



Maximising performance with development

Here we continue our series of workshops about the employee talent lifecycle. The first workshop focused on building the business case for talent management, while the second looked at how to use assessment to select the best people. In this third and final workshop **Ali Gill** of Getfeedback explores the final piece of the talent lifecycle jigsaw – employee development and engagement



Organisations need to develop leaders and managers who will make a real difference to the business. There is strong evidence to suggest that those who have learned to operate at a higher level are more likely to:

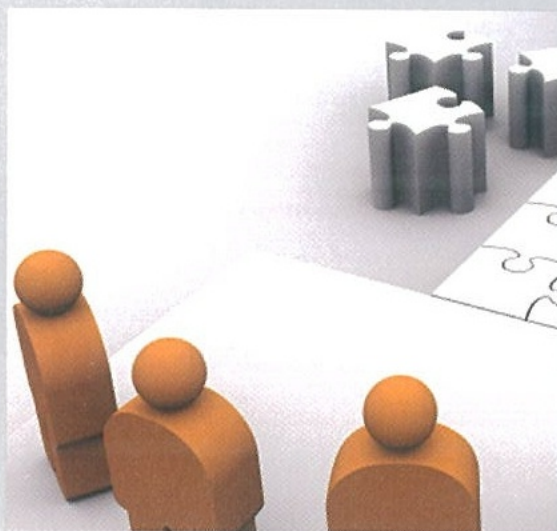
- win and keep customers in competitive markets;
- find new ways to save the organisation money;
- seize opportunities that will help the business grow;
- make sound decisions about how the business responds to external pressures;
- improve the way the business operates internally;
- help make the business a place where talented people want to be.

Getfeedback's experience suggests highly talented individuals need development programmes that are a cut above the rest. They need advanced

level interventions that will challenge and stretch them in all directions – behavioural, intellectual, commercial and emotional. The most effective development programmes also use a variety of delivery channels.

Conventional workshops have their place, but they are not always the right or best vehicle for learning. Carefully structured interventions such as role modelling, coaching and storytelling – to name just a few – are an excellent way to help people make significant shifts in the way they approach problems, formulate strategy and deal with the people around them.

Later in this workshop we will describe five innovative approaches to top talent development that have used successfully with talent pools in leading organisations. But before organisations get down to the detail of exactly how they deliver development, they need to set the scene.



You know you want to take your skills to a higher plane – but you need to be mentally ready if you are to get the best out of any development experience

Creating the right environment

People need to be 'ready' before real development can happen. By 'ready', we mean they need to feel energised, inspired and engaged with the organisation they are working for. Preparing to run a marathon is a good illustration of this point. Imagine you have decided to run the London Marathon next year. You know it is something you definitely want to do – but you might not have thought about what it really means in practice.

Explore the idea with someone who has been there, and it soon becomes clear that a few Sunday morning jogs will not be enough. A significant amount of training will be required. You will have to run every day. You will have to gradually build up to longer and longer distances. It will take up a significant amount of your time.

Still want to do it? Great.

Now that you have explored the issues and are in the right frame of mind, you are ready to get your running shoes on and start training. It is much the same with personal development. You know you want to take your skills to a higher plane – but you need to be mentally ready if you are to get the best out of any development experience.

Inspiring interventions

Role modelling is a good way to get people development-ready. We have successfully used a programme called Inspiring Interventions with clients such as O2. This entails inviting people who have achieved extraordinary things in their lives to come in and talk to small groups of top talent.

Paralympian Marc Woods, who took up swimming after losing a leg through cancer and went on to win four gold medals, is one example. We have also used adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes and economist and futurist Patrick Dixon.

These inspirational people come and share their story with high-flying individuals within the business. The intimate, small-group setting means delegates can get a real insight into the

speaker and what has driven them to the highest levels of achievement. They can ask the kind of questions they would not get the chance to pose in the large motivational-style conferences where these individuals are more typically found. This kind of approach is effective in helping people to broaden their horizons and encourages them to think more creatively about the challenges they personally are facing. It encourages and inspires them to be the best they can be – and wonder about the things they might be able to do.

A day in the sun

Of course, it is not just those in the public spotlight who can act as inspiring role models. Senior executives from the business can also spur talented individuals on to achieve new heights. One programme we have used places people from the talent pool in front of some of the most influential executives in their own organisation. They are given the opportunity to present their live business issues to these senior people and to discuss how they are planning to tackle them – their day in the sun. The senior executives are briefed to listen, explore the questions and ideas, and provide constructive but challenging feedback that moves the individual on and helps them see things from a different angle. To make sure this feedback leads to real development, senior executives should be coached beforehand in the arts of real listening and asking insightful questions.

What makes this process particularly dynamic is the fact that individuals take their issues round the room – so that by the end of the day, they have had sessions with four or maybe five top executives from different disciplines. Each time they present their case, they include the learning they have brought from the previous session. This means that as the day progresses, their thinking and solutions become better and clearer.

The advantages of this kind of approach to development are twofold. Individuals from the talent pool meet

people they would not normally have the chance to meet, giving them the opportunity to learn from people at the very top of their profession.

The senior executives themselves have the chance to role-model the type of behaviours they want to see coming up through the business – and of course the opportunity to have a real influence on the people who have been ear-marked as leaders of the future.

Time to think

The title of this third development programme refers to something managers have precious little of in today's fast-paced environment. We are talking about time to think – meaning, time to step back from everyday working life and give some careful consideration to business challenges and the ways you approach them.

Today, people often have much less management input from above. There simply is not anyone there who can help them add a different perspective. That is partly why coaching has become so popular. It gives hard-pressed managers an opportunity to take time out, step back and discuss their issues with a neutral third party. An executive role can be a lonely place, and managers often appreciate the opportunity to meet regularly with someone who has no particular agenda, and will pose them exploratory questions to help them think through things and come to their own conclusion.

There are people who need time to mull things over – and who often think while they are talking. People who are trying to move things forward find it frustrating to be faced with someone who is still thinking their ideas through.

Carefully structured coaching can help to overcome this problem, by giving the individual the space they need to explore their ideas fully beforehand. Critical to making this approach work is:

- a mindset that the individual is the best person to solve their own problems;

- the ability to share stories as examples of options. People typically present advice as a solution. Another person's solution might not fit but if the advisers share appropriate stories of their experience, the example often sparks more profound thinking around the solution;
- being comfortable with silence. Sometimes, silence in the presence of another, is comforting. It gives the receiver time to think;
- a contract of confidentiality.

Coaching triads

Coaching triads involves people working in groups of three to coach each other. The process focuses around short, sharp 20-30 minute sessions, where one person coaches another on a business issue – and is then coached by the third person on how they performed the coaching itself.

It is a dynamic process that helps to overturn the idea that coaching can only be successful when done within the confines of a long-term relationship, or can only be delivered by people external to the organisation. It helps people find



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Development must have a focus on behavioural change. How we interact with others and get the best from ourselves and the people that work for us is at the core of great leadership

fast, creative solutions to their business issues – and builds their coaching skill-set. Equally importantly, it increases understanding and respect for the practice of coaching throughout the organisation.

Creating the future

It is not just individuals who can make significant leaps forward through coaching. Whole teams or departments can benefit from development programmes designed to bring about behavioural change.

When it comes to developing new strategy, organisations often turn to external consultants to devise a way forward. In reality, internal executives are usually more than capable of analysing the situation and deciding what needs to be done themselves. What they are not so good at is bringing their individual thinking together and coming up with a strategy that has been created through collective thinking.

We have used Creating the Future, a series of five workshops that helps talented individuals understand how they can best reach consensus and exploit the diversity of thinking within a team. Participants drawn from the organisation's talent pool are brought together and charged with creating a strategy to tackle real live issues. The emphasis of the approach is on using thinking behaviour and maximising the interaction skills required for people to identify issues, explore causes and create powerful solutions together.

- In the first workshop, delegates
 - discuss corporate and personal issues, learn about effective strategic thinking behaviours and identify and research some of the key internal and external challenges they will need to tackle.
- In workshop two, they discuss their new findings, pushing each other to broaden their understanding and thinking about the situation.
- The third session focuses the participants on solutions. The emphasis is on combining their

thinking and driving the group's ability to build ideas into comprehensive strategic solutions.

- The emphasis moves to action planning in workshop four, where there is also an opportunity to have an in-depth discussion about values and the way they influence our thinking.
- The fifth and final workshop is about making it happen – identifying the milestones and measures of success, discussing roles and responsibilities and planning how the new strategy will be communicated.

There is an emphasis throughout on every participant airing their views, ideas and concerns. The result is that the team uses the breadth and diversity of thinking within it to create a strategy that everyone has bought into. The beauty of the process is that people are learning while they are actually solving a real problem. The business gets a strategy to take it forward – while at the same time individuals have made significant strides forward in their ability to create the right type of environment for teams to think effectively together.

To create an effective talent programme requires a three-pronged attack:

- accurate assessment helps self-awareness and ensures improvement can be monitored;
- inspiration and engagement interventions help to open people's minds, inspire a little and create the right mindset for development to occur;
- development must have a focus on behavioural change.

Behaviour is learnable – how we interact with others and get the best from ourselves and the people that work for us is at the core of great leadership. Development that enhances these skills enhances the people, strategic, inspirational and performance leadership makes organisations – and the people within them – excel. ■