

Staff Members Self-Managing Their Talent Development

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Abstract

A self-managed approach to staff members' talent development places the primary responsibility on staff members for developing their talents. However, it is essential that the organization support staff members' talent development quests through policies, practices, and most importantly from the efforts and commitment of its leaders (front-line supervisors to top management). Staff members' individualized career growth plans should drive the talent development pursuit process. Strengths management, grit, optimism, resilience, growth mindset, and elastic thinking are examples of concepts that will aid staff members in maximizing their talent development through self-managed programs.

Keywords: self-managed talent development, strengths management, career growth plan

1.0 Context

“Organizations, managers, and employees alike want a career culture where employees are in charge of their own destiny, feel in control, and seek to do meaningful work. To make that happen, it will take new, flexible, career options, future-focused thinking, and professional at all levels who are committed to their own learning” (Kaye, 2018, p. 173).

The self-managed approach to talent development in an organization clearly places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of staff members for managing their performance and careers. This approach is in concert with the trend of talent development noted by Cappelli (2008) when she states, “Virtually every organization has begun to think about shifting to more internal development of talent” (p. 131). Staff members need to take the initiative, with assistance from managers within the organization, to “get the development they need to carry out their current role and for their next and for the one after that and for all of those in the future” (Caplan, 2013. p. 55). Staff members should focus on developing observable skills that match the present-needed competencies for their job and work unit and skills linked to competencies needed for advancement in the organization (Lawler, 2017).

The self-managed approach to staff members' talent development prompts commitment from them that is beneficial to the organization because it is a self-selecting process that generally attracts staff members who are highly motivated and have top talents. This is supported by Caplan (2013) when she observes that the self-managed talent development approach “automatically attracts high performers and the ambitious, who will want to buy-in enthusiastically” (p. 55).

The organization benefits from staff members willing to put forth extra effort, make sacrifices, and invest time and energy in professional self-managed talent development. As Charan, Barton, and Carey (2018) indicate, “The organization has a vested interest in staff members' abilities to develop their talent because talent drives strategy, as opposed to strategy being dictated by talent. The wrong talent inevitably produces the wrong strategy, and fails to deliver [for the organization]” (p. 156). The organization must commit to a policy with a tangible support to aid staff members in their self-managed talent development, without negating the philosophy that *getting better* and developing talent is the responsibility of staff members.

While the aspirations of staff members drive the self-managed talent development program, the organization needs to provide “a wide range of learning, development, and assessment practices that are integrated with the organization’s capabilities” (Caplan, 2013).

Self-managed staff member talent development programs embrace the concepts that: (1) all staff members have opportunities for long-term career development in the organization; (2) the organization needs to provide “stretching” and challenging developmental work experiences for participants; and (3) the organization needs to provide self-assessment tools to aid participants in identifying strengths and weaknesses, with a focus on talents to be developed (Caplan, 2013). Self-managed talent development programs for staff members have an interlinking three-part relationship: (1) The organization assists with the tools and processes; (2) managers provide stretch and developmental work assignments, support and feedback; and (3) the individual staff members take advantage of these opportunities to develop their talents through hard work and pursuit of excellence (Caplan, 2013).

White (2017) identifies these questions for staff members to answer regarding taking the initiative for their talent development: (1) How can I become the person [in my profession] I want to be? (2) How can I develop myself? and (3) How can I set myself up for career growth? White advocates three avenues to obtain insights for talent self-development:

1. **Self-reflection**—This enables one to gain an awareness of strengths and weaknesses in comparison to state-of-the-art standards and competencies for one’s professional area. It requires honest and open “soul searching” of one’s actual performance and competencies.
2. **Input from Others**—As the Johari Window Model points out, we all have “blind spots” (insights known to others, but unknown to selves) regarding how we actually are viewed and performing (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Regarding blind spots, as Mautz (2018) observes, “Leaders [staff members included] who can come to grips with their blind spots and tune into unspoken rules are skilled indeed. Both of these things fit into the broader camp of self-awareness” (p. 1). Addressing blind spots and enhancing self-awareness necessitates open and honest feedback from others received with a non-defensive open mind. One must ask trusted friends and co-workers: “What am I really good at doing? What are things I do that might impair my future professional growth? What are my weaknesses?”
3. **Self-assessment instruments**—Data such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DISC (a behavior assessment), and LEAD (Lead Effectiveness and Adaptability Description) provide reference points for analysis of information for self-development (White, 2017, p. 65).¹

2.0 General Principles for Self-Managed Talent Development by Staff Members

Guidance from Ignatius and Bernstein’s (2018) observations regarding people who “conquer one challenge after another” (p. 2) provides good advice for staff members’ self-managed approach to talent development. These people: (1) are astute about how they set goals and pursue them; (2) specify in concrete terms *how to get things done* to achieve goals; (3) make the process of attaining goals enjoyable; (4) have a *work-life balance* so that one complements the other, and they are motivated to be successful in each; (5) know how to evaluate their professional options on-the-job and choose among them as they pursue their vision for the near term in their position and future self in other desired positions; and (6) know how to prioritize and sequence their on the job efforts instead of trying to do everything at once—and none of it well (Ignatius & Bernstein, 2018). Implied in the advice of Ignatius and Bernstein (2018) is the assumption that staff members have identified talent and career development goals and an articulated vision of what near-term advancement they desire and their long-term career aspirations.

Four aspects for successful self-development of talent by staff members regarding *learning* are: (1) desire to learn, (2) learnability, (3) learning agility, and (4) transfer of learning. *Desire to learn* is representative of staff members who have “innate curiosity about the world around them” (Henriksen, 2018, p. 132). *Desire to learn* means having an open mind that is inquisitive to finding cause-effect connections to solve problems. Interestingly, staff members indicative of *desire to learn* understand the importance of the *ability to unlearn* (Caplan, 2013). This means “letting go” of what traditionally has been done, and how to do it, in favor of identifying new job targets that improve the work process and implementing unique ways to solve problems.

Henriksen (2018) describes *learnability* as “the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt skill sets to remain relevant for the long term” (p. 139). Henriksen (2018) goes on to explain learnability by referencing the Learnability Quotient™ that assesses the following about each staff member:

Intellectual: How motivated or willing is the individual to learn or understand things better?

Adventurous: Does an individual have an intrinsic desire to explore and try new ways of doing things?

Unconventional: Is the individual willing to question the status quo?”

(pp. 144-145).

Learning agility is defined by Gay and Sims (2006) as:

“Encompassing the ability to learn very quickly and think creatively. Individuals with high learning agility also seek out the ideas and feedback of others, and work towards continuous improvement both for personal effectiveness and team effectiveness. Demonstrating high learning agility includes the ability to be flexible, handle stress well, and adapt to change. Individuals with high agility perform effectively in ambiguous situations” (pp. xvi-xvii).

Dalziel (2018) adds innovation and self-reflection to the learning agility concept (p. 132).

Dalziel notes that the inability for staff members to effectively apply learning agility can result in *derailment*. Derailment is indicative of the “know-it-all” staff member who is extremely inflexible and is ineffective in reacting to change. The self-managed staff member in pursuit of talent development must embrace learning agility and counteract derailment.

Transfer of learning refers to a staff member’s ability to take knowledge and skills acquired in one context (e.g., off-site seminars or previous on-the-job tasks) and effectively transfer and apply the learning to new tasks or unfamiliar situations. New learning is of minimal utility in the context of talent development if it cannot be put to the correct use in performing new and difficult tasks.

3.0 Concepts that Will Aid Staff Members’ Pursuit of Self-Managed Talent Development Plans

3.1 Grit²

Grit is perseverance and passion coupled with extraordinary effort. Passion includes interest, desire, enthusiasm, and devotion to talent development goals. Staff members are intrinsically enjoying what they do and feeling that pursuit of talent development is purposeful and matters flames passion. Connecting with people is often important to sustaining passion. A futuristic vision through a career growth plan and discovery of new information and experiences helps drive passion and develop new and enhanced talent (Duckworth, 2016).

Perseverance is composed of willpower, persistence, self-discipline, hope, and learned optimism. A high achievement drive, coupled with a belief in striving for continuous improvement, is indicative of staff members with perseverance. Stubbornness in the form of not giving up when obstacles occur in talent development is also important. Effort is crucial to perseverance and is an essential element of grit. Effort combined with existing talent leads to enhanced talent development.

3.2 Growth Mindset³

Examples of Dweck’s Mindset Fixed vs. Growth

| Fixed | Growth |
|---|--|
| abilities/skills are static | abilities/skills can be developed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● avoids challenges ● gives up easily ● sees effort as fruitless ● ignores useful criticism ● is threatened by others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● embraces challenges ● persists against obstacles ● sees effort as necessary ● learns from criticism ● is inspired by others’ success |

Staff members can believe that factors such as intelligence and personality are unchangeable (fixed mindset) or believe that these factors can be nurtured and developed (growth mindset) for talent enhancement (Dweck, 2016).

Both impact staff members, but the growth mindset will likely enhance their expertise and talent development (Bartz, 2016). Staff members challenging themselves to develop existing attributes and being willing to put forth the needed effort is key to maximizing the growth mindset and enhancing talent development.

To nurture the growth mindset, staff members need to focus on: (a) having purpose drive their talent development; (b) dealing head-on with deficiencies instead of hiding from them; (c) seeing setbacks as learning opportunities for future successes; (d) viewing fellow workers as collaborators and stressing the team approach; (e) nurturing a burning desire to keep learning new knowledge and skills; (f) finding inspiration from successes of others and learning from them; (g) understanding that they can change and grow through passion, effort, application, and experience; and (h) being ready to take risks, confront challenges, and keep working to get better and develop talent even when feeling distressed.

3.3 Optimism and Resilience⁴

Optimism helps staff members to utilize their human capital in pursuit of talent development by being motivated to *be their best*. Optimism prompts staff members to perform effectively, even when the talent development challenges are monumental and helps them to have the resilience needed to work through challenging situations when things are difficult, or go wrong (Seligman, 2002).

Resilience by staff members is composed of four characteristics: (1) clearly accepting the harsh realities facing them in their talent development pursuits, including failure; (2) finding meaning and learning from situations that go wrong; (3) having the uncanny ability to improvise and make do with whatever resources are at hand, as limited as they may be, to continue their talent development; and (4) having unwavering optimism (Coutu, 2010).

Facing a harsh reality means a staff member is realistic, but not pessimistic, about the difficulties and barriers that sometimes exist to accomplish important talent development goals. Such a staff member creates an optimistic and positive attitude that allows for enduring and moving forward when things go wrong and not letting a defeat have a lasting effect on motivation. It is essential for staff members to remember that optimism is motivational and breeds a “can do” attitude, whereas pessimism leads to a lost sense of control and a “cannot do” attitude.

3.4 Elastic Thinking⁵

Holistically, key elements of elastic thinking beneficial to staff members enhancing talents are:

- moving beyond conventional mindsets through flexible thinking to reframe questions asked in order to generate more ideas to solve problems and gain new insights into issues;
- displaying the ability to abandon ingrained assumptions and open themselves to new associations, relationships, and paradigms for ideas to solve problems and address ongoing issues;
- generating new ideas for problem-solving and perspectives for issues by utilizing their imagination and “free thinking” as much—or more—than the traditional step-by-step analytical thinking based on existing frames of reference;
- demonstrating the willingness to experiment, innovate, and try different approaches to problem-solving; and
- looking beyond the existing conditions and order of things to explore new ideas to solve problems and gain additional perspectives on issues for their talent development (Mlodinow, 2018; Kirkus Review, 2018).

3.5 Learning to Get Better at Tasks⁶

Hansen (2018) advocates the *learning loop* approach to performance enhancement for talent development. He identifies six highly effective tactics composing a learning loop applicable for staff members: “(1) striving to make changes in an effort to improve, (2) trying out new approaches, (3) learning from failures, (4) demonstrating curiosity, (5) not assuming she/he “knows best,” and (6) experimenting a lot with continuous talent improvement as the focus” (p. 67-68).

Hyatt (2018) advocates staff members should be willing to be innovative and open to a variety of perspectives regarding talent development, which aligns with several of Hansen’s highly effective tactics. Other basics of the learning loop approach to improving accomplishment of tasks related to talent development are: do → measures → obtain feedback → make needed modifications → redo (try again).

1. **Do:** Identify a new approach to completing the task based on well-thought-out logic and experience.
2. **Measures:** Identify and apply effective metrics to assess the effectiveness of the new approach.
3. **Obtain Feedback:** Solicit information from others involved in developing the new approach to accomplishing the task with an emphasis on causation (If it worked, why? If it did not work, why not? What needs to be changed?).
4. **Make Needed Modifications:** Make the identified needed adjustments to the approach for addressing the task.
5. **Re-do:** Implement the modified approach and complete the cycle again, at least through measures (Step 2 above).

It is not unusual for a staff member to encounter a *stall point* when striving for the optimal completion of a goal related to talent development. A *stall point* occurs when the staff member is making good progress toward goal attainment and feels satisfaction for the effort and progress, accompanied by the feeling that what has been accomplished is “good enough.” Hence, a sense of satisfaction regarding effort sets in. As John and Paisner (2018) note, “When things start to get good, we all have a tendency to get a little complacent. We lose whatever it was that pushed us to act in the first place, that feeling that we can do anything” (p. 28). The staff member must recommit to excellence, “plow through” this *stall point* and achieve the best—not just good enough—performance in completing the talent development goals at the highest possible level (Hansen, 2018).

3.6 Technology

“The Internet of things, the global proliferation of mobile devices, and the rapid decrease in the cost of these devices and related services are taking us to a place where everyone across the globe will have just-in-time access to information and learning platforms, right when they’re needed” (Neal & Sonsino, 2016, p. 292).

Micro-learning, in increments as minimal as five minutes, meshes well with some aspects of technology-driven on-the-job talent development. Microlearning means “making learning [only] as long as necessary. Cut out extraneous details and only focus on the most relevant and pertinent information” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). The heart of microlearning is understanding “how long it will take to teach [learn] the most critical parts of the concept” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). Microlearning is also facilitated through the quick “accessibility across devices, particularly mobile devices. Integrating the use of these instruments with microlearning paves the way for a more enjoyable learning environment” (Otmanboluk, 2017, p. 8).⁷

Micro-credentialing is certification of mastery by staff members of knowledge and skills acquired through a technology-based delivery system. Staff members can develop many talent areas through technology-driven micro-credentialing. The internet provides a plethora of sources for staff members to supplement on-the-job talent development. Ketter (2017) acknowledges that the speed of technology advancements has prompted those working on talent development to explore the plethora of learning options. In this context, Leaman (2017) observes that:

“Today, there are innovative new platforms that have been purpose-built to deliver bottom-line business results by leveraging brain science techniques, adaptive and personalized microlearning, and gamification that only take a few minutes per day to drive real behavioral change in employees” (cited in Ketter, 2017, p.66).

3.7 Mentors, Performance Career Coaches, and Networking

3.7.1. Mentors.

“Mentoring aims include: building confidence through support, feedback and advise how to develop; serving as role models; helping the mentee [staff member] to learn to navigate organizational politics” (Caplan, 2013, p. 117).

The self-managed talent development staff member can profit from a mentor within the organization because such an individual has a holistic, contextual understanding of the organization’s culture. As a learning process, mentoring has the huge advantage of being one-to-one (Caplan, 2012, p. 103). The mentor has expertise and knowledge specifically relevant to the organization to pass on to the staff member, especially in the realm of internal politics and other factors likely unknown to the mentee. The staff member also has the potential for the mentor to *sponsor* her/him for career advancement positions. Requisites of an effective mentor-mentee arrangement are: trust, positive relationship, accessibility, confidentiality, and a bonded interest in the pursuit of talent development for the staff member.

3.7.2 Performance Career Coaches. A performance career coach (individual external to the organization) is another avenue of insights for staff members regarding talent development. A performance career coach can make the following contributions to staff members: (1) explore their career aspirations, (2) provide growth-oriented perspective and identify new opportunities for such, (3) help them to focus on developing and releasing all of their potential, (4) identify more challenging experiences in present job situations, (5) help them to develop “emotional and social maturity,” (6) aid them in the use of networking to assist in problem solving, (7) help them to become solution-oriented and to establish authentic commitment for future actions, (8) ask probing questions while being a *careful listener*, and (9) help them to minimize their complaining and focus on what they can control in making positive change (Caplan, 2013; Bartz, 2016).

Trust, a positive relationship, and accessibility are keys to effective results for the staff member working with a performance career coach. Cost is the downside to utilizing a performance career coach and, thus, may prohibit a staff member from using this source. Performance career coaches may be more cost-effective when used on a limited basis such as bi-annually or for a more intense short time (e.g., several months). Caplan (2013) refers to this intense short-term experience as “just-in-time coaching” (p. 105).

3.7.3. Networking. To succeed in any work environment, staff members need to forge strong and productive connections with other employees and groups. This is not about “having fun” at work and socializing online, but fitting in better, gaining new and broad-based perspectives, creating access to knowledge and other relevant resources, accelerating, producing timely and high-quality results (and taking productivity to the next level) (Hagerman, Christiansen & Stein, 2016, p. 54). Professional associations are excellent sources for networking, either in person or online. Formal and informal digitally-based platforms can also be beneficial for gaining talent development and career advancement insights. Regarding social networking tools, Caplan (2013) advises self-managed talent development staff members to “take advantage of these new technologies to disseminate capabilities, value, and culture. The possibilities are endless and will change the nature of learning, as well as career development” (p. 116).

4.0 Staff Members Assessing Their Talents through the Clifton Strengths Management Approach

Bickham (2016) notes the importance of “focusing on developing strengths . . . instead of trying to fix innate weaknesses” in the context of participants in talent development programs (p. viii). The strengths management philosophy is a natural fit with the self-managed talent development approach. Regarding strengths management, Rath (2007, p. 20) notes that:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| X | + | = | Talent (a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving) |
| | | | Investment (time spent practicing, developing your skills, and building your knowledge base) |
| | | | <hr style="border: 1px solid black;"/> |
| | | | Strength (the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance). |

As Drucker (1966) observes, “The effective executive [manager] makes strengths productive. He knows one cannot build on weaknesses” (p. 71). The general well-being and feelings of gratification for staff members are enhanced by meaningfully pursuing and engaging their strengths in the work environment (Seligman, 2002).

It is important for staff members to distinguish between their patterns of behavior and predispositions (preferences) and what constitutes their authentic strengths. Patterns of behavior represent what staff members have previously done, which may not be their strengths. Strengths are those activities in which they exhibit “consistent, near-perfect performance” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 21).⁸

4.1 The Clifton Strengths Management Self-Assessment (StrengthsFinder 2.0).⁹

StrengthsFinder 2.0 by the Gallup Organization is beneficial for staff members in identifying their talents and can serve as a basis for strengths usage and development. The main application of StrengthsFinder 2.0 is in the work domain, but it has also been applied to other environments. The self-assessment of 177 items is delivered online and usually takes about 30-60 minutes to complete.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 provides specific information on five signature themes referenced to four domains: (1) executing, (2) influencing, (3) relationship building, and (4) strategic thinking. A theme is defined as “recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior” (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007, p. 4). Including the five signature themes identified by the StrengthsFinder 2.0, there are 29 other themes of lesser intensity for a given staff member’s StrengthsFinder 2.0 results. In totality, there are 34 themes that represent the raw talent of a staff member which serve as a basis for intrapersonal strengths development. The 34 possible themes anchored to the four domains are:

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Executing: | achiever, consistency, focus, arranger, deliberative, responsibility, belief, discipline, and restorative |
| 2. Influencing: | activator, competition, significance, command, maximizer, “woo” factor, communication, and self-assurance |
| 3. Relationship Building: | adaptability, empathy, individualization, developer, harmony, positivity, connectedness, include, and relator |
| 4. Strategic Thinking: | analytical, ideation, learner, context, input, strategic, futuristic, and intellection |

Each theme has a narrative description. For example, staff members who are exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive (Asplund et al., 2007). The number of items measuring themes is from 4-14, with reliability coefficients ranging from .50 to .76. (Theoretically, the range can be from .00 to 1.0, with the higher range being more desirable.) The five signature themes listed for a staff member through the StrengthsFinder 2.0 identify talent areas that can be further developed as strengths to enhance productivity. These themes also inform the staff member on probable strengths which he/she can utilize on the job. Such signature themes are identified based on the intensity (i.e., high to low rates) of a staff member’s responses.

Gallup makes video and print information for each of the 34 themes available for staff members utilizing the StrengthsFinder 2.0. Gallup also has other development support services available, such as coaching. These services are fee-based (Asplund et al., 2007). Rath’s (2007) *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book is an excellent supplemental source for managers to use in understanding how to apply the information from the instrument’s results.

A limitation of StrengthsFinder 2.0 is that it is a *self-assessment*. If used in a talent development program, it should be accompanied by a 360-degree assessment process. Because it is a self-assessment, it does have the built-in advantage of being perceived by the staff member as a credible information source.

5.0 Individualized Career Growth Plan

The purpose of the individualized career growth plan is to prompt the staff member to plan talent development experiences over time strategically (Kaye, 2018, p. 175). A vision of what the staff member wants to achieve career-wise in the near-term and long-term, drive this plan. The output of the StrengthsFinder 2.0 needs to serve as input for developing the career growth plan. This plan specifies what talents to pursue through goals, experiences needed to fulfill the goals, resources that will facilitate achieving goals, and a timeline.

For each goal, specific action steps are identified. The individualized career growth plan also outlines in broad terms future positions desired within a time frame. It is important that this plan is reevaluated annually. Most crucial is that the staff members keep their “eyes on the prize”—goal attainment and movement toward advancement.

6.0 Closing Thoughts

All staff members in an organization should have an equal opportunity to pursue a talent development program with organizational support. The staff member self-managed talent development program approach allows for an equal opportunity approach and is cost-effective to the organization. Using the Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 self-assessment serves staff members effectively in identifying their talent strengths. An individualized career growth plan which is updated annually establishes goals with implementation activities to guide the staff member’s pursuit of talent development. A mentor within the organization and a performance career coach external to the organization, are options likely to accentuate a staff member’s talent development. Lastly, Caplan (2013) notes that organizations need to “give everyone the opportunity, at least annually, of long-term career development planning that aligns their aspirations with the business strategy” (p. 128).

7.0 Footnotes

¹ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018) Components for talent development of staff members. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 6(1), 1-9.

² Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2017, September). Applying positive psychology to school administrators. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 4(8), 1-13.

³ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. & Rice, P. (2017). Managers using positive psychology to maximize productivity and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(8), 1-7.

⁴ Based in part on Bartz, D., Thompson, K., & Rice, P. (2017). Managers helping themselves “be their best.” *International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration*, 20(1), 1-8.

⁵ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018, May). How “elastic thinking” can stretch superintendents’ minds for enhanced problem solving. *Leadership Matters*, 20-23.

⁶ Based in part on Bartz, D.E., Karnes, C., & Bartz, D.T. (2018). Leaders accomplishing results. *International Journal of Education and Human Developments*, 4(2), 1-8.

⁷ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018). On-the-job talent development programs. *International Journal of Education and Human Developments*, 4(5), 1-5.

⁸ Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2017). Managers effectively applying strengths management and emotional intelligence. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(7), 1-5.

⁹ Based in part on Bartz, D. & Bartz, D.T. (2017). Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management for managers. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 5(1), 1-10.

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