

Five ways to help your employees advance their careers (without leaving the company)

Practical advice for HR professionals

Mary Beth McGrath

Mary Beth McGrath is Senior Vice President Global Talent Management at Level 3 Communications, Broomfield, Colorado, USA.

How many times have you heard this one, “You must leave your job and go to another company to advance your career or earn a higher salary?”

I see this line frequently on career advice blogs and have heard it from employees. According to a Glassdoor employee confidence survey, more than one in three employees reported they will look for a new job if they do not receive a pay raise in the next 12 months.

This is where, I think, HR professionals can step in and make a difference. One of the greatest costs to a business is employee turnover. *I’m not just talking dollars and cents, although some experts contend the cost to replace an employee is at least 40 per cent of their annual salary.* I’m talking about the impact employee turnover can have on morale and productivity. HR professionals have avenues to advocate for employees advancing their career without walking out the door. Here are a few things to consider:

- *Harness the power of managers:* A good manager can make or break an employee’s perceived career path. Spend the time and money to invest in your managers. Don’t just encourage your managers to have frank career development conversations with their

employees, teach them how to have discussions tailored to employees’ skills and experiences. Provide the right tools to have open conversations about career development. By investing in this layer of leadership, you are grooming a new generation of leaders and creating company ambassadors.

- *Training or certifications:* Most companies or outside trade organizations offer valuable training or certification programs. Make sure your employees are aware these programs exist. Many people think they have to go to an expensive outside company to get training, but there are internal trainings people can take advantage of to advance their skills. Also, there are many free webinars or specials at trade shows that allow people to get certifications for a fraction of the cost. Encourage employees to investigate these options. And don’t forget MOOCs, massive open online courses, like Coursera. These sites offer full university courses for free.
- *Practice the “me to we” mantra:* People underestimate the power of being a team player in a corporate environment. The HR team should be the best example of being a team player.

While a lot different from a leader, team players are equally important in helping drive the organization toward success. A 20-year study at Stanford University examined the career paths of thousands of executives to determine what qualities they either had or developed that enabled them to move ahead at a rapid pace. Researchers concluded that there were two primary qualities, more than any others, that were indispensable for men and women who are promoted to positions of great responsibility – the ability to handle crisis situations and to function as a team.

To emphasize the importance of functioning as a team, encourage employees to focus on the overall goal or objective and how their contributions can affect the team's outcome. Encourage them to investigate where it makes sense to collaborate and where it makes sense to be an individual contributor.

- *Provide opportunities for leadership roles:* Offer programs for motivated employees to participate in leadership roles in less formal settings, for example, with employee resource groups (ERGs) or a mentoring program. Most employee resource groups have an employee-elected or volunteer leadership team. This is a great way for employees to meet other company *leaders* while gaining valuable skills and growing professional networks.

Level 3's HR team, for example, supports ERGs focused on millennials, women, veterans and even predictive analytics. The leadership teams running these

employee-led groups are volunteers who have the opportunity to learn and *grow within the company*, while also increasing awareness of their leadership skills among peers and top executives.

- *Encourage employees to "know thy self":* Helping employees understand their natural tendencies, what they're good at and what may be a struggle can go a long way in charting a path for development and career advancement. For example, in a team environment, a natural tendency may be to sit back and wait for an assignment. However, an employee who is interested in advancement may be coached to be more proactive in team settings by taking the initiative to ask for an assignment.

An employee who is encouraged to take the initiative out of the gate, in a safe space, will gain confidence, have an opportunity to learn best practices regarding what does and doesn't work for them as a leader and be able to identify the work best suited to their skill set. I frequently hear from people managers who take notice of employees who volunteer to take on a task versus waiting to be assigned.

I encourage managers to remember, while initiative is great, they need to set up for success the members of their team who step forward to take stretch opportunities by making themselves available to be a sounding board and to provide direction when needed. Among the toughest things for managers to remember is, their way isn't the only way and emerging leaders need the room to make

and learn from their own mistakes, and managers who make it safe to do so.

As HR professionals, we are not immune to falling into our own routines, ones that may not always afford us the time to connect with employees. It's just as important for us to take a step back and remember why we got into this field and make time to add value to our business by encouraging ourselves and the HR professionals on our team to them to use our expertise to help employees ignite their career path without leaving the company.

About the author

Mary Beth McGrath is Senior Vice President of global talent management for Level 3 Communications. In this role, Ms McGrath is responsible for the development and implementation of global talent strategies and programs, including corporate social responsibility, designed to attract talent and increase leadership and organizational capability. She and her team of talent management professionals enable the business to achieve its strategic objectives and deliver against the goal to be an employer of choice. Ms McGrath's team also manages a global training curriculum that offers skill and compliance training to all employees, managers and leaders. To support Level 3's organizational culture and the success and development of all individuals, the team provides a wide range of tools that support change management, career frameworks, employee surveys, performance management, 360 feedback, teambuilding and succession planning. Prior to joining Level 3, Ms McGrath held various HR leadership positions at First Data Corporation and PepsiCo. Mary Beth McGrath can be contacted at: marybeth.mcgrath@level3.com