

Paths to improvement: Giving leaders options to achieve success

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April 2011

Most effective talent management strategies utilize individual development plans. Offering just one or two types of plans, however, is simply not sufficient. Implementing a multiple-plan approach, and understanding the distinctions between each option, will assist HR leaders and coaches in matching plans to organization and employee needs.

A nimble organization needs an approach to talent management that can be fluid and responsive. In a recent study, researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,500 CEOs in sixty countries and thirty-three industries. An analysis of short- and long-term operating margins reveals that the top-performing companies were those whose leaders embraced continuous creativity, reinvention, and dexterity (IBM Global CEO Study 2010).

That level of organizational agility requires that employees be able to better themselves. Offering a sophisticated individual improvement process is one of the most effective ways to accomplish that.

Most individual improvement plans, however, are poorly crafted, are unlikely to be executed, and produce unsustainable results. Part of the problem is that plans tend to focus on one of two themes: fixing weaknesses or augmenting strengths. Used in isolation, these approaches often are insufficient.

A “fix-it” development plan is rarely the most effective or efficient route to improvement. Discovering and curtailing weaknesses can work, but focusing exclusively on one’s shortcomings can be challenging and discouraging (Eichinger et al. 2011).

On the other hand, a plan that concentrates solely on strengths does not necessarily round out leaders in all the areas that their posts demand. Research has found that leaders’ success is jeopardized by derailers, or significant shortcomings. And, while an attribute may be a personal strength, it may not rise to the level of being competitive with peers (Eichinger, Dai, and Tang 2009).

If developing weaknesses and building on strengths are insufficient to grow a competitive and adaptive talent pool, what other routes are available? Fortunately, there are a substantial number of improvement plans that enable leaders to change and grow. Aware of the array of options, leaders have many more avenues to get better results at work.

Not all improvement plans are created equal

What other paths are available to performance change? Which are best in light of changing organizational initiatives?

The answers to these questions rest in understanding that not all improvement plans are created equal. Some naturally take longer to implement. Others require the assistance of a coach. Some require strong personal drive to reach success.

Figure 1 The paths to improvement

Deeper exploration

Get a more accurate and complete picture of one's own strengths and weaknesses.

Insight — Increase self-awareness.

Exposure — Try out an untested skill.

Direct skill building

Develop weak, average, or good skill areas to improve effectiveness.

Development — Work on a weakness.

Enhancement — Move a mission-critical skill from average to strong.

Good to extraordinary — Move a strength to outstanding.

Rerailment — Get performance back on track after a stumble.

Alternative paths

Use other skills or resources to accomplish a task.

Substitution — Use a stronger skill to get the same thing done.

Workaround — Use another person or process to accomplish the task.

Compensation — Temper overused strengths with other skills.

Demonstrating skill

Make existing skills apparent to others or oneself.

Marketing — Let others know about a key strength.

Skill transfer — Take what is working in an outside context and transfer it inside.

Confidence building — Build self-esteem.

Accepting the consequences

Choose not to work on a skill deficit.

Redeployment — Find a better match.

Capitulation — Keep things the way they are.

In a recent survey by Korn/Ferry International, executive coaches were asked about their experiences working with one system, called Paths to Improvement. These plans, identified and briefly defined by focus area in Figure 1, are the result of many decades of coaching experiences with thousands of executives (Eichinger et al. 2011). Korn/Ferry researchers sent a survey to approximately 300 internal and external executive coaches. Forty-nine responded to queries, including:

- > How frequently did they use each plan?
- > How difficult was each to implement?
- > How long did it take to see results?

The coaches reported that the plans differ in how difficult and time-consuming they are to use (see Figures 2 and 3). For example, coaches reported that the work-on-a-weakness Development Plan was one of the most challenging and involving to implement. Maybe this finding seems a bit contradictory, as one would think that the most popular plan would not be among the most difficult.

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On the other hand, the Workaround Plan—using another person or process to accomplish the task—was seen as much less difficult and time-consuming for coaches and learners. Perhaps this finding is a bit less surprising, as generally it requires less effort and resources to accomplish something using a skill at which one is already proficient.

Figure 2
Difficulty to implement

Each plan requires a different amount of coaching support and effort from the learner. Of the fourteen plans the coaches were asked about, these were the most and least difficult, in order.

Most difficult	Least difficult
Rerailment	Capitulation
Development	Workaround
Compensation	Marketing

Figure 3
Time to implement

Similarly, plans demand different time commitment. Here are the plans that the coaches said took the most time, and those that could be completed most quickly, in order.

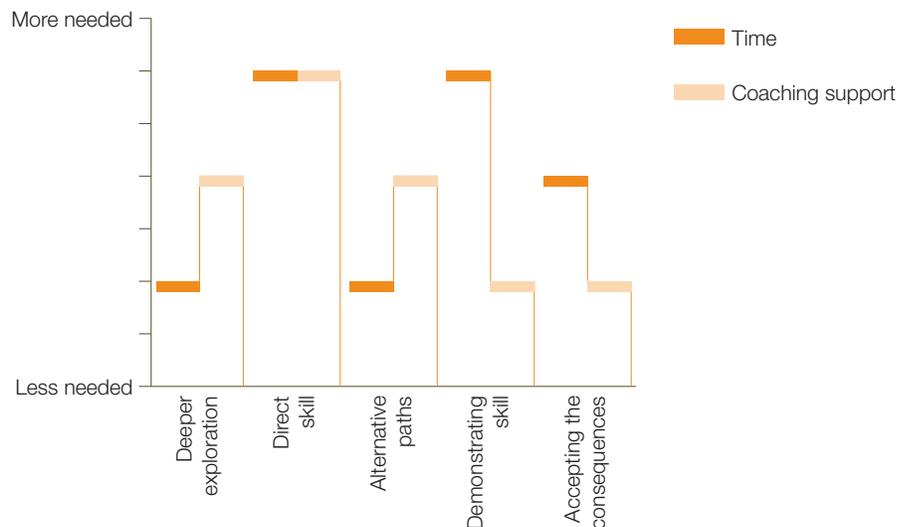
Most time-consuming	Least time-consuming
Rerailment	Capitulation
Confidence Building	Workaround
Development	Exposure

Matching a plan to a specific need

Of the lessons learned these coaches made note of, the most prominent was that improvement success depends on applying the most appropriate plan to the unique set of personal and environmental demands. The time commitment or coaching support needed can make some plans more suitable when resources or time is limited. These factors also can have an impact on the likelihood of success (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Considerations for the plan types

Improvement plans vary in the amount of time required for implementation, and the level of coaching support needed. With multiple plans in use, executive coaches can select one to suit the individual's need and personality—and the company's budget.



HR departments can take advantage of these characteristic patterns to address specific dilemmas.

Situation 1: Untested skills

A manufacturing company, opening a plant in a new region, promoted some plant managers from front-line positions in older plants and hired others from outside. This pool of new leaders, plunged into new circumstances, did not have a good grasp on how their skill strengths or deficiencies aligned with role demands. Perhaps they had not had substantial feedback. Or, maybe their peers viewed them as unskilled in an area critical to the role.

Objective: Fast exploration of abilities in new areas.

Leaders in this type of situation need to quickly and deeply explore their untested skills and blind spots with only a moderate amount of coaching support. Providing them with opportunities for assessment or skill testing can increase self-awareness and guide learners to other improvement plans.

Situation 2: Weak bench

Approaching retirement in five to ten years, the executive team of a consulting firm was eager to build a succession plan and identify the next generation of company leaders. Assessments, however, revealed that the current managers either suffered critical skill gaps or had recent career stumbles that prevented them from easily climbing to the next level.

Objective: Prepare the next generation of executives.

In order to be ready to lead the firm, emerging leaders need to focus on direct skill building, supported by an investment in coaching. Of less concern is a speedy fix.

Situation 3: Need for rapid progress

A financial services company with a long history of strong sales was struggling to launch a new portfolio offering. The problem? Not design, but execution. The division manager didn't have the process management skills needed for the final stages of rollout.

Objective: Find an alternative, indirect strategy for faster results.

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Rather than focus directly on developing a weakness, these leaders need to find alternative approaches or effective work-arounds so they are able to stay more focused in their roles.

Situation 4: Constrained resources

A small technology firm was crafting a career development process, but its flat organizational structure and low tolerance for high-risk learning assignments made it difficult to grow its young professionals. This firm needed options that required little investment from the company.

Objective: Bring existing skills to light.

Individuals in this kind of situation could apply skills they already possess but haven't used in their current role or department. Or, they could explore skills they are less confident in. Helping these professionals exhibit skills in new ways can assist a company in understanding, expanding, and diversifying its capabilities.

Situation 5: Blocked success

A family-owned company had been acquired by a large investment firm. The new board of directors was eager to shift the relaxed corporate culture to a high-performance, high-reward environment. Yet, the HR executive, a longtime employee, was resistant. Maybe he or she was choosing to ignore failure signals or had decided that the rewards of the role were not worth the challenges.

Objective: Support free choice.

Sometimes a modified role is just not a good fit. Rather than try other improvement plan options, leaders can move on to other jobs or face the consequences, which could include demotion or termination.

Organizational benefits of a Paths to Improvement culture

Talent management initiatives operate with two intentions: to benefit individual employees and their careers, and to positively impact company performance. Offering multiple improvement paths presents several long-term benefits that serve to satisfy both of these intentions.

Synchronize human resources investments with employee goals. Arriving at a successful outcome is more likely when there are many approaches.

Choosing a specific path for an individual clarifies the improvement goal and fosters stronger accountability for results. These benefits mitigate common frustrations with the improvement process, such as lack of follow-through by managers and deficient resources (Dai, De Meuse, and Peterson 2010; Dragoni et al. 2009; Smither, London, and Reilly 2005).

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Capitalize on organizational needs. Many of the “lesser known” plans take advantage of the ways that corporations, especially larger ones, are storehouses of learning experiences. Task forces, cross-moves, turnaround challenges, international positions, and staff-to-line switches are all examples of opportunities that work easily with the multiple paths to improvement approach (Parry and Sinha 2005; McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison 1988).

Drive employee engagement. By empowering managers and leaders to tailor an improvement plan to meet their needs and interests, organizations can win their long-term commitment. Historically, career planning and personal development are widely recognized as two of the strongest drivers

Wisdom from veteran executive coaches

More than half of the coaches responding to the survey had more than ten years of experience in a wide variety of sizes of firms and with leaders from different levels. They reported that the majority of their coaching engagements lasted between six months and one year. Not surprisingly, they had plenty of comments about lessons learned. Here's a snapshot of their comments:

“The variety of options available to coaches is often a relief—learners typically assume that the only option will be the Developmental Plan.”

“Watch out for the old baggage the people (and some coaches) carry about the only kind of plan is the pure developmental plan that we were all taught—and in fact many still teach solely.”

“Big ‘ah-ha’s’ when the learners learn there is more than one kind of plan...that opens them up to be more active and positive about working at it—especially when they work the tools and realize it’s not as hard as they thought.”

“Success really depends on many factors (coachee readiness, openness, capacity, etc.) and is difficult to compare as these plans are not created equal.”

“There is not a one-size-fits-all. Every improvement plan needs to be tailored to fit the coachee, the organization, and the coach.”

of employee engagement, or the discretionary effort applied by individuals toward company success (Ruyle, Eichinger, and De Meuse 2009; Kaiser and Kaplan 2006).

Support enterprise agility. Talent management practices often strain to keep up with organizational change—caught between bureaucratic procedures and technological systems, global movements in workforces, and shifts in corporate strategies. A toolkit of multiple paths to improvement can serve to keep the talent pool fresh and adaptable and the talent strategy responsive (De Meuse, Dai, and Hallenbeck 2010; Joiner 2009).

From one path to many paths in your organization

A “cafeteria” improvement system promises to be more responsive to diverse organizational and situational demands. Making such a shift, however, can present considerable challenges, given that most performance improvement plans are embedded within a complex talent management system with many interlocking components.

Organizations that have relied solely on the more traditional plan types (such as developing weaknesses or leveraging strengths) tend to have more rigid communication methods, policies, budgets, and systems to support those plans. Their culture may not embrace the regular feedback and accountability required by these other plans. Leaders may emphasize goals associated with developmental outcomes rather than goals related to learning. And there may be low levels of trust and transparency between

managers and subordinates.

Changing these elements is no easy task.

HR’s first move does not need to be a global change effort. Simple steps can be taken to gently shift

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Simple steps can be taken to gently shift the organizational culture in a way that encourages a broader implementation of multiple plans.

1. Change the name of the individual development plan. The first shifts in the organization’s culture can be as simple as replacing the symbols representing the old practices. For example, calling individual development plans “individual learning plans” or “improvement plans” can cue more responsiveness and creativity in pursuing different options (DeRue and Wellman 2009).

2. Build links between each plan and the resources that support it.

HR can draw connecting points between the new plan types and existing opportunities (Crotts and Ford 2008). For example, develop-in-place assignments can be identified to satisfy an individual's need, such as trying out an untested skill or building self-confidence.

3. Provide opportunities to grow more self-aware. The same performance blind spots that could derail a career also can serve as the fire under the crucible of improvement. Regular feedback is a cornerstone of all improvement plans. Personal coaching, as well as assessments that solicit ratings from peers, supervisors, direct reports, and clients, can be effective in identifying and removing blocks in self-awareness (Dai, De Meuse, and Peterson 2010; Eichinger, Dai, and Tang 2009). Self-awareness also can come through simple and cost-effective means, such as supervisors having an open door for performance-related conversations.

4. Communicate the options.

Effective implementation relies on coaches, performance managers, and learners each understanding the overlapping and distinctive characteristics of the plans (Hamlin, Ellinger, and Beattie 2006). Success also is driven by awareness of the availability of unique opportunities to fulfill the various plans (DeRue and Wellman 2009). Sometimes the multiple plans already are being used in an informal way, but not in a systematic way that takes full advantage.

5. Win top-down support. Buy-in from even one or two executives can go a long way when promoting a new HR process. Are there any leaders willing to showcase the benefits they drew from one of the less conventional plans? More experienced users also can suggest lessons learned and best practices for implementation.

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Conclusion

Organizations are complex, and their global context even more so. A company could face many or all of the situations discussed above at any one time. Further complicating things, people are intricate beings. They have different personalities, dispositions, intentions, and appetites for change.

Given those complexities, the simple development plan is not sufficient. The improvement process offered to leaders should be comprehensive, customizable, and flexible. Such an approach can be implemented effectively over time with a small investment of HR effort.

Without a doubt, organizations have much to gain. The personal and supportive nature of a multi-pronged approach reinforces the bond between company and employee—the proverbial “psychological contract”—strengthening leaders’ engagement and their dedication to company performance. An advanced improvement process also helps create a culture of growth and learning, which is the only way to sustain the adaptability of talent organizations need to remain competitive.

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