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The Career Collaborators Program In Action

The Career Collaborators Program has worked in large and small companies and with teams of all sizes. All it requires is a small group of individuals who are motivated and willing to explore possibilities and to support each other.

Here is a story of how the program worked in one company.

For months, morale in the HR Department of a large public company had been eroding. HR Benefits Specialists who understood each of many benefit plans available to employees and who thrived on providing excellent customer service to their internal customers began to take longer to return telephone calls. They were sometimes abrupt to callers and they spent much more time chatting with each other than ever before. As a consequence, productivity dwindled and employees in several locations began to complain to their managers. It didn't take long for the complaints to reach the SVP of HR, and she decided to get to the root cause of the problem.

What the SVP found was that this team believed that the consequence of the company's move toward HR automation would mean job losses and no one on the team felt equipped or motivated to think through their options, so they spent a great deal of time complaining about their presumed fate.

Once the SVP understood the concerns of the Benefits administrators, she introduced the Career Collaborators Program as a pilot career planning initiative.

Once a week for five weeks, on a volun-

Career Collaborators: Career Coaches For Everyone

What would you give to have your own personal career coach? You might think the answer would be in the thousands of dollars, and, for the right career coach, this might be a good use of your financial resources. Suppose, however, that you either don't want to, or can't spend the money. Is there any other way to get career development help? We believe the answer quite possibly could be the Career Collaborators program.

What Is the Career Collaborators Program?

The Career Collaborators program enables individualized career development through teamwork. It provides direction, resources and tools for you to take control of your career through participating in a support group, called a Collaboration Team. The team helps you to identify possibilities for your future, convert these possibilities into probabilities and prepare for opportunities that will present themselves as a result of your preparation.

Career Collaborators Program

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A Team Approach To Career Development

tary basis, several HR Benefits Specialists met during their lunch hour to work through the materials the SVP provided to them. The SVP joined the group for the first meeting to ensure that they understood the goals of the program and what their roles would be. She considered the fact that they might need her at every meeting to facilitate, but she soon learned that they were so motivated that they became a self-directed Collaboration Team, capable of meeting without an advisor.

During each weekly meeting, the group focused upon one of the following topics:

- **Make Time For Your Career**
- **Focus On What's Possible Today**
- **Identify The Skills You Need To Get There**
- **Develop Your Three Month Career Action Plan**
- **Allow Yourself To Daydream About Your Future**

Week One: **Make Time For Your Career**

During the first meeting, the Specialists discussed how they currently spend their time and the reasons for their choices, how to focus their efforts to make the best use of their time, and rethink their priorities to accommodate their career explorations.

For example, Kathleen complained that she had too much to do and too little time for career development. She thought that she would need to spend several evenings or a part of each weekend to truly grow her career. She discovered instead that spending two to three hours each week could make a significant difference. And she discovered that she actually had more time available than she had thought. By using a simple four-box tool, **Where Does Your Time Go?** (available at www.synergyconsulting.com) to assess the tasks she was performing, Kathleen was able to identify her time-wasters and carve out the time she needed for career development. For example, Kathleen realized that she was spending three to four hours each evening watching television. While she did so to relax, she found that she could take some of that time to focus on career development activities, such as reading or internet research, and still have enough time for relaxation.

Week Two: Focus On What's Possible Today

In their week two meeting, the team investigated what is possible as next career steps for each of them, choosing which possibility they would like to focus upon,

and thinking about how to make their possibilities more probable. During week two, the notion of the Collaboration Team became real since each person received peer support and ideas from the other team members.

In fact, Sarah had stopped thinking about tomorrow when she heard the news about the HR Automation initiative. "What's the point," she thought "...there may not be a tomorrow here." Yet before the news was announced, Sarah had been thinking about moving into an HR Generalist role. While Sarah, on her own, could talk about wanting to grow into a broader role, it wasn't until she voiced it to her Collaboration Team colleagues that she learned that there would still be a need for HR Generalists after HR Automation was in place and that she should really think more about this option. Sarah and the others could come up with a number of possibilities, but the support they provided to each other and their additional ideas helped keep them motivated while still being grounded in the realities of their current state.

Week Three: Identify the Skills You Need to Get There

The Collaboration Team met in their third week to assess their skills as they related to

their areas of focus, select a skill that they'd like to build or strengthen, and consider how they could build that skill.

Sarah had Benefits experience, but she needed to develop greater knowledge of Compensation to become an HR generalist. Kathleen had prior experience in Compensation, and offered to help Sarah grow her expertise. She spent an hour each week with Sarah, increasing her knowledge of the company's compensation approach and methods. Others on the team looked at the company's internal training offerings to learn skills such as project management and accounting. Still others investigated the tuition reimbursement program and considered enrolling in evening classes at the local college. Week three provided the "down to earth" look at what each person would need to do to take their next career step. They indeed were gaining the confidence to see possibilities where they previously had thought none existed.

Week Four: Develop Your Three-Month Career Action Plan

Some time during the fourth week, the SVP of HR checked in with one of the Specialists to see how things were going. She was somewhat surprised and very pleased to hear that the team had continued to meet regularly and that they were accomplishing a great deal. She was especially pleased to hear how the team had jelled and how the power of the team was being used to assist every member.

During week four, each person in the group determined specific activities she was willing to engage in, broke each activity down into manageable tasks and enlisted the help of others to build her skills.

Andrea had been thinking about moving into an accounting role. She had majored in Accounting in college but upon graduation had not found an accounting job. One of Kathleen's friends was a lead accountant in the accounting department of their company. Kathleen arranged a conversation for Sarah with her friend. He agreed to mentor Sarah for the next three months, helping her learn the company's accounting policies and procedures, and preparing her to be ready to apply for future openings.

Catherine committed to learning the skills of market research and found someone

in the marketing department who gave her a few recommended websites and textbooks so that she could begin to learn more about what good market research entails. Catherine committed to her Collaboration Team colleagues that she had a hard time "hitting the books" and asked for their help to encourage her to do the necessary reading it would take to learn these new skills.

Each person found that using the Career Action Plan helped them get specific about what they were committing to do and helped them hold each other accountable for their commitments.

Week Five: Allow yourself to daydream about your future

While their meetings during the past four weeks were often difficult to squeeze into their busy schedules and required time outside of the office to complete their commitments, each person on the team was glad that she had begun the program. However, they all also reported that they really looked forward to Week 5 which allowed them to do some legitimate daydreaming about future possibilities. During week five, they thought about what they would like to be doing five years from now, discussed what skills they would need to realize that dream, and went back to their Career Action Plan to list one more skill they had not included on their skill building list that would help them reach their future goal.

Kathleen dreamed about one day having her own business. She had significant HR experience and was thinking about how she might use that to create a business. Her team members had always regarded Kathleen as the "go to" person for any questions they had or information they needed. Together, they brainstormed ways in which Kathleen might be able to leverage her experience along with her growing competence in the new automation tool that was being implemented.

Kathleen had not been a big supporter of the Automation initiative because she was concerned that they would lose the all-important human touch. With the help of her team, Kathleen recognized that the tool could actually enhance her interaction with the employees. She decided she would become the tool "expert" and once the automation initiative was complete, she

would talk with the tool vendor about the possibility of providing services to their clients in the future as an independent consultant.

When the end of the fifth week came, the Benefits Specialists were well on their way to helping themselves chart their career directions. They also realized something equally important, though, and that was the benefit of the informal Collaboration Team they had formed. Although they chose not to continue meeting weekly, each person indicated that what she had learned about actively listening to a colleague, providing support and encouragement and applauding each other's successes were attributes that not only helped them in their career exploration but were also valuable skills they intended to apply in their work environment and their home lives.

Catherine said it best. "We thought the SVP of HR was trying to brush us off when she suggested we try to do the Career Collaborators Program, but what we found was that each of us wanted to think through our career decisions and the support provided by the team was the motivation we needed. It was also the glue that held us together during a very difficult time."

Although at this company, the team had the support of HR, any individual or group who is serious about thinking through career options can follow the Career Collaborators Program steps outlined above. You might even want to do the program as part of IAAP chapter meetings. You might just find that what you learn about yourself and your interests and skills is just enough to provide that career development focus you were seeking.

The forms mentioned in this article are available for download at www.synergyconsultingcollaborative.com

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