

EXECUTIVEINSIGHTS

Leaders can build on their skills, gain useful experience and make the most out of their jobs by taking on extra challenges



Learning on the job

PEOPLE LEARN MOST at work when they are presented with new challenges or opportunities, and leaders are no exception to the rule.

Situations such as taking on a new division or overseeing an acquisition provide invaluable experience and are therefore guaranteed to offer a great chance for learning and personal development.

But we do not have to wait for a new job or a promotion to find opportunities to extend ourselves. That is because everyone should be able to identify many ways to acquire new skills and gain useful experience in the context of their current jobs.

The key is to look for developmental assignments. These are roles and activities which provide the chance to stretch oneself and, in doing so, to become a better leader.

They do not automatically entail a major job shift or a move to a different company.

Provided you adopt a practical strategy geared towards consistent self-improvement, you should have no trouble finding extra opportunities to learn. To get started, you can consider the following options:

Take on temporary assignments Look beyond your job description or outside the department for different projects. There may be task forces to join, one-time events to organise, or short-term activities for which you can volunteer.

Reshape what you do Explore whether you can assume new responsibilities or reshape your current job on a permanent or temporary basis. This demonstrates commitment, interest and willingness to take on more – all traits that are generally appreciated. See if it is possible to exchange certain responsibilities with a colleague or take charge of a project that is not being run by

WEEK 10 | Developmental assignments

anyone. At the same time, re-examine your responsibilities and make sure that each of them is receiving sufficient attention.

Seek challenges outside the workplace There are many lessons to learn about leadership from personal experiences and challenges encountered outside the formal scope of your job. They can come through contacts with non-profit, religious, social or professional organisations, as well as from getting involved in school events, sports teams or even arranging family get-togethers.

Whatever you choose, it is important to have a plan in mind and to be clear about what you hope to learn. Otherwise any efforts towards self-development will lack direction and risk becoming haphazard and less than effective.

To have a personal development plan that works, start by addressing your own strengths and weaknesses. Take the initiative and prepare well by following these steps:

1) Think it through and write it down At the outset, it is important to define what you need to learn to build on strengths and eliminate or compensate for certain weaknesses. Take about 30 minutes to think things through. The aim is to recognise what you need to do better in your job and what is needed to cope with future assignments and bigger opportunities. Write these initial thoughts down, and refer back to them periodically.

2) Consider the opportunities Once it is clearer what you need to improve and learn, consider

which route to take. There are likely to be several options, and each of them should be weighed up carefully. List all the possibilities which may be temporary or longer term, in the workplace or outside, in order to have a structured approach.

3) Set priorities Armed with the relevant information, review the options and decide on your priorities. In the short term, there might be an opportunity to attend an international sales conference in Singapore, for example, or to edit the company newsletter while a co-worker is on maternity leave. Take advantage of such openings, while remembering to have other goals that require longer-term application. The priority will be to choose the assignment which has the most value. For example, if you know it is crucial to learn about managing change, choose an assignment that requires solving a specific problem or establishing a new policy.

4) Check again and get going After deciding which project to take on, ask yourself a few final questions. These are to clarify how you will measure progress, where you can find assistance if necessary, and what problems you should realistically anticipate. Then you just have to take the first step. Planning is important but, ultimately, learning how to become a better leader depends on taking action.

To get the most out of a personal development plan, it is essential to look beyond the obvious. Never limit yourself to the easy options of the first ideas that come to mind. Instead, delve deeper and make use of the

following guidelines:

Ask around Do not simply consider your own ideas. Talk to co-workers, employees and friends. Discuss your plan with them to get suggestions and different perspectives. Even if you do not agree with all the comments, take note of them. Some may not fit your short-term needs, but could be worth revisiting in the months or years ahead.

Get the boss involved Narrow down the list of potential assignments and discuss them with your boss. This is a good way of assessing which are the most practical and offer the best potential for learning. Some may have the additional benefit of helping the team or organisation in ways you had not foreseen. The boss may expect to know what is going on anyway, and could be instrumental in getting the assignment set up.

Plan thoroughly Some parts of your plan may fall into place quickly, while others will take more time and may require waiting for the right moment. Lay the groundwork so that you can take each opportunity as it arises.

To keep growing personally and professionally in a career, we need to keep seeking out new experiences which foster learning.

A new job usually forces us to develop new skills, but with a proactive approach to development, it is also possible to learn continuously in our current job.

It is largely a matter of taking the initiative, looking out for opportunities, and being prepared to accept the assignments which come along.

Contributed by Cynthia McCauley, a faculty member of the Center for Creative Leadership, an educational institution dedicated to leadership training and research worldwide

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO ADVANCE IN YOUR CAREER

Doing the best thing for your career isn't always easy. However, the following questions and answers may help you overcome some of the more common obstacles:

We are all overloaded at work. How can I make time to focus on learning and try new things? Facing real-life challenges is the way to learn, so regard your heavy workload as a chance to practise new skills and grow as a leader. Accept the challenge of trying to improve the processes in your team or department to reduce the workload or deal with it more efficiently. Look at things you can delegate, eliminate or integrate, so that the system functions better. You might even

explore how to develop a new mindset to meet existing deadlines and handle day-to-day pressures more decisively.

I've been doing the same job for years. Where do I start to make a change? If your job is static and repetitive, look for new experiences by taking on temporary assignments. This might be while a colleague is away or by volunteering to help with the annual dinner. Alternatively, acquire new skills outside the workplace by teaching a course, working on a political campaign or coaching a sports team. Choose something that ties into your overriding goals.

How can I work on developmental

assignments when my boss is not supportive? Having a boss who is involved and supportive is a great help, but it is not essential. If you cannot get the opportunities you want, look for responsibilities at work that no one owns, or find a mentor in another part of the organisation to help out with practical advice.

How do I overcome anxiety about taking on a new challenge at work? Most people worry about trying new things, so start by doing a few tasks which can be considered low risk. When those go well, you will have the confidence to move on. Remember that the key to learning is having the courage to try something new.

HRTRENDS

Taking the risk out of business

To prevent catastrophes at work, HR personnel should have a structured approach and plan ahead

Edith Cormier

MANY OF US REGARD the word "risk" as negative, especially when used in the context of finance.

But Steve Tunstall, the managing consultant for Asia Risk, believes this is a narrow view of the word.

Mr Tunstall defined the word "risk" as "the chance of something happening that will impact objectives".

The good news is that risk is "not all downside". Mr Tunstall said human resources (HR) professionals and managers should be aware of the opportunities that risk provides, such as those associated with strategic business changes.

He said it was vital for management in organisations to recognise risks.

In assessing risk, he recommended a structured approach.

Understanding the consequences of not addressing the issues was an important component in the process. A systematic approach to risk management required understanding important influences in the organisation, in addition to business environment factors.

Mr Tunstall said HR professionals should provide clear examples to senior managers of the risks they had identified, including financial impacts to the company. The costs of ignoring such risks were unlimited.

When faced with multiple risks, Mr Tunstall encouraged HR professionals to make a "register" of the big issues and prioritise them with clear actions.

He said the most prevalent risk HR practitioners had to address was how to keep their key people. In assessing employee turnover, it was important for HR to consider turnover in their industry. Mr Tunstall said it was much cheaper to utilise initiatives that retained key talent than it was to retrain new employees.

Useful strategies to reduce this risk included implementing work-life balance, family days, job sharing and flexitime. Some may appreciate childcare vouchers to help offset childcare costs.

Mr Tunstall said company orientation programmes were a vital tool, especially when it came to hiring people with skills that were in high demand in the labour market.

Whatever the action plan, it was important for managers to demonstrate commitment to initiatives to ensure effectiveness. "Most importantly, don't commit to things you are not going to deliver," Mr Tunstall said.

When organisations fail to address retention issues, the results can be devastating. If people leaving an organisation are angry or bitter about their experience, this puts the business at increased risk of theft or industrial espionage. Word gets out when organisations do not treat people well, putting the company's reputation at risk.

Unfortunately, when Hong Kong employees are unhappy, they are most likely to resign. Employees do not want to upset their bosses, so they don't say anything when problems crop up.

Mr Tunstall said he was concerned that because of cultural influences, there was a higher risk that bosses might not find out about problems in their organisations until it was too late – in some cases when the company was declared bankrupt.

DEMISTIFYING RISK

- What are the key issues?
- What are you doing at the moment to manage the risk?
- How big is the risk?
- What are you going to do in addition to current activities to manage the risk?
- Who is going to manage these activities and when will they be implemented?
- Communicate these actions openly to address risk with employees

"When things go wrong in business there is usually someone who knew it would happen but did not have a way to get this information to the right people," Mr Tunstall said.

To prevent such a catastrophic result, Mr Tunstall said that key decision-makers should draw out the issues that normally did not come forward. Through facilitated processes, these difficult discussions could be used to identify risk early. When necessary, he suggested getting a second opinion. Quick fixes cost the business and direct the focus away from profit generation.

All managers, including HR managers, must communicate more openly with their staff about changes to their organisations. Mr Tunstall said managers should not "sugar coat" tough management decisions.

It was essential to be honest with employees. In absence of the truth, the rumour mill runs rampant with fictitious interpretations of current business realities.



Asia Risk managing consultant Steve Tunstall says family days help. Photo: Edward Wong

QUICKFIXES

Q

How often should I do performance appraisals and what is the best way to conduct them?

A The purpose of conducting a performance appraisal is to ascertain employees' expectations of their job duties and responsibilities, as well as to assess their performance based on agreed-upon objectives and pre-defined targets. It gives employees the opportunity to highlight the employee's strengths and weaknesses and the chance to identify areas for improvement.

Many organisations appraise their employees on a biannual or even a yearly basis. However, the gap between annual reviews is too long. The optimal frequency for such reviews is three to six months. If there is too long a gap between the appraisals, you give your staff the impression that you do not take them seriously and hence are not committed to them.

Furthermore, if appraisals are limited to once a year, your employees may lose sight of what is expected of them.

Appraisals should be taken seriously and should not be postponed due to the demands of a hectic schedule. If they are to be seen as an invaluable tool, then both the manager and employee must be committed to them.

Formal appraisals should take place in a private environment where all parties involved feel comfortable. Since confidential

information is being discussed regarding financial targets and objectives, a casual chat over coffee is not appropriate.

To get the best out of an appraisal, it is essential that targets are quantifiable and the time frame is realistic. The key is to set specific key performance indicators (KPIs) and to follow up on the previous appraisal. Issues that were identified in the last appraisal should be reviewed and measured against. The employer should adopt a consultative and open approach so that the employee is encouraged to freely express his or her views.

Supervisors must document the appraisal and file a final copy signed by all parties with the human resources department.

Appraisals are not the only way for the employee and manager to communicate. While the appraisal will take into account the employee's career and development needs, salary expectations and promotion prospects, regular weekly or monthly catch-ups are vital to address informal and daily issues.

Article contributed by Aruna Alimchandani on behalf of Hudson, which delivers specialised professional recruiting, outsourcing and human resource solutions worldwide