

Professional Development on a Shoestring

In these days, more than ever, training and development budgets are extremely lean, or nonexistent. “I know professional and leadership development is important, but I have no money to spend,” our clients offer. “I believe in investing in people, but I’ve nothing to invest.” “Maybe next year we can offer training,” they suggest. More and more, organizational leaders are realizing that it is important to invest in their employees, managers, and senior leadership team. They just don’t see how they can possibly do that with tightening budgets and rising operational and programmatic needs that must be met, and met first.

Rather than wait for budget relief in order to commit to developing your organization’s current and future leaders, get creative and proactive by implementing a few or all of the ideas we outline below for professional and leadership development. They may require some time, effort, and attention, but they call for minimal budget. In addition, making these initiatives happen now will demonstrate that you are committed to continuing to invest in your people; increase engagement and enthusiasm throughout your organization; and develop your staff and leaders.

1. *Launch a book discussion group* – Choose a book that resonates with where your organization is and/or where it needs to go, invite all employees (or selected employees if that works better for you) to read the book, and discuss it over lunch. Have participants take turns leading and facilitating the discussions. Work as a group to highlight learnings that apply directly to your organization and plan out how you’ll take steps and actions that will move each of you individually, as well as the organization as a whole, forward.

Great books that we recommend to spark action-oriented discussion are:

- *Made to Stick* by Chip and Dan Heath
- *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni
- *Our Iceberg is Melting* by John Kotter
- *Leadership and Self-Deception* by The Arbinger Institute
- *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler

If reading books seems unwieldy or too time-consuming, choose an article from a favorite magazine or newspaper such as *Harvard Business Review* or *The New York Times*, disseminate that, and discuss it. You can also find thought-provoking short videos to use with a group as well.

2. *Start a "learning society"* – Chances are you have more knowledge, experience, and know-how in your organization than you think or know you do. And this knowledge, experience, and know-how can be a great resource when it's readily shared. Gather employee data on their experiences, expertise and related (and unrelated) knowledge – and share it widely. There may easily be others in the organization who need to learn a skill that already exists in the cubicle next to them. You can even start "lunch and learns" around these topics, if there's enough interest.
3. *Build accountability groups and partners* – So often learning doesn't happen and action items don't get accomplished because we simply don't make time for those things, even if we deem them important. By building accountability throughout the organization with accountability partners and groups, you easily get your employees, managers, and senior leaders to hold themselves more accountable for what they say they need to learn and do, and how they need to develop. An accountability partner can be as simple as someone your staff checks in with once a week, or twice a month – to whom they "promise" what they'll get done and with whom they hold themselves accountable. This simple use of the "guilt-factor" can move mountains.
4. *Identify stretch assignments* – Often the greatest way to further develop future leaders is to offer your staff the opportunity to learn skills real time – to put them in an assignment that stretches them to grow personally and professionally. Assess the development needs of your staff and then find, or design, an opportunity or project that will allow your key staff members to stretch themselves and develop the skills, gain the knowledge, and grow as necessary.
5. *Assign internal coaches and/or mentors* – There are times when what is truly most needed for further development is a sense of being supported and/or a watchful eye. By assigning internal coaches and/or mentors to your staff, you offer them guidance from someone who's "been there, done that," as well as a (hopefully) caring eye who is invested in the staff member's success. It is most beneficial to assign an internal coach and/or mentor who is not within the staff member's reporting structure. A boss who also serves as a mentor may focus his or her guidance on what is best for his or her own needs as the head of the department, as opposed to offering guidance that is solely focused on what is best for the employee.
6. *Offer the opportunity to shadow* – Seeing can be believing. By offering staff members the opportunity to shadow strong managers and leaders you afford them the chance to see good, and maybe even great, leadership and management in practice. Your staff members can learn by watching, then emulating and copying, specific leadership behaviors.

7. *Establish action learning groups* – There may be specific issues that need to be tackled within your organization – things like the backlog in customer service, or the need for innovative marketing and promotion, or the dearth of effective communication within the organization overall. By establishing an action learning group (facilitated by senior executives and Human Resources) that has the mission of diving into and providing recommendations for addressing your issues, you not only offer the action learning group members a great developmental opportunity, you also address an ongoing organizational issue.
8. *Take advantage of free or inexpensive resources* – There are resources available that may not require a large financial investment, yet offer a large developmental result. There are assessments such as the *Time Mastery Profile*® and the *Work Expectations Profile*, from John Wiley & Sons, Inc., that are relatively inexpensive and extremely easy to administer and interpret – and offer great insight for individuals, as well as the organization as a whole, as to development needs and opportunities and specific next steps to take. In addition, you can offer select staff members the chance to attend local professional seminars offered by your partners, affiliates, and sector professional groups.
9. *Have developmental conversations* – They're free, they're important...but they're not always easy to have. Especially when you're concerned that you can't necessarily take any actions to further your staff's development because of your budget constraints. Still, and maybe even more so, these conversations are essential. Be upfront about your constraints, yet work with your employees and senior leaders to together design what the organization, and they themselves, can do to further their development. Work with what you have and show them you're invested in them.
10. *Talk to your colleagues* – Now is the time to share ideas. Chances are there are actions and approaches you've taken that others would benefit from knowing, and actions and approaches they've taken that you've never thought of...and you could easily bring into your own organization with great results. Reach out to colleagues – both internal and external – and see what ideas are out there to share.

It may seem insurmountable and there may be no actual dollars for investment in your most important asset at this time, but there are ways to continue to develop the people that your organization depends upon. Try these ten ideas and then come up with ten more of your own. Invest in the people who do, and will continue to, make a difference for your organization and the stakeholders you serve.

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