10 do's for making both employee and organizational development a success

Academy

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An engine just sits there doing nothing - until somebody fills it with fuel, sets it going in the right direction and gives it the room it needs to move in. We use this metaphor to explain how we utilize employee development and improvement (D&I) as an engine to drive organisational D&I. And there's every reason for optimism here!

People naturally want to improve themselves. It's all we do right from our birth - it's in our very blood. It is both impressive and amazing what we have learned (and unlearned) since we saw the light of day. Part of this happens by itself, thanks to our inner drive. You want to eat, run, climb and talk, and you always want to be able to do more yourself. Part of this is shaped for you by the family you grew up in and by the upbringing they gave you, with its values, norms, rules and tips. As well as by the broader social environment: relatives, the neighbourhood, your friends, clubs. Another part is shaped by the environment that we grew up in, namely by the learning environment at school and in other courses. These various influences reinforce each other and ensure that the employee with his own knowledge, skills and experience uses them to carry out his work at the organization. His self-improvement continues at his organization. He learns from colleagues, finds solutions himself, delves into issues, and takes courses.

So, how do we ensure that an employee's natural inclination to improve himself dovetails with the organization's own needs? Well, the organization consists of people who make the organization's aims a reality. They need knowledge and skills to do this, but which ones? And how and when do you master these skills?In practice, we see that this can be an intractable problem. We hear various opinions when it comes to learning, developing and improving yourself. For example, it is managers' experience that progress is not happening quickly enough and/or is not going well, despite the range of learning opportunities. For their part, employees are often unsure exactly what is expected of them, feel that they don't have any time to learn, and that what they do well doesn't get the attention (and praise) it should.

Clearly, there is a difference between what the manager observes and what the employee experiences, and vice versa. This is logical, as they occupy a different place in the organization and thus have differing perspectives. The way in which I look - and the position from which I look - determine what I see and can see. Add to this a different background and different interests, and we see that the result is a jumbled mess of good intentions and misunderstandings. On both sides.

Despite this, there are grounds to be very optimistic about employee D&I as the engine that drives organizational D&I, because the former is the engine that drives the latter. And not just because it really happens both automatically and every day but because employee D&I can be properly guided and reinforced. We know what turns out to be an obstacle in practice and what it is that actually ensures successful employee D&I. It is an approach that focusses on removing the obstacles and implementing the success factors, i.e. on utilising employee D&I as the engine that drives organizational D&I. We will now look at these obstacles and success factors in more detail.

Obstacles on the road to success

We hear the obstacles in the assumptions and opinions expressed by managers and employees. The good listener or observer quickly uncovers them.

Here is a list of the ten most common examples:

1. If management devotes multiple offsite retreats and sessions to a particular topic then this same topic can be explained to employees in a single hour.

2. Once we have explained the right direction to go in, D&I will happen by itself.

3. We offer a wide range of learning interventions, so you just have to pick one.

4. An employee can still handle his entire workload while he is learning.

5. Once the employee has been to a training session he will immediately start working in the new way.

6. The professional can decide for himself what is right for him.

7. Everybody learns at the same predictable speed.

8. I am too old to learn/I am too busy/I am not smart enough.

9. If I make mistakes when I'm learning then I will see this reflected in my job appraisal.

10. The development process begins on 1 March and ends on 1 December.

It is the job of the internal or external consultant who is guiding the employee's D&I process to be alert to these ways of thinking. They are clearly discernible in what people say and how they behave. The consultant helps to open up these thoughts and assumptions for discussion and to show the extent to which they are true in practice. Is the thought or assumption incorrect or no longer correct? In this case, the consultant helps to turn this obstacle into helpful and achievable ideas. At the same time, he points out the practical obstacles and helps to remove them.

Experience has shown that most solutions are practical in nature and are not actually that hard to come up with. Example: an employee who feels he has no time for an e-learning course can be helped with advice about time management. Another example: if an employee who has taken a training course is unsure how to apply what he has learnt then his manager can give him an assignment where he can do precisely that.This raises the question of why this doesn't happen all by itself. Well, the main focus is usually on deciding on the content of training sessions, e-learnings, seminars and so on. This is absolutely essential work, as without the right content, the efforts made to learn and develop/improve will be somewhat wasted. In other words, the process of achieving employee D&I will be organized based on this content and should receive just as great a focus.

Three success factors

It is our view that employee development and improvement (D&I) is always present, as it is a process that happens naturally every day. If we direct this process together, focus on individual needs and wishes and give people the room they need to learn and experiment then organizational D&I and employee D&I will both dovetail and reinforce each other.

Setting the right course

You can both expect and not expect employees to shape their own D&I process. You can expect: them to be curious about developments both within and outside the organization. You can expect: them to understand that working pro-actively and proposing initiatives are part and parcel of the D&I process. You can expect: them to help colleagues with their own D&I. You can expect: them to find out what suits them best and to take responsibility for their own D&I. However, we cannot expect employees to know everything about all the relevant current and future developments and to make the right choices based on their company's organisational strategy. This is where the management team has the responsibility for pointing out, for making choices, and for setting the course to be pursued. In other words, setting the right course and moving in the right direction is the end-product of the interaction between management and employees, whereby the various perspectives – of the manager and the skilled worker – reinforce each other.

Focus

Focus on discovering what and how someone can and wants to learn. And on recognizing the fact that each person learns in a different way and at a different pace.

Focus on the need to commit yourself to that which is being asked of you. Benefit and need are usually explained well, but what benefits the organization and what it needs do not naturally dovetail with what the employee wants and is able to achieve.

Focus on the need to apply theoretical concepts in practice, to experiment and to obtain feedback. And on the need to have someone around to provide feedback and practical support, i.e. to be a role model.

Focus on the results that are achieved and on the steps that are being taken in the right direction.

Focus on those problematical situations that you will need help to get through.

Room to breathe

Learning costs time, money and effort - full stop. This means that we need to discuss how we can make the D&I (development and improvement) possible. What is realistic? What does the employee himself want, and what possibilities and solutions does he think there are? What inspires and motivates him? What happens to the work that the employee doesn't have time to do right away? What training exercises are there? How is feedback organized? What role does he play in helping his colleagues to learn? What role is reserved for the manager, and how do manager and employee work together?

Practical advice

This brings us to the activities that can be developed in order to take the action needed to make employee D&I and organizational D&I a success, and to keep this process going (and ongoing). Let's go back to our first sentence: people naturally want to improve themselves. In fact, they can't stop themselves from doing so. Now we return to our earlier statement: employee D&I is the engine that drives organizational D&I.

Here is a list of 10 do's that in our experience help people to take the right action to achieve D&I. If you convert these ideas into don'ts, you will soon see where things often go wrong in practice.

10 do's for making employee D&I and organizational D&I a success

1. Be clear about the direction that the organisation is heading in, and keep repeating this.
2. Involve both employees and managers (i.e. not just employees).
3. Organise group-based learning in which people acquire the same knowledge and experience.
4. Combine this with individual learning interventions that match the person's needs and preferred way of learning.
5. Hold regular individual discussions and focus on their problems/needs/wants.
6. Put employees with the same interests in touch with each other.
7. Provide experts to give on-the-job advice and feedback and to demonstrate exemplary behaviour.
8. Avoid having a "mould" that all employees in a certain field of expertise have to fit into.
9. Accept that making mistakes and an initial decline in productivity are part and parcel of the learning process.
10. Celebrate your successes so that all can see them.

Conclusion

If we combine an inspirational, long-term goal with the human factor then, the approach we take will be combining the best of both worlds!

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