

Want an engaged workforce? Prioritise development as a strategic focus

As International Women's Day (8 March) approaches, it's worth reflecting on the rich diversity of South African teams and how this can be an asset for any organisation. Not only do different genders bring rich perspectives to business, but people from different cultures, religions, and generations bring unique skills and creativity to the mix.

By Michelle Bisset ^{3 Mar 2020}



Yet few organisations understand the importance and benefit of recognising and developing these diverse outlooks and experiences and making them part of the company culture. This is despite the fact that [inclusive companies](#) are 1.7 times more likely to be innovators in their market and outperform industry norms by 35%.

So why are people still expected to fit standard “templates” or KPIs?

And why is their success still measured using outdated, inefficient metrics or “old-school” performance appraisals?

These inflexible approaches do not acknowledge or adapt to accommodate and develop individuals based on their unique talents, skills, and interests – they stifle growth and organisational agility.

Rather, individual development should be approached in the context of the individual: What are their strengths and talents that can be nurtured and leveraged? What skills do they want to develop? How do they learn and develop most effectively? What are their personal and professional aspirations? And, how can the organisation focus equally on developing individuals' strengths as it does on developing areas identified for improvement?

The vital role of managers

For personal development to be effective, leaders must identify the uniqueness, talent, and aspirations of the

each person brings to the organisation, and establish how these can be aligned to business imperatives.

Why is this important? Because homogenous, linear career paths no longer exist. There is often no single ladder to the top and, increasingly, people may not want to climb a ladder. They also don't want to sit still. They want to be challenged, to grow, and to feel like their contributions are acknowledged and appreciated. Yet, few employees feel this way. In fact, [70% of employees](#) leave an organisation because of their working relationship with their direct manager, and 93% leave because they want more opportunity to develop.

This suggests that not enough managers are nurturing relationships with their teams and employees based on the individuals within them; they're not creating environments in which development and growth are frequently addressed; and they're failing to provide opportunities for continuous learning and growth.

So, what's lacking? In a word: Engagement.

Building engaged workforces

Managers and organisations need to have constructive conversations with their people about their strengths and how the business can nurture them. Great managers are alive to the possibility and opportunity that developing individuals and teams offer; they consciously invest in their development, and regularly provide feedback and recognition.

But, as it stands, few organisations have reached this level of maturity. Sage's "Why your Workforce isn't Working" research found that:

- Most people (66%) are either partly or not at all engaged at work,
- Half of respondents have never been asked what would improve their workplace experiences, and
- Nearly 70% see being valued and recognised as the most important aspect of their day-to-day employment.

To develop employees who are emotionally connected to their work and – by extension their customers, businesses must make development a strategic focus.

How? By simply providing an environment for growth:

- Ask them to self-reflect, and decide what skills they want to develop and how.
- Get them to advocate for themselves and identify the uniqueness they bring to the table.
- Take them seriously. If they come to you with new ideas, listen to them. If the ideas are good, implement them, and acknowledge the teams that make it happen.
- Nurture future-ready skills, like collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.
- Encourage them to "manage up" by making suggestions for improvement and taking ownership and accountability for their own development.
- Communicate effectively through regular, open feedback loops.
- Embrace and promote diversity.

Without inclusion, diversity means nothing

One thing I cannot stress enough is the importance of inclusion. The power of diversity is lost if employees don't feel that their ideas and perspectives are considered. Having a seat at the table is not enough – it's important to create an environment in which every seat has a voice that is heard and considered.

This may be a challenge for more traditional, homogenous businesses, but it's an imperative that can no longer be ignored and will yield significant dividends if achieved. Ultimately, culture change may be required.

Businesses and individuals that open themselves up to the endless opportunities provided by diversity and tailored development will outperform those that don't.



Give them wings; let them fly

What if you do focus on individual development and employees still leave, taking their talents and skills with them? Well, equally, what if you don't and they stay? While creating an environment of growth increases the likelihood of retention, it does not guarantee it. People move on, and while this may disrupt initially, it can provide further opportunity, both for the individual and business.

In developing your people and embracing diversity, they're likely to be more loyal, engaged, and productive and they're more likely to stay longer. But when they do seek an external role, it's often good for them, good for the business economy at large, and an opportunity to build the next set of talent and skills required. Employee development is a continuous imperative that enables people and businesses to adapt, grow, and thrive in the changing world of work.

Embracing an environment where diversity of talent is embraced, engaged and valued will lead to a shared commitment between managers and their teams, and will provide a platform for growth of both individuals and businesses in which they contribute.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Bisset is the Vice President of Customer Success: Sage Africa & Middle East