

7 July 2005

In the Middle of Development

Welcoming new employee generations without apprehension

It's time organizations prepare for a dramatic change in the workforce composition. Over the next decade, millions of baby-boomers are slated to retire. Besides combating the highest retirement rates ever, what poses a greater challenge is the entry of millions of new employees. The huge workforce swing is bound to create wide gaps in corporate knowledge and leadership. Complicating matters further are middle managers willing to jump ship during economic downturns.

The need to focus

Organizations must focus on their middle management now because these managers will soon move into senior leadership positions, filling vacancies created by retiring baby-boomers. Organizations can address the changes in leadership requirements provided they understand the new workforce dynamics.

A role defined

Learning professionals play a key role in addressing these emerging leadership requirements. In the absence of adequate training and development, organizations may fail to plug the knowledge and leadership gaps created by the impending workforce changeover. An effective way of catering to evolving leadership requirements is to design training and development initiatives around five key areas:

- The learning environment
- Corporate communication
- A trust culture
- Evaluating growth and leadership
- Improving retention

The learning environment

Two training insufficiencies render continuous leadership development in most organizations ineffective. One is the lopsided focus on 'soft' learning, such as mentoring, communities of practice (COP), distance learning, training software and course design. While there is no denying the importance of these areas, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which they impact workforce performance. As a result, learning organizations find it increasingly difficult to justify training budgets.

Two, most organizations continue to treat training as a *'single instance of instruction with no residual impact'*. As a result, employees attend courses, earn certificates and forget about the training! The learning content finds a place on some shelf until the next course gets underway.



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The solution

An effective way to correct these insufficiencies is to invest in technologies that:

- Capture, organize and disseminate information
- Focus on information related to how business is done at the processing level
- Links an employee's activities to the skills and knowledge required to process related tasks efficiently

Process-centric learning provides a context for every activity. Documenting and organizing organization-wide knowledge/information on all its processes takes the guesswork out of how the business operates.

Each employee is clear about his or her role in the process and how his or her performance impacts the process and others involved. The more the employee understands the context and impact of his or her role, the better his or her understanding of the business as a whole. Such an employee evolves into a better leader. However, organizations restrict middle management involvement to their specific business areas. Creating a learning environment where process-centric information is delivered right down to middle managers fulfills most leadership development requirements.

Corporate communication

Effective communication is not merely about sharing best practices and disseminating relevant information to support decision-making. It is also about sharing strategic, operational and tactical information amongst different management levels to create a better understanding of the organization.

While most organizations remain 'guarded' about strategic information, learning professionals believe that sharing such information with middle managers gears them to become better decision makers, or, in other words, leaders. Breaking down this guard involves:

- Collecting detailed knowledge on how the organization operates
- Documenting and organizing the information in a way that it can be accessed and shared easily, allowing managers to actually use the information

Organizations that understand the importance of information sharing invest in web-interfaces, content management technology or business process management technology.

Cultivating trust

Improvements in learning initiatives and information dissemination help build trust. However, organizations can do much more to build a trust culture.

Senior managers hesitate to involve middle managers while formulating strategic plans. As a result, middle managers are not closely associated with the organisation's strategic goals. They also lack the context around which they can perform their tasks and manage their teams. A culture of trust requires organizations to ensure:

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- Organization-wide dissemination of corporate strategies
- Participation of middle managers in strategic planning, irrespective of their areas of operation
- Middle managers tweak business processes if it supports the strategy
- Middle managers make suggestions or recommendations (on improving processes) and motivating them by implementing the best ideas

Evaluating growth and leadership

Leadership assessment tests, 360-degree reviews or annual performance reviews - most organizations resort to these popular tests to monitor employee growth and performance. However, these tests, as important as they are, may not provide a comprehensive assessment of whether a middle manager has understood how the business operates and is capable of execution. Worse still, most view annual reviews as an administrative burden rather than an opportunity to identify future leaders.

Another reason for the unfavorable response to such reviews is that often someone they have not worked with for a full year evaluates the middle managers.

Some effective ways to identify and sift future leaders from the ranks of middle management are:

- Conduct continuous evaluations
- Use technology to identify implicit leadership traits such as thinking out of the box or a person who is willing to take calculated risks to achieve goals

Improving retention

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers in managerial positions serve an average tenure of five years. Those in the bracket of 25 to 34 years have a median tenure of only 2.9 years. According to a survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management and the Wall Street Journal's website, common reasons for a job search are '*ready for new experience*' and '*dissatisfaction with career development opportunities*'.

To improve retention, especially amongst middle managers, organizations must satisfy the innate human needs to learn and grow.

Investing in middle management development is the best way to bid goodbye to baby boomers and welcome new employee generations without apprehensions.