D is for Development

The ABCs of the Big D.

By George Ferguson

We have retitled the cc:You column! Now called Your Career, it will continue to focus on practical tips and topics to help you develop professionally and achieve work-life balance.

Illustration by Eyewire

Let me paint a picture.

Your company feels it needs to develop bench strength and increase the retention of top talent. So, it creates an objective for managers to develop their staff. You learn about it in a meeting in which senior management presents the division's objectives for the year.

The human resources department creates a process: Everyone will write a development plan with his or her annual performance review. Your manager attends a session explaining the process, forms, and due dates, and passes the information on. You notice several people rolling their eyes with a "here we go again" attitude, but you know that everyone will comply.

Three days before it's due, you begin working on your plan. You write that in the next three to five years you want to be a manager, because that's the next step in the company's hierarchy. You skim over the 50 or so open-

enrollment courses in the training catalogue and find two classes you haven't attended. You indicate on your forms which classes you'll attend and give the forms to your manager. At the end of the year, the company proudly points to the number of hours spent in training in the name of development.

In preparing for your yearly performance review, your manager notices that you didn't attend one of the classes listed in your development plan. You explain that the class was cancelled. However, your manager says that because you didn't fulfill all of your goals, your rating will drop from *outstanding* to *very good*. The drop was really because of the curve requirements, but that's another story.

Sound familiar? Pretty ugly, isn't it? Unfortunately, that's the process in many organizations. Here are several problems with that scenario and the typical career development process.

No one can develop you. It amazes me when I hear managers talking about how they're going to "develop their people." Development is a choice a person makes, not something you can *do* to someone. Your manager might be able to help with your development, but he or she can't develop you.

Attaching career development to the performance management process is a mistake. Many workers view performance systems as punitive rather than developmental. Taking an initiative that should be positive, such as career development, and attaching it to something perhaps seen as negative can make the initiative seem negative.

Training isn't development. Training imparts knowledge and understanding, not competence. Going to a two-day class on negotiation techniques doesn't make a person a competent negotiator. In addition, many open-enrollment, corporate-university training classes are typically just-in-case training versus just-in-time.

Managers don't want to get their hands dirty. People development? Go see HR.

Effective career development requires a two-pronged approach: systems changes and personal responsibility.

Systems changes

Organizations must take these key actions to improve their career development systems.

Separate career development from the performance management process. Development actually comes in two flavors: short-term and long-term. Short-term development, or job development, means ensuring that people have the skills, knowledge, and abilities to do their current jobs. That should be included as part of the performance management process.

Long-term development is career development, in which people decide what they want to do and where they want to go beyond their current jobs. Because career development doesn't relate to a worker's current role, it shouldn't be included as part of the performance management process. Your manager isn't and can't be responsible for your career; you are. Why give up freedom of choice on what you want to do for the long-term?

Have clear competencies. Every company should identify competencies for each position to help you determine what skills to develop to achieve your long-term goals. The competencies should be specific enough so that you'll know when you've attained them. For example, a competency defined as *leadership* is too broad. Break it down to *visioning*, *gaining trust*, *influencing others*, and so forth.

Hold managers accountable. Organizations should hold managers accountable not for staff development, but for coaching and supporting development plans. Holding managers accountable for activities—hours in a classroom or classes attended—is a big mistake. Instead, companies should hold managers accountable for how satisfied staff are with managers' support in the career development process. For example, blinded 360-degree feedback can ask workers how satisfied they are with their manager's efforts in coaching, training, and supporting their development. The results can be included in managers' performance reviews, tied to a portion of their compensation.

Personal responsibility:

Here are 10 ways to manage your development.

1. Focus on tasks, not positions. Make sure you focus on the tasks you want to undertake in your career, not the positions you want to be promoted to. With all of the changes and reorganizations, positions identified as crucial today may be gone tomorrow.

2. Explain what you want for your career. Take the initiative to make sure your manager is clear on what direction you want to take in your career. Explain your needs, desires, and dreams. Your long-term career goals needn't be the same as your manager's or relate only to your current company.

3. Understand your responsibilities. Always remember that development is your responsibility. If you don't want to develop yourself, understand the possible consequences, such as being first in a downsizing due to changing business needs.

4. Understand future requirements. Make sure you know where your company is going, what it needs, and what competencies are required to support those needs.

5. Be honest about where you are in your career. If you've been in your job a short time or are having performance issues, focus on job development. If you have truly mastered the job and are ready for new challenges, your focus can shift to career development.

6. Search out and volunteer for new projects that add value to your develop-

ment. Think about how every meeting you attend and task you take on fit with your development needs.

7. Visit other areas. Knowledge of the business is a key requirement for self-development. Learn how other departments, divisions, or business units contribute to the business and bottom line.

8. Set up networks. Networks can help you understand the business, get things done, and learn new skills. Network with other employees at lunch meetings and learning teams.

9. Go to training. Make sure any class you attend is tied to your career plan and that the skills taught in the class match a specific business purpose. When you return from training, teach other people what you learned, and set up a plan for how and when you'll use your new skills.

10. Make sure everything you do is tied to career development. Don't do just anything to develop yourself; do something that helps the company, increases your skills, and is tied to your development plan.

Each of us carries a little kit containing all of the skills, knowledge, and abilities we've developed over time. No one can take away your kit; it's yours forever. The key to development is to continue putting more competencies into your kit. The more you add, the more valuable we are to the organization and the more employable you become in a slow economy.

The more your manager helps you fill your kit—by exposing you to new experiences and helping you build new skills—the more likely you are to stay with the organization as a valuable contributor. That's because your manager has built up trust and strengthened the manager-worker relationship. A poor one is often the prime reason employees leave.

Career development isn't hard so long as you understand the concepts, philosophy, and requirements. If done poorly, it becomes just another task. If done well, it can be a rewarding experience for workers and managers alike.

George Ferguson *is an independent consultant in Kansas City, Missouri, specializing in nleadership, teams, and change; george.ferguson@gftcs.com*

Send submissions to **Your Career,** T+D, *1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; yourcareer@astd.org.*