



Using a Career Framework

to Foster Better Conversations

By Kathy Kibbe, Laurie Bienstock

"It's performance review day, companywide. Last year, my performance review started with Michael asking me what my hopes and dreams were, and it ended with him telling me he could bench-press one hundred ninety pounds. So I don't really know what to expect."

— Pam Beesly, receptionist on TV series "The Office".

HOW MANY of your employees "don't really know what to expect" from managerial communications? Their questions may seem clear-cut: Where do I fit into the organization? What is

expected of me? How can I grow my career and financial opportunities? But the answers are not always easy or clear for managers and employees.

And while television can make fun of poor communication, companies cannot afford such levity. Watson Wyatt research shows that getting these conversations right is pivotal to an organization's success.

Furthermore, our research has found that helping managers communicate effectively — in essence, have better conversations with their employees — is a fundamental "secret of success." So where do you start?

Building better systems

Encouraging managers to communicate better immediately brings training to mind. The Watson Wyatt 2007/2008 Communication ROI Study™ shows that high-performing companies are much more likely than their peers to provide managers with formal training in interpersonal communication skills, internal communication strategy and processes so they can help employees understand expectations and deal with change.

However, to make communication flow between managers and employees, a clear understanding of jobs,

career paths and the links to reward opportunities is crucial for both parties.

One way to create the openness needed for increased dialogue is to transition to a global career framework.

The objective of a global career framework is to create a foundation for describing work, career paths and pay opportunities throughout the organization. The framework can also be a means to streamline job titles and levels and ensure these are meaningful and consistent. In the end, career opportunities have more transparency and clarity throughout the organization.

Instead of having a multitude of narrow, vertical grades, a well-articulated global career framework pares everything down. It ideally includes a handful of significant career levels comprising groups of roles similar in scope of responsibility, level of autonomy and impact on the business. By broadly defining such career levels, employers help workers understand where their roles fit into the overall organization.

Titles are also positively affected when a global career framework is set in place. The list of perhaps hundreds of titles that provide distinction without meaningful difference is compressed to a small group of titles that reflect position value and content, are meaningful and are easy to administer across the organization.

Removing the mystery surrounding career growth

A global career framework eliminates any sense of “mystery” about growth opportunities and grade structures. A well-designed framework is not a strictly prescribed, one-plan-fits-all career model. Rather, it gives managers and employees the structure, tools and resources to map out a career that’s unique to each employee.

This is significant because a worker no longer has the artificial incentive to jump to a new position in order to “get the grade.” The framework approach can open up multiple career paths that reward both depth and breadth throughout a

career. With a clear framework in place, employees can see how an organization places value on all career paths — whether that path deepens one’s skills in a particular role or one chooses to pursue additional responsibilities.

A global career framework smoothes employee transfers geographically and departmentally and helps organizations compete effectively for talent. Companies also gain more flexibility to develop careers and talent within and across functions and geographies. At the same time, a framework can attract new talent with clear paths to professional growth and rewards.

Building better conversations

Once a better structure is in place, how does manager communication improve?

Quite simply, implementing a well-defined global career framework enhances understanding so managers can have more effective career conversations with current and potential employees. It also allows managers to set realistic expectations for where jobs fit in an organization.

When linked to career development, performance management, compensation and other talent-focused programs, a global career framework can provide a clear picture of the paths an employee can take in an organization to reach a desired career goal. That clarity makes for more tangible discussions about what to do to get there.

Such transparency also changes the role of the manager. Managers move from interpreting individual career opportunities to advising employees how to understand and navigate the framework information.

Finally, a global career framework places career management squarely in employees’ hands. No longer does it appear that only managers control who gets transferred or promoted. A framework offers employees what they need to manage their careers globally.

Talking the talk, walking the walk

While your managers probably don’t quote bench-pressing statistics during year-end reviews, most managers do need help communicating more effectively. Creating a well-articulated career framework is one way to aid the flow of communication between managers and employees.

Begin with small steps. Start with a review of your company’s jobs. Identify the roles and career paths that exist, and then develop a systematic approach to describing and aligning jobs to the framework. Involving your managers and subject-matter experts in the development process, create a rollout plan that integrates other ongoing processes, such as performance management and career planning. Most important, ensure that senior management is on board. Change is hard, particularly when you contemplate changing employee titles.

In the end, a global career framework will foster better employee development conversations and will help set more realistic expectations. When aligned with career development, performance management, compensation and other programs, a framework will map the routes to career success. **W**



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