

# Career advancement through leadership

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Talent retention requires investment in the careers of key players. Special efforts are made to develop critical staff while all employees are supported in managing their own careers. A balance is struck between top-down initiatives and self-managed career efforts. This talent management strategy is not working because employees are not as fully engaged as they should be. They too strongly expect management to promote them. Career self-management must be re-framed as a search for leadership opportunities – employees striving to discover new ways of contributing to the business that generate career opportunities for themselves as a side benefit.

## **The problem: a dependency mindset**

Even the most empowered employees feel it is up to management to tap them on the shoulders and offer them a new position. Career frustration is as much due to a felt powerlessness to influence their career progress as the actual lack of advancement itself. Because they see management as holding all the strings, frustration leads the more vocal to complain while the rest simmer in silent resentment. Possible outcomes include demotivation, negative attitudes, lowered productivity, passive resistance to change and premature departure for greener pastures. Saddled with a dependency mindset, employees expect management to do all the work of figuring out where to place them. Both sides focus on existing slots, most of which tend to be filled at any given point in time. *The key problem is that employees make the mistake of focusing on their own needs – what the organisation can do for them rather than the other way round.* Turning this on its head, employees need to discover or create new roles for themselves by finding new ways of adding value to the business. They need to become leaders, in effect, not pawns on a chessboard.

## **Re-framing self-managed careers as a search for leadership opportunities**

Employees should view themselves as self-employed business people providing services to internal customers. Colleagues are potential strategic partners. The key point of this re-framing is the realisation that no business in its right mind would hope to succeed by *complaining* to customers for not buying their services! For career success, employees must focus on their customers' needs, not their own. The latter will take care of themselves when they help their customers succeed. Those most effective in managing their careers seek opportunities to show leadership. They work closely with the business and internal customers, aiming to discover new ways of adding value. They then champion the changes for the benefit of the business in the first instance and, secondly, to generate career opportunities for themselves. The wrong approach is simply to ask managers if they have a job opening. This is a closed question that makes the manager do all the work. Employees need to do the hard work of probing and networking to find out what prospective customers are trying to achieve and thinking creatively about how they can add value to the customer's efforts, thereby selling themselves and perhaps generating a new role they might fill. It's not a matter of either complaining or boasting but of jointly creating new services that customers really want to buy.

Management's role is to foster bottom-up leadership rather than be gatekeepers for a pool of existing slots. Otherwise, managers are seen as blockers rather than as

enablers. Hence the frustration and disengagement brought about by an overly paternalistic culture – the flipside of dependency.

### **Searching for leadership opportunities**

Organisations are full of leadership opportunities that may not be visible unless someone digs them out. The process requires employees to ask the right questions to foster creative brainstorming. It is not a matter of having an idea in advance to propose but rather of initiating a business dialogue with prospective internal customers that has the potential to generate new insights and opportunities. The right questions, asked supportively, can help managers step back and see what they are doing with a fresh perspective. Knowing what questions to ask and how to frame them is critical. Employees need to learn how to influence upwards in a manner that does not come across as an attack. They also need to cultivate a stronger external focus to learn more about the needs of end customers and how competitors are meeting those needs. In short, they need to learn to think like leaders. But upwards leadership requires a special set of skills and attitudes that need to be developed.

### **Benefits for the organisation**

- More proactive, fully engaged, employees thinking laterally about how to contribute more by focusing on the business first, their own needs second.
- Employees with more positive attitudes gained through a feeling of control, rather than simply waiting for management to do something for them.
- Greater cross-functional team work as employees seek to work more closely with key players rather than see them as competitors or obstacles.
- Better relationships with employees when they see managers as customers rather than as gatekeepers and overseers.
- More leadership shown by employees instead of passive dependency.

### **One Day Workshop – Career Advancement Through Leadership**

A one-day programme to turn employees into proactive business people and leaders taking ownership for their own careers. Options include tailoring, follow up group support, one to one coaching and briefings for managers of participants.

The programme is a mixture of interactive exercises, discussions, presentations and coaching in small groups to facilitate fast development and accommodate a variety of learning styles. Topics covered include networking, probing to better understand customer needs, forming strategic alliances, using market knowledge, how to sell oneself by helping others, how to lead upwards with active listening skills and emotional intelligence. The focus is not on career management as an extracurricular activity or diversion but as a smarter way of working, re-framing how employees see themselves and motivating them to be proactive, business focused leaders.

### **Target participants**

- High fliers – those you most want to retain.
- Stalled middle managers who could contribute more if they made the effort.
- Solid performers who are not developing because they are not thinking creatively about how to develop new services of interest to the organisation.
- Demotivated employees with potential but who are disengaged.