

Career Paths that Lead to Leadership

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This may seem like pointing out the obvious, but I'm going to do it anyway because I often encounter prospective clients that I cannot help because of this shortfall: you cannot create a pipeline of future leaders in your organization if you don't first have retention.

Career paths are one of the easiest and most effective ways of retaining and developing talent in your company.

Let's dig into what a career path is, how to develop them, and what the benefits are.

What is a Career Path?

I use the term Career Path; others use the term Career Roadmap – they are the same thing. A career path is a long-term plan that includes a series of stops or milestones along one's career. The stops include jobs, experiences, and learning. For instance, for someone to become the Director of Business Development for your firm, they might start as an engineer/trades worker, then a project manager, then, utilizing that hands-on knowledge they might move into a sales role, then account management or program management, and finally director of business development. You can see how each of these milestones requires a different set of skills and knowledge.

A career path is simply a diagram that shows the progression from engineer to business development and the job experiences and learning required at each milestone to succeed.



How Do You Develop Career Paths?

You'll start by identifying every entry level job in the company and the logical, linear progression that job would take. Entry level to advanced, to supervisor, manager, director, etc.

Then, brainstorm where someone with entry level or advanced skills might be able to use those same skills in a different role. For instance, a capable CSR doesn't need to become the supervisor or manager of the customer service department – they might move into an entry level sales role instead. You will have already plotted the linear path of an entry level salesperson, so they'll know what their "new" career path entails.

After plotting all the linear paths, catalog all the skills and knowledge (including experiences and technical skills training) needed at each milestone, along each path.

Once you've done these two steps it becomes easier to identify where "branching careers" are possible. A person with the same

set of skills or experiences could become a program manager or a branch manager in the future – depending on their interests and goals.

Providing long-term career options and the path(s) to achieve them fixes two vexing problems every business owner faces: recruitment and retention. Read on...

What Are the Benefits of Career Paths?

Career paths are incredibly effective in three arenas: recruiting, retention, and leadership development.


Recruiting: Showing the diagram of potential career paths is hugely attractive to younger generations. Today's college graduates want careers, not just "a job." Yet too often companies hire them into an entry-level job with no explanation of how their career could progress with that company or what the timeframe might be. One complaint I often hear is that new hires leave within two or three years. I firmly believe that is simply because they didn't know what the next steps would be at their current firm, so they start looking elsewhere to learn more and advance their career. If you have career paths laid out (even in a basic form, such as simply job titles) new hires will understand that in five or 10 or 15 years they can be well along a challenging and fulfilling career with your firm.

Retention: Retention is critical for consistency, reliability, and quality, but too often companies lose experienced employees right when they've hit "their groove." Why? Because they haven't thought through how to take that employee to the next level. You want to keep a good worker performing in their current role, but they feel stagnant. A well-planned career path will show the steps required to achieve the next job title. Those steps might include job rotations, earning a certificate, or being responsible for a sub-set of a project.

For one client we "made up" a new job title because the company didn't have an immediate need for new project managers, and they were afraid of losing the four individuals who had completed all the career path requirements to be promoted to that role. The new title was Assistant Project Manager and we carved out a specific subset of tasks that they would take over on the jobsite while being mentored by the project manager.

Leadership Development: When designed with the "long game" in mind, your career paths should lead right up to senior leadership roles – Vice President, Director, even the CEO. I like to tell my clients that at college recruiting fairs, when they present the career path to potential hires, they should say "Anyone could be the next CEO of this company because we will give you the developmental opportunities to equip you for that role." If that doesn't say "career longevity," what does?

Career paths that include "branching roles" (aka non-linear) such as the business development example at the start of this article, ensure you develop well-rounded business people who truly understand the business and will be capable of leading it in 15, 20, or 30 years.

Developing career paths is one of the most critical activities a business can utilize to engage and retain employees and develop future leaders from within. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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