

Designing CD Programs the OD Way

The success of your career development program depends on how well it dovetails with corporate culture, goals, and objectives. Using action research in program design can ensure needed integration.

By RICHARD J. MIRABILE

Asked to create a career development program for a large insurance company, I knew a successful program meant doing more than simply hiring a career counselor to direct employees. I suggested an alternative strategy. While many career development programs exist, few seem to have been integrated effectively into existing human resource planning systems. As a result, there is little evidence that supports the benefits of career development efforts. To effect real change through a career development intervention, you need a strategy that fosters organizational integrity.

A valuable approach is offered in the action research process engaged by organization development methodology. In more traditional approaches, the researcher collects, interprets, and prepares some form of feedback for a target population. When

signed with frequent involvement from both sides. The difference lies in the group involvement for data interpretation and solution design that action research requires.

Its advantages are several. First, it solicits participation from the organization in diagnosing issues and problems. Also, it empowers organization members to be part of the solutions or strategies. Third, action research uncovers the inside perspective to which external consultants are not privy. By integrating data into new hypotheses, it's tangibly relevant to the organization's mission. Finally, it's evidence that organizations have part of the solution or strategy within their control.

A development process

For this task then, I proposed using an action research model to diagnose, devel-

op, implement, and evaluate a career development program that fit the needs and goals of the organization.

We held an initial meeting to determine what the company vision of a career development program was, what related types of programs were currently in place, and to understand more about the organization's culture. Out of a three-hour meeting, we developed a conceptual model that depicted some of the existing

components of the organization's activities, as well as additional information that would facilitate a successful effort. The model was presented to key personnel. Figure 1 shows the model's three distinct, but related focal points. Most organizational interventions entail individual involvement, organizational involvement, and some integrating mechanisms. Several of the components are specific to this organization (e.g., technical review board, high-expectation philosophy). Others, such as SMS (skills management system) are externally purchased programs intended to facilitate gathering and managing information relevant to career development effort. If a career development program were to be developed and integrated into the organization's existing structure, it would necessarily need to include these components.

Upon reviewing the model and agreeing to it in principle, we developed a proposal that outlined a step-by-step procedure for gathering the information necessary to design the program. Key individuals in the organization were chosen to participate in the various phases of the project. (See sidebar, "Developing CD Program.") The intent was to deliberately involve a variety of individuals affected by the new program. Also, it began establishing participation, commitment, and useful suggestions for the design of the program.

Phase one is data gathering. Information invaluable in designing strategies is collected. Phases two and three are analysis and feedback steps. Here is where the action research approach differs from traditional research efforts. Rather than analyzing the information and making recommendations to the organization, phase three permits the organization to participate in the interpretation and strategy development. From this point, program drafts are created, with continued organizational input (phase four). Phase five suggests that a pilot program be implemented, reviewed, and revised as necessary. Phase six encourages establishing a tracking mechanism that will enable the organization to monitor and revise the program.

Discovery

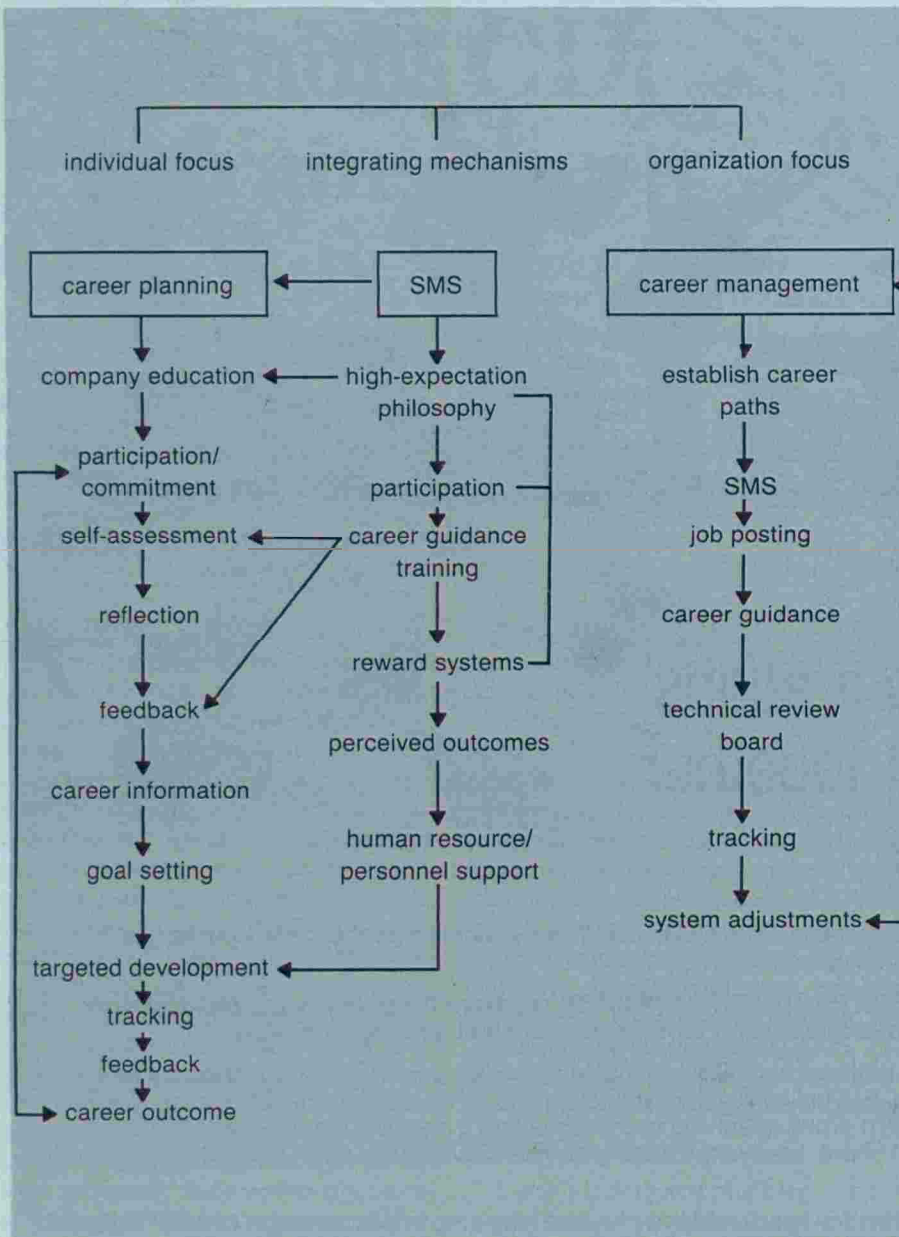
Initial results from the data-gathering phase indicated a desire to understand more about the developmental process and opportunities available within the company;

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doing action research, however, the OD specialist, after collecting pertinent data, presents it to the organization. With assistance from the OD specialist, its members interpret what the data mean. Together, they agree upon strategies, typically de-

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Figure 1—Organization Career Development



- integrate career development activities with departmental goals and objectives;
- participate in training sessions designed to teach managers how to conduct career guidance (coaching) sessions with employees;
- communicate to employees that career planning is ultimately their responsibility;
- contract for outside assistance in career counseling, or hire a career counselor;
- see more payoffs for attempts at self-development;
- have more access to higher-level managers in different departments; and
- provide greater incentive for managers

to participate in the career development process with subordinates.

Managers did see the need and value of implementing a sound career development program. They wanted tangible rewards for participating, and penalties for not participating in such a program. Third, the managers were aware of the necessity to integrate career development activities into a more comprehensive human resource plan. Moreover, they genuinely wanted training to facilitate their interactions with subordinates and more information regarding opportunities within the company.

Strategy development

The information from the data-gathering phase, implied a general strategy. The key organization members and I refined the approach until we created a workable pilot program. Next, we needed to implement the pilot, evaluate the results, make revisions in the design, and then develop the departmental program. Crucial to the program's design was a liaison task force comprised of managers from different work groups within the division. In addition to participating in data-gathering, they were also consulted about design. Further, as the program was implemented over time, this group of managers linked the human resource personnel to line management. They became an internal support group whose mission was to monitor the program, become the focal point of line managers' input, make suggestions to the human resource team, and assist in educating and training additional managers about the project. The result was a clear sense of commitment and ownership in the process, and the creation of a task force that could monitor and manage change.

Building ownership

Methodology is important: The more organization members participate in the design and development of the program, the more likely they will be to commit and feel a sense of ownership in its implementation. Career development designs that ignore this undoubtedly will struggle for acceptance. Program developers must seek the creative input of affected groups.

Doing ED design

The implications are substantial. It's clear that career development efforts need to expand from simple workshop formats to comprehensive change strategies. Second, program developers need to expand their own knowledge and skill bases to include relevant background in such fields as organization development. Further, systemic views of organizations need to become the rule rather than the exception, for only through such perspectives will we replace fragmentation with integration. As practitioners, we need to develop new conceptual models to provide substance to vision; conceptualization provides a framework for design. The responsibility is ours to create and foster an understanding of career development that reaches deep into organization cultures.