



Accelerating People's Development *Nik Kinley & Shlomo Ben-Hur*

You need talent, and you need it fast. The question is how.

One of the most common queries we are asked is how to accelerate people's development. How to help people learn and develop and be ready for promotion sooner than they otherwise would. In technical specialisms with a fast-aging workforce, or geographies with a need to rapidly develop local talent to fill senior-level roles, it is a pressing issue.

Money is being invested, programs are being developed. But results are hugely variable, with tales of limited progress and people being over-promoted. And the reason for this is that businesses are missing a crucial piece of the puzzle they need to address the issue, and until they find it, they will continue struggle to find ways to genuinely accelerate development.

What Businesses Do

What businesses tend to do at present to help accelerate people's development is two things. First, they try to identify a small sub-set of people they want to provide extra developmental input and resources to. These people are usually high performers who are also perceived as having future potential or a strong

ability to learn. Identifying the right people is obviously critical and many businesses invest heavily in doing so, using external providers and objective assessment processes to select those people most likely to benefit from the extra development.

The second thing firms do is to then provide some extra development. Sometimes this may be different from the development available to people elsewhere in the organisation – for example, facilitated role moves. Other times, it can just be more of the same. Either way, there tends to be a fair amount of it. And the basic equation from these two steps together is to find the right people and then throw extra development at them.

$$P + D = AD$$

Potential + Development = Accelerated Development

What is Missing

Both of these steps are critically important. You need to find the right people and you need the right developmental activities. But what would you say if we told you that the vast majority of businesses largely ignore the one factor that most researchers agree is the most important for ensuring the success

of development activities, such as training and coaching? Because that is the surprising state of people development today.

One of the most consistent findings from research into the effectiveness of development activities is that contextual factors (what happens in the workplace outside the training or coaching room) are actually more important in ensuring development happens than the quality of the training, workshop or coaching.

In fact, research almost every type of developmental or change intervention you can imagine shows that context matters. Studies of whether criminals reoffend, of which sufferers of depression recover, and which addicts stay clean all point to the same thing: that if you want to develop someone and change their behavior, their context – the environment and situations in which they operate – has to act like a life-support machine for the desired change. If it does not, then the chances are that the development will have little impact and new behaviors will not hold.

What the equation for accelerating people's development ought to read then, is this:

$$P + D + C = AD$$

Potential + Development + Context = Accelerated Development

The Importance of Context

Learning and development researchers have not ignored context, of course. In the training literature, it is often referred to as either environmental favorability or transfer climate – the day-to-day workplace environment in which people who are being trained or developed have to replicate a new, desired skill or behavior. These contextual factors include things like cues that prompt people to use new behaviors, incentives for the correct use of them, and social support from managers and peers. Yet it also includes factors that not part of what many people would typically call

'context', namely what is going on inside people, and what they bring to any attempt to change their behavior. One obvious such factor is their current level of capability – what they are able to do. Then there is how much confidence people have that they can change, and how committed they feel to the change. These are as much part of the context for change as external factors, and each has been shown by researchers to be critical in determining whether or not development actually succeeds.

Yet unfortunately, all this research into context has not made it into businesses, and for two clear reasons. First, although the research has pointed to a mass of possible contextual factors that could accelerate development, there has been no one model that captures them all and easily describes them. So there has been no simple way for business and their leaders to clearly understand what is meant by context. And secondly, there has been a lack of clarity around what to do about it – around how firms can practically go about optimizing context for development. The key challenge here is that the single most significant part of anyone's working context is the manager. So any solution here would need to be something simple that that could be delivered through managers during their day-to-day activities, without requiring much extra time.

What Needs to Happen

Alongside with my co-author from IMD business school, Professor Shlomo Ben-Hur, we have been working with businesses to try and resolve these two issues. We have developed a model that helps define what these contextual factors are – things like motivation, ability, and social support – and a set of tools to help and equip managers – who are the frontline for all learning and development – with techniques that they can use, quickly and easily to help support and accelerate people's development.

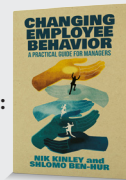
But models, tools and techniques are only useful if you use them. And what it requires first is a change in

the mindset that businesses approach accelerating development with. To help the people they have identified fulfil their potential and make the most of the extra development provided to them, organizations need to start addressing the last and most important piece of the puzzle. They need to insert context into the equation.

For further information please contact us at: info@ysc.com

About the Authors

The authors' new book, **Changing Employee Behavior: A Practical Guide for Managers** was released on March 31st.



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