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Redeveloping the Individual Development Plan

The individual development plan needs an update to better conform to the fluid nature of talent management.

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Individual development plans, or IDPs, have become a staple for managers and human resources professionals alike. But the development activity is often steeped in a systematic approach — forms, deadlines, sign-offs and processes — that ultimately dilutes the value it brings to the individual employee. In a similar vein, the stress of following the IDP process and hitting the associated deadlines often leaves managers overstressed.

The advantage of such a comprehensive system in a big organization is that every employee is assured of having at least one development conversation each year. The disadvantage, however, is that too many leaders view the requirement as the ceiling, rather than the floor. What frequently results is that managers only engage in one such conversation each year, instead of using the platform as an invitation to support individual development on a regular basis.

Among other unintended consequences:

Development as a transaction: As development has become increasingly part of a system, it has taken on a very different complexion. Formalizing the process has put greater focus on forms, checklists and deadlines, transforming development into a transactional task to be crossed off to-do lists. This is in stark contrast to what most organizations want and need, which is a perpetual approach to the responsibility of developing a workforce.

Development as a de-motivator: Increasingly, organizations are realizing that development of the "See you this time next year" variety is more dangerous than no development at all. It raises expectations and ignites interestin employees. It starts to open the door to possibilities only to promptly shut it as everyone gets "back to work." This leads to disappointment and disillusionment, which deplete engagement and motivation.

Development as a tool for misinformation: Busy managers understand how the system works. If they complete the forms on time and check all of the right boxes, they're in the clear for another year. Compliance becomes more about filling in the proper fields and hitting "complete" than driving genuine development.

Consequently, organizations have a skewed sense of what is happening in their workforce. HR and otherexecutives believe what's on paper is playing out in real life. They engage in workforce planning, talent reviews, succession planning and other organizational processes — all based on a foundation of information that managers have frequently provided in a hurried fashion just to comply with administrative requirements.

Time for Change

Perhaps a starting point is to redefine the terms. While the individual initials in IDP are appropriate, the words are somewhat misguided given today's demands.

Consider the "I," which stands for "individual." This term was intended to reflect a special sense that the individual employee was receiving a unique and customized development experience. But given how the process has evolved, "individual" in this regard frequently connotes a singular sense of responsibility targeted toward the managers, not the employees benefitting from development.

What if development became a group activity? What if employees used crowdsourcing to solicit feedback and ideas about experiences that might build new skills and capabilities? With this mindset, development might take on a different complexion and grow beyond the annual-event mentality.

Although the "D" stands for "development," the word has grown into a term that is more likely to describe employee weakness or problem, not necessarily a path forward for positive improvement. The term has taken on a deficit-based tone, resulting in dwindling enthusiasm and energy for the task.

Even the "P" — "plan" — has lost its intended meaning to some extent. Because the word is generally overused in business, many leaders spend just as much time "planning" as "doing." The problem with this is traditional plans no longer are an accurate reflection of the speed of business. By the time the ink on a plan has dried, something likely needs to be changed.

Although these words may have lost their meaning, the term IDP can live on — with a refresh in the words used. By doing this, organizations may be able to reinvigorate enthusiasm for the practice.

How about this: iterative dialogue around possibilities?

IDP's: The Old Way and the New Way

OLD	NEW
CYCLE IS ONCE A YEAR	CYCLE IS PERPETUAL
DEADLINES IMPLY ONE AND DONE	OPEN CONVERSATIONS IMPLY CONTINUED DIALOG
EXPECTATIONS ARE SET ONCE A YEAR	MULTIPLE EXCHANGE OF EXPECTATIONS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE YEAR
BASED ON MANAGERS PERSPECTIVE AND IDEAS	BASED ON PERSPECTIVE AND IDEAS
FINALIZED DIALOGUE	ITERATIVE DIALOGUE
DICTATE BASED	DIALOGUE BASED
ONE TIME CONVERSATION ABOUT CAREER GOALS	ONGOING EXPLORATION OF CAREER OPTIONS
FIXED	FLUID
ANNUAL OR BIANNUAL ON DEVELOPMENT	DEVELOPMENT FOCUS SUPPORTS FREQUENT CHECKUPS AND CHECK-INS
CONVERGENT THINKING	DIVERGENT THINKING

Source: Authors

A New Approach

Transforming static annual individual development plans into vibrant, iterative dialogues around possibilities demands that leaders and employees alike adopt a new mindset and set of priorities.

Start a new conversation: Current development processes are dictate-based, characterized by paperwork, processes and a sense that there's a start and an end.

By contrast, dialogue-based development is characterized by questions that create an evolving joint understanding between managers and employees. It sets the expectation that every employee can learn and grow with sincere interest, curiosity and trust. Instead of concentrating on forms, the most effective leaders connect with people.

Substitute development "Post-its" for development plans: Development-related documentation is necessary for leaders to remember, track and hold people accountable for their goals and intentions. But it shouldn't be a free-for-all. Neither should it be a straitjacket, which is how many plans feel to employees.

In many organizations, significant time and energy are invested in selecting goals, making them specific, measureable, assignable or attainable, and realistic and timely. Time is spent completing complex forms and cross-referencing various systems.The process is tiring, and the result is thinking that's frequently concretebecause it's set up in a way that makes it hard to make changes. In many instances, it's easier to ditch development rather than repeat an overly complex process.

A small change that can create disproportionate results is to scrap the plan and break out the Post-it notes. Leaders and employees will appreciate the simplification. Different objectives, strategies and actions can be captured on separate Post-its. They can be moved around and re-sequenced easily when needed. This is often a smoother approach; it energizes the process, allowing iteration to occur. And it better meets the cadence and rate of change present in today's corporate environment.

Promote possibility thinking: Possibility can be defined as "a thing that may be chosen out of several possible alternatives." The key word is "several." But busy managers aim to streamline the process and make it more efficient. In the process, they work with employees to quickly identify the right goal, strategy, approach, course or experience. They gravitate toward convergent thinking when divergent thinking is what's really necessary. Possibility thinking requires that "quick" gives way to "quantity," which ultimately leads to betterquality outcomes of the development practice.

Leaders should encourage employees to generate lots of ideas for how they might like to grow, the work they might like to do and the strategies that might bridge the gap between where they are and where they want to be. Employees should cultivate the ability to entertain unrestricted thinking as they generate a variety of experiences likely to help them achieve their development goals. Using this approach is likely to activate greater creativity, engagement and motivation to push forward on the development plan.

Generating more ideas doesn't need to mean more work for already overburdened managers. It isn't reserved for managers and employees — broad collaboration is required. Employees should take the lead, using their own peer networks, generally made up of individuals who know them, their skills, talents and aspirations far better than their managers would.

Distribute development: Concentrating development conversations around an annual deadline makes it a one-and-done activity, in which the ideas outlined in the plan frequently gather dust in a file folder or on a computer server. Breaking this cycle means transporting development into the fabric of the employee's work itself.

In this regard, leaders should aim to become developmental "multitaskers." They should look to make the most of common interactions already occurring among themselves and their employees.

For instance, when a manager is driving to a client meeting with an employee, check in on how development possibilities are proceeding. Also, invite team members to share development updates during regular status meetings, include quick development check-ins during one-on-one meetings, link ongoing coaching and feedback conversations to development, and then debrief learning experiences by connecting the dots back to development objectives.

Ultimately, the switch from the individual development plan to iterative dialogue around possibilities means moving from an annual, transactional, proceduralapproach to something that happens on an ongoingbasis and is embedded in the workflow, delivering betterhuman resources and business results alike.