

Staff Development – A Practical Guide for Managers & Leaders

Pre-Learning

First, you need to identify what your staff need to learn and how they need to develop. This can be via a team competency assessment, a one-to-one review meeting, a request from a staff member, observation, monitoring performance, feedback from others, change (e.g. a new process or methodology) or career path planning.

Next, you need to have a conversation with the staff member to ensure they understand and agree with what they need to learn and how they need to develop. It is this conversation that will gain buy-in and have a motivated learner who is prepared to take some ownership for their own learning. At this stage you should also develop a plan as to how the learning and development is best accomplished.

For the purposes of this guide, we will focus on the three main learning tools – training courses, coaching and practice (there are plenty of others discussed in [Brilliant Leader](#)).

Training Courses

You should select a training course or learning event carefully based on the targeted learning outcomes, the course content, the learning methodology, the quality of the provider/trainer, the cost and the duration – preferably, in that order. What you should avoid doing is selecting a course based solely on the title because you might not get what you expected or your staff member needed.

Prior to attending the course, you should sit down with the staff member and explore with them the expectations for the learning experience and what both you and they hope they will get from it.

When they return from the course, you should sit down with them again and have an in-depth conversation about what they have learned and how they are going to apply it back in the workplace. This should then conclude with an action plan for practising and developing the new knowledge and skills.

Practice

It is imperative that staff members are given opportunities to practice what has been learned, ideally in a safe environment. A safe environment could involve a simulation or test platform but normally, this simply means that there should be opportunities for their work to be checked and corrected or improved before going live.

Practice should be timely and initially might require supervision while giving them more freedom to work independently as their competence improves and confidence grows. This is the main function of on-the-job coaching.

Coaching

It is your job to ensure that staff receive coaching support to ensure the proper application of what they have learned and to accelerate learning. You can either coach yourself, utilise other team members or engage the services of an external professional, depending on the complexity of the learning and the expertise required.

Coaching in this context primarily involves monitoring or observing how the knowledge and skills are being applied – what is being done well and what can be improved. On the back of this monitoring and observation, the coach should then be having feedback conversations with the staff member that are timely, two-way, constructive and motivational.

As a result of applied practice supported by coaching the learning and development should be accomplished expeditiously and the staff member will become competent and confident in their own ability for the relevant competency area. They should then be allowed to work independently and your role becomes one of driving performance.

What you should not do

These are the common things that go wrong in relation to the staff development process.

- Send a staff member on a training course without discussing why and gaining their buy-in.
- Present the staff member with a menu of training courses and ask them which one(s) they would like to go on.
- Assume that once they have attended the training course they will now be competent and it is 'job done' as far as your involvement is concerned.
- See the pre-course briefing and post-course debriefing documentation that is produced by your HR department as a form filling exercise. The briefing and debriefing conversations are the most important part of the process, the forms merely prompt and support these conversations.
- Get staff members to just learn on-the-job without providing coaching support.
- Select a training course without exploring whether it is the right one for the needs of your staff. Training courses cost quite a lot of money and you have a responsibility to ensure this money is well spent.

Summary

The effective development of your staff is not rocket science and yet, it is an area where many managers and leaders don't always get it right. Mainly, they get it broadly right and have good intentions but fall short in one or two critical areas that restricts the learning and development of their staff.

- Identify learning and development needs
- Gain buy-in and develop a learning plan
- Select the right training courses or learning events
- Have a pre-course conversation to focus on learning expectations
- Have a post-course conversation and develop an action plan
- Allow opportunities to practice, ideally in a safe environment
- Provide coaching support to develop ability and confidence
- Once they are competent, focus on driving performance

Please [contact us](#) if you would like to discuss any matters arising from this guide in more depth.

Copyright and Distribution

You may circulate this document freely to your colleagues and business associates. You may not alter the text, the links or our copyright notice without our prior written consent.