

Managing

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Helping Employees Create Career Development Plans

A client recently told me that in accepting a new position, he had based his decision on several factors. Notably, one was that his new boss spoke about the importance of helping him create and work on a personal career development plan. This interest in his future goals and career weighed heavily in my client's decision. Employees today are motivated by, contribute to *and* stay with a place of employment because they feel they are developing new skills and knowledge—and that their employer is engaged in the process with them.

A personal career development plan enables the employee to proactively take charge of his or her career by describing specific goals and assigning action steps to achieve them. Your involvement as the supervisor allows you to understand the career motivations of those who work for you. You can then mentor the individuals in areas they wish to develop, look for assignments that give them greater opportunities to do so, and help identify resources to move your people closer to their stated goals.



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Action Plan

Personal Career Development Plan Outline, Step by Step

- i. Identify your long-term career goals. What would you like to be doing in three to five years? Where do you want to be in your career? Be as specific as possible in describing your goals.
- ii. Identify two to five short-term career goals that you would like to accomplish over the next 12 months. Examples of areas that your goals might cover include: knowledge building; skill development; client management; case management; leadership skills; client development; and pro bono involvement.
- iii. Create action steps for reaching each of the short-term goals you have identified. Include due dates and start-by dates for each step.
- iv. Identify any assistance you may need to reach your goals. This might include specific individuals in the firm who can be helpful to you, CLE courses, printed and online resources, networking groups and so forth.
- v. Describe obstacles or challenges you believe you will face in reaching these goals. What would be useful in overcoming those hurdles?

Step One: Creating the Plan

The process begins by meeting with each employee to explain the whys and hows of creating a personal career development plan. Acknowledge the benefits of having such a plan, and

describe your involvement in helping the plan succeed. Then ask each person to draft his or her own plan in three specific parts: long-term goals, short-term goals and action steps.

The individual will want to identify long-term career goals to be reached in the next three to five years. The short-term career goals should be aims that can be accomplished over the next 12 months. Employees often glean their short-term goals from the longer-term ones. Then, once the short-term goals have been selected, the individual needs to state action steps for meeting each of those goals. Writing down specific “due dates” or “begin by” dates next to each step increases the chances that the step will actually be accomplished.

Here are examples of the types of goals and actions a plan might include:

- Long-term goal: Build practice in estate planning.
- Short-term goal: Gain substantive knowledge in estate planning.
- Action steps:
 1. Identify CLE courses in estate planning (by May 1).
 2. Ask estate planning partner Joe Smith for advice on building expertise in this area (by next Tuesday).
 3. Ask Joe Smith to include me in estate planning matters that will build my practical knowledge of this area (by next Tuesday).

You might want to create a standard outline of a personal career devel-

opment plan that employees can use as a template in drafting their plans. (See the *Action Plan* sidebar.) It can be helpful to give examples of categories in which employees can select specific goals. A lawyer, for example, might select goals in areas such as knowledge building, case management, client development and leadership skills.

What if an employee chooses not to create a personal career development plan? Do not take responsibility for getting the plan completed. Instead, spend your time with those who see the value in this process and *want* to take a proactive approach to their careers.

Step Two: Reviewing the Draft

Once an employee has completed a draft plan, meet with the individual for an initial discussion about the plan's specific contents. (Be sure to set aside enough *uninterrupted* time for this meeting.) Your discussion will allow the employee to go into greater detail and, thereby, clarify his or her goals. But it will also allow the two of you to add specific action steps and resources that will help the employee meet those goals. You'll want to ask the individual several questions during this discussion:

- How would you prioritize your goals?
- What resources, including specific individuals, can the firm provide to help you meet your goals?
- Are there specific things I can do to help you? For example, are there specific assignments that might be useful to you in gaining a particular skill or in building special knowledge?
- What obstacles or challenges do you anticipate facing in trying to reach these goals? How do you plan to overcome those? How can I help?

At the end of this discussion, ask the employee to make any changes to the draft plan that were decided on

during the meeting, and to send a copy of the edited plan to you. In addition, select a mutually convenient time to have a follow-up meeting regarding the employee's progress on the plan.

Quarterly in-person meetings, even if only for 15 minutes, allow you to know how the employee is progressing, give him or her an opportunity to ask for further assistance, and provide an opportunity to build the human connection between the two of you.

Note that some employers tie career development plans to evaluations. However, while the annual evaluation can provide an opportunity to review the plans, keep the two processes separate. Otherwise, many employees will feel there are "wrong" and "right" career goals that are judged

during performance evaluations. It's when they are used as standalone tools that career development plans can be great motivators.

It Brings Benefits to You, Too

One of the things today's employees seek from their employers is a commitment to professional development. Most of us, but especially lawyers, are goal-driven. Building a personal career development plan allows individuals to set meaningful career goals for themselves. As a supervisor, your involvement gives you the opportunity to mentor and coach individuals to meet their goals. As one supervisor put it, "This has not only allowed me to become a better supervisor, but also a better person!" ¹⁸