

## TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT

Employees, managers, and companies need to share ownership of career development.

In a recovering economy, as organizations work to recapture market share and preserve their customer base while economizing and streamlining operations, enabling employees to learn in a flexible, cost-effective manner is often hugely appealing.

Workforce research has proven that the opportunity to continually enhance professional skills is a major factor in employees' overall job performance and satisfaction. High performers, especially, have been shown to learn the most from on-the-job experiences and coaching, dually supported by the right formal education and training programs.

At J.H. Cohn, we encourage our employees to learn in a variety of ways and in the manner that works best for them. To facilitate this, we host a comprehensive Learning and Development program that delivers comprehensive educational opportunities to help them advance their skill set and broaden their knowledge base in a number of areas. Since establishing this formal program, we've identified a series of "words to live by" that help managers and other supervisors motivate and develop their staff:

- **Help employees find their interest.** People learn best when they're motivated, and a large part of that motivation is the degree of natural interest someone has in a particular area. To help illustrate this point, at J.H. Cohn we frequently



ask employees to identify their most rewarding learning experience and describe what made it so memorable. In discussing these experiences, it becomes clear that the learning experiences people remember most are those in which they have a personal interest.

Early on, we encourage employees to seek a number of different types of engagements to help them find the practice area or industry in which they have a genuine interest; we have found that this results in higher motivation, faster learning, and improved performance. In addition, during their first year at the Firm, employee learning plans include core skills in each major practice to not only help make them more well-rounded, but to expose them to what may be an untapped proficiency. Lastly, the Firm's mentoring program exposes young professionals to different views, types of work, and areas of opportunity.

- **Clearly define required skills.** In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat wisely tells Alice, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there." As with virtually every other aspect of business, creating a clear roadmap to results is a critical success factor. Employee development is no exception. To help employees define where they're going and how, we've developed specific "competencies" or skills needed to perform various roles, each of which is documented in job descriptions and in J.H. Cohn's online HR performance management system. These competencies provide supervisors and employees with a uniform standard for development, one that is also flexible and can be changed quickly in response to today's dynamic business environment.
- **Provide for self assessment.** Involving employees in processes that affect them increases motivation and performance and provides the organization with valuable information on how to

better manage performance and results. At J.H. Cohn, self-assessment is the first step in our performance management process. This assessment includes a comparison of employee skills to defined competencies. Combined with feedback on the same skills from supervisors, this assessment provides employees with a well-rounded snapshot of where they are skill-wise at any point in time and provides a basis for setting new goals. Areas of personal interest—both new and ongoing—are routinely discussed as part of the employee's career growth plan.

- **Encourage goal-setting in terms of desired skills and business results.**

In an organizational setting, both the company and its employees have goals which they pursue. When employees' goals are aligned with those of the organization, performance and job satisfaction increase. Within an organizational setting, one approach for encouraging alignment between company and employee goals is to ask people to include the phrase "so that" in their goal statements to help define what they believe the benefit of accomplishing their goals is to the business and to their own development. For example, an employee's goal might read: "Increase my ability to perform public company audits *so that* that the Firm can improve market share in this area."

The success of this approach depends on employees having accurate information on organizational goals and strategy. At J.H. Cohn, we provide this information in a number of ways, including Firm-wide communication; a robust intranet with timely, relevant information; quarterly town hall meetings; and regular "state-of-the-Firm" sessions which include a discussion of the Firm's global objectives and strategy. In addition, we encourage frequent group discussions and one-on-one meetings between the employee and their engagement supervisor to discuss department and Firm developments.

- **Prioritize on-the-job development.**

A Center for Creative Leadership study, supported by other research and tools from leadership development authorities, found that the biggest factor in developing high performers was the quality of the job experiences they had, supported by feedback and formal training when needed.

Among the ways to put this concept into action is to identify "stretch" assignments for employees that enable them to grow while performing their jobs. Action learning is another frequently used technique which combines job assignments, feedback, and formal training in a single activity. In one type of action learning program that we use, employees work in teams to analyze an actual Firm issue and create recommendations to present to senior management. Through their team experience and the feedback they receive on their recommendations, participants gain skill in areas such as strategic thinking and team performance while contributing meaningfully to a solution.

- **Emphasize learning as a continuous pursuit.**

Given today's rate of change, it's clear that to remain current, and grow, people need to make a lasting commitment to learning throughout their lives and careers. Within the Firm, we've found that those employees who view learning as a career-long pursuit develop faster. Within the HR field, this valuable quality is referred to as "learning agility." Individuals with a high degree of learning agility actively try to learn things quickly from experience as well as feedback, and importantly, are willing to continually try new things. We communicate this concept in "passage" programs such as campus hire orientation and our courses for new managers. We also include continuous learning as a specific skill in every skills competency list. Including this skill ensures that there is ongoing goal-setting and feedback throughout the Firm on this ability.

## Managers (Together With HR), the Job is Yours

At its core, employee skill development is a two-way street that requires ongoing attention and dialogue among the organization's managers and their employees. At the outset, however, HR management must ensure that there is a consistent message and a clear mandate: employee development is important and every supervisor must play a part.

In the process of creating or strengthening your employee development program, keep the following in mind:

- Supporting development is an ongoing commitment.
- The organization needs to provide direction and tools.
- Structure and flexibility must be balanced.
- Establishing an effective program takes time.

The relationship between competent, fulfilled employees and satisfied customers cannot be overstated—over the years, studies have shown time and again there is a direct correlation between employee satisfaction, excellent service, and customer satisfaction. By embedding these tips and techniques throughout your employee development programs, you are helping to facilitate a team of satisfied, highly-skilled employees, and by extension, increasing your company's chance for overall business success. ■

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