

# It's All About the Manager

How do corporations maximize the return on their training investment so they have the talent to successfully compete in the marketplace? Much of the answer lies with the manager/direct report relationship. **BY ROSS TARTELL, PH.D.**



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**B**usiness spends billions of dollars on training—more than \$55 billion in 2012 alone, according to *Training* magazine's 2012 Industry Report. But does this enormous investment produce the desired results? Many would say no, a perception buttressed by the fact that 80 percent of training content is not applied to the job.

Yet corporations continue to increase their investment in training because they need employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to a volatile work environment, and organizations must ensure they have the talent available for future success. Corporations face daunting challenges in the labor market: The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that in the 21st century, 60 percent of all new jobs will require skills possessed by only 20 percent of the workforce.

So the multibillion-dollar training question is: How do corporations maximize the return on their training investment so they have the talent to successfully compete in the marketplace?

Much of the answer lies with the manager/direct report relationship.

## THE BOSS FACTOR

The impact of a person's direct supervisor is tremendous. Just think about the truth in this opening welcome heard in a training session for new supervisors: "Congratulations, you are now the topic of dinner conversation for those who report to you." Yes, even at home around the dinner table, "the boss" has a great deal of influence.

The employee engagement literature backs this up. When employees have high levels of engagement, companies do well. And among the top drivers of retention and engagement are a good relationship with the supervisor and an understanding of potential career opportunities in the organization.

But the definition of satisfaction is personal; one size does not fit all. In their book, "The Engagement Equation: Leadership Strategies for an Inspired Workforce," Christopher Rice, Fraser Marlow, and Mary Ann Masarech point out that in today's workplace, engagement occurs when the manager can simultaneously enable employees to maximize their satisfaction and their performance. Similarly,

Cathleen Benko and Molly Anderson in their book, "The Corporate Lattice: Achieving High Performance in the Changing World of Work," suggest that "engagement is in the eye of the beholder." They demonstrate that the workplace needs to be customized to fit the needs of the individual.

While each individual is responsible for his or her career, the supervisor's effectiveness at developing people makes a big difference.

The Corporate Executive Board (CEB) found that direct supervisors who are effective at developing people can increase employee:

- Performance by up to 25 percent
- Engagement by up to 29 percent
- Retention by up to 40 percent

Based on the CEB research, 75 percent of managers recognize that effectively developing their direct reports is essential to boosting the engagement and performance of their teams. Furthermore, managers spend 20 percent of their time on employee development, a significant investment of time and resources.

All of that sounds good, right? But it turns out that less than half of managers are actually good at developing people—a tremendous waste of time and resources.

## WHAT SHOULD MANAGERS DO?

People in organizations develop competence through a combination of three methodologies:

- Informal, on-the-job, experience-based projects and practice
- Coaching, mentoring, and developing through others
- Formal learning interventions and structured courses

Regardless of the methodology, most managers are ineffective at developing their direct reports. The CEB identified three sets of day-to-day, on-the-job interactions that can effectively support development and performance:

**1. Leverage work to accelerate development.** Much of what is necessary to succeed on the job is learned by doing the work. This on-the-job training is enhanced through a planning effort that answers the questions: What are the knowledge and skills required for success? What are the appropriate

on-the-job activities that will build those competencies? One of the highest-impact activities identified by the CEB was simply to ensure that projects provide learning—this could improve individual performance by almost 20 percent.

**2. Articulate the personal development value.** This is where it gets personal. The manager's insight is critical in understanding his or her direct report, so the manager can link the importance of the job activity to the direct report's career aspirations and skill/knowledge gaps. This enables the manager to choose the activity that works best for that individual. The CEB identified two additional activities that each can increase individual performance significantly:

- Explain performance evaluation standards
- Provide developmental experiences

Without an understanding of the learner, high-impact experiences cannot be chosen or linked to an individual's career aspirations.

**3. Unlock the development gained from the learning activity.** This requires three steps:

- Diagnose and discuss the person's performance as he or she tries out what he or she has learned. Thoughtful diagnosis provides the foundation that enables feedback and coaching

on how to use the new skills.

- Discuss how to use and apply the training so the focus on job success is clear.
- Provide feedback coupled with support to enable the learner to try out new behavior. Feedback is one of the most important post-training managerial responsibilities, and it often is overlooked. As leadership guru Ken Blanchard has noted, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions."

#### WHAT CAN THE L&D DEPARTMENT DO?

Clearly, the Training department must do more than deliver a great training program. It plays a critical role in creating the context for the training and engaging the manager in the appropriate behaviors to support training implementation.

The Training function can provide the information and support materials the manager needs to understand the relevance of the training. This support can enable the manager to have a pre-training discussion, so the trainee knows why he or she is attending the program and how it can improve performance. In addition, the trainer can create a rhythm to the training that can help maintain the momentum and increase the training's application and impact. **t**



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