



5 STEPS TO HELPING EMPLOYEES GROW THEIR CAREERS

Advice from ourCHRO - White Paper Series

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Strong leaders develop other leaders

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important and rewarding responsibilities of a manager is to help their employees grow their careers. A mark of a strong leader is that they have helped build and develop other leaders over time. This white paper outlines five steps to help you do just that..



Bryan L. Olson
FOUNDER & MANAGING PARTNER

STEP 1: *Invest in Building Sufficient Relationships*

In order to most effectively help employees grow their careers, the manager needs to have a sufficient relationship with each of them. In other words, it's important that you as the manager build trust with your employees so that they each believe that you are working with their best interests and personal development in mind. That's what I mean by having a "sufficient" relationship – that when you offer suggestions, coaching and development advice, the recipient believes that you are doing it because you care about them and their development.

There are a number of ways to invest in the relationships with your team members. Over a period of time, something as simple as asking about someone's weekend on a Monday morning before jumping right to the business at hand can make a difference. Taking the time to truly listen when an employee comes to you with a new idea reinforces that you value their contributions. Asking for input prior to making decisions that impact a team member shows that you care, even if you are not ultimately able to do everything that the employee suggested. Investing in relationships isn't particularly difficult, it just takes a little caring and focus.



TIP: SHORT ICE BREAKER EXERCISES AT THE BEGINNING OF TEAM MEETINGS CAN HELP YOU GET TO KNOW YOUR TEAM MEMBERS, HELP THEM TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER, AND ULTIMATELY HELP BUILD TRUST BETWEEN ALL MEMBERS OF THE TEAM.

It's difficult to help someone reach their goals when you don't know what they hope to achieve. The best managers ask their team members about their career aspirations. Managers should hold regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings with each team member. Occasionally, one of the agenda items covered should be the employee's professional development and career aspirations. Ask your team member to give some consideration to these topics in advance, and potentially even ask them to send written answers prior to the meeting. When asked to submit written responses, people tend to take the time to be thoughtful and sincere in their answers. As the manager, reviewing these responses in advance will position you to have an effective development conversation.

STEP 2: *Understand Their Motivations & Aspirations*

A few questions you may consider posing are as follows:

- In terms of your career, what would you like to be doing 5 years from now?
- What aspects of your job do you currently enjoy most?
- What have you learned since our last professional development conversation?
- What are the other career development items that you would like to discuss?



Your short-term team of HR experts

The ourCHRO team has substantial experience helping leaders across multiple industries skillfully manage through M&A, turnarounds, restructurings, leadership changes, and other types of company transitions.

If you are a manager of managers, you might also want to consider periodically having development conversations with employees deeper in your organization. These "skip level" development meetings will not only reinforce that you care about the professional development of your team, but will also help to build a culture of collaboration and trust. Personally, I have also found these meetings to have an important side benefit. They tend to be a treasure trove of great ideas. Hearing the challenges of team members at a variety of levels in the organization will help you to stay in touch with improvement opportunities that you may not have come up with on your own.

STEP 3: *Support Their Professional Development*

Once you understand the aspirations of your team members, the next step to helping them achieve those goals is to support the development of the skills they need to do so. This can range from giving them stretch assignments, to putting them on cross-functional project teams, to enrolling them in training programs. Each team member will have different development needs and as their manager you are in a unique position to help them address those needs. Many organizations have formal development plans that can be leveraged for this purpose, but a formal plan is certainly not necessary. Once you and your team member have agreed on the skills they need to develop to get to the next level, you can work with them to figure out how best to develop those skills.

For your team members who are ready for it, be sure to empower them to take appropriate risks and give them stretch assignments whenever you can. It's a key step in helping them grow in their careers and you'll be surprised what they can accomplish. You'll have to provide them air cover, support them, and own the results with them. Thus, you will need to be careful to only empower team members who are ready, willing and able to take on that level of responsibility.

TIP: WHEN YOU EMPOWER YOUR TEAM MEMBERS, YOU NEED TO BE COMFORTABLE THAT THEY CAN DELIVER

Another way to support their professional development is to assist them with network building, both inside and outside of your company. A simple introduction paired with a few supportive words can make a difference. Consider making these introductions whenever there is a business reason to do so.



One of the more advanced skills you will need to develop in your employees is how to effectively navigate the politics of your company. During my career I have worked in an assortment of companies of different sizes, with a variety of organizational structures, in multiple industries. Each of them had a unique culture and a set of unwritten rules and power structures that the most effective leaders were able to navigate with proficiency.

Of course, you can only effectively develop this skill in others if you possess it yourself. If you have been promoted to a leadership level in your organization, then you probably have some level of savvy in terms of navigating organizational politics. A few suggestions to help you build your own organizational savvy are as follows:

- Learn how your organization makes decisions and look for patterns in decision-making at the top levels
- Get interested and stay aware of what is happen across the organization beyond your department
- Ask questions to understand the needs and challenges of your peers and colleagues
- Build relationships and help others succeed
- Strive for win-win solutions at work
- Learn from co-workers who are able to get things done through influence
- Observe the culture of your organization and its influence on how decisions get made
- Help your boss accomplish his or her goals
- Listen carefully to others to hear and fully understand what they are saying

As you engage these techniques your awareness of company politics will grow, as will your ability to effectively navigate them. This will put you in a better position to help your employees grow and be successful. As it turns out, building these skills also tends to build your political capital, which takes us to the next step.

STEP 4: *Help Them Learn to Navigate Organizational Politics*



STEP 5: *Be Their Sponsor*

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Almost no one gets promoted without some level of sponsorship.

Mentoring is different than sponsorship. Mentoring is a personal development relationship in which a more experienced or knowledgeable person helps to counsel, advise or guide a less experienced or knowledgeable person on a particular topic or skill. Mentoring is important, but it is much less impactful on helping your employees grow their careers than sponsorship. Sponsorship is a higher level of support – putting one's own political capital on the line to forward the career of another deserving person.

Almost no one gets promoted without some level of sponsorship. If you don't believe that, consider whether you were in the room the last time a decision was made to promote you. It would be rare if you were. Rather, someone in that room likely made the case for you to get the promotion. They put some of their own credibility and political capital at risk to make the case for you. As a manager, you will need to do the same for your team members if you truly want to help them grow their careers.

Many of the best leaders I have worked with in my career are individuals whom I have sponsored. I go out of my way to work with them, because I know I can trust them and that they will make meaningful contributions to our shared success.

A few suggestions on how to be an effective sponsor for your employees are:

- Check your implicit bias (make sure you are not only sponsoring those employees who look, think and act like you)
- Hold regular conversations regarding their career aspirations
- Give them stretch assignments and hold them accountable for results
- Stand up for them when others seem to be making biased assessments
- Learn from them and solicit their input – no one person has all the best answers
- Advocate for them when you have the opportunity
- Take calculated risks with your political capital to help them achieve their goals

HELPING YOUR EMPLOYEES GROW THEIR CAREERS IS WHAT STRONG MANAGERS DO. HOWEVER, IT IS MORE THAN AN ALTRUISTIC ENDEAVOR. ASSISTING YOUR TEAM MEMBERS IN FURTHERING THEIR CAREERS WILL LIKELY HELP YOU TO ADVANCE YOUR OWN, AND YOU WILL UNDOUBTEDLY FIND IT PERSONALLY REWARDING TO SEE THEM SUCCEED.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Olson has over 30 years of professional experience, more than 15 of which is as senior executive in Human Resources at several leading global companies. He has supported more than 50 corporate M&A transactions as either an HR leader or HR M&A attorney. These deals ranged in transaction size from under 5 million to over 10 billion dollars.

In addition, Bryan has significant experience leading executive teams through corporate turnarounds, leadership changes, and other company transitions. He is currently serving on a part-time contractor basis as the Chief Human Resources Officer of publicly-traded The Cannabist Company, where he is helping its senior leadership team reshape the business. Bryan is the former CHRO of global law firm K&L Gates, where he was awarded an HR Hero Award by a national HR organization for bringing the best of HR from the corporate world to a major law firm.

Bryan previously held senior HR executive positions at Aetna and United Technologies Corporation (both in the top 50 of the Fortune list at the time). Bryan is a former practicing employee benefits and executive compensation attorney at one of the top global law firms, Skadden Arps. He started his career at Fidelity Investments. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Business from Westminster College and a Juris Doctorate from Boston College Law School.

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