SIGMA
Talent
Development

How to Launch a Talent Development Program

© 2023 SIGMA Assessment Systems Inc. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

Page

3 **Introduction**
The purpose of a talent development program.

4 **Identifying Common Development Areas**
Utilizing scientifically validated talent assessments to identify skills gaps among a broad group of employees.

5 **Types of Development Opportunities**
Matching the right development opportunity to each employee based on their unique needs and objectives.

8 **How to Launch a Talent Development Program**
Deconstructing the talent development process into clear and manageable steps.

11 **Talent Development Program Best Practices**
The three key components of every effective talent development program.

12 **Updating the Plan**
Integrating employee feedback into talent development program design and assessing the program's effectiveness.

13 **Steps to Launch a Talent Development Program**
A summary of the necessary steps to design and launch a talent development program.

INTRODUCTION

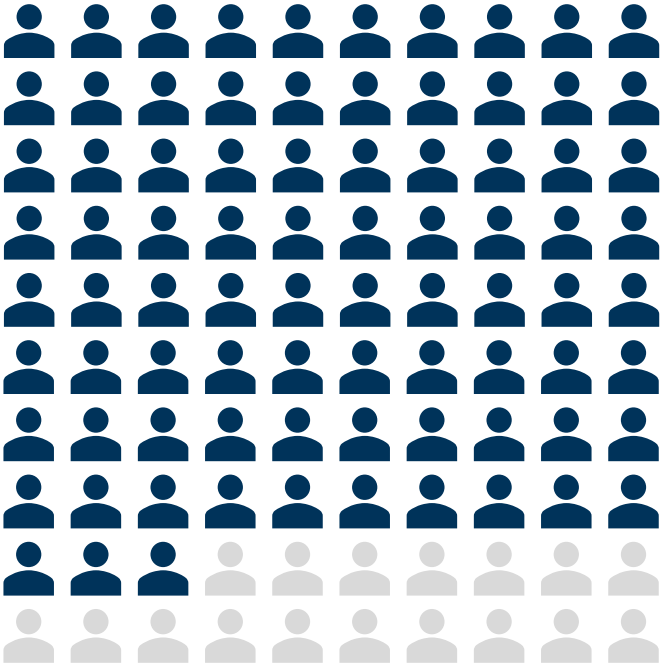
> Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don't want to."

Richard Branson
Founder, Virgin Group

Providing employees with opportunities to learn and grow is at the heart of every talent development program. Not only do effective talent development programs increase employee satisfaction,[1] but they lead to boosted productivity,[2] higher levels of engagement,[3] and an improved employee experience.[4] These outcomes contribute to increased revenue[5] and, perhaps most important of all, higher retention rates.[6]

The goal of every talent development program is to harness employees' untapped potential. To do this, the right kinds of development opportunities must be offered to target the right areas of development. By providing opportunities for employees to reach their full potential, talent development programs are an essential tool in creating a high-performance workforce.

Although talent development programs lead to several positive outcomes, most organizations are not doing enough to engage their employees throughout the development process.



83%

of workers reported that they no longer felt like they were growing in their position[7]

IDENTIFYING COMMON DEVELOPMENT AREAS

The Importance of Identifying Common Development Areas

Before designing and launching a talent development program, organizations must first determine what areas need to be developed. Although each employee who participates in a talent development program will have their own unique set of development needs and objectives, there will be common development areas across employee groups. For example, almost every organization struggles with both communication and strategic planning. To maximize the efficiency of a talent development program — and to ensure cost-effectiveness — group training and shared learning experiences should be offered to address these common development opportunities among employees.

Examples of Common Development Areas

- Communication
- Strategic Planning
- Business Acumen
- Conflict Management
- Motivating Others
- Facilitating Teamwork

How to Identify Development Areas

There are many different approaches to understanding development areas. At SIGMA, we recommend adding objectivity into this process by using scientifically-validated assessments to understand where individuals are strong and where they have room for growth. For example, SIGMA's Leadership Skills Profile – Revised™ (LSP-R™) uses personality measurement to predict an individual's strengths and development areas. The data generated from this assessment reveals relative strengths and areas that can be targeted for improvement. When this individual employee data is aggregated across the organization, common strengths as well as common development areas are able to emerge. These common development areas can then be used to prioritize specific development opportunities across the organization. Development opportunities are the activities offered to employees that allow them to work on addressing the skill gaps previously identified by the talent assessment.

Once those opportunities have been determined, current development offerings can be compared to the common gaps identified from the talent assessment to evaluate if there is alignment. Do the current development opportunities offered by the organization address the needs of the development areas adequately? If not, do minor tweaks need to be made or does the program need to be overhauled? If there is alignment, it may not be necessary to devise an entirely new development program.

TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Types of Development Opportunities

There are two main types of development opportunities: knowledge transfer and experiential learning. Knowledge transfer is a way to share information and ideas, and is primarily concerned with knowledge dissemination. Experiential learning builds on the skills developed through knowledge transfer — it's an engaged learning process where employees learn by doing, with adequate time allotted after the development opportunity to receive and process feedback as well as reflect on the experience.

Knowledge Transfer	Experiential Learning
A way to share information and ideas; primarily concerned with knowledge dissemination	An engaged learning process where employees learn by doing
Best suited for employees who lack foundational knowledge in a specific subject area	Best suited for employees who possess adequate knowledge but require hands-on practice to get better at skill application
While they may be at a more junior level in their career, this is not always the case	Typically suited for senior, more experienced employees, but this is not always the case

Typically, knowledge transfer development opportunities are best suited for employees who lack the foundational knowledge in a specific subject area. While they may be at a more junior level in their career, this is not always the case. Experiential opportunities are best suited for employees who possess adequate foundational knowledge but require hands-on practice to get better at skill application. These practical, experiential development opportunities are typically suited for senior, more experienced employees, but again, this is not always the case. To effectively match the right development opportunity to the right employee, it is important to determine the current level of skill development of the employee. The level of skill development dictates the right opportunity to offer them.

The Importance of Feedback

Feedback is information provided to the learner regarding aspects of their performance and comprehension. The purpose of feedback is to help the learner deepen their understanding. It serves to reinforce knowledge by correcting mistakes, affirming competence, debunking misconceptions, and is an essential conclusion to an effective development opportunity.

> ***[Feedback] plays a decisive role in learning and development … We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need in order to improve."***
>
> — Dai Hounsell, Professor Emeritus, University of Edinburgh

Knowledge Transfer

Self-directed learning: Self-directed learning is a process where individual employees take responsibility for planning and evaluating their own learning experiences. Online courses, webinars, conferences, and books are all examples of self-directed learning. These types of activities are great ways for employees to learn if they have an interest in — and an aptitude for — professional development in a specific skill.

Group training: Not only is group training a cost-effective way to deliver important knowledge, but it can also build community and accountability for learners. Group training ensures control over the content being delivered, and most importantly, ensures consistency of messaging to trainees. Choose group training as a method to address common development areas among a specific team or across the organization.

Employer-subsidized degrees and professional certifications: In this approach, the responsibility for knowledge transfer is outsourced to a post-secondary institution or professional organization for skill development in which the organization does not have in-house expertise.

> **What if we spend money on training our employees and they leave?**
>
> **What if we don't and they stay?**

Employer-subsidized professional development programs offer employees the ability to combine full- or part-time study with paid work experience. The benefits of these programs include increased job satisfaction, loyalty, productivity, and brand image.[8] Employees who maintain professional certifications ensure their knowledge stays current. Additionally, many who participate in these programs often build informal peer support networks outside of the organization, providing an additional resource and support system when faced with work-related challenges.

Peer support networks and mentoring: An employee is paired with either a peer who excels in a particular skill or a more senior employee with years of experience applying that same expertise to offer advice and answer any questions. This development opportunity is appropriate for an employee who has the foundational knowledge about a specific skill, but has not yet had the opportunity to practice the skill in an appreciable way. Peer support networks and the mentoring process act as a natural progression from knowledge transfer to experiential learning opportunities.

TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Experiential Learning

Job shadowing: Through job shadowing, an incumbent takes on an observational role, passively participating in meetings, calls, and tasks while observing the employee's work. This method of experiential learning allows the employee to actively develop job-specific skills and gain a realistic preview of the role and its responsibilities. This development opportunity is appropriate to practice multiple job-related tasks at once.

Coaching: Coaches guide reflection, offer expert advice, and track progress towards completion of identified goals. While a mentor shares their knowledge, skills, and experience, a coach provides personalized guidance to help each coachee reach their full potential. In the context of a formal relationship, a coach provides accountability and support in overcoming challenges on the path to skill mastery. This development opportunity is best suited for employees who are beginning their experiential learning journey and are participating in one or more of the related opportunities in this section.

Stretch assignments: Stretch assignments are temporary and used to optimize or further strengthen an existing skill. Leaders commonly delegate work to individuals that is outside of their current scope of responsibilities. This development opportunity stretches existing skills and is appropriate for monitoring skill development progress.

Cross-training: Some skills cannot be acquired in one's current role. Leaders may choose to cross-train their team members in another area or assign them to work with a different team, offering employees practical experience that can only be gained from a different role. This kind of development opportunity helps employees round out their skill set and enhances their proficiency across teams.

Not all development opportunities are equal. Some types of opportunities may be more motivating for some individuals than for others. When deciding which development opportunities to offer to employees, it may be meaningful to consider how to most efficiently use organizational resources as part of the decision-making process.

It's important to recognize that these types of development opportunities are not mutually exclusive. For example, group training can be supplemented with job shadowing, and stretch assignments can be paired with individual coaching.

How to Launch a Talent Development Program

Developing and launching a talent development program from the ground up may seem like an overwhelming endeavor. However, when the process is deconstructed into steps, it's much more manageable.

1. **Establish a team or committee responsible for the launch of the program.**

   A talent development program doesn't have to be managed by human resources (HR) exclusively. Executives, leaders, and frontline workers from other departments may also participate in the development and execution of the program. No matter how this team or committee is composed, roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined for it to be effective. In the absence of clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the talent development program may run the risk of stalling due to ambiguous expectations and a diffusion of responsibilities. Ideally, one member of the launch team should be tasked with championing the program. Because talent development is often viewed as a non-essential organizational function, unlike operations or accounting, its momentum can be jeopardized if it's not considered a priority. A champion of the cause will drive the program forward when competing projects and commitments get in the way.

2. **Obtain buy-in from leadership.**

   Buy-in from organizational leaders is an important early step. Before the plan gets communicated to employees, there needs to be a consensus among the leadership team about the program's parameters, objectives, and processes. Clear expectations for the people involved are also critical. If a talent development program is launched prematurely and the leadership team isn't clear on what is expected of employees, it can cause apprehension about the program. Leaders must be prepared for the questions employees will ask and have a plan for how to deal with contentious situations. For example, if development opportunities are offered to a subsection of employees, leaders need to be consistent with messaging to those employees who have been excluded and transparent in their rationale. If there is confusion in the communication to employees, it may create an environment of distrust which can sabotage the success of the program before it begins.

3. **Determine the competencies most important for your organization to develop.**

   Create a list of the skills, abilities, and characteristics required for someone to be considered a high-potential in the organization. Outlining these competencies can help make the process of delineating between current performance and future potential clearer. To do this, use a comprehensive competency framework to identity which competencies are important for employees to demonstrate. SIGMA's Leadership Competency Framework may be used as a template. Additionally, gather feedback from several leaders in the organization to ensure the list considers multiple perspectives and determine if these competencies are aligned with the organization's mission, vision, and values.

4. **Communicate the plan.**

   One of the most important parts of successfully launching a talent development program is the communication of the plan to employees. It's advisable to include organizational leaders in the communication planning process to ensure alignment.

   Not only should employees be consulted in the types of development opportunities offered, they should be heavily involved in the process of deciding which development opportunities they participate in. A collaborative process includes gathering employee feedback and incorporating that feedback to determine which development opportunities to offer. This collaboration with employees will increase the likelihood of their successful participation.

When different development opportunities are communicated to employees, it's important for employees to understand that they have autonomy over their own development. Opportunities won't be assigned to employees; instead, there will be a collaborative discussion to identify their goals for development. Each employee will have the opportunity to express their desired areas of growth and skill development during a consultation process. Employees are more likely to actively participate in development opportunities if they have the autonomy to say if they want to participate or not, otherwise it will feel like additional work is being assigned to them that is outside of their job description.

Expectation management is a key part of program communication. Stress the fact that the organization is electing to align the development program with what employees want, but may not be able to fulfill every employee preference or request. Transparent and honest communication is a critical point because it maintains engagement with employees throughout the process of program design and implementation. If the talent development program doesn't meet the needs of the people who are going to be participating in it, or the participants aren't engaged in the process, then it's just going to sit on a shelf.

Communication is an ongoing process and employees should be updated at important stages, such as the announcement of new development opportunities and the progress of the talent development program's roll out.

5. Source a scientifically-validated talent assessment.

By far the best way to determine areas of development within an organization is to utilize a scientifically-validated talent assessment that uses an evidence-based model of personality. The assessment should measure traits that are relevant to each job and be validated on a sample that is similar to the target employee pool. There should be evidence that the assessment has strong predictive validity and reliability, and it should be created by test experts who have experience in psychometrics.

A leadership skills assessment, like the LSP-R, provides a personality-based assessment of leadership skills that can be used to guide talent development efforts. The assessment ranks individuals on 50 leadership competencies, including cognitive, personal, interpersonal, and senior leadership skills. Each individual who takes the LSP-R for development receives a Focus Report that provides a summary and analysis of results, as well as templates and activities to help create a personalized development plan. This data-driven approach removes ambiguity from the talent development process, allowing organizations to achieve alignment on organizational goals and best serve its employees' development needs.

6. Select development opportunities.

Once organizational development areas have been identified using an assessment, talent development opportunities may be chosen to address those areas of need. Create an inventory of the current development opportunities already on offer and supplement new ones, either in-house or sourced from a third-party vendor, to address gaps. Do current opportunities need to be modified or does the entire program need to be redesigned to adequately address development areas? Both knowledge transfer and experiential learning opportunities should be offered for each development area to effectively support different employees.

At this point in the process, it is not essential to have opportunities for every type of development area as long as it's communicated that this is something that's going to be rolled out over time. Being clear in the communication piece that the development program will be delivered in a phased nature with expanded development opportunities is important to manage employee expectations. This allows employees to plan for what's coming and prepare to follow through on upcoming opportunities.

7. Document the process.

Talent development programs may vary in terms of formality and structure, but they should all include documentation, regular meetings, ongoing dialogue, and a concrete plan for sustainable progress and standardization.

For example, for those who are being coached, will there be standardized forms or worksheets for employees to make development plans? Or are people going to do things in a way that suits them best? Structured and standardized talent development programs allow for a consistent method of program evaluation relative to its goals and objectives and are generally more effective overall.

8. Measure effectiveness.

To determine the effectiveness of a talent development program, progress must be measured. It helps to think about the objectives of the program when considering which metrics to use. Why are employees participating in the program? What is the expected impact of the program on existing skill gaps? What critical behaviors could employees demonstrate and embody to show competence in a particular skill?

To start, consider metrics that are currently available over the course of the plan's implementation. What is the participation rate among employees? If the training involves coaching or development workbooks, is progress being documented? Are employees providing feedback? Are they getting what they want out of the program? Are the development opportunities aligned with employee goals?

From an HR perspective, a compelling measure of progress is the percentage of job vacancies that are filled internally vs. externally. Is HR able to draw on the existing talent pool to fill job vacancies? How long does it take to fill each role? Is the rate of turnover decreasing? One of the top reasons employees leave an organization is because of a lack of available development opportunities,[9] so a successful talent development program should lead to increased employee retention.

If these metrics improve following the implementation of the development program, it may mean the program is working as intended.

If a specific development area has been prioritized, an effective measure of progress is a comprehensive 360 assessment, such as SIGMARadius. Designed to support employees to develop essential competencies, a 360 assessment collects feedback from multiple perspectives such as leaders, colleagues, direct and indirect reports, as well as self-evaluation. This customized solution allows organizations to select only the competencies that align with development areas, details specific comments provided by raters, and recommends action steps for further development. When used in tandem with the LSP-R, development areas can be assessed before and after development opportunities have been completed to provide a detailed snapshot of the current talent pool and an evidence-based measure of training effectiveness.

Talent Development Program Best Practices

All effective talent development programs share three key features. These three best practices are essential to ensure a talent development program's success and longevity:

Sustainability

Although a talent development program may be robust and fit the needs of various employee groups in the present, if the development opportunities are not continuously evaluated and refreshed, employees will not have confidence in the longevity of the program for the future. Ongoing maintenance and evaluation of program content and types of offerings is essential to the effectiveness of the program. Regular conversations between the leadership team and employees to generate new ideas and offer new opportunities should be integrated into the overall program as part of an ongoing process.

Accountability

Without accountability, we cannot grow, nor can we improve. Accountability is an integral part of any talent development program. An easy way to integrate accountability into the design of a development program is to schedule a check-in after six months to evaluate what transpired over that previous six-month period. What went well? What isn't working? What needs to be adjusted?

Remember, the purpose of accountability is not to be punitive if someone isn't meeting development goals. Rather, it's to evaluate the effectiveness of the program itself, and to determine if leadership needs to make any changes to better support employees. An accountability review period is recommended to ensure a continually improving development program that serves employees' needs and consistently achieves organizational objectives.

Feedback

One of the best methods to ascertain the state of a talent development program is to solicit feedback from the program participants directly. Similar to an employee engagement survey, employees are asked to answer questions and provide their feedback related to the program. Like employee engagement surveys, these program feedback surveys are only effective when the feedback is acted upon. If employees take the time to intentionally provide thoughtful, actionable feedback and that feedback is ignored, it only serves to breed distrust, frustration, and resentment. In fact, it will leave employees more dissatisfied than if they were not asked for feedback in the first place.[10]

Even if the feedback provided by employees can't be acted upon for various reasons, or the feedback provided doesn't ultimately change the program because employees want things the organization can't reasonably offer, the feedback itself still needs to be addressed. An additional communication to employees that acknowledges the feedback, recognizes the challenges presented, and offers a compromise is essential to maintaining a positive relationship between employees and leadership. Regardless of the feedback provided, the absence of this transparent communication has the potential to derail the program.

Incorporating Feedback and Making Necessary Adjustments

Following the completion of the talent development program's first iteration and the measurement of its effectiveness, the program can be evaluated and adjusted as needed. This final stage is an opportunity to make good on the promise to incorporate employee feedback and build trust. Think of ways that employee suggestions can be used to improve the talent development program as a whole, and clearly communicate to the organization how employee feedback has influenced the development of the program. Assess whether the selected development opportunities are meeting the needs of employees and refresh or replace opportunities as required. To ensure forward momentum and sustainability, regular conversations between the leadership team and employees to generate new ideas and offer new opportunities should be integrated into the program development and evaluation process.

Common Questions to Gather Feedback

To get the most value out of employee feedback, it can be helpful to consider what type of feedback is most important to collect. Providing a framework for gathering feedback can make this process more efficient. Some common questions used to solicit feedback include:

- **ACCESSIBILITY:** How would you rate the accessibility of professional growth in this organization?
- **MEETING EXPECTATIONS:** Did the development opportunity or opportunities you participated in meet your expectations?
- **EASE OF APPLYING LEARNING:** Did the development opportunity or opportunities you participated in provide skills and knowledge that is easy to apply?
- **RELEVANCE:** Is the talent development program relevant to your needs?
- **PREFERRED OPPORTUNITIES:** In terms of training and development opportunities, what would you like to see us offer or continue to offer?
- **ADDITIONAL TRAINING:** What additional training or education would help you better do your job?
- **SATISFACTION:** How satisfied are you with the current development opportunities available to you?
- **SUGGESTIONS:** Do you have any suggestions to improve the talent development program?

STEPS TO LAUNCH A TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Summary

To summarize, these are the necessary steps to design and launch a talent development program:

IDENTIFY
common development areas.

01

ESTABLISH
a team or committee responsible for the launch of the program.

02

OBTAIN
buy-in from leadership.

03

DETERMINE
the competencies most important for your organization to develop.

04

COMMUNICATE
the plan.

05

SOURCE
a scientifically-validated talent assessment.

06

CHOOSE
knowledge transfer and experiential learning development opportunities to address development areas.

07

LAUNCH
the talent development program and document the process.

08

MEASURE
program effectiveness.

09

INCORPORATE
feedback and adjust as necessary.

10

REFERENCES

1 Schmidt, Steven. (2007). The Relationship between Satisfaction with Workplace Training and Overall Job Satisfaction. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. 18. 481 - 498. 10.1002/hrdq.1216.

2 On-the-Job Training Program: Increase Your Employee Productivity. *Association for Talent Development*. Retrieved from https://www.td.org/professional-partner-content/on-the-job-training-program-increase-your-employee-productivity.

3 Developing and Sustaining Employee Engagement. *Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)*. Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/sustainingemployeeengagement.aspx.

4 How to Improve Employee Experience. *Gallup*. Retrieved from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/323573/employee-experience-and-workplace-culture.aspx.

5 Markanyx Solutions. (2021). 5 Reasons Why Every Organization Needs a Learning Management System. *Edmonton Chamber of Commerce*. Retrieved from https://www.edmontonchamber.com/2021/09/24/5-reasons-why-every-organization-needs-a-learning-management-system/.

6 Rogers, M. (2020). A Better Way to Develop and Retain Top Talent. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2020/01/a-better-way-to-develop-and-retain-top-talent.

7 From the Great Resignation to the Great Reskilling: Insight on What's Next for the "Great Resigners." *Cengage Group*. Retrieved from https://cengage.widen.net/s/78hrkqgfj7/cg-great-resigners-research-report-final.

8 Why Companies Pay for College. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. Retrieved from https://www.nber.org/digest/feb03/why-companies-pay-college.

9 The Great Solution to the Great Resignation. *SIGMA Assessment Systems Inc*. Retrieved from https://www.sigmaassessmentsystems.com/the-great-solution-to-the-great-resignation/.

10 Church, Allan & Golay, Leslie & Rotolo, Christopher & Tuller, Michael & Shull, Amanda & Desrosiers, Erica. (2012). Without Effort there can be no Change: Reexamining the Impact of Survey Feedback and Action Planning on Employee Attitudes. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*. 20. 223-264. 10.1108/S0897-3016(2012)0000020010.

SIGMA Assessment Systems Inc.
How to Launch a Talent Development Program

Prepared by SIGMA Assessment Systems Inc. Any questions about the information and materials contained within this document can be directed to SIGMA.

PO Box 610757 ▪ Port Huron MI ▪ 48061-0757 ▪
P: 800-265-1285 ▪ E: support@sigmahr.com
www.SIGMAAssessmentSystems.com