two others, confusing reporters to the point that they called the executive director asking for clarification. You have also noticed that she still doesn't give the standard "spiel" when describing your organization's work to reporters. These problems go to the heart of the media director's fit for the role. You might eventually succeed in drilling the basic spiel into her, but she lacks judgment, the ability to think on her feet, and perhaps even basic critical thinking skills. Development efforts might produce small improvements with her, but she will probably never perform at the high level you need.

In determining whether the problem goes beyond a simple development need, watch for the following signs:

- You've tried developing the person some but have not seen significant improvement.
- The issue is something fundamental to the job.
- You're busy and are simply unable to invest the amount of time that would be needed to guide the staff member to where you need her to be.

If any of this is the case, you're facing not a development need, but rather a serious performance problem.

HOW TO DEVELOP PEOPLE

When it does make sense to invest in developing your people, how do you do it? While formal training programs can help when they are aimed at specific, concrete skills, generally the best learning comes when employees stretch themselves in the pursuit of meaningful goals and when managers coach them through the process.

In fact, simply managing to a good outcome will in and of itself develop your staff! For instance, imagine that you manage a grant writer who is responsible for producing a major proposal to an important foundation. If you delegate well, you'll discuss your expectations and what makes for a good proposal, and you may show your staffer a sample of a proposal that worked in the past; once you have agreed on the expectations, you'll review and discuss an outline and possibly even a draft of one section to make sure the tone is right, and then you'll make comments on full drafts until they are where they need to be; and after the proposal is in, you'll do a quick debrief to talk about what went well and what could have gone better. Through this rigorous process – even more than formal writing courses, or official development plans, or any of the rest – your staff member will almost certainly come out a much better proposal writer than before. If you think about the times when you have most successfully learned a new skill, the same probably holds true: we'd bet that most of what you learned came from actually *doing* the work, rather than from sitting in a classroom or reading a book on the subject.

Still, there are things you can do beyond simply managing to a good outcome that will enhance your staff's learning – think of them as the vitamin supplements to your muscle-building shake of good ol'-fashioned managing to outcomes – including “naming” the issue, giving stretch assignments, modeling, giving feedback, and more.

WHAT ABOUT MOTIVATION?

If you have the right people on your team, you shouldn't have to spend lots of energy motivating them. It's important to create the conditions in which the right people will feel motivated, of course – by doing things like giving them meaningful roles with real responsibility, helping them feel like they're making progress toward ambitious but attainable goals, giving them a sense that they're learning, reminding them of the bigger picture of what the work is adding up to, praising their efforts, and showing that you care about them as people. Managers also need to avoid demotivating staff, by doing things like yelling, not recognizing good work, or ruling by fear. But taking someone who is not excited about a job and turning that person around is awfully hard, and generally a questionable use of energy. Therefore, the development techniques we'll talk about here focus mainly on developing skill, not will.

Naming the issue

Before you can address a development area effectively, you first need to name the issue. We know this sounds obvious, but sometimes just coming up with a label for a behavior you want to see can be quite powerful. For instance, if you have a general unease with the training workshops you've seen a staff member give, don't simply tell her that she needs to work on her presentation skills. Instead, identify specifically what the issue is, such as that she's using the same presentation for experienced participants as she is for less advanced ones. Once you've determined that, you'll be better able to name the issue for her – in this case, saying something like, “We need to work on how adapt your message to fit different audiences.”

Articulating key principles

Once you've named the issue for your staff member, you can further help her by breaking down the key principles behind how to perform the skill well, even if it seems obvious to you. After all,

if you're a successful and experienced presenter, adapting your message to fit your audience might feel like second-nature to you. But it won't come naturally to someone with less experience, so be sure to articulate the principles that go into doing it well. So after identifying for the staff member that you'd like to work on adapting her workshops to fit the audience, you'd then go on to talk about key elements of how to do that well, such as asking questions to gauge audience members' prior knowledge, modifying examples to make them relevant to the audience's work, and paying attention to the audience's body language and other cues.

Stretch assignments

Another way to develop people – and often one that produces significant growth – is assigning a staff member a responsibility that requires her to apply new skills, or old skills at a higher level (such as going from managing two people to managing eight). After all, since people learn by doing, you might produce more learning by asking your strongest staff members to do more!

Introducing one piece at a time: “structured doing”

While some staff members will love an enormous new challenge and will rise to meet it (and grow in the process), others can be paralyzed. A complement to the stretch assignments approach, then, is to structure the process so that your staff member starts with easier pieces and gradually adds others. For example, in grooming someone to become a manager, you might first have her manage others on a particular project, without giving her overall responsibility for managing all of their work.

As part of this process of breaking down a large new skill into its component steps, you can create an atmosphere of deliberate learning by using an approach of “discuss, do, reflect.” In other words, first you and the staff member talk through what she is going to do, then she does it (perhaps with you observing her in action, where appropriate), and finally she reflects with you on how it went and how to improve in the future. For instance, if your assistant already screens job applicants' resumes, you might ask her to go further and begin conducting initial phone interviews with internship candidates. In the discussing stage, you'd meet with her to talk about interview techniques and perhaps role-play several interview situations. In the doing stage, you might observe her conducting one or two of the phone interviews. And in the reflecting stage, you'd discuss how she did, identify what she found most difficult, and brainstorm alternate ways of responding in the future.

A similar approach is to do what classroom teachers do in almost every lesson: using a cycle of “I do, we do, you do.” Here, rather than talking about the skill, you first demonstrate it for the staff member, then you do some of the work jointly, and finally you step back and allow her to do it on her own. For instance, if you're teaching your staffer to create formulas in a spreadsheet, you might first do a few yourself while she is watching (“I do”). Then, you'd talk through a few examples together and do them jointly (“we do”). Finally, you'd have her do a few on her own without any help from you (“you do”).

Modeling the skill for the staffer

Implicit in the “I do, we do, you do” approach is the idea that often people need to see a skill or approach applied before they can do it themselves. For instance, if you want a staff member to get better at conducting external meetings, you might have her accompany you and watch while you do one yourself. In modeling the skill, be explicit with your staff member about what you are

doing and why – for instance, in modeling an external meeting, point out to the staff member how you were careful to agree to an informal agenda at the beginning of the meeting.

Giving direct feedback

One of the most powerful tools managers have for developing staff is providing direct feedback. Simply articulating areas in which you'd like to see a staff member develop can go a long way.

At different times, your feedback will be positive (recognizing where an employee is doing well), developmental (sharing ways a good employee could do even better), or corrective (things that must change in order for the employee to meet your expectations).

You should provide feedback on a constant, ongoing basis, in order to reinforce behavior you want to see more of, prevent bad habits from becoming ingrained, and foster an atmosphere of open communication. Providing feedback regularly can also allow you to address potential problems while they're still small, rather than telling a staffer that something she has been doing for months is wrong.

Providing additional resources

Particularly for help in developing very specific skills or knowledge, you can steer staff members to books or articles, workshops, or other people you have found helpful.

Pulling it all together

In practice, you'll often use more than one of these techniques at a time. You'll also choose different techniques for when you're helping someone develop a *technical skill* versus a *behavior*. For instance, writing effective press releases is a skill, while being consistent in work product is a behavior. You might use "I do, we do, you do" with the skill, but would probably rely on naming the issue and giving feedback for the behavior.

Here are a few examples of different development needs you might face and how you might approach them:

* You want to help your program director run more effective meetings. You'd start by naming the issue and giving her feedback on her technique, followed by giving her some key principles for running a meeting well. Then you might have her watch you run a meeting and talk with her afterward about what she observed. Then you'd watch her run a meeting herself, using the guidance you've been giving her, reflecting afterwards on how it went.

* Your database coordinator is speedy but – perhaps in the pursuit of speed – too often makes mistakes in her work. In this case, you'd name the issue and emphasize the need for accuracy. Then you'd check back in a week or two later and provide feedback on her progress.

LEARNING ON THE JOB: THE 70-20-10 MODEL

When you're trying to decide what development approaches will be most effective with a particular staff member, remember the 70-20-10 development model. Developed by the Center for Creative Leadership, the 70-20-10 model says that professional learning and development is generally about 70% from on-the-job experiences and problem solving, about 20% from coaching and feedback, and about 10% from classroom training.

In other words, most development comes from *doing*. That means that rather than sending an employee to a class, you might look for opportunities for her to gain experience and develop her skills on the job – such as stretch assignments, "I do / we do / you do" exercise, or the other mechanisms described in this reading.

* You manage a manager who is having trouble addressing a performance issue with one of her staffers. In this case, modeling the skill might mean role-playing the conversation – starting with you playing her role so that she can hear what the conversation might sound like. Then you’d switch roles and have her play herself while you play her employee – allowing her to practice the tough conversation on you and allowing you to give her feedback on tone and language. She’d then speak with her staff member directly, and debrief with you afterwards.

One thing the approaches in all three scenarios share is that “developing” is usually a process, not a one-time event. So in addition to surfacing the issue, a good developer of people will stay engaged to see how the staff member is progressing, and then she will ensure some kind of a step-back conversation happens once the staff member has had a chance to improve, to see how things are going.

WHAT ABOUT PROMOTING FROM WITHIN?

Promotions can be a great way to recognize when a staffer has developed and is ready for new challenges, and promoting from within lets you avoid the uncertainties of hiring a relative unknown from the outside. At the same time, even when your staffer is outstanding in her current role, there are many cases in which a promotion isn’t the right move.

When contemplating promoting someone, the most important factor to consider is not what sort of job the staffer is doing in her current position, but instead how strongly matched she is with the skills you need in the *new* position. Organizations often do the opposite of this: we have frequently seen outstanding staffers get promoted and then flounder because the skills that made them so fantastic in the first position aren’t the same skills needed for the new position. Most commonly we see this with promotions to managerial positions, since the skills needed to get results *through others* are often very different than the skills needed to get results on your own. For instance, a grant writer might excel at writing winning grant applications, but when promoted to development director, she might need very different skills, such as the ability to articulate expectations, help people solve their problems, and judge talent.

We do encourage you to create opportunities for promotion when they make sense for the employee and the organization. But don’t feel you need to promote employees in order to retain them. There are many other ways to keep good employees on your staff!