Are You Overlooking Talent?

Written by Steve Marr
Tuesday, 03 October 2006 10:00

In today's ever-tightening labor market, businesses are struggling to hire and keep key managers. Often, companies will recruit outside talent, paying expensive agency fees in the process, while overlooking current staff members who could have been groomed, developed and promoted. In a highly competitive economy, businesses cannot afford not to develop and utilize every employee to his or her maximum potential.

Despite all their talk about empowerment, most companies fail to offer employees a clearly defined process for effective career development. Employees need to see how they can grow with the company and be promoted to greater responsibility, but by and large it isn't happening. A common complaint is one I heard recently from a staff member of a large organization: "Senior management talks a lot about employee involvement, but they never follow through. They spend time talking to each other, but never ask others for ideas. When I offer ideas, nobody gets back to me, even if the idea is used."

Many company managers do a poor job of germinating ideas that come from other staff members, and they are also weak in identifying promising assistants who are capable of moving higher in the organization. The reasons for these oversights fall into three main categories: busyness, stubbornness, and selfishness.

1. Busyness. Many managers insist that their own workloads leave very little time to mentor, coach, and interact closely with their subordinates.
2. Stubbornness. Despite all the books and seminars on the "upside down organization" and bosses as cheerleaders and coaches, many managers are still unwilling to share power with others.

3. Selfishness. Many managers would rather "hang on to" qualified staff members, rather than see them "promoted out of my department."

Unfortunately, all of these reasons why managers fail develop to develop their subordinates are shortsighted and eventually backfire. Frustrated employees lose energy and morale, and either leave for greener pastures or simply become less productive. In the end, everyone loses#managers, employees, and businesses.

Effective Staff Development

Like any important change in a business, effective staff development begins with a heartfelt commitment by senior management. Without such a commitment, status quo will likely prevail. But once key managers are committed to the goal, implementation is as simple as establishing a straightforward process. Ask your employees to identify how and where they could and would like to contribute more to the organization. Create a means by which individuals can identify special talents and interests that apply either in their current department, or elsewhere in the company. Work one by one with each subordinate and write a plan to utilize their ideas, skills, and interests to advance both the individual and the organization.

Taking a long-term perspective is essential to the success of any employee development effort, because it will take time and persistence to make it work. Regardless of time pressures and competing priorities, a commitment must be made to interact with ambitious subordinates to understand their hopes, dreams and aspirations. One of my colleagues, an excellent staff member named Tom, shared with me once that he would like to manage a branch office, and was open to any location. Shortly thereafter, a branch manager's position became available in a remote location. Tom was offered the job and eagerly accepted. Without our interaction, however, I never would have known that he was interested.

Include a "staff development" component in your management review process, and reward your managers for their efforts in developing individuals for promotion. Don't overlook employees who transfer to other departments to pursue more suitable employment. In other words, don't fail to reward managers who help their subordinates identify interests outside the department.

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Identifying Candidates for Promotion

Ask your managers to prepare a list of candidates for promotion and establish an action plan for staff development. Too often, employees express an interest in being considered for promotion, and managers agree to assist them, but then nothing happens. When management follow-through is weak, employees become demoralized and eventually give up or seek other employment.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). Wise managers understand that talents and interests vary among employees, and they look for ways to match up individual gifts with the needs of specific positions within the organization.

Don't miss the diamond in the rough. Require your managers to evaluate the readiness for advancement of all of their subordinates. Create an interactive process whereby the manager's judgment is balanced by feedback from your employees about their interests, hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Investing in staff development will pay rich dividends. Remember, "he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Preparing Employees for Advancement

Keep in mind that not everyone who applies for advancement is suitable or qualified. To avoid mistakes, test the water by increasing a worker's responsibility incrementally. If possible, start by revising the employee's job description to include 5-10% new or more advanced responsibilities. If difficulties crop up, you can more easily make adjustments at this level before

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everything gets out of hand.

Gradual training and development has the added benefit of maintaining expectations at a reasonable level until the employee has had an opportunity to demonstrate his or her ability to handle the increased responsibility. Raising the prospect of promotion and then having to quickly backtrack can kill employee morale faster than taking no action at all.

Despite the potential problems attendant with promoting from within, the benefits far outweigh the risks. Knowing that the company is committed to employee development and advancement can raise morale across the board, even among employees who do not take advantage of the program. Furthermore, "home grown" managers have a deeper knowledge of and commitment to your organization than any outsider you might bring in. Don't overlook the people closest to you when seeking to fill management and supervisory positions. Promoting from within is truly a win/win situation.

Steve Marr, your christian business coach

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