

# **Managers as Developers of Others: Main findings of an IES research study**

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# Managers as Developers of Others: Main findings of an IES research study

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This paper presents the main findings of a study by the Institute for Employment Studies. The study investigated the behaviour of managers who are good at developing other people in the workplace. This paper contains:

1. Managers as developers of others – a brief introduction
2. Characteristics of good and bad development support
3. Situations where good developers make a difference
4. What ‘receivers’ of development have to do
5. What motivates good developers of others
6. Enablers and barriers to developing others
7. The impact of good and bad development support
8. A framework for managers as developers
9. Some practical suggestions for managers
10. About the research – information on method and sample.

Two companion papers are also available. *Managers as Developers of Others: A literature review* examines a wider range of theoretical and practical material on this topic, and *Managers as Developers of Others: Personal experiences of pleasure and pain* presents extracts from the narrative accounts collected in this study. These extracts serve to illustrate the general conclusions presented here and may make useful training material.

## 1. Managers as developers – a brief introduction

Organisations are now placing heavy emphasis on the role of the manager as coach, and on the workplace as a learning environment. Some managers take on other formal development roles, *eg* as mentors. Some find themselves offering more informal support to staff who may not work for them directly. All these managers need a practical idea of how to ‘develop others’ effectively.

This research set out with the specific aim of generating some vivid and detailed evidence of what good (and bad) development

by managers really looks like. We did this by finding and interviewing employees who felt they had received effective development from one or more managers. We also asked them about any memorably bad managers they had experienced with respect to development. After this, we followed up some of the managers who had given unusually good development support, and interviewed them also.

The research approach and sample is described in more detail in section 1.10. Before looking at the findings, a couple of definitions will be helpful:

### **‘Development support’ at work**

We defined *effective development support*, as experienced by the individual, to be:

... any discussions or activities which have been of significant value to you in developing your skills, experience, or career. The support could be from any manager (not necessarily your direct boss), but we are concentrating on managers in line roles, rather than training or HR professionals. The support may be formal or informal, and could be quite recent or some years ago.

### **‘Givers’ and ‘Receivers’ of development support**

We use the term *‘giver’* or *‘developer’* for the manager supporting an employee’s development and the term *‘receiver’* or *‘individual’* for the employee themselves. We use these terms to cover all aspects of development support reported, avoiding terms like *‘mentor’* or *‘coach’* that are often used for more specific forms of development support.

The findings of this study are illustrative rather than conclusive. This study is not large enough to be representative of all managers in all situations. However, it is based on a rigorous analysis of the experiences of over 50 people in four varied organisations and nearly 100 specific narrative accounts of good or bad development support. This makes it a significant study in a field, which is short of empirical evidence.

## **2. Characteristics of good and bad development support**

Experiences of both good and bad development stay with people for a very long time. Nearly half of the experiences described by *‘receivers’* took place at least five years ago. Experiences early on in their career may be especially memorable, and good relationships with managers can be sustained long after the line relationship has ceased.

The experiences of positive development were largely with line managers, but some were also with more senior managers (including the boss's boss), formal and informal mentors, and colleagues.

### **The characteristics of good development support**

Good development is delivered through a **supportive relationship** between a 'giver' and a 'receiver', often a manager and their subordinate. Relationships that are developmental seem unusual in the degree of engagement the manager has with the individual employee as a person, and the warmth of the relationship. Trust is developed through this concern and a genuine desire to see the employee do well. Positive encouragement is offered. These relationships are usually characterised by frequent informal interaction, detailed discussion of work issues, and a relative lack of hierarchy. Development experiences within such relationships usually occur over months or years, rather than weeks or days.

- Such relationships are more likely to grow if the manager sets a **climate** in which they are easy to approach, and where development is an important part of working life. The word 'accessible' was used very often to describe good 'givers'.
- Good development support is quite **focused** through a clear, shared analysis of development needs, frequent review, and honest but constructive **feedback**.
- The delivery of development is through a **wide-range of learning methods**, tailored to individual needs. Good 'givers' make active use of formal training opportunities, but also frequently use informal coaching (by themselves and others) and are especially active in finding employees the right range of work experiences (both within their current job and outside it).
- Good 'givers' nearly always couch development activity within a wider view of the employee's **career**, and their current career situation and future options. They actively spot potential, often where others have not done so. Sometimes they push individuals to go further in their careers than they otherwise would. They often carefully explain the processes by which individuals can change job or get promoted, and coach them on how to navigate these processes. They see people leaving them to progress their careers with satisfaction rather than regret.

### **Characteristics of bad development support**

If you ask employees to think of managers who were especially bad at development, what emerges is both a lack of consistent,

positive intent and also a lack of skill. Common experiences included:

- total neglect of development
- identification of development needs but no action
- deliberate career blocking
- aggression and bullying
- erratic responses to individuals asking for support
- negative or inconsistent feedback.

### **3. Situations where good developers make a difference**

Most of the examples of support offered by the 'givers' were focused on certain types of situation, which included:

- employees new to a job or to the organisation, often with specific skill gaps
- employees they saw as having potential for more challenging work or promotion, but needing support to make this transition
- 'problem people' who had a particular behaviour which was dysfunctional
- individuals or teams who had been demotivated by previous circumstances
- employees re-thinking their career possibilities (often women who had been working part-time while their children were young)
- employees with a range of more personal issues: health problems, deep seated lack of confidence, or experiencing stress at work.

Many of the receivers' positive examples echoed these same kinds of situations. However, several of their bad experiences were when little development support was given to them once they were well settled in a job. Several bad experiences also related to times when they had been working part-time, or as temp or agency staff, even in organisations giving good development to full-time employees.

### **4. What 'receivers' of development have to do**

Although the study mostly focussed on the behaviour of effective 'givers' of development support, we also asked both 'givers' and 'receivers' what individuals had to do to develop themselves. The replies included:

- using the giver's time in a responsible and productive way
- willing and able to work with other people
- being receptive to feedback and willing to listen
- open to new experiences and willing to make some mistakes
- being interested in the work and the organisation
- willing to focus on certain development priorities
- motivation to learn and develop

Where 'givers' felt they had failed to help someone develop, it was most often a lack of self-awareness which had prevented the employee from understanding their shortcomings. Even employees with quite severe behaviour or performance problems had improved once they recognised the need for change.

## 5. What motivates good developers of others?

We asked the 'givers' interviewed why they placed a high emphasis on developing other people at work. They had two common answers, and most of them gave both:

- Development is good for the organisation, because it is about helping someone to use more of their potential. They often added it is even worth losing someone good from your department for the greater benefit of the organisation, and that the greatest business benefit of development is longer term.
- Developing other people is inherently satisfying. This satisfaction took a wide-range of forms:
  - helping someone feel better about themselves or overcome some disadvantage
  - seeing people 'move on'
  - the pleasure of using your own skills in developing someone;
  - being seen by others as running a department in which people develop
  - sometimes even developing people in spite of the organisational barriers!

Good developers are strongly influenced in both their motivation and their approach by both good and bad managers they have had in the past. They often vow not to be like the bad managers they had early on in their careers, as well as picking up tips from the varied ways in which good managers have developed them.

## 6. Enablers and barriers to developing others

The 'givers' interviewed were asked what helped or hindered their development of others in the workplace.

### Factors helping development include:

- An HR function which provides a good range of formal training for staff, and advice to managers on staff development. Training architecture running right across different business units is helpful to staff making lateral career moves. Competence frameworks are used to some extent by 'givers' in analysis of training needs, but they more often rely on an holistic analysis of the person and the job demands.
- Well-embedded performance appraisal process, encouraging thorough review.
- Training for managers in people management, including coaching skills.

### Factors hindering development include:

- Wide spans of control and numerous or conflicting objectives for line managers. Even good developers reported that they sometimes found it difficult to give their staff the individual time they needed.
- Lack of recognition for managers who put a real emphasis on staff development.
- Unrealistic or inflexible departmental performance targets, which squeeze out the time employees might spend on their development.
- Geographical distance between line managers and their staff, even within the same office building.
- Lack of visibility and accessibility of the 'boss's boss' in some organisation structures. The boss's boss is often an important 'giver' of development, especially with regard to spotting potential.
- A business climate where staff are not given much autonomy. Several commented that the fashion for 'empowerment' in the early 1990s was better for development than the more risk-averse, target-driven climate of recent years.
- The promotion into management of managers who don't want to manage people.
- HR processes, especially promotion criteria and job descriptions, which are too mechanistic and inhibit managers from giving stretching work opportunities to employees they believe have potential.



Good 'givers' of development support are very tough minded about overcoming organisational barriers. They are adept at 'working the system', and ignore or bend rules they see as unreasonable. They often enlist help from colleagues or superiors, including people they trust in HR.

## 7. The impact of good and bad development support

### What does good development do to people?

Good development in most of the detailed accounts obviously involved the acquisition of **skills and knowledge** relevant to current and future work. Both technical skills and generic skills were seen to be important. Political skills were often mentioned too. The knowledge acquired was often a deeper appreciation of the underlying approach to work or the nature of their organisation.

It also very often involved extending the range of **work experience**, partly as a means of giving new skills, but also as a means of improving their CV, gaining a broader view of the organisation, and becoming more visible. Delegation and 'acting up' were often used to give 'receivers' greater experience and exposure.

In addition to these expected types of impact, this study shows the huge emotional impact of both positive and negative development support.

Increased **self-confidence** was the single most often mentioned impact of positive development, along with **career** impacts – usually a job move or promotion (both confidence and career impacts were mentioned in nearly 70per cent of positive cases). It seems that, in spite of the attempts to play down the importance of career development for most staff, individuals associate good development with managers who helped them progress their career and 'move on' in some way. Both upward and lateral career moves were important.

Good development support was also associated with improved **motivation** (in nearly half the cases) and to **job satisfaction** and improved **job performance** (often implicit rather than explicit in self-reported accounts), and **a more positive view of the employer**. Where 'receivers' were now managers themselves, good development had also influenced how they **developed their own staff**.

So the positive impact of good development is not just through a direct link between skills acquired and job performance, but also through an emotional cycle of greater confidence, leading to greater motivation and job satisfaction, and career development.

## **What does bad development do to people?**

A lack of development does not just act as a mirror image of good development. Interestingly, it did not all that often undermine self-confidence, but it did make people both very angry and very miserable. This hit hardest at job satisfaction and motivation, and often created a negative attitude towards the employer. Interestingly this seemed to happen even in organisations which up to then had been seen as positive. It is as though one bad manager can undermine wider organisational values. In several cases, poor development damaged job performance, more through reduced job motivation than a lack of skill acquisition.

In a number of cases, bad managers blocked individual's careers, but in an equivalent number the discontent was so great that the individual left the organisation or escaped to another department. So some people had experienced positive career moves as a result of bad management!

Therefore, the negative impact of bad development is not only about lack of skill acquisition, but an emotional cycle of reduced job satisfaction and motivation, reduced organisational commitment and either prolonged frustration or escape.

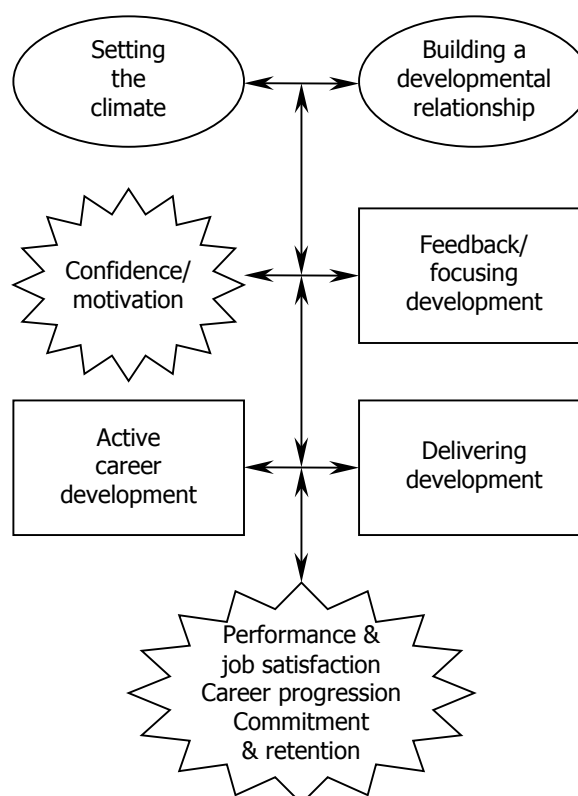
## **8. A framework for managers as developers**

The findings above can be summarised in the form of a framework that highlights both the key aspects of behaviour which good developers show, and the main dimensions of the impact of development on the employee.

- Setting the climate and building the relationship are the crucial start points.
- These increase confidence and motivation, as does constructive feedback.
- Development, including active career development, is focused through monitoring and feedback discussions.
- Effective development increases performance and job satisfaction, career progression, organisational commitment and retention.

## Key elements and impacts of developing others

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Source: IES

## 9. Some practical suggestions for managers

**What to do to improve your effectiveness in developing others:**

### **Setting the climate**

- Find time for people whenever they need help, and make them welcome.
- Make development part of your team atmosphere by encouraging team members to help each other and share information in team meetings.
- Acknowledge your own need for improvement and development.
- Set work objectives with your staff and team which build in development, adjusting job design if appropriate.
- Work on staff development within your own natural management style.
- Allow yourself to take pleasure in developing others. Treat it as a business priority.

### **Building a developmental relationship**

- Get to know your staff well through frequent, informal conversations about their work and how things are going.
- Listen carefully to their concerns. See the work situation from the individual's point of view, and tailor your response to their particular needs.
- Offer positive support, and build trust through an open, honest and considerate approach.
- Be pro-active and persistent in the development of staff, but try to give employees as much control over their own development as possible.
- Be alert to the extra development needs people have when they are new in a job or when they are outgrowing their job. Signs of stress or poor motivation can also show the need for extra development support.
- Adjust each developmental relationship over time, giving people more space as their skills and confidence grow.
- Be open to supporting other employees who do not work for you directly.

### **Feedback & focusing development**

- Be explicit about the standards of work and behaviour required.
- Achieve a sound understanding of the individual's performance and skills through conversation, and also through direct observation and review of specific tasks.
- Review performance and development progress in frequent one-to-one meetings.
- Be open and honest in giving feedback. Give praise wherever you can, and use positive feedback to build confidence. Make any criticism specific and constructive.
- Listen carefully to how the individual sees themselves, and challenge this if necessary.
- Try to agree a few development priorities, based on a clear, objective, and shared assessment of their needs — sometimes just one thing is best.
- Track development activity and progress consistently, keeping notes if this helps.

### **Delivering development**

- Make sure that agreed development priorities are actively pursued.
- If you are coaching the individual yourself, be focused and take the time to explain things thoroughly, preferably through using real work examples.
- Invite the individual to rehearse important tasks or to share ideas before executing them. Review such tasks afterwards and help the individual learn from them.
- Give employees a wider understanding of the business, including how it operates politically.
- Pull in others to help with development. Choose them for the skills they have and work experiences they can offer, but also pick people who are effective developers.
- Make the best use of the formal training your organisation can offer, where this meets the development needs you have identified. Talk to the individual before and after any training course.
- Look for direct experiences outside the normal job which can deliver development *eg* projects, working groups, job swaps, secondments, external activities *etc.* Use delegation consciously to develop others.
- If personal problems are affecting an employee's work performance or development, try and work with them to solve the problem in a supportive but objective fashion. Be flexible in your approach. Pull in expert help if needed.

### **Active career development**

- See a person's current job performance in the context of what they have done before, and what they may go on to do. See their work and career in the context of their life outside work, and remember that people's circumstances are always changing.
- If you think someone has potential beyond their current job, or would do better in a different kind of job, talk to them. Be prepared to gently push them to extend their career aspirations if they under-estimate their own ability. Sometimes, the reverse is needed for people who over-estimate their own skills or abilities.
- If an individual is thinking about a career move, help them obtain a realistic view of the possible new job role, and whether they have the skills it requires.
- Support staff through the processes of job change or promotion. Make sure they understand how these processes work, and coach them if necessary on the application documents they have to complete, or for interviews or presentations.

## **What NOT to do in developing others:**

We could write a long list, but here are some of the negative behaviours, which the 'receivers' in our study mentioned most frequently:

- Blaming work objectives or targets set from above for not developing your staff.
- Making yourself inaccessible or being aggressive when people ask you for help.
- Criticising your staff or your team in front of other people.
- Showing an erratic or inconsistent attitude to staff development.
- Using negative feedback to undermine people, or hurt them personally.
- Giving someone a job you know they can't do and leaving them to sink or swim.
- Trying to keep someone in a job you know they have outgrown.
- Ignoring a personal problem that is clearly affecting someone's work.
- Losing touch with what your staff are doing, and how well they are doing it.
- Only talking about development once a year in formal appraisal. Agreeing a Personal Development Plan and then putting it in a drawer.
- Seeing development only in terms of sending staff on courses.
- Being uninterested, not exploring performance and not helping the individual think ahead.

## **10. About the research**

This study was conducted in the UK in four large employing organisations, two in the public sector and two in the private sector. Individual participants were selected as either 'receivers' or 'givers' of good development. 'Receivers' volunteered themselves on the basis of notices posted on staff bulletin boards or Intranet systems. In some cases a specific sub-group of employees was targeted and invited to volunteer through email. The invitations included a clear definition of what we meant by 'effective development support'. If the number of volunteers exceeded the target sample in an organisation, the desired sample was randomly selected.

In the second phase of the study a sample of 'givers' of good development was constructed from the 'receivers' and, in some

cases, from objective data held by HR (eg through 360 degree feedback). Both 'givers' and receivers' had structured, confidential interviews to obtain detailed narrative accounts of specific experiences of good and bad development at work. Most of the interviews were conducted by telephone. A few participants submitted their accounts electronically.

The structured interviews of both 'givers' and 'receivers' covered: the context of specific experiences (both good and bad); behaviour and skills shown by the giver; the impact of the development support in each example; more general attitudes to development. 'Givers' were also asked what motivated them to develop staff. The sample, as shown in the table below, comprised 51 people, who described 99 specific experiences of development.

**Table 1: Sample of participants and their development experiences analysed**

	'Receivers'			'Givers'			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
No. of participants interviewed	11	20	31	13	7	20	24	27	51
	Pos- itive	Neg- ative	Total	Pos- itive	Neg- ative	Total	Pos- itive	Neg- ative	Total
No. of development experiences analysed	38	20	58	36	5	41	74	25	99

Source: IES, 2004

The youngest 'giver' was 25, but most were in their forties and fifties. The 'receivers' were quite evenly spread in age from their mid-twenties to late fifties. Their length of service with the organisation varied from a few months to over thirty years.

## Further information

The research team at IES ([www.employment-studies.co.uk](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk)) comprised Wendy Hirsh, Michael Silverman, Penny Tamkin and Charles Jackson. They would like to thank their contacts in each of the participating organisations, and the time, interest and frankness of all those who volunteered to be interviewed. For more information contact: Wendy Hirsh 01273 813752 or [wendy.hirsh@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:wendy.hirsh@employment-studies.co.uk) or Penny Tamkin 01273 873675 or [penny.tamkin@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:penny.tamkin@employment-studies.co.uk)