

## Empowering Employees to Own Their Careers

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By Lisa Quast

Recently, an employee complained to me about his lack of job satisfaction, and specifically the roles his manager and human resources representative were playing in his career development. From his perspective, his manager is responsible for telling him what job he should aspire to and his HR representative should be communicating the kind of training and career development courses he should attend. When I asked him what role he thought *he* should play in his career development, he looked at me blankly.

This person is not an atypical employee, and this is not an isolated incident. A large percentage of employees do not view themselves as integral participants in their own career paths and job happiness, as well as overall professional development. When I ask these employees what they believe is preventing them from achieving their career aspirations, I get answers that frequently place blame on someone other than the individual: "My manager never writes performance appraisals or reviews, and as a result I'm unable to get accomplishments or concerns on record, which results in not being able to get a promotion," or, "My manager is supposed to fill out my career development plan, but has been too busy to write one for me," or even, "HR is always so busy, they never have time to tell me which training sessions I should attend."

Passivity and indifference in the workplace are common, and I've witnessed first hand the ramifications of inaction. Those individuals that do not take ownership of their own career development often place the blame for their job dissatisfaction on others, and ultimately burden the company by reducing productivity, teamwork, and company-wide profitability. For HR managers, this often leads to spending unnecessary time with complaints, putting employees on a probation period, or even having to hire a replacement for the position. For companies that want to be successful with their number one asset—especially in an economic climate where employee development funds can be scarce—it is crucial for employees to understand the importance of guiding their own career development.

How can you help? Provide support and training that guides your employees to overcome the following most common career obstacles and take control of their own future:

**1. Fuzzy Aspirations.** If an employee doesn't know where they want to go, how will they know how to get there? I've often asked employees what they want to be doing in five or 10 years, and their answers are generally along the lines of, "I'm sure if I do my job well, my boss will notice and eventually promote me." Maybe, but maybe not.

*Encourage employees to take time to clearly define their aspirations. When they identify their own objectives, they are more likely to own and implement them without outside help.*

**2. No Actionable Plan.** As the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, "A goal without a plan is just a wish." Would you ever try to drive across the country to a specific destination without a map? Achieving success requires a plan.

*Encourage employees to create their own actionable plans which detail activities that will help them realize their career aspirations and goals efficiently and quickly.*

**3. Limited Experience.** Many employees lack the breadth of experience needed to advance their careers. Additionally, lateral moves are often looked down upon because many employees believe they should advance upwards with every job change. It's imperative for employees to understand a common pre-requisite to successfully handle most high-level management positions is a lateral job move.

*Encourage employees to make lateral career moves to broaden their experience and enrich your company's management talent pool.*

**4. No Coach or Mentor.** Most people tell me they hadn't really thought about hiring a coach or asking someone to act as their mentor. When Sun Microsystems compared the career progress of about 1,000 employees over a five-year period, it turned out both mentors and mentees were more than 20 percent more likely to get a raise than people who did not participate in the mentoring program. Additionally, 25 percent of mentees and 28 percent of mentors received a raise—versus only 5 percent of managers who were not mentors. Employees who received mentoring were promoted five times more often than people who didn't have mentors, and mentors were six times more likely to have been promoted to a bigger job. Your employees' success is your success.

*Encourage internal mentoring programs at your company. Help create high-potential employees and provide them with expert guidance and support through external, certified coaches.*

**5. Going It Alone.** Many people don't consider networking to be a method for achieving career aspirations, when in fact networking should be a key element of every employee's career. Networking is a great way to get to know people in the community, in the workplace, and in other businesses. It helps expand circles of friends, provides additional contacts for current and future job opportunities, and helps create a solid support system as employees advance within their careers.

*Create networking opportunities for employees within your company and encourage active participation. Examples include Lunch 'n Learn sessions with outside speakers, Breakfasts with the Boss, Women's Networks, and any other opportunities that bring employees together to learn from and get to know each other.*

You are now in a position to help your employees realize the importance of taking ownership of their career development and success. By doing so, you'll be integral in the creation of a more productive and satisfied work environment, where your employees can thrive and your business can sustain success. Remember: "The best way to predict your future is to create it."

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