

A WEEK IN *Learning*

FROM HERE TO THERE: DESIGNING AND USING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

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Over my career, I have found that most professionals struggle when asked to talk about their future. The idea of designing - and following - a professional development plan often seems to stop even the most motivated and talented individuals in their tracks. With this short article, I'd like to clarify exactly what a professional development plan is - and what it is not. I'd also like to review a short process that will help you build and work with your own development plan.

Definition

A development plan is simply a documented strategy for helping you **improve in your current role - and for helping you grow into your next role**. It is **not** an indication of weakness, a punishment, or a sign that you are not performing well in your current role. In fact, having and following a professional development plan indicates that you take your current and future roles seriously. It shows that you want to perform at the highest level for both the organization and for yourself.

A good development plan is also designed with a lot of flexibility. It represents a commitment to your growth - but not to a specific path of growth. The needs of the organization may change over time - and your own desires and interests will almost certainly shift as well. A good plan can absorb these types of changes and help you pivot when necessary.

Process

If a great development plan is a true career asset, how can you build and use one?



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- Lane Schonour

Define the Challenge – Just like a doctor who makes a diagnosis, the first step in any development plan process is to ask, “What’s going on here? What is the gap between where I am and where I want (or need) to be in my professional life?” Engage your colleagues, as well as your supervisor, in an honest evaluation of your skills and abilities in relation to where you are – and the variety of professional destinations that may exist for you in the future.

Set Goals – With your overall challenge defined, spend time working on goals – individual, measurable steps that will help you address your challenge. Working with your supervisor, pay close attention to both the size and sequence of your goals. Size is important because you won’t be able to do everything at once. Sequence is also critical because the organization may have specific requirements that need to be met before others.

Identify Resources – As you set out to work on your goals, ask, “What do I need to help me reach my next goal?” You might need time or dollars to allocate towards a goal. You might need access to specific people with the right expertise to teach and support you along the way. **Don’t skimp** on this part of the process. Many development goals stall – or take much longer than they should – because of insufficient resources.

Get to Work – The key in this step is to pursue development activities that are also connected to your current job. Design “stretch assignments” or temporarily change roles with colleagues on your team so you have a chance to practice new skills in a safe environment. Also, use any “extra” time efficiently. Keep a journal with you so you can make learning notes between meetings. Carry something to write in at a moment’s notice if you discover some down time.

Reflect and Learn – Finally, remember to pause and notice what you are learning. Adult learning happens when we reflect. Ask, “What have I done to challenge myself today? What new tools or techniques have I tried? How did I do?” Your colleagues and your supervisor can be helpful here. Don’t wait for them to **tell** you what they are seeing – **ask** them if they have noticed a change in your behavior.

Development Never Ends

Remember, by nature, development is ongoing. The goal of a development plan is help improve current performance and grow into future roles. Thus, there should never be a time when you are not working on “what’s next” for you. A final offer; as you start to build your own development plan, remember that you are not alone. In addition to your colleagues and your supervisor, the Learning and Development Team is here to support you. Connect with us anytime at LearningandDevelopment@goodwillaz.org. We’ll be happy to help you get rolling!