

Final Project
Professional Development Proposal

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Introduction

The information age has brought with it a pace that is near hard to keep up with. From changing technologies to changing colleagues, the workplace environment presents a significant challenge for career-minded professionals. Because of this challenge “it’s more important than ever ... to continue learning” (Hughes, L., 2004, p. 26.). Adopting this career necessity has the potential to keep an employee competitive and add value to the organization. Through a professional development process, the organization can support each employee by encouraging and facilitating necessary lifelong learning.

Opportunities for professional development vary from soft-skills, such as leadership, coaching, and time management to technical/craft skills such as software and engineering. At the core of professional development, regardless of the opportunity, is the goal to improve and expand one’s skill (Cano, J., 2006). Knowing the need for and goal of professional development, organizations have a responsibility to support employees by promoting opportunities for continued learning (Dall’Alba, G., & Sandberg, J., 2006; Suttell, R., 2005). Identifying the right opportunities requires a means of evaluating the organization. Through this evaluation, the current state can be identified, revealing the gap to the desired state.

Methodology

Company A desires to promote and support professional development; therefore, an initiative to identify opportunities was implemented. Through customer evaluations and employee monitoring, senior leadership identified a need to help middle management improve their professional development skills. The precise opportunities for improvement were not clear from the customer evaluations and employee monitoring, so a custom survey instrument was created.

Survey Instrument

A concise paper-based survey instrument was created to gather data about the present state of skill proficiency and also each participant's individual professional development goals. Eight topic areas that represent holistic leadership (Clawson, J., 2006; Kouzes, J. & Posner, B., 2002) were presented: (a) leading others, (b) coaching others, (c) following a strategic vision, (d) setting goals, (e) managing others, (f) time management, (g) using computers/ software, and (h) using technology. These eight topics were included in four primary questions: (a) relevancy to job; (b) percentage of time practicing the topic; (c) proficiency; and (d) anticipated development time necessary for improvement. A fifth question offered each participant the opportunity to express, in their own words, professional development needs. The final question measured the participants' comfort level of four different learning situations: (a) instructor-led in a classroom; (b) instructor-led, but instructor is not physically in the classroom; (c) self-paced, but with an instructor available; and (d) self-paced, but no instructor available. Each participant was hand-delivered a copy of the survey and asked to complete it within one business day.

Participants

The survey was administered to twelve participants, each of which senior leadership views as having leadership responsibilities within the organization. Although all are viewed as leaders, some do not have supervisory responsibilities. The participants represent various departments within the organization and bring with them a diverse collection of skills at various levels of experience. The majority of participants were females, which is representative of the entire organization. Additionally, most participants are in the middle of their careers; however, vary in their tenure with this organization.

Results

Senior leadership recognizes there is a need for improvement within the organization; however, was not able to pinpoint the opportunities for improvement. The eight suspected opportunities were included on the survey. Upon initial review of the survey results, it appears senior leadership accurately identified the skills needing improvement. Each of the questions is further analyzed. Question one asked each participant to rate the relevancy to their job for each topic (Table 1). The results show the majority of participants recognize each topic to be relevant to highly relevant to their job.

Table 1

Survey results for question one, relevancy to job.

	Minimally Relevant	Relevant	Highly Relevant
Leading Others (Teams)		3	8
Coaching Others	1	2	8
Following a Strategic Vision		1	10
Setting Goals		1	10
Managing Others	1	2	8
Time Management		1	10
Using Computers/Software		3	8
Using Technology		4	7

Question two asked each participant to identify the percentage of time each topic is practiced (Table 2). The results show the participants moderately vary where each spends time; however, there is a cluster at the 70 and 80 percent range.

Table 2

Survey results for question two, percent practiced.

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Leading Others (Teams)		1				2	2	2	0	1	3
Coaching Others		1	1			2		1	3	1	2
Following a Strategic Vision				1	1	1		3	3	1	1
Setting Goals					1		3	2	3	2	0
Managing Others		1		1		1	1	1	2	1	3
Time Management							1	4	2	2	2
Using Computers/Software				1		1		2	2	3	2
Using Technology			1			1		3	3	2	1

Question three asked each participant to identify their proficiency at each topic (Table 3). The results show the participants perceive they can do most skills with minimal guidance and some participants perceive they are proficient.

Table 3

Survey results for question three, proficiency.

	Struggle to do most of the time	Can do, but require guidance most of the time	Can do, but require guidance half the time	Can do with minimal guidance	Proficient
Leading Others (Teams)	0	0	0	7	4
Coaching Others	0	0	2	4	5
Following a Strategic Vision	0	0	1	9	1
Setting Goals	0	0	1	7	2

Managing Others	0	0	1	5	5
Time Management	0	0	1	7	3
Using Computers/Software	0	0	1	7	3
Using Technology	0	0	2	6	3

Questions four and five were subjective questions and the results varied significantly from participant to participant. The amount of time needed for improvement (question four) ranged from 30 minutes a week to an overall approximation of 40 hours of development time. The majority of hand-written responses to question five paralleled the eight topics presented on the survey. Question six asked each participant to rate their degree of success in four different learning situations (Table 4). The results show strong success for traditional classroom style learning and mixed success for self-paced asynchronous learning.

Table 4

Survey results for question six, learning situations.

	Hesitant about learning	Successful with some hesitation	Successful with no hesitation
Instructor-led in a classroom	0	0	11
Instructor-led, but instructor is not physically in the classroom	0	6	5
Self-paced, but with an instructor available	0	5	6
Self-paced, but no instructor available	3	6	2

Discussion

Generally, the results of the survey align with the perceived current state of skill level. The results also help identify areas for improvement, as well as, reveal an additional topic of investigation. First, as identified by senior leadership, each participant is expected to be a leader within the organization. The high number of responses for question one in the highly relevant category seem to indicate that the participants also view themselves as leaders. However, the results from question two indicate that the participants do not practice holistic leadership all the time. Higher responses in the 90 and 100 percent categories would have indicated that each participant understands what it means and takes to be a leader. With the responses clustered in the 70 and 80 percent category, an opportunity to improve holistic leadership is identified. The hand-written comments indicated a variety of professional development needs; however, time management was an apparent trend. Many participants discussed inefficiencies in their daily tasks and requested development opportunities that would add efficiencies to their schedules. Additionally, the wide spread distribution of responses on question two and question five indicate that a variety of individualized development needs may exist.

The results of the survey also revealed an interesting finding. The participants indicated on question three they were either proficient or could complete the tasks with minimal guidance. This finding, on the surface, seems to negate that there is any gap, or opportunity for improvement. Instead of relying on the surface value of this finding, it is recommended further investigation is completed. It is suspected that there is a communication disconnect between senior leadership and middle management about leadership expectations. Should this be shown, a more far-reaching opportunity for professional development would be identified. In this case, senior leadership and middle management would both have the opportunity.

Professional Development Strategy

The conclusions drawn from the results of the survey identify the organization, as a whole, can benefit from developing an understanding of what leadership is and more specifically, how to manage time. Beyond these two organization-wide opportunities for professional development, there are opportunities for individualized professional development. The key for all opportunities is to start off with clear performance objectives (Fenwick, T., 2003; Suttell, 2005). The absence of clear performance objectives would be an inefficient use of resources and time for the organization because it would never be known if development had occurred. Beyond objectives, Cano (2006) identifies three additional necessities for effective professional development. “Professional development is most effective when [(a)] it takes place in vibrant professional communities, [(b)] there are strong leaders, [and (c)] there are adequate resources” (p. 2). The concept of professional communities is elaborated on by Dulworth (2006). Dulworth discusses the role peer networks play in professional development. Through peers, professionals have an outlet to explore ideas and observe other techniques, which ultimately broadens the professional’s field of experience. Wlodkowski (2003) supports Cano’s point for strong leaders through a discussion on motivation. The motivation to improve is unique for each individual, yet a strong leader can support various motivations through inclusion, favorable attitude, experiential meaning, and valued learning. Combining these four necessities into a single professional development strategy that is implemented as part of a required leadership practice has the potential to foster professional development achievements (Fenwick, 2003). Using a formal coaching program which includes pre-program, in-program, and post-program activities (Ting, S., & Hart, E., 2004) as the basis for the design of the professional development strategy and program increases the likelihood of achievement and improvement.

Leadership and Time Management Development

The opportunities for professional development of leadership and time management require organization-wide programs. Using the results from question six on the survey, the most desirable method of learning is traditional, classroom-based instructor-led training. Working with the corporate learning and development department, it is proposed that two formal development programs are created. Tools that will prepare, aid, and continuously support employees need to be created and distributed.

Individualized Development

Due to the diversity revealed in question two and from the hand-written comments, individual development programs are proposed. Learning and development, in conjunction with the employee's immediate supervisor/manager, will develop a focused program. Development accountability should rest nearly entirely with the employee. The supervisor/manager and learning and development should act as support agents, fostering, not providing, ideas for development.

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