

THE CAREER DIALOGUE:

aligning the interests of employer and employee

Fair and equitable career progression doesn't have to be standardised and inflexible. Indeed, organisations can make a virtue of offering a wide variety of roles and career paths, says **Jill Flint-Taylor**

One of the most challenging areas in people management is that of career development. It is here that individuals' hopes, fears and aspirations intersect with the business imperatives and goals of the organisation. Not surprisingly, many organisations struggle to reconcile individuals' expectations of support for their career development with the established systems and processes for assessment, promotion and talent management.

Probably the single most important factor in achieving this alignment is the establishment of an effective "career dialogue" between individuals and the organisation. If this dialogue is working, there will be regular communication between the employee and a representative of the organisation – in most cases his or her line manager. The manager is responsible for providing information on the organisation's future direction and requirements, and the employee is responsible for making good use of this information to plan ahead and position themselves to meet these future requirements.

Perhaps more controversially, the organisation needs to empower its managers to shape job and career opportunities to suit the needs and aspirations of individuals – negotiating and contracting with employees to ensure both parties' requirements are satisfied. Extra care is required to ensure fairness in career progression and promotion, but anything less will make it almost impossible to achieve a fit between the expectations of individuals and the needs of the organisation. This is a delicate balance for managers to strike and organisations have a responsibility to support them in this challenging area.

Although all organisations need to comply with equal opportunities legislation, there tends to be more pressure on public sector organisations to demonstrate best practice in this area. This pressure can lead to rules and procedures that place severe constraints on career dialogue – resulting in frustration and disappointment for individuals and potential resourcing problems for the organisation.

To avoid these problems, it must be recognised that a process can be equitable without being standardised to the point of "one size fits all". People should be promoted on the basis of their potential and ability to fulfil relevant role requirements, as determined by a rigorous assessment process. Beyond that, however, there is still considerable scope for career dialogue. Indeed, organisations can make a virtue of having a wide variety of roles and career paths – for example, a range of more and less attractive postings – by agreeing career packages tailored to individuals.

Within the civil service the current context for career development is the Professional Skills for Government (PSG) initiative, the implementation of which helps to illustrate some of the principles and challenges outlined above. The PSG framework provides a good starting point for career dialogue by spelling out the skills and expertise required by senior employees across the civil service. Official PSG communications indicate that departments should adhere strictly to the principles of PSG, while applying these principles in a pragmatic way to suit their specific business needs.

This recommended approach preserves the flexibility required for effective career dialogue, as described above. However, there is a risk that in the implementation of PSG this flexibility is compromised in a number of ways. For example, some senior roles require a high level of technical expertise. If promotion criteria are weighted towards a highly standardised version of PSG requirements, it may be difficult to offer an acceptable career package for people with this level of specialist expertise. A more pragmatic approach would adjust the criteria to emphasise the technical requirements of the role – possibly tying the promotion to the role in question.

A recent review conducted by Robertson Cooper identified a number of key practices adopted by government departments to ensure effective career development within the context of PSG. These include:

- Education of promotion board assessors to meet the specific challenges associated with assessing core (generic) skills and competencies when the candidate's current role is a more specialist one.

- Effective talent management, with early assessment of potential and development needs, followed by individually tailored development opportunities – well in advance of promotion gateways.

- Practices like this make it easier to establish a meaningful career dialogue and to achieve a good fit between the needs of employee and employer. Another example is an idea currently being explored in Whitehall, which involves promoting the civil service employment offer on a regional basis. From a career dialogue perspective, this would make it easier for employers to offer opportunities for development and career progression, and for the civil service to retain valuable skills even when the requirements in particular organisations are fluctuating.

Such strategies are particularly important where there is a high risk of losing key employees to other sectors. So the message is: ignore career development at your peril. It's not easy, but it is a critical strand of any long-term people strategy.



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