“Promotions are overrated”: Managers must tap into the career growth e...
MANAGING

‘Promotions are overrated’: Managers must tap into the career growth employees want

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Career development has traditionally been defined by promotions and title changes. Growth and success came from moving up the ladder, gaining recognition and rewards.

The hierarchical pyramid meant opportunities were limited beyond a certain point in the organization. And these days, with the thinning of middle managers, a further complication of fewer spaces has been added at a time when people are living and working longer.

“Opportunities to climb the corporate ladder and enjoy growth via promotions have become increasingly limited. Continuing to define careers and career development in these narrow terms will only perpetuate confusion, frustration and competition,” consultant and trainer Julie Winkle Giulioni writes in Promotions Are So Yesterday.

Managers need to re-evaluate career development. Sure, promotions will continue to exist, but managers need to open their eyes to other ways employees can grow. And there is evidence those employees are willing. A survey of 750 working professionals by Ms. Giulioni, where workers were exposed to eight ways of career growth, found promotions ranked last. Here are the choices, in order of popularity:

- Contribution: Making a difference and aligning with your purpose.
- Competence: Building critical capabilities, skills, and expertise.
- Confidence: Trusting and appreciating your talents and abilities.
- Connection: Cultivating relationships and deepening your network.
- Challenge: Stretching beyond what’s known and comfortable.
- Contentment: Experiencing satisfaction, ease and joy in your work.
Choice: Enhancing the control and autonomy you can exercise.
Climb: Advancing through promotions or new positions.

Regardless of age, gender or level in the organization, promotions were at the bottom, with one exception – people in their twenties ranked it second last.

“For years, conventional wisdom has instilled the belief that the bulk of employees are always angling for another role or to take the next step up the ladder. This kind of thinking has caused many managers to avoid career conversations altogether, assuming they can’t offer the growth their people want. Now we know that this is not true. Simply put, promotions are overrated,” she writes.

That should be exciting. Ms. Giulioni notes people want to grow in precisely the areas organizations need them to grow. Tapping into that urge might also enhance engagement and enthusiasm and reduce burnout.

Contribution is particularly intriguing. It tops the list. People don’t want to waste time. They want to make their days at work count. “Strategic contribution is the ultimate win-win. It lets people get more development while giving more value,” she says.

Employees probably are contributing right now. But that can be obscured by the routine aspects of the day-to-day. She says dialogue makes the difference. You need to jointly identify contribution as an important element of their career path, and how best to fulfill that objective. Try questions like: What more could you offer in your current role? What’s getting in the way of you bringing everything you’ve got to your work? How might you find greater meaning and purpose in your work?

Some employees may eagerly offer suggestions. Others will be reticent, wary of your motives or doubtful you can deliver, so that will take more time.

You might flinch at this approach, worrying that you can’t satisfy your entire team. A lot of what your company does likely isn’t heroically meaningful. But she notes few people have optimized what can be accomplished in their current roles. In most organizations, there is also no shortage of projects and initiatives that can offer meaty opportunities for greater contribution. And even some contributions that employees might want but fall outside business-as-usual might be honoured in some fashion at a time when organizations are re-examining their role in society.
Helping employees to broaden their skill has long been a key component of career development programs, even if not always effectively done. Ms. Giulioni says the world of work is the biggest classroom on the planet. In fact, there are so many possibilities that managers must serve as a “Skills Sherpa,” helping to winnow the immediate options and assist the employee to successfully climb the mountain.

Humans are hard-wired to connect. The urge for connections was often tied in the survey to altruistic motivations like serving others and multiplying the respondent’s value to others. The higher up the ladder, the more likely was the desire for this connection.

She urges you to build this into a structured development experience. When launching a traditional group project, managers typically focus on the business issue or opportunity at stake. As well, focus on development needs that might be accommodated, notably connection. For such projects, you will usually spend time considering the skills and abilities required to advance the issue. As well, consider the specific connection-related development goals of various team members.

Selecting a team should involve consideration of the impact on member growth and you should be offering feedback and coaching related to developmental outcomes as well as the business outcomes. Finally, hold people accountable for results but also hold them accountable for growth.

More generally, look for ways to make it easy and natural for people on your team to double up and do things together. Encourage shadowing or joint customer calls. Look for ways to encourage collaboration and connection.

Employees will still want promotions. But her survey suggests other factors for development are important to them and probably more plentiful. Promotions may not be yesterday but the future should offer much more than the hope, sometimes faint or far-distant, of promotions.

**Cannonballs**

- Reward differing viewpoints. When you hear one, consultant Jennifer V. Miller recommends saying, “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” and asking follow-up questions to understand their perspective.
• The simplest way to move your team from blind compliance to engagement, commitment and creativity is to always explain “why,” says Toronto-based consultant Donald Cooper. Whenever you’re assigning a project, discussing a policy or trying to improve some part of the operation, always tell them why you’re doing this.

• Venture capitalist Sarah Tavel argues “sevens kill companies.” If you rate employees or job candidates on a scale of one to 10, it’s easy to figure out what to do with the fours and the 10s, but the sevens show a glimmer of doing the job. So leaders miss the opportunity presented by replacing them – or not hiring them and instead finding a 10 for that slot.

Harvey Schachter is a Kingston, Ont.-based writer specializing in management issues. He, along with Sheelagh Whittaker, former CEO of both EDS Canada and Cancom, are the authors of When Harvey Didn’t Meet Sheelagh: Emails on Leadership.

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