

Learning and Development Skills

Managers have a vital role in helping their people to learn and develop. Most learning takes place on the job but it will be more effective if managers provide the coaching, guidance and support people need. To do this they need to know about induction training, how to ensure continuous learning, and personal development planning processes, as covered in the next three sections of this chapter. They also need to use coaching, mentoring and giving instruction skills as described in later sections.

Induction training

You are involved in helping people to learn every time you welcome new employees, plan how they are going to acquire the know-how required (preferably as recorded in a learning specification), provide for them to receive systematic guidance and instruction on the tasks they have to carry out, and see that the plan is implemented. You may delegate the responsibility for providing this induction training to a team leader, or team leaders may carry it out themselves – the ideal method – or delegate it to a team member. Whichever approach is used you should be confident that the individual responsible for the induction has the right temperament and skills to do it.

Continuous learning

You provide learning opportunities for team members every time you delegate tasks to them. At the briefing stage you should ensure that team members are fully aware of what they have to do and have the knowledge and skills to do it. If appropriate, you ask them to tell you what they need to know and be able to do to carry out the task. If you are unsure that their staff have all the skills required but still believe that they can do it with additional guidance or help, then you will need to provide the support yourself or arrange for someone else to do so.

As you monitor progress to whatever degree is necessary (you can just let some people get on with it; less experienced people you might need to monitor more closely), you can follow up to find out whether the best approach is being used, and if not, give them any further help they need. But you must be careful. People will not learn if everything is done for them. They have to be given a chance to find things out for themselves and even make mistakes as long as things are not going badly wrong.

When outcomes are reviewed with people, preferably immediately after the event, it is a good idea to ask them what they have learnt so that it is reinforced for future use. They can also be asked whether their experience has shown that they need to learn more. This is a good opportunity for you to get individuals to develop their own learning plans (self-directed learning), but it also means that you can step in and offer your support.

Personal development planning

Personal development planning is carried out by individuals with guidance, encouragement and help from their manager as required. A personal development plan sets out the actions people propose to take to learn and to develop themselves. They take responsibility for formulating and implementing the plan, but they receive support from their managers in doing so.

The stages of personal development planning are:

1. Analyse the current situation and development needs. This can be done as part of a performance management process.
2. Set goals. These could include improving performance in the current job, improving or acquiring skills, extending relevant knowledge, developing specified areas of competence, moving across or upwards in the organization, or preparing for changes in the current role.
3. Prepare an action plan. The action plan sets out what needs to be done and how it will be done, under headings such as outcomes expected (learning objectives), the development activities, the responsibility for development (what individuals are expected to do and the support they will get from their manager, the HR department or other people), and timing. A variety of activities tuned to individual needs should be included in the plan, for example observing what others do, project work, planned use of e-learning programmes and internal learning resource centres, working with a mentor, coaching by the line manager or team leader, experience in new tasks, guided reading, and special assignments. Formal training to develop knowledge and skills may be part of the plan but it is not the most important part.
4. Implement the plan.

The plan can be expressed in the form of a learning contract, which is a formal agreement between the manager and the individual on what learning needs to take place, the objectives of such learning and what part the individual, the manager, the learning and development department (if one exists) or a mentor will play in ensuring that learning happens. The partners to the contract agree on how the objectives will be achieved and their roles. It will spell out learning programmes and indicate what coaching, mentoring and formal training activities should be carried out. It is, in effect, a blueprint for learning.

Coaching

Coaching is a one-to-one method of helping people develop their skills and competences. Coaching is often provided by specialists from inside or outside the organization who concentrate on specific areas of skills or behaviour, for example leadership, but it is also something that can happen in the workplace. You should be prepared and able to act as a coach when necessary to see that learning takes place.

The need for coaching may arise from formal or informal performance reviews, but opportunities for coaching also emerge during day-to-day activities. As part of the normal process of management, coaching consists of:

- making people aware of how well they are performing by, for example, asking them questions to establish the extent to which they have thought through what they are doing;
- controlled delegation – ensuring that individuals not only know what is expected of them but also understand what they need to know and be able to do to complete the task satisfactorily (this gives managers an opportunity to provide guidance at the outset, although guidance at a later stage may be seen as interference);
- using situations that arise as opportunities to promote learning;
- encouraging people to look at higher-level problems and how they would tackle them.

A common framework used by coaches is the GROW model:

‘G’ is for the *goal* of coaching, which needs to be expressed in specific measurable terms which represent a meaningful step towards future development.

‘R’ is for the *reality check* – the process of eliciting as full a description as possible of what the person being coached needs to learn.

‘O’ is for *option generation* – the identification of as many solutions and actions as possible.

‘W’ is for *wrapping up* – when the coach ensures that the individual being coached is committed to action.

To succeed in coaching you need to understand that your role is to help people to learn and see that they are motivated to learn. They should be aware that their present level of knowledge,

skill or behaviour needs to be improved if they are to perform their work satisfactorily. Individuals should be given guidance on what they should be learning and feedback on how they are doing, and, because learning is an active not a passive process, they should be actively involved with their manager in the latter's role as a coach.

Coaching may be informal but it has to be planned. It does not involve simply checking from time to time on what people are doing and then advising them on how to do it better. Nor does it mean occasionally telling people where they have gone wrong and throwing in a lecture for good measure. As far as possible, coaching should take place within the framework of a general plan of the areas and direction in which individuals will benefit from further development. Coaching plans can and should be incorporated into the personal development plans set out in a performance agreement.

Coaching should provide motivation, structure and effective feedback. As a coach, you should believe that people can succeed and that they can contribute to their own success.

Mentoring

Mentoring is the process of using specially selected and trained individuals to provide guidance, pragmatic advice and continuing support which will help the individuals allocated to them to learn and develop. It can be regarded as a method of helping people to learn, as distinct from coaching, which is a relatively directive means of increasing people's competence.

Mentoring involves learning on the job, which must always be the best way of acquiring the particular skills and knowledge the job holder needs. It also complements formal training by providing those who benefit from it with individual guidance from experienced managers who are 'wise in the ways of the organization'.

Mentors provide people with:

- advice in drawing up self-development programmes or learning contracts:
- general help with learning programmes:
- guidance on how to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to do a new job;
- advice on dealing with any administrative, technical or people problems individuals meet, especially in the early stages of their careers;
- information on 'the way things are done around here' – the corporate culture in terms of expected behaviour;
- coaching in specific skills;
- help in tackling projects – not by doing it for them but by pointing them in the right direction, helping people to help themselves;

- a parental figure with whom individuals can discuss their aspirations and concerns and who will lend a sympathetic ear to their problems.

Mentors need to adopt the right non-directive but supportive approach to provide help to those they are dealing with. They must be carefully briefed and trained in their role.

Managers may be asked to act as mentors, and should receive guidance on what is involved. But they may be able to call on an organizational mentor to provide help with an individual case.

Job instruction

When people learn specific tasks, especially those involving manual skills, the learning will be more effective if job instruction techniques are used. The sequence of instruction should consist of the following stages.

Preparation

Preparation for each instruction period means that the trainer must have a plan for presenting the subject matter, using appropriate teaching methods, visual aids and demonstration aids. It also means preparing trainees for the instruction that is to follow. They should want to learn. They must perceive that the learning will be relevant and useful to them personally. They should be encouraged to take pride in their job and to appreciate the satisfaction that comes from skilled performance.

Presentation

Presentation should consist of a combination of telling and showing – explanation and demonstration. Explanation should be as simple and direct as possible: the trainer explains briefly the ground to be covered and what to look for. They make the maximum use of charts, diagrams and other visual aids. The aim should be to teach first things first and then proceed from the known to the unknown, the simple to the complex, the concrete to the abstract, the general to the particular, the observation to reasoning, and the whole to the parts and back to the whole again.

Demonstration

Demonstration is an essential stage in instruction, especially when the skill to be learned is mainly a doing skill. Demonstration can take place in three stages:

1. The complete operation is shown at normal speed to show the trainee how the task should be carried out eventually.
2. The operation is demonstrated slowly and in correct sequence, element by element, to indicate clearly what is done and the order in which each task is carried out.

3. The operation is demonstrated again slowly, at least two or three times, to stress the how, when and why of successive movements.

The learner then practises by imitating the instructor and constantly repeating the operation under guidance. The aim is to reach the target level of performance for each element of the total task, but the instructor must constantly strive to develop coordinated and integrated performance; that is, the smooth combination of the separate elements of the task into a whole job pattern.

Follow-up

Follow-up continues during the training period for all the time required by the learner to reach a level of performance equal to that of the normal experienced worker in terms of quality, speed and attention to safety. During the follow-up stage, the learner will continue to need help with particularly difficult tasks or to overcome temporary setbacks which result in a deterioration in performance. The instructor may have to repeat the presentation for the elements and supervise practice more closely until the trainee regains confidence or masters the task.