

Career support is an engagement driver, a driver that most organizations fail to fully leverage. Those organizations that do define career paths and provide career support often focus on the generalist path. Few provide sufficient definition, branding, and support for the technical career path. But it's your pool of technical specialists that provides the talent most likely to drive innovation in your organization. It's important to support the careers of technical talent, in particular, high potential specialists.

- **Build depth in the discipline.** Unlike generalists who typically have a variety of roles in their careers, experts normally stay within a narrowly defined discipline and career track. They may take one or two short assignments outside of their function over the course of their career, but this is relatively rare for deep experts.

The roles of deep experts are narrower and the positions are also stickier. Experts move between roles less frequently than do generalists. Even those who are on a fast track for advancement will stay in their roles for longer time periods as a specialist. The high potential generalist may be moving to a new position every two or three years, often making a lateral move. High potential specialists may stay in a position for four or five years. The reason for this has less to do with the length of learning curves than it has to do with availability of roles within a function. But specialists still need to be aggressively developed in jobs just as generalists do.

To accomplish this, it pays to get creative and introduce a variety of developmental stretch assignments for deep experts. Look for short-term special projects that place experts outside of their comfort zone. You may be able to "lend" them to key clients to work on projects that stretch the expert, directly benefit your customer and, provide your firm with long-term benefit. You may periodically create pilot projects to explore applications of applicable technology to new markets.

- **Develop teaching/coaching skills.** Stretch your technical experts by pushing them into coaching and teaching roles. These roles can be formal or informal, but the important thing is to get them accustomed to sharing, to talking about the specifics of what they do. There's an old saying that you never really know something until you've taught it to someone else.

Expertise, to a large extent, is transparent to the expert, and experts find it difficult to share their tacit heuristics. Sure, they may be able to talk about the general technology or discipline, the stuff typically found in related textbooks. But they will struggle to articulate their heuristics, rules-of-thumb, and tricks of the trade. Yet this is a primary way to grow and multiply organizational expertise.

Experts often benefit from having a coach, especially a coach to help enhance their self-awareness and emotional intelligence, but don't neglect the opportunity to cast them in the role of a coach. If you assign high potential specialists to coach emerging talent, you will reap multiple benefits. Young, energetic high potentials want to learn about how the organization works, how careers are built, elements of the business strategy, customer insights, and so on. They do need to learn these things, but they also need to learn about the technology and expertise that drive the organization's value proposition and fuel innovation.

Young high potentials will push your experts to think more deeply about organizational issues, develop perspective, and enhance emotional intelligence. Experts will push the young high

potentials to learn technical aspects of the business. The coaching relationship benefits both parties.

- **Develop perspective.** Experts are focused on their discipline and stick to a narrow career path. Nothing wrong with that as long as they don't develop tunnel vision to a point that they're unaware of business challenges, the competitive landscape, customer segments, and business fundamentals. They don't need to jump to a different career track to gain perspective.

You can ensure that your experts occasionally visit customers and serve on cross-functional project teams tasked with tackling organizational issues. This will give them opportunity to learn how the business works and develop relationships outside of their discipline. Ensure your experts are not insulated or isolated from the broader organization. Make sure they have opportunity to develop a degree of perspective that will enhance their deep expertise.

- **Leverage external development opportunities.** Encourage your experts to participate in professional activities outside of the organization. Support them in those activities. Experts will find it stimulating and engaging to participate in professional societies and conferences. You want them to be more than passive attendees, though, and it's OK to push them outside of their comfort zone. Encourage them to make presentations, submit journal articles, lead panel discussions, and serve in leadership roles. Remember that development occurs outside of our comfort zone, and you'll want your experts to become skillful in articulating what they know. Proprietary expertise, of course, is off limits, but that still left lots of latitude for technical specialists to make professional contributions. You'll find an added benefit is that experts often return from those experiences inspired and anxious to try something new that will spark innovation inside your organization.
- **Enhance self-awareness.** The first step to development is awareness. Without self-awareness we won't be motivated to pursue development. We need awareness of our weaknesses, awareness of our preferences, and awareness of how others perceive us. We need to have our blind spots illuminated. Self-awareness is a critical component of emotional intelligence, which enables us to build effective relationships. It is critical for your experts.

Becoming self-aware can be a painful process, and especially so for your deep experts. They are successful. They have confidence. They may be arrogant. Figuratively speaking, we need to hold up a mirror for them to gain insight and grow in self-awareness. Consider 360 assessments and coaches to provide feedback. Develop coaching skills in all your managers so they learn to provide constructive feedback while minimizing the sense of threat that generates defensiveness.

- **Focus development on emotional intelligence.** The ability to manage emotions and build relationships is a strong predictor of success. And the lack of EQ is an even stronger predictor of derailment. When your experts disappoint you, it's almost always because of relationship problems. They may find it difficult to relate to others. They may be unable to coach effectively. Worse, they may be obstinate, arrogant, uncooperative, defensive, tactless, ... and the list goes on. These problems are due to a lack of EQ skills.

The greatest gift you can provide your experts is help with developing emotional intelligence. They probably don't need much help developing their technical skills and expertise. They're capable and

self-motivated learners when it concerns their area of expertise. But when it comes to relationships, it's a different story. Provide EQ development for all your employees, but especially with your specialists.

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