

Talent Development 33 Identify Relationships

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Section 3.3 in the CPTD Certification program for ATD is Organization and Culture. Skill Statement C has “Skill in identifying formal and informal relationships and hierarchies and power dynamics in an organization.”

The Formal Structure

The formal power structure in most organizations is easy to identify. Simply start with the organization chart, and pay attention to any dotted

line relationships that are identified. A dotted line indicates an influence but not a direct reporting relationship.

It is important to recognize that any organization chart represents a point in time. The actual organization is always in a state of flux, whereby some people are in the process of moving up the organization while others may be leaving or even moving down. The issue of succession planning needs to be handled with great care, because it not only defines the future state of the organization but impacts the morale of people currently working in it.

It is common to have the issue of impending succession be the root cause of all kinds of political infighting within an organization. Most people perform today’s tasks with one eye on their future potential and the other eye on what other people might be planning.

The power will be distributed in a way that reflects the solid line relationships between managers and subordinates, but there is a caveat.

The chart will tell you who reports to whom and what the basic structure looks like. Some organizations have very loose or vague organization charts, and there are some groups that prefer to have no chart at all. For these situations, you need to identify the informal relationships and power dynamics. You need to stay alert for the signals of people operating in ways that are not consistent with the formal organization.

Modifications for a Virtual or Hybrid Situation

When some or all of the people are working remotely, the formal structure is still in place, but the inter-office dynamics can be very different from the conventional patterns. In a virtual world, interfaces are usually planned in advance without the opportunity for chance encounters that are so important for interpersonal dialog. Meetings usually involve groups of people, so individual coaching is less prevalent than in a conventional office environment. Supervisors should be encouraged to have frequent one-on-one time with each of their direct reports.

Informal Power Structures

In parallel to the official formal structure is a kind of web of influence that permeates every organization. These paths of authority often go around the official or intended layout and frequently operate in a clandestine manner.

The best way to describe the informal paths of influence is to give some examples. This is not a complete list, but is a series of things that might come up in a typical arrangement.

Outside influence

You might find a situation where Mary is reporting to Alice directly, yet she is being given “advice” from another manager who is at Alice’s level or above. Alice may or may not be aware of this parallel path, and it may lead to significant friction at times when Mary does not do the bidding of her official supervisor.

Friendships

Often, people who are fond of each other will seek to influence decisions about placements or decisions based on history rather than potential. The basis of politics is that people do things for people they like. You need to keep alert to this type of potential disruption.

Nepotism

Family ties can be the basis for power struggles in any organization. An employee may have a relative who is in a position to influence him or her outside the normal chain of command. This pattern often becomes a stumbling block when succession planning is happening. Sometimes the illogical advance of a relative usurps the normal progression of functions and upsets people or causes loss of motivation.

Favoritism

Favoritism is similar to nepotism. It occurs when one person singles out a specific person for special attention. The perception of favoritism usually leads to a loss of trust within an organization. When trust is lost, people do all kinds of crazy things to hang onto power. It can get very messy.

Diversity

The stated goals of an organization may include Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Unfortunately, in many organizations, managers prefer to advance people who look and think like they do. The perception is that people who think and act differently will upset the normal chain of command and cause decision making to be more cumbersome.

This habit is a dangerous one because it works against diversity, which is a highly effective means to keep “groupthink” in check. Having people with differing points of view is a significant advantage in any organization because it leads to more robust solutions. It is sad that many organizations find themselves operating with a “monoculture” when it comes to specific functions.

There is a delicate balance here. You want to achieve a state where diverse opinions are heard and respected, but you also want to avoid having disruptive conversations that cause people to become polarized. The key defense here is to keep working on a culture of high trust where all voices are included and mutual respect is the expectation.

The Antidote

When assessing the relationships and power structure of a group, it is important to be highly vigilant and constantly look for potential abuses. Try to build a culture of high trust where diversity is valued and succession is an open discussion. Shut down the back channels of influence and be as transparent as possible with all decisions regarding the placement of people.

Be willing to confront abuses directly and expose people who abuse power for their own advancement. Check your own choices and make sure you are doing succession decisions with the highest level of integrity and always with an eye toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online, Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind, and Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

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