

Motivation Employees Crave

Work-based development opportunities are rare • BY JOELLYN PROUTY MCLAREN



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A past column in this space highlighted the lack of research to support the 70/20/10 model. True, the ratio has not yet been supported empirically, but let's not miss the intent of this rule of thumb. In today's do-more-with-less environment, improving development opportunities represents a diamond in the rough for organizations. Let me explain.

My doctoral research studied the difference between the employer brand promised by the employer and experienced by the employee — what I call the employer brand gap. In my analysis of five global organizations, results indicated that development opportunities are an underutilized tool in the corporate engagement toolbox.

It is widely acknowledged that opportunities are key motivators for employees; however, my cross-case analysis of the employer brand gap revealed that employees define opportunities more broadly than promotions, consider them one of the most important promises an employer makes and look for evidence of their fulfillment in daily actions. Setting expectations for opportunities and keeping these promises is vital for employers in the current business environment.

Recent focus on high potentials has de-emphasized the rest of the employees. Imagine the impact of a 1 percent improvement in engagement and motivation across the other 80 percent, those not categorized as high potentials, simply by doing a better job leveraging internal development opportunities.

In my study, opportunities were described as activities or circumstances requiring commitment of resources that are coupled with some risk. In employee minds, opportunities posed chances for development, improvement and advancement. They were a key reason employees joined and stayed with their employers. Opportunities also had the power to overcome brand failures and engage employees emotionally. Thus, creating opportunities for employees represents a critical opportunity for companies that should not be taken lightly.

Employees developed their expectations for opportunities from a range of employer brand signals. They found explicit signals from employer communications, but also implicit signals in products, market positioning and financial performance. For example, one employee cited an employer's recent growth and competitive success as the source of innovative projects and international relocation opportunities, while another described the relative size of the response box in a personal-devel-

opment plan form as evidence of the organization's commitment. The range of signals that concerned employees created significant expectations.

And what about delivering against these expectations? Employees measured opportunity fulfillment in terms of awareness, availability and accessibility to these opportunities. Line managers generally were responsible for pulling these pieces together on behalf of the employee. Discrepancies between expectation and reality reduced employee trust in leadership and business processes.

If development opportunities are important, can be personally as well as professionally motivated, and evidence of their existence is all around us, how can we do a better job mining these diamonds in the rough? Three implications emerged from my research to help us bridge this gap.

Opportunities are not limited to promotions. While everyone is used to opportunities as promotions, these are practices of the past. Standard career paths are no longer sufficient. It's time to develop and offer more personalized ones that include nontraditional development options.

Demonstrating progress is essential. Everyone benchmarks. People need to know where they stand. While many forms of development opportunities are valuable, employees need to feel they are accomplishing something. Whether for the organization or personal gain, individuals need to know that the opportunities fit into their bigger picture. Progress doesn't have to be a vertical path, just a meaningful one.

Communication is crucial. People don't resist change, they resist change they don't understand or see the benefit in. Constant change, employee skepticism and diverse needs are hard to keep aligned. Making sense of these dynamics demands a deeper understanding of the employee and the context.

Good managers explain the context of organizational change and meaning for individuals. Yet, few have time to discuss employees' work experiences or ambitions. We need to develop managers' ability to discover, make sense of and convey these important connections. We need to help those in our organizations see what's in the experience for them and clearly communicate it. In doing so, managers will help individuals in their team feel valued. [CLO](#)