How to Help an Employee Figure Out Their Career Goals

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The best leaders want to help their employees develop and reach their career goals. But what if your employee doesn’t actually know what they want? These days, career paths at many companies aren’t clear cut, so chances are some of your employees are looking to you for direction. Should they try to move into management, or stay as an individual contributor? Angle for an overseas opportunity? Move into a different functional area that might better fit their interests?
Of course, your employees are the best judge of what feels right for their future. But if they’re unsure, there are steps you can take to offer support. Here’s how to help them identify career goals that feel both meaningful and motivational.

**Help them analyze patterns.**

Many employees are unsure about what their “passion” is — and, frankly, identifying one is a fairly high bar. But we all have a good sense of what we like or find interesting. As I describe in my book, *The Long Game: How to Be a Long-Term Thinker in a Short-Term World*, focusing on the question of how to “optimize for interesting” is valuable because we rarely take the time to think about our preferences — and to understand what they mean for our long-term career aspirations. Help your employees think this through by asking them what they enjoy most and least in their current role, and which new areas they’re curious about.

It can also be useful to discuss where they naturally excel. They may have a sense of their strengths already (from prior experience, or comments from colleagues and clients), but for many professionals, this can be a blind spot, so don’t hesitate to point out areas where you believe they have a special aptitude. It’s often harder for people to identify their strengths (which they take for granted) rather than their weaknesses (which feel abundantly clear), so helping them gain clarity here is a mitzvah. Armed with their answers and the preferences they articulate, you’ll be able to suggest logical next steps and avenues for them to explore.

For instance, an employee may recognize that he loves giving presentations and is good at it. But he may not be aware of opportunities at your company to leverage that skill, especially if it’s outside the realm of the work he’s doing now. You could encourage him to
look into sales positions, or — if he also loves travel — steer him toward international business development or government relations positions where he’d have the opportunity to pitch new regions on your company’s expansion.

**Expand their worldview.**

For some employees, probing into their interests will help uncover patterns about where they excel, what they find most compelling, and possible future directions. But others, especially if their role is fairly narrow, may not have had enough exposure to opportunities to form a reliable picture. If they’re interested in exploring career goals, one strategy you can attempt is to create a personalized “micro-rotational” experience for them. Just like a company’s talent development department curates special learning opportunities for high-potential employees — often including tours of duty through different geographies and functional roles — you can do the same for your employee on a much more limited scale.

It’s unlikely you could (or would want to) send them abroad for months on end or farm them out to a different team, of course. But you could craft a more limited version that might involve making a special effort to let them try new things, whether it’s presenting at an all-hands meeting, attending an industry conference they’ve never been to, or serving on a cross-departmental committee. By letting them experience new challenges and then debriefing regularly to see what they enjoy and where they have natural skills, you can help them identify areas of interest to explore further — and your personalized approach is likely to engender both gratitude and loyalty.

**Don’t steer too hard.**

Once you immerse yourself in the role of mentor, it’s easy to get a little too wrapped up in the outcome. You might find yourself taking
it personally if your employee decides that they don’t like an activity that you think they’re good at, or doesn’t want to pursue a career goal that you think would be right for them. We have to control ourselves and recognize that as leaders, we’re there to support our employees in achieving their career ambitions — not to dictate them. If they end up looking different than what we’d hoped or imagined (for instance, your protégé decides they don’t want to take over your position when your planned promotion comes through), we need to adapt to reality and stay loose enough to appreciate our employees for what they *can* offer us, the team, and the company.

It’s not always possible to help the people we supervise identify and work toward their career goals. But having a sense of purpose and a feeling of momentum in achieving our career goals is powerful — so when we can assist our employees in getting there, it’s a meaningful way we can make a difference in their lives and their professional success.

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