

This article first appeared as a "Business Tool Kit" article for the "InBusiness" section of The Rio Rancho Observer in April 2006.

Developing Talent on the Job

By Dr. John Drozdal

Business Tool Kit, April 2006

Training programs and coaching/mentoring experiences can be effective in developing management talent. However, a tool that many organizations overlook is the use of stretch assignments on the job to develop critical competencies in high potential managers. There are five types of these assignments:

The first is a cross-functional move in which the high potential employee works outside of his or her area of functional expertise. This type of assignment helps an individual understand that no one functional area alone adds value to the business's good or service. The Japanese are masters of this approach. In fact, when an entry level professional joins an organization, that person rotates through multiple areas BEFORE joining his or her own functional area.

The second kind of developmental assignment is to start up a new office, department, or product line. In this case the professional learns how to create and implement a business plan from scratch. The ability to build something from nothing is a competency that many organizations value dearly.

The "fix-it" assignment forces the manager to learn how to deal with conflict, hold difficult conversations that come with addressing

performance issues, and make difficult decisions. It also requires the individual to learn how to transform a struggling business into a successful one.

Closely related to the "fix-it" is the "shut down" assignment. In this case the company has made the decision to close a plant or to eliminate a product. While this can be a very difficult assignment, it helps the manager develop the emotional intelligence that comes from having to find devoted employees other jobs in the organization, or worse yet, telling them that their positions no longer exist.

The last kind of an assignment is the opportunity to work internationally. For businesses that have an international presence, giving a high potential the opportunity to work in another country for a period of time provides that person with a chance to learn what it takes to build and run a business in a foreign country. It challenges that person's assumptions and confronts him or her with valuable cross-cultural realities.

Developing the talent in your organization requires well thought out training and mentoring/coaching programs. However, don't overlook the value of stretch assignments on the job as a way to hone critical competencies in your high potential managers. ■

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