

# Employee Development Approach for Generation Yers: A Conceptual Framework

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## ABSTRACT

*Generation Y is beginning to make their presence felt in today's workforce. Unfortunately, most organizations are unprepared to handle this technology-savvy new type of worker that demands instant gratification and a high feeling of importance. In this article, we provide a conceptual framework based upon employee development. The conceptual framework developed in this article can be utilized to better understand and foster productive working relationships with Generation Y employees.*

## INTRODUCTION

Robert F. Kennedy stated in July of 1964, "Great change dominates the world, and unless we move with change we will become its victims" (Frank, 2001, p. 91). This statement is undeniably accurate in today's organizations. Technology has made every aspect of business faster and cheaper, and the organizations that have it and know how to use it have the potential of experiencing rapid growth and profitability. Although it is obvious that technology has greatly affected our products, processes, and procedures, many would argue that it has affected society's greatest asset, its people, just as profoundly.

Those entering the workforce at the present time are known as Generation Yers; born between 1982 and 2000. It is evident that Generation Y is different than any generation the living world can remember. Their exposure to certain technology at such an early age has given them unique characteristics. For instance, they typically have a need for instant gratification. MP3s, Tivo, high speed internet, and the affordability of the personal computer have all contributed to this generation getting what they want, when they want it; and most from their very own bedroom. Profile websites, chat rooms, and blogs have also given every individual a voice that can be heard around the world. This translates into a heightened sense of individual power. Once source writes:

*It should be no surprise that the tech-savvy Gen Yers in your organization want to feel connected, updated and involved. The technology that they grew up with gave them real-time access to information, and their boomer parents and teachers socialized them to speak up and contribute their ideas (Reynolds, Bush, & Geist, 2008, pp. 20-21).*

So how does an organization deal with this new kind of employee that desires to be involved and important from the very beginning? Sadly, some imprison these employees in an organizational hierarchy until they learn to respect the chain of command. DeLong, Gabarro, and Lees (2008) stated, "today's professional service firms are so busy making money that they've lost the art of making talent" (p. 115). These organizations most likely find themselves with an elevated amount of turnover. Those looking to heed the words of Robert F. Kennedy and move with change instead of fighting it have adapted to their Generation Y employees. It is pivotal for management in any organization to understand the needs of this new generation that is entering the workforce and have a strategic plan of how their role will

change as they develop through an organization. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explain the Employee Development Conceptual Framework and demonstrate how managers can utilize this framework to develop the newest generation of employees – members of Generation Y.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Generation Y**

They have been labeled GenMe, Echo Boomers, the Net Generation, RenGen, Millennials, and Generation Y (Gen Yers). Regardless of the label, it describes a group of Americans who were born between 1982 and 2002. Howe and Strauss (2007), leading researchers on Gen Yers, describe this group as entitled, sheltered, confident, realists, conventional, time sensitive, and achievement centered. According to Conrad and Matuson (2009), over 20 percent of the workforce consists of Gen Yers. For this reason, it is pivotal for management in any organization to understand the needs of this new generation and have a strategic plan on how to develop this new batch of employees. The Employee Development Conceptual Framework was created to demonstrate how managers could develop Gen Yers while simultaneously meeting their organizational needs.

### **Employee Development**

Vaught, Hoy, and Buchanan (1985) defined employee development as “any individual or organizational activity that, through increased learning, contributes to both personal and organizational objectives” (p. 10). This continuous process can be an arduous task that can be accomplished through multiple approaches. For example, organizations have traditionally used coaching, counseling, or mentoring as a means of employee development.

Coaching is defined as, “the process of providing one-on-one guidance and instruction to improve knowledge, skills, and work performance” (Blanchard & Thacker, 2007, p. 268). According to Stone (2007), challenges related to the coaching method of employee development consist of undermining employees’ self-esteem, failing to follow up, not recognizing improvement, failing to give direction, making unrealistic demands, and being impatient.

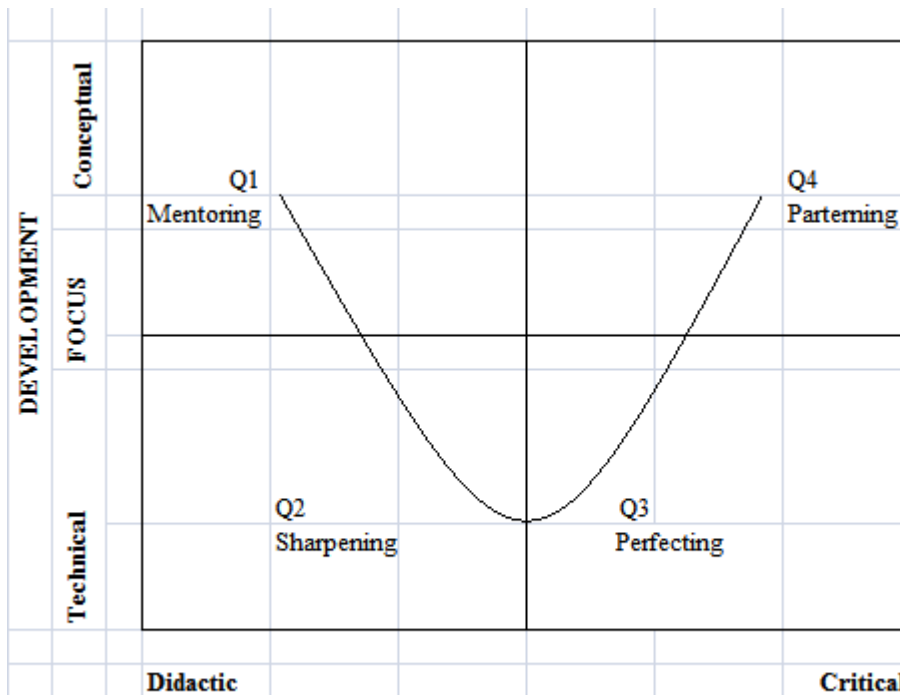
Employee counseling is “an emphasis on encouraging training and development efforts in a situation in which an employee’s unwillingness or inability to perform his or her job satisfactorily is either voluntary or involuntary” (Robbins & DeCenzo, 2007, 349). A unique challenge to employee counseling is the risk of offending or alienating employees.

Mentoring has been described as “providing guidance, advice, and encouragement through an ongoing one-on-one work relationship” (Certo, 2003, p. 465). Typically, this is accomplished by assigning a senior employee to an employee when he or she enters an organization. According to Kram (1985), when mentorship is one-way, from the top down, the relationship between mentor and mentee rarely works out. Each of previously mentioned employee development methods have their own unique challenges, thus, we have developed the Employee Development Conceptual Framework to address these challenges.

### **Employee Development Conceptual Framework**

The Employee Development Conceptual Framework is understood by the relationship of three different areas of measurement: 1) competency, 2) development style, and 3) development focus. These three factors will come together to highlight the appropriate relationship that a manager should have with

a subordinate. As illustrated below in Figure 1, an employee will start at the Mentoring stage (C1) when they begin their career in a given organization. They will then progress through the sharpening and perfecting stages; thus, finally reaching the partnering stages as their competency develops. Through all of these stages, the role of the manager changes to fulfill the needs of the subordinate.



**Figure 1: Employee Development Conceptual Framework**

The following is a detailed description of the three measurements and the four quadrants of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework. Suggestions on how an organization can use this framework to implement a mentoring system, cross-functionality, and self-managed work teams are also provided. It is important to note that the true concept of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework is how the relationship between a manager and a subordinate will change as the employee grows within the organization. How an employee develops through an organization and the time frame is organizational specific. Like any employee development approach, it must be personalized by the organization in order to be effective.

**Competency**

An employee’s competency can be defined as a “broad grouping of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a person to be successful at a number of similar tasks” (Blanchard & Thacker, 2007, p. 9). Competencies can increase with job specific training and organizational experiences. As an employee develops competency, he or she can begin moving through the quadrants of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework. Judgment of an employee’s competency can be done informally at the discretion of a manager or formally through tests, timelines, or achievements of certain milestones. It is recommended that a balanced approach be used. Further, a structured approach is needed because it

promotes fairness in the process and creates a tangible set of goals for employees to achieve. Employees are different; therefore, assessing them all the same way can yield challenges. Management should be responsible for building and developing strong relationships with employees to approve their competency.

### **Development Style**

Development style is the measurement on the horizontal axis of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework. A manager's sole responsibility is to make sure that his/her subordinates are performing their tasks at the desired level of effectiveness; but the way in which a manager teaches those tasks will vary depending on the competency of the subordinate. The range of the development style measurement is didactic to critical. A didactic theory of teaching states that "employees need to be taught what to think" and will "learn how to think if they are given details, definitions, explanations, rules, guidelines, reasons, etc." (Paul, 1990, p. 21). In other words, the manager explains to the employee exactly what to do and how to do it. This style of development is necessary when the subordinate does not yet have the knowledge, skills, or abilities to be proficient on the job. On the other side, a critical style of teaching says that "employees need to be taught how to think not what to think" and "this should be accomplished by raising live issues that stimulate learners to gather, analyze, and assess them" (Paul, 1990, p. 21). This style is made effective by the ability of the manager to stimulate critical thinking by using Socratic questioning, which according to Paul and Elder (2007) is: disciplined questioning that can be used to pursue thought in many directions and for many purposes: to explore complex ideas, to get to the truth of things, to open up issues and problems, to uncover assumptions, to analyze concepts, to distinguish what is known from what is not known, and to follow out logical implications of thought. (p. 36)

In other words, the manager should not just focus on giving employees the answers, but rather challenging them to understand the big picture so that they can find their own answers. So when the employee becomes involved with the organization through the mentoring and sharpening stages, the teaching style of the manager will be very didactic in that he or she will be telling the employee the processes and procedures. As the employee develops into the perfecting and partnering stages, the manager takes a much more critical stance to help the employee begin to understand the big picture of the organization which not only develops a more valuable employee for the organization, but a resource for those still in the didactic development style.

### **Development Focus**

A manager should always be a visible resource and focus on the relationship with his or her subordinates; however, the focus of the development will change over time. The vertical measurement of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework is development focus and will measure the range from technical to conceptual. If the development focus is conceptual then the employee is thinking of long-term, strategic possibilities. So when an employee starts with an organization in the Mentoring stage, he or she should be introduced to all of the possibilities within the organization. Whether it's a future position, salary, or any other incentives, the employee should be excited about their potential within the organization. When the focus is more "technical" the manager and employee are focused more in the present and what needs to be done in order to maximize effectiveness. The manager and employee analyze the details of the job responsibility through the Sharpening and Perfecting stages where the employee will try to achieve complete knowledge of tasks they are to perform. Then, in the Partnering stage, the focus returns to conceptual where the employee will be given the proper outlets to try to

improve the process of the organization. Below is a detailed breakdown of the four quadrants of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework and suggestions for developing employees through each quadrant:

### **Q1 Mentoring**

Armstrong (1999) defined mentoring as “ the process of using specially selected and trained individuals to provide guidance and advice which will help to develop the careers of the ‘protégés’ allocated to them” (p. 838). The first quadrant of the Employee Development Model is called the “Mentoring” phase and is generally where an orientation would occur. Of course, the act of having an orientation does not encompass the Mentoring stage. Again, the Employee Development Conceptual Framework does not signify an event, but a change in the manager/subordinate relationship. In this period, supervisors build a mentor relationship with their new subordinate to orient them into the company and make sure that they are developing as planned. This can be accomplished through weekly or biweekly one-on-one meetings. It is critical that managers understand the art of effective feedback and practice active listening skills at this time. Bruce Bodaken and Robert Fritz (2006) devised a four-step process to giving effective feedback. The four steps are:

1. *Acknowledge the truth.* All Managerial Moments of Truth begin the same way: all parties involved agree on the “truth.” This is the actual truth, not an interpretation of the truth. For example, telling a subordinate that he is slacking on his deadlines is not the truth. Telling him, the report was due Wednesday and it is now Friday is a truth that both can acknowledge because it is based around fact. This puts all parties on the same page and the focus is on a behavior, not a label. It is imperative that the subordinate acknowledge and agree with the truth before proceeding to step two.
2. *Analyze how it got to be that way.* This is where a manager must practice the art of the question and make sure that every detail of the events that led up to the current situation is understood. One of four types of questions can be asked: information, clarification, implication, and discrepancy (2006). It is imperative to recognize any assumptions that are being made and make sure that those are verbally verified so that the situation in its entirety can be revealed.
3. *Create an action plan.* In using the previous example of a late report, it is a good idea to ask the subordinate when the next time he will have a similar project to complete and have him describe in detail what he will do differently to get the report in on time. It is always best if the employee comes up with his own action plan as this gives ownership and accountability to the plan, but the manager may need to provide some support with ideas.
4. *Establish a feedback system.* This is not nearly as complicated as it sounds. Bodaken and Fritz (2006) suggest simply having the employee email a detailed description of the conversation and his action plan by a specific date. This not only gets the subordinate to rethink the conversation and put it on paper so he understands it, it also provides a written account that the conversation occurred and can be a resource to the manager in case the employee becomes a bigger problem and more serious action needs to be taken.

It is also imperative to build a structure that drives the one-on-one meetings. An effective way to do this is to have each employee complete a S.W.O.T. (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis on themselves as well as set S.M.A.R.T.C. (Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Reachable, Timely, and Challenging) goals (Latham, 2004). With this agenda, new employees will formally meet with their manager to discuss their progression on these goals as well as any new insights to their S.W.O.T. Analysis. Managers can use the four steps provided by Bodaken and Robert Fritz (2006) to

effectively address performance gaps and begin improving their employees' competencies to the Sharpening stage.

## **Q2 Sharpening**

Once the employee is comfortable in their work environment and their initial job responsibilities, the next step is to begin opening them up to the bigger picture of the organization in a phase called Sharpening. A test or evaluation could be utilized to move them into this level from Mentoring. The development focus for the manager in this stage shifts from the possibility-minded conceptual focus to the technical aspects of the task(s) the subordinate is responsible for completing. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, this may be a good time to begin cross-training. This will expose the employee to the organizational process, not just their particular task. It would make sense to keep the employee in the same streamline as their current task. For example, don't send a welder to unload trucks. Instead, let the individual learn how to sand so that it is clear what he or she needs to do as a welder to make the sander's job easier. An article in HR Focus (2008) writes, "A cross-functional rotation moves people between distinct business units to allow a wider range of experiences" (p. 7). It is up to the organization to determine how cross-functionality can work for them.

## **Q3 Perfecting**

The Perfecting quadrant is when the manager shifts from being a didactic style of development to a critical style. This means that, although the focus is still on the technical aspects of an employee's job, the manager refrains from giving too many direct answers to questions and, instead, encourages the employee to think critically about the answer by asking questions. Questions have two functions: 1) increase self-awareness, and 2) increase self-responsibility. They help the subordinate to begin to understand the big picture of the organization, which is essential for progressing to the Partnering stage.

The shift from Sharpening to Perfecting is often up to the discretion of the manager because the change from didactic to critical is often a process that takes some time. In other words, if a manager just decides one day to begin making an employee think critically, that employee will most likely become very frustrated and the relationship may suffer because of it. It is probably a good idea for a manager to have an upfront conversation with each employee when this shift will begin to occur and ease the employee into the critical thinking process.

## **Q4 Partnering**

Once the employee completely understands the process, it is essential that they are put into a situation to prove their understanding. The final phase of the Employee Development Conceptual Framework is called Partnering because the development focus shifts from technical back to conceptual. The manager and employee partner to begin improving the organization. This stage is crucial to an organization because it promotes new ideas, growth, and positive organizational change. When this stage is employed correctly, employees feel empowered, significant, and loyal to the organization. Members of this quadrant would make good mentors for new members of the organization or be prime candidates to go into another job classification (such as budgeting or shipping/receiving) and learn an entire new process making them even more valuable to the organization. Nevertheless, the most advantageous way to utilize these employees is to turn them into change agents. An increasingly popular way to do this is by introducing them to self-managed work teams. There is a lot of planning and details that go into effectively developing self-managed work teams, but four of the most crucial factors for implementing them into any organization are: commitment, vision, training, and feedback.

- *Commitment.* Change is hard. It takes time, effort, and sacrifice. It is, nonetheless, essential for everyone to completely support the implementation of self-managed work teams, starting at the very top of the organization and filtering down, before the process can begin.
- *Vision.* If everyone is not aligned with the same vision, self-managed work teams will not be effective. This gives the team an identity and a purpose. The team coach facilitates the members in developing their own vision and gives the team ownership in their vision. Once this is created, they can develop their team goals. Mae Moss calls this, “the most essential step toward staff ownership (Moss, 1996 p. 185).”
- *Training.* Lack of training is the most consistent reason that self-managed work teams fail. Many managers do not realize the time that it takes to develop a team and the members in it to perform at this level; and most lack the patience to invest the time and funds into adequate training. Cross-functionality is an important part of self-managed work teams, so members must learn how to do many tasks within an organization. On top of task-focused training, members must also learn how to work in a team. This means training in leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, conflict management, dealing with difficult people, etc. This is where the organization usually fails to allocate enough resources. As a result, many teams fail because of lack of synergy, not because they were inept in their work.
- *Feedback.* Of all the documentation on self-managed work teams, only a few sources seem to mention the importance of feedback. In fact, this step is as crucial as any in the development of work teams. How else will they know that they are improving? Bodaken and Fritz (2006) also developed a way for teams to use the *Managerial Moment of Truth* to achieve effective team feedback, and this process is recommended.

Self-managed work teams are not appropriate for every organization but, whether an organization decides to implement them or not, these four crucial factors can apply to almost any level of involvement given to employees in this quadrant.

## **CONCLUSION**

A new generation of people is entering the workforce today. These individuals are known as Generation Y and their proficiency in technology has created a serious demand for their skills. These employees expect to be informed, move at a fast pace, and to be empowered by their organization. The Employee Development Conceptual Framework illustrates how the relationship between a manager and a Generation Y employee can change as the employee’s competency in the organization grows. Their increased competency will lead them through four quadrants: 1) Mentoring, 2) Sharpening, 3) Perfecting, and 4) Partnering. These quadrants are distinguished by their relationship between the manager’s development style (didactic/critical) and development focus (technical/conceptual). But, like most leadership models, the Employee Development Model can only be effective if it is interpreted correctly for the organization that decides to use it.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Employee Development Conceptual Framework highlights the appropriate relationship between managers and subordinates. Although we have provided some suggestions as to how to implement a feedback system, a cross-training system, and a self-managed work team through this

framework, it is up to the organization to determine the most fitting way to develop an employee as his or her competency increases. It is recommended that an organization be bold enough to give this model a chance. But doing so will require an extensive amount of planning and research in the changes they would like to make to ensure that they are successful. In any case, we hope that the Employee Development Conceptual Framework enlightens any manager to consider his relationship with his subordinates and how he can use that in order to develop his employees through the organization.

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