



5 Steps To Helping Employees Grow Their Careers

Advice From The CHRO—White Paper Series

Guest Authored By Bryan L. Olson, CHCO Columbia Care

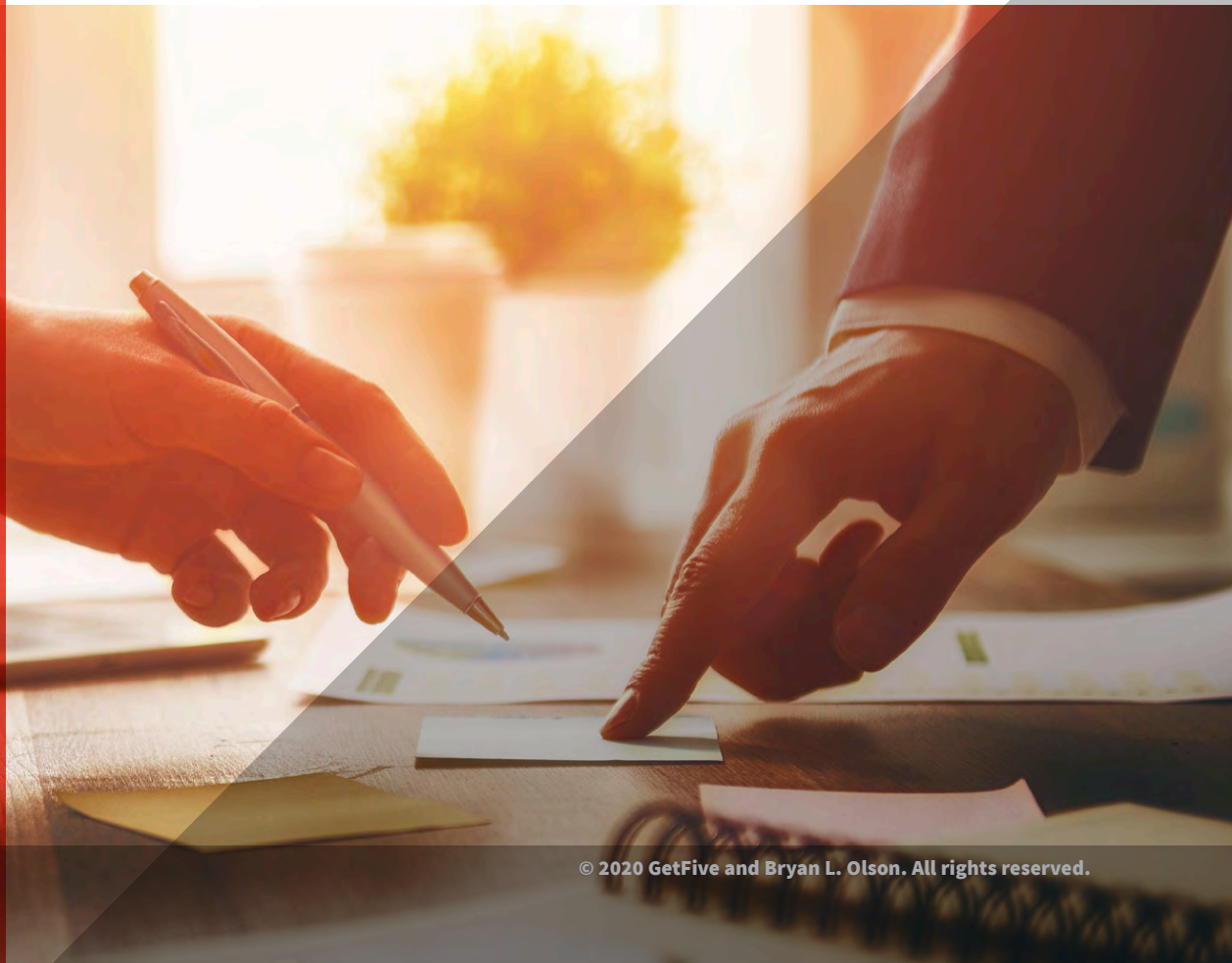


BRYAN OLSON

*Chief Human
Capital Officer*

Introduction

One of the most important and rewarding responsibilities of a manager is to help their employees grow their careers. A mark of a strong leader is that they have helped build and develop other leaders over time. This white paper outlines five steps to help you do just that.





Step 1: Invest in Building Sufficient Relationships

In order to most effectively help employees grow their careers, the manager needs to have a sufficient relationship with each of them. In other words, it's important that you as the manager build trust with your employees so that they each believe that you are working with their best interests and personal development in mind. That's what I mean by having a "sufficient" relationship – that when you offer suggestions, coaching and development advice, the recipient believes that you are doing it because you care about them and their development.

There are a number of ways to invest in the relationships with your team members. Over a period of time, something as simple as asking about someone's weekend on a Monday morning before jumping right to the business at hand can make a difference. Taking the time to truly listen when an employee comes to you with a new idea reinforces that you value their contributions. Asking for input prior to making decisions that impact a team member shows that you care, even if you are not ultimately able to do everything that the employee suggested. Investing in relationships isn't particularly difficult, it just takes a little caring and focus.

→ **TIP:** *Short ice breaker exercises at the beginning of team meetings can help you get to know your team members, help them to get to know each other, and ultimately help build trust between all members of the team.*

Step 2: Understand Their Motivations/Aspirations

It's difficult to help someone reach their goals when you don't know what they hope to achieve. The best managers ask their team members about their career aspirations. Managers should hold regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings with each team member. Occasionally, one of the agenda items covered should be the employee's professional development and career aspirations. Ask your team member to give some consideration to these topics in advance, and potentially even ask them to send written answers prior to the meeting. When asked to submit written responses, people tend to take the time to be thoughtful and sincere in their answers. As the manager, reviewing these responses in advance will position you to have an effective development conversation. A few questions you may consider posing are as follows:

- In terms of your career, what would you like to be doing 5 years from now?
- What aspects of your job do you currently enjoy most?
- What have you learned since our last professional development conversation?
- What are the other career development items that you would like to discuss?

If you are a manager of managers, you might also want to consider periodically having development conversions with employees deeper in your organization. These "skip-level" development meetings will not only reinforce that you care about the professional development of your team, but will also help to build a culture of collaboration and trust. Personally, I have also found these meetings to have an important side benefit. They tend to be a treasure trove of great ideas. Hearing the challenges of team members at a variety of levels in the organization will help you to stay in touch with improvement opportunities that you may not have come up with on your own.

Step 3: Support Their Professional Development

Once you understand the aspirations of your team members, the next step to helping them achieve those goals is to support the development of the skills they need to do so. This can range from giving them stretch assignments, to putting them on cross-functional project teams, to enrolling them in training programs. Each team member will have different development needs and as their manager you are in a unique position to help them address those needs. Many organizations have formal development plans that can be leveraged for this purpose, but a formal plan is certainly not necessary. Once you and your team member have agreed on the skills they need to develop to get to the next level, you can work with them to figure out how best to develop those skills.

For your team members who are ready for it, be sure to empower them to take appropriate risks and give them stretch assignments whenever you can. It's a key step in helping them grow in their careers and you'll be surprised what they can accomplish. You'll have to provide them air cover, support them, and own the results with them. Thus, you will need to be careful to only empower team members who are ready, willing and able to take on that level of responsibility.

→ **TIP:** *When you empower your team members, you need to be comfortable that they can deliver*

Another way to support their professional development is to assist them with network building, both inside and outside of your company. A simple introduction paired with a few supportive words can make a difference. Consider making these introductions whenever there is a business reason to do so.

Step 4: Help Them Learn to Navigate Organizational Politics

One of the more advanced skills you will need to develop in your employees is how to effectively navigate the politics of your company. During my career I have worked in an assortment of companies of different sizes, with a variety of organizational structures, in multiple industries. Each of them had a unique culture and a set of unwritten rules and power structures that the most effective leaders were able to navigate with proficiency.

Of course, you can only effectively develop this skill in others if you possess it yourself. If you have been promoted to a leadership level in your organization, then you probably have some level of savvy in terms of navigating organizational politics. A few suggestions to help you build your own organizational savvy are as follows:

- Learn how your organization makes decisions and look for patterns in decision-making at the top levels
- Get interested and stay aware of what is happen across the organization beyond your department
- Ask questions to understand the needs and challenges of your peers and colleagues
- Build relationships and help others succeed
- Strive for win-win solutions at work
- Learn from co-workers who are able to get things done through influence
- Observe the culture of your organization and its influence on how decisions get made
- Help your boss accomplish his or her goals
- Listen carefully to others to hear and fully understand what they are saying

As you engage these techniques your awareness of company politics will grow, as will your ability to effectively navigate them. This will put you in a better position to help your employees grow and be successful. As it turns out, building these skills also tends to build your political capital, which takes us to the next step.

Step 5: Be Their Sponsor

Mentoring is different than sponsorship. Mentoring is a personal development relationship in which a more experienced or knowledgeable person helps to counsel, advise or guide a less experienced or knowledgeable person on a particular topic or skill. Mentoring is important, but it is much less impactful on helping your employees grow their careers than sponsorship. Sponsorship is a higher level of support – putting one's own political capital on the line to forward the career of another deserving person.

Almost no one gets promoted without some level of sponsorship.

If you don't believe that, consider whether you were in the room the last time a decision was made to promote you. It would be rare if you were. Rather, someone in that room likely made the case for you to get the promotion. They put some of their own credibility and political capital at risk to make the case for you. As a manager, you will need to do the same for your team members if you truly want to help them grow their careers.

Because you are putting your own political capital on the line for anyone that you choose to sponsor, these sponsor relationships tend to be beneficial to both parties. You are most likely to sponsor your top-performers. Because they are top performers, they are likely to perform well for your team or department. As a result, the employees that you sponsor tend to be people that you want to work with. They are those who help you reach your shared goals. They tend to be individuals who are worthy of sponsoring and in whom the investment tends to pay off.

Many of the best leaders I have worked with in my career are individuals whom I have sponsored. I go out of my way to work with them, because I know I can trust them and that they will make meaningful contributions to our shared success.



A few suggestions on how to be an effective sponsor for your employees are:

- Check your implicit bias (make sure you are not only sponsoring those employees who look, think and act like you)
- Hold regular conversations regarding their career aspirations
- Give them stretch assignments and hold them accountable for results
- Stand up for them when others seem to be making biased assessments
- Learn from them and solicit their input – no one person has all the best answers
- Advocate for them when you have the opportunity
- Take calculated risks with your political capital to help them achieve their goals

A Closing Thought

Helping your employees grow their careers is what strong managers do. However, it is more than an altruistic endeavor. Assisting your team members in furthering their careers will likely help you to advance your own, and you will undoubtedly find it personally rewarding to see them succeed.

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45 West 34th St, Suite 1111 | New York, NY 10001



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Capital Officer*

About the Author

Bryan Olson is the Chief Human Capital Officer for Columbia Care, one of the nation's largest and most experienced manufacturers and providers of medical cannabis products and services. Prior to Columbia Care, Bryan was CHRO for global law firm K&L Gates and previously held senior HR executive positions at Aetna and United Technologies Corporation. He is a former practicing employee benefits and executive compensation attorney at global law firms, Skadden Arps and he started his career at Fidelity Investments.

Bryan holds a Bachelor's degree in Business from Westminster College and a Juris Doctorate from Boston College Law School.