What does people development really mean?

A statement I hear often from my network of business owners, executives, and decision makers is “I want to develop my people.” And, over time, I have wondered what exactly “developing my people” means.

With the intent of learning more, I asked my network “What does people development mean to you? Is it professional, personal, or a combination of both?”

The response was concerning – 99 percent looked at me as if I had asked them to solve a quantum physics problem. I learned that people have the desire to develop their workforce but few have a definitive answer as to how, nor the time to execute a plan even if they had one. I think some make the statement because it is a hot topic, and some felt that just sending people to periodic seminars was sufficient development effort.

I have also posed the same question to numerous human resource professionals. One seasoned HR professional at the executive level with a track record of success in developing people had an interesting response that was chock full of common sense:

“My general definition of developing people is about positioning them for growth, ideally at the intersection of their passions and the needs of their organization. It includes focusing on how to enhance, highlight and expand upon what they do best already, and shore-ing up what they don’t – or building awareness of shortcomings so that they can manage around them.”
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A trick is that “ideal intersection.” To your question of “personal v. professional”, that’s sometimes a fuzzy line related to their passions! And, folks won’t develop that about which they do not have passion for . . .”

He points out, you cannot (and should not) think about professional development without starting on a personal level. That, in my opinion, is a feat even for some of the best. The investment of time to conduct the research and help people identify at least some of their goals is huge. Most business owners and executives do not have that time (or the skills required) and a conversation during performance reviews once every six months is not enough.

I posed the same questions to Regina Sacha, another HR executive and owner of Your HR Partner, LLC, and her response is below.

“Dream with me and the return will be bountiful for morale, retention, enthusiasm, customer satisfaction and ultimately, business success!

People development is essential for thriving and sustaining businesses, be they large or small. It is directly related to employee morale, engagement and retention which impact the customer experience and your bottom line. It can’t be an isolated program or corporate buzz word. It must be inculcated into all people systems to be believable, real, and supportive and to have impact upon your people resources. It begins with a core value of investing in your people and enabling growth and enrichment. It includes your listening systems, career planning and educational opportunities, mentoring, job enrichment, job sharing, job swapping, etc. All lend credence that people and their career growth matters and they are worth the time. It may surprise you that DREAMING with your employees about their lives and what motivates them ties directly back to their desire to apply energy and passion to their daily work. Dreaming puts everyone in the right frame of mind and elicits positivity. It is personal and development IS PERSONAL. You cannot separate the personal from the professional since you are interested in the holistic person. Do you care enough to see me? What motivates me? What my personal ambitions are? What are my big dreams and it all starts with investing the time on a personal level.

One size does not fit all! Personalize it. You might be surprised that you will discover high potentials and talents that were hidden and unleveraged in the organization.

In these demanding business times, it must fit the needs of the organization and the individual. It is doable without a lot of down time and distraction from the work a hand.

What should this process look like? People Development must be innovative, fresh, sincere and new to address the complex business and workforce needs.

It is about conversation and interest. Asking and listening vs. telling! Gathering data and or helping them to have clearer thoughts. Encouraging this exchange will open up the lines of communication on a number of fronts and improve work relationships.

The only way to do that is to conduct multiple conversations about themselves and truly care about the answers. This can be done over the phone, e-mail, and texts but it won’t work by having a 30-minute sit-down chat once every six months. That is “old school” and was fine with boomers, not with millennials.

Too often, performance discussions are only about “shortcomings.” While necessary, it must be
balanced with leveraging strengths. Also, our non-verbal body language sends a message that you are important enough to invest this time.”

In conclusion:

1. For people development to be effective, time must be invested and on a personal level.
2. It involves dreaming and stimulating inner motivation.
3. People development is doable.
4. It is essential to compete in today’s global/competitive markets.
5. It is essential for leveraging millennial talent and must be supported by all people systems (hiring, planning, rewards, compensation and people practices and policies.)
6. It translates directly to the customer experience and eventually, your bottom line!

Tips to get you started with people development:

1. Ask your people to share their “hidden” talents, and realize dreams can benefit both you and your employee. Asking and caring sends a message of concern and interest.
2. Focus upon what your people do best and leverage that talent. It may surprise you that DREAMING with your employees about their lives and what motivates them ties directly back to their desire to apply energy and passion to their daily work.
3. It may mean that an extra or special assignment is made to provide the opportunity to do tasks or projects that someone has always wanted to do. Also, you could discover someone has always wanted to be on the front line when they have been in the warehouse! A short “temporary duty” assignment might bring energy and light to the dreams of your people.
4. Ask your people what they most enjoy doing. What dream did they hold for their jobs? Picture them productive and happy. How does that picture compare to their strengths?

You will find ideas and strengths in people you may not have noticed. If you harness this positive power, it can prove to become a win/win/win situation.