

Individual development plans: A trap?

by Martin Lanik, Ph.D.

Many organizations around the world use development plans to document their employees' development goals by itemizing the skills they need to improve and the learning activities they should undertake. In theory this is an honorable effort, but in practice, at most organizations development plans have become just another bureaucratic exercise that consumes time and effort without producing the desired results. In fact, researchers at Maastricht University in the Netherlands found that, among 2,271 employees, those who had a development plan in place didn't plan to engage in more learning activities than non-users, nor did they see themselves as having stronger skills than non-users. The only thing the employees with development plans were better at was creating development plans.

There are many reasons why development plans fail. Two in particular are worth highlighting in the context of the [Leader Habit Formula](#). First, development plans are often too big. Spurred by the "more is better" fallacy, employees and managers cram too many learning activities into their plans, without regard for how much time those activities will require. The individual activities seem reasonable in isolation, but during busy workdays it is hard to find time to read a book, take a class or practice a complex skill. As a result, employees struggle to make meaningful progress toward their development goals and soon those goals begin to feel overwhelming or impossible to achieve. And we have already seen what happens when people don't believe that they can do something—they procrastinate or give up.

The second reason why individual development plans fail is one we've already encountered; in fact, it's the same reason why most training and leadership development programs fail: They focus on acquisition of *knowledge* rather than skills and habits. As soon as someone says "learning activity," we're right back where we started with "read a book or take a class." The intentions are good, but, as we've already seen, the familiar methods and tools of knowledge-based instruction simply aren't effective at developing skills, which can only be done by practicing the behaviors that make up the skills we want to learn. It doesn't matter how many books you read about music theory or how many lectures you attend where someone explains proper piano-playing technique with glossy handouts and a slick PowerPoint presentation—you can't learn to play the piano without actually playing the piano. Similarly, you can read all the books you want on influence, empowerment and coaching, but unless you start practicing those skills, you won't get better at them.

If you want your leadership development workout to succeed, don't waste time creating a big, overwhelming development plan—just start practicing your first Leader Habit exercise. After your self-efficacy increases and you start to believe that you can develop your leadership skills despite all of the inevitable distractions at work and at home, then you can think about putting together a long-term plan. For now, focus on turning your first exercise into a keystone habit, and the rest will follow.

Adapted from [The Leader Habit: Master the Skills You Need to Lead—in Just Minutes a Day](#)

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