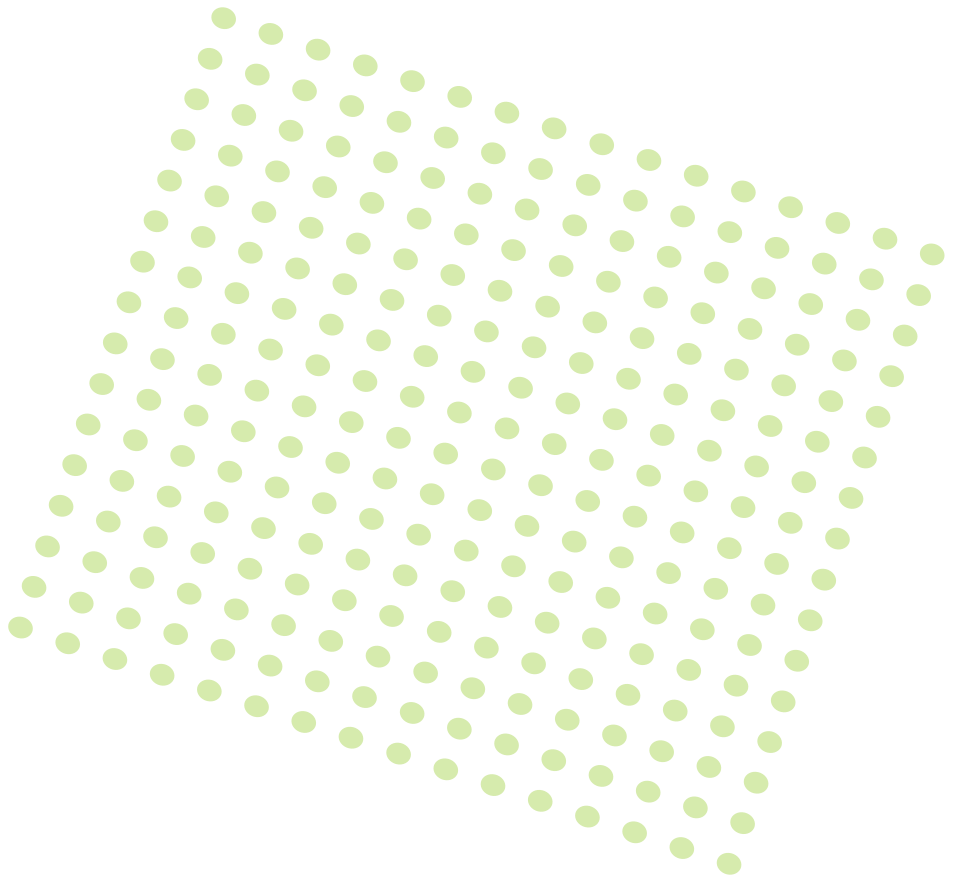Advancing employee productivity

accel : team

…jobs depend on it

Supervisory guides to performance improvement

PLANNING
EMPLOYEE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Developing a process that will meet the goals of the organization and the career development aspirations of individual employees.

In training and developing employees, it is important that managers and supervisors know how;

- to assess employee training needs

- to set performance goals and

- to plan developmental strategies accordingly.

These three steps make development an individualized, systematic process. This article explains these concepts and suggests a process that will meet the goals of the organization and the career development aspirations of individual employees.

Some questions to consider

The process of assessing needs and goals usually involves a discussion or series of discussions between the supervisor and subordinate. Before beginning these discussions, several issues should be considered:

What is required of the employee? What the employee will be required to do as a result of the developmental process, if anything, should be clear in the supervisor's mind before this process is begun. Think of it in this way; is the supervisor making a "can" or a "must" intervention?

A "must" intervention is one that the supervisor feels he or she must perform for some reason. It may be because of company policy, or because the employee is not performing satisfactorily. In a "must" intervention the supervisor must be satisfied with the outcome of the intervention.

If, for example, company policy states that each supervisor and subordinate must develop a two–year developmental plan for the subordinate, the supervisor would be faced with a "must" situation. The supervisor would require that the subordinate work with him or her to design and implement the developmental plan and would not be satisfied until it was done.

In a "can" intervention, the supervisor does not feel compelled or required to perform the intervention. Instead, he or she does so because of a belief that it will benefit the employee and/or the organization.

Also, in a "can" intervention, he or she should leave it up to the employee to decide what action to take as a result of the intervention. For example, let's say the company has no policy on the supervisor's role in developing subordinates and the subordinate is performing his or her job adequately. But the supervisor believes a more systematic approach could benefit the subordinate's development.

He or she can suggest to the subordinate that they work together to design and implement a developmental plan but it is up to the employee to decide whether or not to enter into the developmental process.

It is critical that the supervisor determine up front whether the intervention is a "can" or "must" -whether the employee will be required to take some action or will be permitted to choose-so that he or she can make it clear to the employee just what is required.

Do the supervisor and subordinate have a helping relationship?

This question is critical in "can" interventions but is also important in "must" interventions. In assessing needs and goals, the supervisor should ask the employee to discuss career goals and personal strengths and weaknesses openly. To expect the person to do this with someone he or she does not trust or believe has his or her best interests in mind is unreasonable.

Obviously then, in a "can" intervention, where the employee chooses to enter or not to enter the developmental process, the supervisor must have gained the employee's trust if he or she expects an employee to accept the offer.

A "must" intervention can be carried out without the benefit of a helping relationship, but its chances for success are diminished. The employee can be expected to do exactly what is required even without a helping relationship with his or her boss.

In other words, the employee will fill out the forms and answer questions whether or not he or she feels the supervisor has a genuine interest in helping. But the employee will probably be guarded in answering questions and unwilling to volunteer

information or explore important issues in depth–all necessary to a meaningful, effective developmental process.

Is the employee Interested in career development?

Even if the supervisor and subordinate have a good relationship, the employee may simply not be interested in the developmental process.

Again, if the intervention by the supervisor is a "must," the employee can be expected to do what is required, although perhaps not very enthusiastically. In a "can" intervention, the employee may choose not to enter the developmental process if he or she is not interested. Of course, the employee may become interested (in either type of intervention) if the supervisor explains the potential benefits of the developmental process.

Career development issues

There is little question who is responsible for assessing training needs and planning strategies to meet these needs. Most organizations hold the supervisor responsible for seeing that subordinates are trained to do their jobs. However, assessing career goals and the education and skill development needed to achieve these goals is another matter. Who is responsible for employees' career development is very often not clear.

In helping employees assess career goals and education and development needs, the supervisor has to decide how far his or her responsibility in career counselling extends and how far he or she is willing to go to provide help.

Most experts on career development believe the employee should have final responsibility for managing and developing his or her own career. The supervisor can help in many ways but should remain a helper–not a decision maker, but a facilitator of decisions. In this role, supervisors should follow good counselling practices:

- Ask questions
- Listen actively
- Provide information
- Help focus ideas
- Give feedback on strengths and weaknesses as they are perceived
- Refer the employee to other sources of information (and perhaps a professional career counsellor if needed and if available,)
- Assist the employee in developing action plans

Supervisors should avoid overdoing the following:

- Evaluating the employee's future (as the supervisor sees it)
- Criticizing the employee's evaluation of his or her own future
- Trying to solve the employee's career problems, and
- Stating opinions about what the employee "should" do.

A potential problem in career development discussions is that of raising hopes about promotions. Many organizations and many supervisors avoid career discussions for this reason alone. They fear career development discussions will raise unrealistic expectations about promotion. Although many employees are not interested in promotions, this is indeed a possibility.

However, it can be dealt with by explaining very clearly to the subordinate what can and cannot be expected as outcomes of the discussions. For example, a supervisor could say to an employee: "Obviously, the more you develop your skills, the more prepared you will be if openings occur. But, frankly, there are no openings at present, and my main interest is to help you grow in your present job."

Time line questions

How far the supervisor looks ahead in the developmental process depends on several factors: organizational needs, the subordinate's current level of performance, and the supervisor's and subordinate's desires.

Organizational needs may dictate that the developmental process focus solely on employees' current positions-that is, training only. This will probably be the case If the company's business is a very stable one that has experienced relatively little change over the years, expects little change in the future, and has little turnover and need for mobility within the company.

At the other extreme, a company experiencing rapid growth, change, and turnover may need to emphasize long–term development of employees. In this case, employee planning three to five years into the future may be worthwhile.

The subordinate's current level of performance and knowledge is another factor to consider. If the subordinate lacks the skills and knowledge to perform up to par in his or her current position, the emphasis should probably be on training needs. Education and development needs may be discussed, but it may make little sense to start preparing the employee for future positions before he or she has mastered the current job.

Individual Development Plan (IDP)

Employee Name _____   Date _____

Job Title _____

Department _____

1.0 Training Needs Assessment (skills & knowledge requirements for improving or maintaining satisfactory performance)					
	Degree of Proficiency		Need Priority		
	High	Adequate	A	B	C
1.1					
1.2					
1.3					
1.4					
1.5					

2.0 Career Goals	
2.1 Short Term (within 2 years)	
2.1.1	Target date
2.1.2	Target date
2.1.3	Target date
2.1.4	Target date
2.2 Long Term (beyond 2 years)	
2.2.1	Target date
2.2.2	Target date
2.2.3	Target date
2.2.4	Target date

3.0 Educational & Development Needs (to achieve goals in Section 2)	
3.1	Target date
3.2	Target date
3.3	Target date
3.4	Target date

4.0 Development Objectives (specific performance indicators to show needs have been met)	
4.1	Target date
4.2	Target date
4.3	Target date
4.4	Target date

5.0 Development Activities (ways to prepare for development objectives)	
5.1	Target date
5.2	Target date
5.3	Target date
5.4	Target date

Next review (date) _____   Signature   Supervisor _____

Employee _____

If the employee's current job performance is adequate, it may be wise to look ahead to education and development needs, especially if the employee has been in the current job for a long time or lacks a feeling of challenge. This is not to say that training should be disregarded. There may be certain skills that the employee does adequately but would like to perfect. In addition, the discussion of education needs does not have to focus on promotions or transfers.

The person's current job may change. Or, if the employee is feeling unchallenged and a promotion or transfer is not possible perhaps the job *should* change. The supervisor and employee may want to explore the possibility of adding new responsibilities or trading responsibilities with another staff member.

Initiating the developmental process

The supervisor may not know how he or she stands with a subordinate or whether the subordinate is interested in career development. The best way to determine both is by discussing the developmental process with the employee. How to proceed in this initial discussion depends on whether the intervention is a "must" or a "can."

In a "must" intervention, the supervisor begins by explaining what the subordinate will be required to do and why. Why is especially important in capturing the employee's interest and commitment to the process. In explaining why, the supervisor should not only point out the "must" reason-for instance, company policy-but also explain the potential benefits of the process to all concerned. After explaining what and why, the supervisor should attempt to involve the subordinate in discussing how to proceed with the developmental process.

By the end of the initial discussion, it should be clear to the subordinate what he or she is expected to do and clear to the supervisor that the subordinate is committed to doing what is expected.

In a "can" intervention, the supervisor should begin by explaining in general terms his or her immediate goals: to work with the subordinate in assessing developmental needs and career goals and planning strategies for dealing with the needs identified. The supervisor should also explain why, again emphasizing the benefits of the process.

After this general explanation, the supervisor should be sure the subordinate understands that it is his or her decision whether to continue the discussion. If the subordinate chooses to continue, the supervisor should explain specifically how he or she would like to proceed, involving the subordinate in

the discussion. Even after the specific explanation, the subordinate should have the option of continuing or discontinuing the process.

In both "must" and "can" interventions, if the subordinate shows any sign of resistance, the supervisor should shift from explaining to active listening. This gives the employee the chance to voice any negative feelings he or she may have about the discussion. Thus the supervisor has an opportunity to understand and possibly overcome the employee's negative feelings.

The Individual Development Plan

The process of needs and goals assessment can be facilitated through the use of the Individual Development Plan (IDP) form shown on the next page.

To use this form, the supervisor should compete section 1.0, "Training Needs. Assessment" by:

1. Listing what he or she perceives as the major skill and knowledge requirements of the subordinate's job
2. Determining the subordinate's level of proficiency in each competency area, and
3. Giving a priority ranking to each area where training is needed

In establishing priorities, the supervisor should consider the following dimensions:

- Degree of proficiency
- Immediacy of the need
- Potential impact if training does not take place

The subordinate should complete sections 1,2, and 3 of the plan independently. While the subordinate should be encouraged to put thoughtful effort into completing these sections, he or she should understand career objectives and goals are never 'written on tablets of stone." Rather, what is articulated here serves as a starting point for discussion, exploration, and action planning. Nor need the employee know in all certainty what his or her two-year career goals and five-year development needs are.

In the first meeting, which will initiate the developmental process, the supervisor should explain how they will use the IDP form. After the initial meeting, each should work individually on the appropriate parts of the form.

Once each has completed the sections in question, they should meet together again for discussion–comparing thoughts on training needs, voicing areas of disagreement and finally reaching consensus.

One method that works well is putting the forms side by side on the table, discussing each competency area and writing down the agreed-on decisions on a third IDP form.

Section 1, "Training Needs," is completed by both supervisor and subordinate, but since training needs impact on the employee's job performance the supervisor can and should play a major role in discussion of this section.

In identifying priorities, the subordinate should feel, ideally, that he or she has had a part in the process. The supervisor, however, may be more directive in this area than in the general discussion of education and developmental needs. This would be necessary, for example, if the supervisor is convinced that the employee's lack of proficiency in a particular skill is seriously impacting group productivity.

In discussing career goals, as was mentioned previously, the manager should be a helper rather than a decision maker. This is also true in discussing education and developmental needs if the discussion is limited to the skills and knowledge needed to meet career goals. One exception is if the supervisor knows that the employee is about to be moved into another position or is going to be given additional responsibilities and for this reason needs to acquire new knowledge or skills. In this case, the supervisor would be justified in taking a directive role in identifying education needs.

Planning developmental strategies

Once training, education, and developmental needs have been determined, plans should be made to meet those needs. The IDP form can again be used to facilitate the discussion. Generally the planning process should follow these steps:

1. From the training, education, and developmental needs identified, select those earmarked as having top priority.
2. Describe in writing the performance standards that will demonstrate when each has been met (developmental objectives.)
3. Discuss alternative methods of meeting each need and select one or more methods that will help the employee accomplish the developmental objective (developmental activities.)
4. Set review dates.

In selecting needs to focus on, the supervisor–subordinate team should consider the priority of each need, then take a realistic look at how much can actually be accomplished. Before deciding how much to take on, the two should consider each need in the context of budgets, workloads, and other contingencies. At this point, the subordinate should take the lead in deciding what and how much to try. Decisions initiated by the subordinate bolster his or her commitment.

Next, the goal should be put in writing. Often, we are tempted to take the easy way out by writing very general goals, "Improve my writing skills", for example. This is fine as a starting point. But let's look at what could happen six months after this goal is written. The supervisor and subordinate get together to review progress and the supervisor says, essentially, "Your writing has not improved!" The subordinate is flabbergasted: "But, boss, I thought I was making real progress."

Who's right? They both may be. The problem is that they didn't specify the criteria for measuring successful accomplishment of the objective. If they had written a specific, measurable objective (say, "I will make no more than one grammatical error per report after October 1",) the subordinate would have a more specific goal to work toward and would be more likely to accomplish the goal to the supervisor's satisfaction. Both persons would probably tend to view the developmental process as a success and would therefore be encouraged to continue working toward further development.

When objectives have been agreed upon and written down, it is time to explore developmental activities. The table *Development Activities* opposite lists a number of activities to consider, grouped according to developmental functions. The supervisor and subordinate may be able to think of other development activities not in the list.

In choosing the right activity or combination of activities, the primary consideration should be: Which will be most effective in helping meet the objectives set? The amount of time required and probable costs are other important considerations.

Finally, a date or dates should be set to review the results of the developmental process and to reassess needs and goals and plan new developmental strategies. About three to six months is about the right amount of time for one cycle. At intermittent dates, the supervisor and subordinate should probably check on progress toward meeting objectives and deal with any problems or questions that may arise.

Development Activities

Task assignments

- New or challenging tasks

- Job or task rotation

- Filling in for the boss or another staff member at meetings

- Filling in for the boss or another staff member during vacations

- Participating on task forces, committees, special projects

- Field trips to supplier / client sites

- Information gathering activities and reporting on findings together with recommendations for improvement

Job and career related training

- Training in other related disciplines

- Formal training, education and developmental programs

- Company sponsored courses

- Correspondence courses

- Seminars and workshops

- Conferences

- College/ university courses

- Other adult education courses

- Community association sponsored courses

Performance Feedback

- Getting feedback from the boss, peers, or subordinates

Other

- Reading – a recommended book list

- Visiting other departments, sites, organizations

- Joining professional associations

- Mentoring / coaching by a professional in targeted disciplines

Needs and goals can change even within a three– or six-month cycle, so the supervisor and subordinate should be open to the possibility of a comprehensive review and revision of plans if needed.

Cliff F. Grimes
E-mail: cfg@accel-team.com
http://www.accel-team.com/