



How “Helpful” Systems Extinguish Career Development (and What You Can Do to Reignite It)

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Career development appears at the top of many lists. Unfortunately, the lists tend to be those focused on what employees desperately want but are not getting from their managers.

As for managers, most appreciate the value of career development and really wish they could do it more frequently and more effectively than they currently do. But let's face it: a manager's day-to-day reality is a kaleidoscopic blur of meetings, responsibilities, and shifting priorities. Helping employees to develop and grow is one of many activities perpetually pushed out in time to that elusive *someday* that too rarely comes.

How can managers get past this conundrum? How can they make career development happen within the pressure-cooker reality that is business today? The answer is definitely *not* new systems, checklists, processes, or forms. Those have actually contributed to the problem.

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A manager in a healthcare organization meticulously completes the form and signs his employee up for several training seminars. He's pleased with the plan and his commitment to career development.

A VP in a financial institution, believing that employees must own their development, lets employees complete their IDPs and submit them to her for approval. It's rare that she doesn't approve their forms. After all, people know best what they need.

A hospitality supervisor uses a template to be able to fit in the eighteen IDPs he must complete within a two-week period. Since most of his employees are in the same basic role, he sees it as an efficient way to meet his expectations.

And they all think they're doing career development.

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What's Wrong with this Picture?

Career development is *not* an administrative task... it's a human endeavor. Yet IDPs (individual development plans) are a pervasive (and too frequently perverse) feature of today's organizational landscape. The forms have become synonymous with career development.

To be fair, the IDP process was introduced to meet a very real need: to ensure that all employees benefit from conscious attention to their professional development and career growth.

This kind of attention can produce powerful results.

- It enhances employee engagement and satisfaction.
- It ensures the ongoing development of critical skills and capacities while building organizational bench strength.
- It contributes to the retention of talent and bottom-line business results.

But, not unlike the message in children's game of telephone, the purpose of the IDP process has become distorted. Unfortunately, in many organizations, today it bears little resemblance to its original intent.

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Form Over Function

The problem is not that managers aren't engaging in the IDP process. They are—some with meticulous precision and according to the schedules outlined by their organizations.

- They log onto the websites.
- They complete the forms.
- They check the boxes.
- They hit *send* so HR receives the needed documentation.

They may even talk to their employees. But, given the rigor of the administrative process and the focus on the deliverables, too frequently the genuine human connection that should be at the core of career development gets lost. In too many environments, the IDP has lost its heart. Managers who survive the extensive process often feel like they've done their career development for the year. After checking all of those boxes on the forms, they check one more.

✓ **Career development**

In an effort to ensure meaningful career development, organizations may actually be extinguishing it.

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Light the Fire

Increasingly, organizations are taking a long, hard look at IDPs and career development in general. Those that are serious about change are developing new approaches to bring humanity back to the very human act of helping others.

Yet doing so requires the counterintuitive move of de-emphasizing the so-called “helpful” systems that are actually *hurting* the process. It requires returning to a more organic approach to development.

Development doesn't occur on schedule, according to the deadlines imposed by the talent management system.

It happens:

- A little bit every day in a layered fashion that adds depth and dimension to employees' capabilities.
- On the employee's schedule around the work that needs to be done, not according to the organization's timeline.
- Through intentional interactions and conversations, not forms and processes.

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Organizations and leaders committed to reigniting genuine career development can benefit from these strategies that redirect energy and attention away from the process and put it squarely back on people.

FORGET THE FORM. OK, that might be slightly strong. But, de-emphasize the form... a lot. Make it shorter. Make it simpler. Make it a tool that drives authentic connections—both between the manager and employee and among employees and those in their networks.

Individual development planning is all about the conversation. Sure, the manager and employee do some independent thinking. But, the magic happens when the two individuals—both committed to growth—come together and talk. The form is just there to capture the highlights.

Conversation is King

Shift the focus of the form from checkboxes and to-do's to a dialogue that surfaces critical information, prompts that drive insights, and what-ifs that inspire action.

TRANSFER OWNERSHIP. Managers don't own their employees' careers. Employees do. All that managers can (and should) feel accountable for is guiding, encouraging, collaborating on, and supporting the effort.

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When a manager really internalizes this reality, it can produce a powerful energetic shift. The weight of responsibility lifts, allowing managers to approach this task with greater energy and creativity than when it was another of their many duties.

Transferring ownership means re-thinking the manager's role and re-calibrating employee expectations. The new contract involves a significant shift...

FROM:	TO:
Manager as orchestrator: making decisions and arrangements on behalf of employees.	Manager as facilitator: asking the questions and offering perspectives, but leaving decisions and actions up to employees.
Manager as the primary person responsible for addressing career development.	Manager as one person within a broader network that the employee constructs to support career development.
Employee as consumer of career development services.	Employee as co-creator of career development activities and results.
Employee following the lead of the organization and manager regarding career development.	Employee setting the pace and leading career development.

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Employees Need Some Skin In This Game

This transfer of ownership enhances employee engagement, interest, commitment, and results. It also shifts the balance of power and responsibility toward the employee, allowing managers to release the unreasonable, undoable, and one-sided burden that career development has somehow become.

CULTIVATE CURIOSITY. When ownership for development is transferred to the employee, career conversations suddenly become a lot easier and less stressful for managers. Managers don't need to have all the answers. But they must be ready to pose the right questions. Questions are the most powerful tool managers have to support career development. And cultivating a genuine sense of curiosity and interest in others and their goals sets the tone for the most productive conversations possible.

Curiosity has the power to transform the exchange of mere words into discovery and insight. It fills even a brief chat with possibilities, opportunities, and hope. It leaves others feeling strong, capable and like they have something of value to contribute. And it allows a career conversation to unlock deep understandings, activate motivation, spark drive, and focus action.

You might be able to fake listening, but not curiosity.

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Curiosity might be the most under-the-radar and undervalued leadership competency in business today. Think about it: what could you accomplish if you practiced passionate, curious listening—*really* listening with intention and a true sense of purpose to learn and understand? What ideas and possibilities could you cultivate if you honed your ability to wonder out loud with those around you? What could others accomplish if you engaged with them in a way that communicated how fascinating and capable they truly were?

ENGINEER EXPERIENCES. Many managers prefer completing forms to engaging in career development conversations because they believe that to make employees happy, the conversations must end with ideas about how to move up or around in the organization. That's simply not part of today's de-layered, leaner approach to business. So how then does development occur? Through experiences that leverage talents and build the skills that employees need.

Development doesn't require a new desk... just new duties.

“Curiosity might be the most under-the-radar and undervalued leadership competency in business today.”

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People don't need promotions or new roles to grow. It can happen through meaningful assignments and enhancement to a current job. It might be leading a team, analyzing data, or getting to know new customers. Jointly arriving at development experiences is smart business because while the employee is developing, important work gets done simultaneously.

CARPE COACHABLE MOMENTS. Too frequently career development feels like one of those regularly scheduled but distasteful annual events. Even when it's done well, once a year is not frequent enough. Without help and encouragement, employees and managers alike put the plans away until next year's "inspection."

In reality, career development opportunities can occur countless times each day when managers are sensitive to the cues around them and are willing to seize coachable moments. When an employee shares a new interest, is starting a project, has just come back from training, or has experienced a set-back, are all moments pregnant with career development cues. A one- to three-minute conversation—right there in the flow of the work that needs to be done—can help employees reflect, analyze, consider, and plan their career development. There's no need to wait for some big career meeting (that likely won't occur anyway).

What's required is for leaders to hone a regular development habit.

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INTRODUCE A “TIME-RELEASED FORMULA” THAT ENSURES THAT CAREER DEVELOPMENT IS TOP OF MIND NOT JUST AT IDP TIME, BUT ALL YEAR ROUND.

These smaller, iterative chunks better accommodate the cadence of business. Perhaps more importantly, they better accommodate how development really occurs: little by little over time.

SUPPORT ACCOUNTABILITY. Sustained behavior change is considerably more possible when leaders are motivated to pay attention long enough for key behaviors to become ingrained. That’s the only way they become part of the leader’s natural repertoire. But *attention* in the short term is required. And nothing inspires attention more than accountability.

Organizations committed to weaving development into the day-to-day fabric of the business use a range of systems and strategies. They draw attention to important skills and behaviors by:

- Setting career development expectations.
- Instituting measures and metrics.
- Backing up their commitment to development with learning and training opportunities to build capacity.
- Targeting coaching.

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- Putting career development on every meeting agenda.
- Elevating visibility in other ways.

Of course, the highest form of accountability involves actually evaluating leaders based upon their employees’ development. Are employees growing? Do they know more today than they did yesterday? Can they do more now than in the past? Are we growing and promoting those from within? Are employees satisfied with their careers?

WHEN LEADERS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR DEVELOPING THEIR PEOPLE, PEOPLE WILL DEVELOP.

These systems support the focus and provide the reinforcement required for sustained behavior change.

The key is identifying systems that are *relevant*. They need to draw attention directly to the behavior, skill, or outcomes required. They also must be *reasonable*—not requiring new departments, another headcount, or superfluous activity streams. Most organizations already have more than enough systems in place; it’s just a matter of leveraging or piggybacking on what already exists.

Burn, Baby, Burn

Growing the business means growing people. But growth doesn't come via heartless processes, checklists, forms, or deadlines. In fact, these things actually extinguish genuine career development.

Fortunately, the embers are still there, just waiting to be ignited. **Add the sparks of humanity and conversation and you'll touch off a fire hot enough to burn past complacency and disengagement, forge new capabilities and passion, and leave competitors in the ashes.** ☞

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Info



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