5 kinds of team members whose growth you may be stifling — without even realizing it

Do you give everyone on your team a fair chance to grow and develop in their jobs? Most managers would say yes. They know that supporting people's growth leads to higher job satisfaction, performance, and retention. But leaders' intentions don't always align with their actions.

The truth is leaders often unconsciously give certain direct reports less opportunity to grow. Here are the kinds of people whose development you may be inadvertently thwarting and how to make sure they get their shot to make themselves — and your organization — stronger.

1. People who have little in common with you.

It might be easier for you to give feedback, advice, and access to your network to a direct report who attended a similar school or followed a similar career path as you did. That's great — unless it means you invest less in the direct reports who have different backgrounds or identities or with whom you think you don't have a lot in common. They deserve a manager who's looking out for their growth, too. With anyone you're at risk of shortchanging, <u>initiate a career conversation</u>. Based on what you learn:

- **Identify areas where you can coach them.** Even if they don't want to follow your career path, there are probably skills you can help them build to prepare for what they want to do next. Could you coach them on improving their presentation skills, leading meetings, or prioritizing their work?
- **Connect them to people or resources to help them in areas where you can't.** If you don't have the technical skills to coach an engineer, you can provide valuable support by introducing them to an expert elsewhere in the organization or by seeking budget for them to attend an appropriate class or conference.

2. People who aren't proactive about their development.

It's common for managers to assume that direct reports who don't bring up their own development don't care much about it. Many managers we surveyed said they have "an open-door policy" around development conversations, putting the onus on their direct reports to raise the topic.

But there are many reasons a direct report might not speak up. They might not know what to talk about — of the 500 individual contributors we surveyed, only 26 percent said they have clear development goals. They might think their aspirations are unrealistic, assume that you don't care, or fear coming off as unsatisfied or demanding. To make it more comfortable to talk about development goals with every member of your team:

- **Build development conversations into everyone's regular 1-on-1s.** Development conversations don't need to be intense, high-stakes discussions. Treat them as explorations to help your direct report figure out what they want to do. Allocating 1-on-1 time gives each team member the chance to discuss their growth and to check in as their needs and interests shift. You might say, *"I'd love to spend some time once a month discussing a few potential development or career goals of yours so we can work toward them. Is that something you'd be interested in?"* A friendly nudge can signify that you care about people's development — and expect them to take it seriously, too.
- **Proactively seek and share information about career paths and development opportunities in your organization.** Some direct reports might not be aware of the options available to them. Describe common career tracks others have followed at your company. Regularly remind them of any conferences, mentorship programs, or other growth resources they can tap. Share with them promotion and job opportunities on your and peer managers' teams. Talk about your own skill-building goals. If you model openness around these topics, you'll spur ideas in others — and create an environment that invites your direct reports to share their goals with you.

3. People who don't interact with you very often.

No manager intends to shortchange someone's professional aspirations. But when you're deciding who should handle an exciting new project, the direct report in a different time zone might slip your mind. Or you might incorrectly assume that the team member who works more independently won't be interested in your company's new training program. People you have less contact with have fewer opportunities to get feedback and coaching; to share their development interests; and to establish themselves as candidates for career-enhancing projects, learning opportunities, and promotions. To ensure you're not neglecting them:

- **Systematically check in with all direct reports — especially those with less access to you — when assigning key projects.** Don't hand someone a plum assignment because they sit down the hall or because you're more familiar with how they work. Instead, touch base with any direct reports who could possibly take it on to gauge their workload and interest. Our [delegation prep tool](#) can help.
- **Set and monitor a quota for giving feedback to your direct reports.** Tracking how often and what type of feedback you give to each direct report can help ensure that everyone on your team receives recognition and constructive input to fuel their development. It can also reveal patterns in how you treat different members of your team. To hold yourself accountable, you might ask a trusted peer to periodically check in with you on [your feedback habits](#).

4. People who are really good at something you value.

It's a joy when you have a direct report so capable at an important task that you don't have to worry about the task getting done. You may be tempted to have them keep doing that task, even if it means that they don't have time to try anything else.

But when you box people into a role or put off their development, you risk them getting bored or taking their valuable skills and knowledge to a different organization where they have a chance to grow. To reduce the risk of a direct report feeling stuck:

- **Make a habit of gauging people's job satisfaction.** Someone loving what they're doing today doesn't mean they'll love it in a few months or a year. At least twice a year, pose questions in your 1-on-1s like *"What's working well for you in your current role, and what would you like to change?"* Observe your team members' general moods and try to establish a baseline around how enthusiastic they usually are. Follow up on any noticeable ups and downs: *"You seemed quieter than usual when the team was discussing project X — how are you feeling about the work you're doing there?"* For more ideas, see the "To gauge job satisfaction" section of [100+ questions for better 1-on-1s with your direct reports](.).

- **Have experienced team members train others who are interested in taking on their duties and responsibilities.** Doing this can be a win for everyone: Your veteran team members pursue new opportunities by passing on their expertise and ownership of some current duties. Less-experienced team members learn new skills and accrue institutional knowledge — all without your help or time. And your team builds stronger interpersonal bonds and resiliency because more people can do more things.

- **Strengthen cross-team relationships to facilitate talent-sharing, shadowing, mentoring, and more.** It's natural to prioritize your own team's needs. But being a leader whom everyone loves to work for means being aware of growth opportunities for your team members elsewhere in the company. Talk to your peers about open positions and cross-team projects, training, or informational chats for your direct reports who might be interested. Collaborating instead of competing for talent is better for your peer relationships, your direct reports — and for the organization.

5. People who are disengaged or lack commitment.

If someone isn't performing well or seems not to care about their work, you might think they don't deserve your attention. But many factors could be affecting their job performance — family or other personal matters, workplace relationships, organizational or industry upheaval, or something about the work itself. To ensure that you really understand what's going on and aren't unfairly dismissing them:

- **Initiate a conversation to get at why they're disengaged.** Consider reflecting on the everyday, informal conversations you might have with a high-performing direct report. How do you open those conversations? What's your body language like with them? Then, try that same approach with your disengaged direct report. When you make an effort to put them at ease and show them genuine interest, you might be surprised at what you learn about them and how your perspective changes. For more, see [An effective way to refresh your relationship with a disengaged direct report](#) and [3 ways to more accurately judge direct reports](#).

- **Check yourself to make sure you're giving the person developmental feedback — not just evaluative feedback.**
  If you write off a direct report as disengaged, you might tend to give them less developmental feedback — denying them the chance to improve and perhaps leading them to disengage even more. Where evaluative feedback may let them know what they're doing wrong (e.g., "I noticed that you got defensive when the client complained"), developmental feedback helps them focus on what they could do differently (e.g., *"Handling complaints is really tricky — how about we talk through a few tactics you could try next time?"*).

- **Delegate small tasks and assignments to help a direct report explore their interests and abilities in other areas.** You might be able to tweak your direct report's mix of duties and tasks so that they spend more time on work they find engaging — while still handling their core responsibilities. Instead of withholding opportunities, look for ways they can contribute and build their knowledge of and confidence in other types of work. You can also network internally to uncover cross-team projects or trainings they might be interested in.