Experiential learning for developing managers: a practical model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to create a practical system for assessing the need for developmental opportunities for management development while functioning on the job and to assist managers in selecting from those opportunities. This includes assessment strategies, discussion of developmental patterns, and potential gains in organizational commitment and managerial performance.

Design/methodology/approach – A model is proposed for connecting previously established management competencies to developmental opportunities in the manager's current task and group environments.

Findings – Self-assessment instruments are presented for general management competencies and for task structure with notes on how managers, their supervisors and/or mentors might complete those ratings, in order to then use the proposed action model for learning/development.

Practical limitations – The potential impact of managerial coaching processes or diversity in organizational cultural contexts on the use of this model are noted.

Social implications – Improved managerial competencies and organizational performance may be obtained from following this model along with increased organizational commitment by the managers.

Originality/value – This paper presents a new model for self-assessment of managerial development needs, discusses how those can be linked with on-the-job tasks within an existing job placement and organization. While the literature documents the value of developmental opportunities, no system exists for the assessment or selection of a developmental plan within an existing job title or organization. The proposed model fills a large conceptual gap in mapping a manager's personal career goals onto the organization's career paths or management development system objectives.

Keywords Management development, Career development, Action learning, Self assessment, Career planning, Competency modelling, Task structure

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Training in organizations increases individuals' capabilities to meet job demands. Such efforts range from required and regular training such as mandated by legal and administrative rules (e.g. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) to technical or technologically based training (e.g. introducing a new Enterprise Resource Planning system). A common distinction is made, however, between training and development, with development usually being associated with the individual gaining new capabilities useful for both present and future jobs (Mathis and Jackson, 2011). Further, most employers today have managerial competency models which target desired capabilities in their managerial staff.

Training vs development for managers

There are many external resources and educational options available for management development. There are one-day workshops to improve leadership skills, project

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management certification courses, and university degree programs for those seeking the highest level of development. Another option for management development is to create an internal management development program. This is not only a cost-effective solution, but it promotes teamwork and allows for a tailored program appropriate to the organization's specific needs.

Management development is therefore training that has an immediate and a long-term organizational benefit. But these developmental efforts can be costly and in times of economic recession, organizations may take a hard look at the disadvantages of traditional management development efforts. Most management development programs are offered as off-the-job and even off-the-job-site activities (see Table I). There are costs associated with developing a program or contracting with a developer. There are costs associated with paying the trainees to attend. It is expensive to pay training staff, buy training materials, and keep training records. There are even opportunity costs for decreased productivity during the times the employees are absent from their work roles.

Learning formats differ in the acceptance by trainees and their prior history of transfer of training. Table II lists six common learning formats (e.g. formal instruction such as platform training to wilderness trips) and some commonly discussed disadvantages to each format.

On-the-job training is the most common method for training non-managerial employees (Bohlander and Snell, 2010). It is also seen by many as the most effective way of facilitating learning in the workplace (Cohn, 2007; Hodges, 2001; Sisson, 2001). However, one of the reasons is it not used more widely with management development is because it is also one of the most poorly implemented training methods due to the

Training method	Percent of organizations reporting use
Classroom instruction	88
Workbook/manual	73
Videotape	70
Public seminar	57
Computer-based training	50
Audio recording	39
Non computerized self-study	35
Case study	33
Role play	33
Internet sources	31
Self-assessment instruments	23
Intranet sources	21
Broadcast/satellite TV	20
Game/simulation (not computer based)	19
Group videoconferencing	17
Teleconferencing (audio only)	11
Outdoor experiential program	9
Game/simulation (computer based)	9
Desktop videoconferencing	4
Virtual reality program	2

Note: *Based on a sample of 1,828
Source: Industry Report 1998 (1998)

Table I.
Instructional methods
and media

Learning format	Possible disadvantage
Formal instruction	Expense of pay trainees and trainers while off the job
	Requires verbal and study skills
	Inhibits transfer of learning
Simulation	Costly to develop the experience itself
	Cannot always duplicate real situations with fidelity
Assessment center	Costly to develop or to send trainees to if agency directed
	Takes time to administer
Role-playing	Cannot recreate true motivations from situation
	Role playing behaviors may not be real or transferable
Sensitivity training	May not relate to job and/or coworkers
Wilderness trips	Costly to administer
	Physically challenging

Table II.
Disadvantages of off-site development programs

lack of a structured development environment, the lack of well-defined competencies that an organization wants their managers to possess, and a lack of coordination with human resources. The core of management development should be on-the-job (provided they are well organized, well planned, supervised, and challenging) with other off-the-job development methods used to supplement these experiences because much of what is learned in off-site training programs rarely gets used back on the job (Bohlander and Snell, 2010).

Another problem with management development is that organizations may opt for fad programs seeking a quick fix reflecting inadequate human resource planning. Another problem with quick fix management development is that when a manager has learned new ideas and techniques outside of the job itself, managers may return to their jobs only to find that they are still bound by old techniques and attitudes held by their coworkers. This means the external job development (usually classroom training) is not used on the job.

Organizational efforts to develop managers frequently utilize ineffective paradigms whereby traditional training programs for managers had the following assumptions: "management consists of a set of skills and behaviors that can be broken down into their molecular elements and presented sequentially; people learn best in a standardized environment with expert models, concrete advice, and practice and repetition to a standard; and people can attain managerial proficiency within 8 to 24 hours. These assumptions have driven the creation of the traditional three-ring binders – how to lists and bullet points in off-site training settings" (Brightman, 2004, p. 48). This often creates a disconnection between the teacher and the student. Brightman states that "current research on how people learn suggests there is a better way to develop high levels of managerial talent in organizations and that learning is optimized when there is a strong desire to learn, opportunity and safety to make mistakes, availability of peer and expert models, real life experience, opportunities for learners to help others learn, and mentoring." Brightman goes on to state that "if good management skill could be reduced to a how to list and acquired through repetition and practice, there would be many more good managers operating in organizations today."

The typical forms of on-the-job training historically utilized such methods as job rotation, cross-training, and apprentice training are not very relevant to management. Other training programs such as hiring trainers to come on site, outsourcing training,

and sending managers to conferences and workshops and/or educational institutions requires taking managers away from their current jobs which has become too expensive for many organizations. In addition, the long-term transfer of knowledge may not occur. Studies show that investment in management development improves financial performance (Bassie and McMurrer, 2007; Lavensaler, 2008). Management development for the most part is also self-development (Kouzes and Posner, 2003). Therefore, the starting point is to have a method in place that will provide the feedback essential for identifying and prioritizing management development by determining the required management competencies the manager needs, then assessing where the manager is, and determining how to incorporate into the manager's current experiences needed to advance that manager to the highest level of each competency.

In this paper we propose a systematic means to assess management development needs of the individual manager which might then be linked to common on-the-job task environments which, when selectively engaged in may lead to substantial benefits in terms of targeted managerial competencies and capabilities. We see this type of system as more cost effective, as having the most face validity, and as minimizing transfer of training losses.

Current models of management development
The developmental challenge profile (DCP) was created and first reported by McCauley *et al.* (1994). This instrument seeks to assess the developmental components of managerial jobs by collecting ratings across 15 scales and a total of 96 items. However, ten of the scales deal with organization-wide factors or even extra-organizational factors (e.g. adverse business conditions). Only five of the scales refer to factors which might be under the manager's own control (e.g. developing new directions). In any case, the DCP lacks any practical guide for how developmental assignments might be identified or even created. It lacks a practical application model.

Previous studies have established the value of job related experiences to career outcomes. Campion *et al.* (1994) showed that job rotation, for example, had a positive relationship with such career-related variables as salary and promotion, positive affect, and self-perceptions of skill acquisition in a sample of 255 employees. In a sample of 809 employees without managerial responsibilities, those who take the initiative in career self-management have been found to report significantly higher affective commitment and self-perceived career success (De Vos *et al.*, 2009). Overall the pattern of results for career self-management and selection of a variety of job experiences supports employees gaining in competencies and showing greater organizational commitment.

We found one empirical study of the impact that developmental assignments have on managerial success. Dragoni *et al.* (2009) conducted an empirical study of 445 junior-level managers to determine the contribution that developmental job assignments made to managerial competencies (i.e. as rated by the managers' supervisor in this study). A moderated regression analysis controlled for demographic variables as well as job tenure and organizational tenure. Results showed a significant amount of the variance in rated competency was accounted for by the main effect for the developmental quality of the manager's assignment. A motivational self-rating, learning goal orientation, interacted with the assignment's quality to account for an additional amount of variance beyond that accounted for by the assignment or any measure of tenure. In sum, managers who were motivated to learn and had access

to developmentally enriched assignments showed significant gains in managerial competencies.

Managerial competency models

Competency models identify gaps in knowledge, skills, and abilities (Mathis and Jackson, 2011). A managerial competency model includes a list of management competencies needed to be successful (Bennis, 1984; Katz, 1955; Mintzberg, 1973; Sandwith, 1993).

Management development must begin somewhere and we are recommending the use of an assessment form to determine what a manager's current competencies are. A plan that includes mentoring/coaching, on-the-job experience, and regular feedback about where the manager is on the organization's competency continuum will enable them to continue to improve upon the competency areas they are weak in. This means designing a program that quantifies the management competencies needed, provides a framework to provide feedback, and measures progress to proficiency. This profile would measure the gaps between a manager's current performance and the desired proficiency. Once proficient in one competency area, the manager would then focus on becoming proficient in another area. Using this methodology, a dashboard can be designed that measures and displays results as the manager works through their development. Such a process involves the human resources staff, the supervisor, and the manager teaming up to create and monitor the manager's on-the-job development plan (individualized learning plan) and progress.

A rating form for assessing management competencies

Organizations may adapt an existing competency model or create a new management competency model. The competencies may include but are not limited to: leadership, customer focus, team/employee development, professionalism, business knowledge, accountability, people management, and personal performance. Most organizations see it as desirable to have a specific competency model. However, to further this discussion, we have created a general managerial competency rating form that could be used across organizations and industries. Each competency may have multiple levels (see Table III for an example of a general management competency rating form with three levels) arranged in increasing order of behavioral demands and characteristic sophistication that defines a logical step-by-step development sequence. Each level builds upon the levels below it. Performance increases gradually as the competency level increases with the target competency level set at the highest level. Any effort spent developing beyond the target level would be better invested in developing a different competency. The initial competencies of all managers are determined via a management competency rating form that may be a manager's self-assessment or may also be utilized like a 360-feedback method where the employee, co-workers, and supervisor also assess all competency areas of each manager to determine where the organization needs to focus their manager development.

Once a management development plan is created ongoing communication between the manager and their mentor and/or supervisor is needed to determine the level of competency achieved and provide continued support to continue to master the highest competency level in all areas the organization deems essential. This reinforces and supports the efforts made by managers throughout the year, modifying priorities and resources as needed. It involves continuously striving to achieve the highest level

Dimension	Description
Leadership	Level 1: Has confidence in others, motivates through example, and is committed to success
	Level 2: Encourages improvement and energizes others to achieve organizational goals
	Level 3: Inspires others to achieve organizational mission/vision
Customer focus	Level 1: Understands customer's needs and ensures customer satisfaction/ service excellence
	Level 2: Partners with customers to create added value
	Level 3: Anticipates customer needs, seeks their perspective to create a competitive advantage
Team/employee development	Level 1: Supports employee development, assesses employee needs, and provides feedback
	Level 2: Coaches employees and creates a personalized developmental plan with each employee
	Level 3: Mentors and works collaboratively with employees to create long-term training goals
Professionalism	Level 1: Demonstrates concerns about meeting organizational standards of performance and follows professional standards even when not in self-interest
	Level 2: Models high standards of professionalism and insists upon high standards of professionalism from others
	Level 3: Demands high standards of professionalism and integrity from the organization
Business knowledge	Level 1: Demonstrates broad knowledge of the business and ensures optimal use of resources
	Level 2: Recognizes and addresses market developments and shares knowledge
	Level 3: Foresees future trends and understands how they may impact the organization
Accountability/ managing performance	Level 1: Insists upon high performance and monitors progress against objectives
	Level 2: Holds others accountable for their performance and appropriately addresses performance issues
	Level 3: Takes action to hold others accountable
People management	Level 1: Provides direction and readily participates. Brings out the best in people
	Level 2: Promotes cooperation and collaboration among employees and keeps them informed
	Level 3: Seeks and values input from others and pulls others around a common goal
Personal performance	Level 1: Works to meet organizational standards and continuously improves performance
	Level 2: Develops own measures of excellence and establishes challenging goals
	Level 3: Anticipates the need for improvement, takes action, and perseveres in the face of obstacles or criticism

Table III.
Management
competency rating form

of competency. There should be an emphasis on frequent feedback and reinforcement. This provides both formal and informal opportunities to discuss progress against objectives, review demonstration of competencies, and determine if any objectives should be modified.

The managerial competency model that an organization develops reflects its vision and its mission statement. Each individual manager's specific application of that model may further reflect the organization's tactical objectives related to the manager's working duties. In any case, our purpose in proposing this model is to suggest that the organization has a valid competency model and is seeking a cost effective strategy for moving its managers further along in developing those capabilities. It is our belief that managers are capable of reflective self-assessments of their current work group, associated tasks, and customer focus. In organizations with formalized mentorship programs, such assessments may be done with a mentor's help. Our proposal is then to offer two instruments that may be used in that self-assessment.

A rating form for assessing a manager's current job characteristics
Situational determinants of leadership effectiveness are a well-accepted part of theory and practice in management. The Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness (Fiedler, 1978), the Path-Goal Theory (House and Mitchell, 1974), and the Substitutes for Leadership (Kerr and Jermier, 1978) model all explicitly discuss how important the task structure of a group's primary tasks is to understanding how effective leadership may be within the group. We propose here that all managers should periodically examine their task structure and consider how changes in their own work routines or in organizational policies may impact that dimension. This approach also extends Stewart's (1982) model for understanding the nature of a managerial job based on numerous longitudinal studies. The Stewart (1982) dimensions of demands, constraints, and choices are embedded in the concept of task structure for task performing groups.

An excellent self-assessment form is given in Fiedler *et al.* (1976). This ten-item rating form is easily completed by any manager in minutes and describes the four primary dimensions of task structure (see Table IV). The four dimensions are decision verifiability (e.g. the degree to which the correctness of a solution or a decision can be demonstrated), goal clarity (e.g. the degree to which duties and related outcomes are clear understood), goal path multiplicity (e.g. the degree to which there exists more than one set of procedures for approaching work on the task), and solution specificity (e.g. the degree to which there exists more than one correct outcome to work on the task). High scores on task structure make a manager's job relatively easier but even when a manager sees her or his job as highly structured, examining the tasks again may suggest ways of de-structuring the tasks in ways that are useful. Such might be the case when managers voluntarily take on new tasks, especially difficult unresolved problems, or seek to produce greater creativity or innovation in the organization.

An action learning model for management development
Our proposal for on-the-job management development assumes that the individual manager works in an organization with a fully developed management competency model. This set of criteria for what knowledge, skills, and abilities the organization seeks in its managers can be taken as the manager's goals for himself or herself. Identifying and prioritizing which competency areas to develop are the next step in that manager's developmental path.

We have offered two separate assessment instruments that should be relevant in any organization and for any management competency model. By completing an accurate assessment using these forms, the manager should identify his/her relative strengths and weaknesses. Of course in some organizations there may already be a

Is there a standard operating procedure (SOP), a diagram, or a detailed description that explains how
to do the tasks that make up your job?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is there a person available to advise you on how the job should be done?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is there a step-by-step or by-the-numbers procedure which explains in detail how to do the task that
make up your job?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is there a way to divide the task into separate parts or steps?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Are there some ways which are clearly recognized as better than others for doing your job?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is it obvious when a task in your job is finished?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is there a book, a manual, or a job description which indicates the best solution or the best outcome for
each task in your job?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Is there a general understanding about the standards you have to meet for your work to be considered
acceptable?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Are you usually given a numerical rating on how well you did your job?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true
Can you find out how well a task in your job has been done in enough time to be able to do it the next
time?
2 = usually true   1 = sometimes true   0 = seldom true

Table IV.
Task structure
rating form

formal process of tracking a manager's progress on developing the desired
competencies. Or in some organizations, a formal mentorship program may exist in
which a more senior manager has assumed the role of guide in developing the target
manager's competencies. In either case, we suggest the two rating forms we have
offered here are useful since they are linked so clearly to common on-the-job events and
experiences with developmental potential. We see them as having a strong heuristic
value in this critical judgment of selecting experiences for development.

In Figure 1 we offer our model as a set of assessments as represented by the factors
listed in the left hand column. In the middle column are listed some common worksite
events, grouped as job transitions, challenges, and obstacles. Our intention is to
suggest that a perceptual judgment must occur linking the assessment results with a
careful selection from among the most relevant worksite events. This is the critical step
in judgment, identifying what on-the-job experiences should be most beneficial to
the particular manager's development. Once a linkage is made then the third and
right-hand column suggests that potential benefits to the manager competency levels
are the outcome(s). We hope the second filter, from event to benefit, suggests that a
single new experience may have beneficial effects upon a number of important
outcomes. For example, an individual manager may assess his/her competency needs
in team/employee development and professionalism as relatively greater than the
others. This model suggests to such a manager that seeking out job experiences such
as accepting new team members and orienting new employees would be a good
linkage. Upon completing these types of assignments, the individual manager may feel
they have enhanced their supervisory knowledge but also may conclude that they have
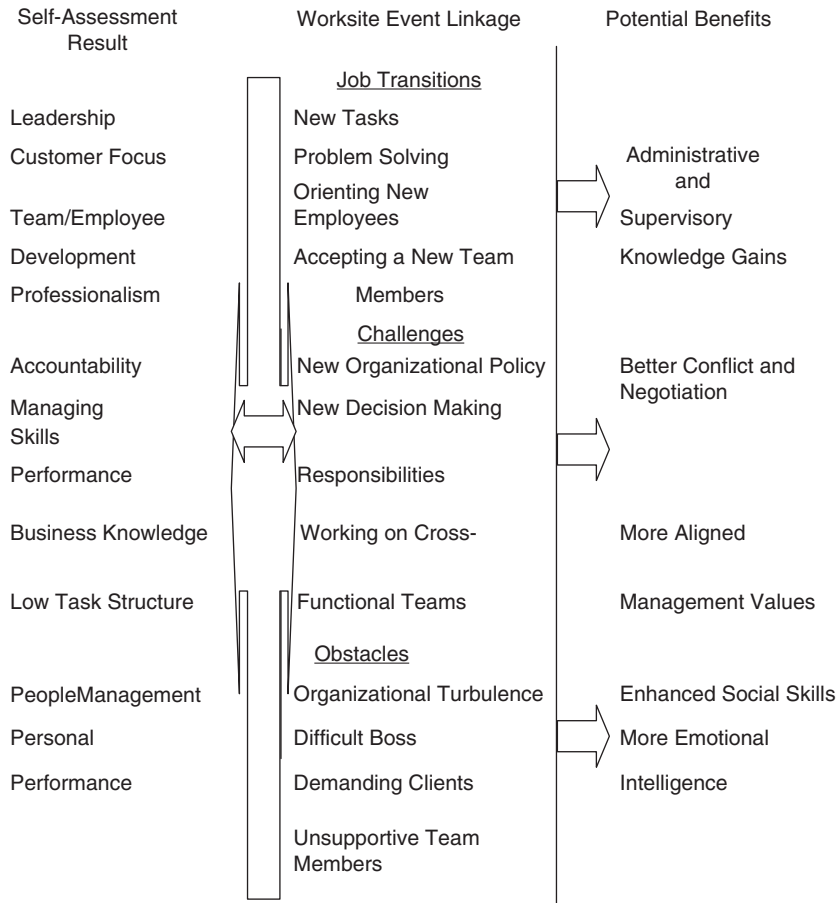gained in emotional intelligence and social skills.

Self-Assessment Result	Worksite Event Linkage	Potential Benefits
	Job Transitions	
Leadership	New Tasks	
Customer Focus	Problem Solving	Administrative and
	Orienting New Employees	
Team/Employee		Supervisory
Development	Accepting a New Team	Knowledge Gains
Professionalism	Members	
	Challenges	
Accountability	New Organizational Policy	Better Conflict and Negotiation
Managing Skills	New Decision Making	
Performance	Responsibilities	
Business Knowledge	Working on Cross-	More Aligned
Low Task Structure	Functional Teams	Management Values
	Obstacles	
PeopleManagement	Organizational Turbulence	Enhanced Social Skills
Personal	Difficult Boss	More Emotional
Performance	Demanding Clients	Intelligence
	Unsupportive Team Members	

Figure 1.
Proposed model for
on-the-job management
development

Another example might include a manager meeting with a mentor as part of an organization's formal mentorship program. The mentor may have personally experienced a very different set of circumstances than their mentee when the mentor was at that stage in their management career, so the tendency to suggest learning competencies in the same fashion as the mentor learned them is not an option. The mentor and mentee might each complete the assignment forms, in each case rating the competency levels of the mentee at the current time, and then meet and compare ratings. They might then discuss future assignments or even possible voluntary actions that the mentee might engage in to pursue her/his developmental needs that both the mentor and the mentee see as most important. At some later point, the two may again meet to assess the benefits associated with the on-the-job experiences and to even return to a second assessment of the mentee's competency levels.

This model can be taken as a template, to be altered or added to by any organization as a management development tool. It should also be considered as a conceptual system that might be added to off-site management development options within an organization. In other words, this can be adapted to other planning systems and it can also be adopted by any hierarchical level within an organization.

Conclusion and limitations

This paper proposes an action learning method for developing managers that emphasizes that the manager take an active role in choosing assignments. Many in the management literature have emphasized how desirable such a process might be (cf. MacNamara and Weekes, 1982) but the model proposed here is the first to make practical a procedure which is experience based, problem oriented, continuous, and is supported by realistic feedback. We feel confident that individuals engaging in such a program will be highly motivated by it.

It is clear that organizations can benefit if their managers create personalized career development plans and that the nature of the manager's current work assignment plays a vital role in developing the manager's competencies. As has been noted previously, "When managers realize that much of what they do may in practice be a choice, they can be freed to review what they really want to do to enhance their units and organization's performance and their own careers" (Stewart and Fondas, 1992).

This model is relevant and important because it allows organizations to pursue their management competency model in a cost effective way. It does not remove people from their jobs, it increases transfer of learning, and it increases training motivation because it is all on-the-job. All this requires is knowledge of the organizations competency model and a realistic self-reflection using the measurements we have provided comparing the competency model desired to the individual manager's self-assessment. The manager and mentor and/or supervisor may then select experiences that will assist the manager in achieving the highest level of competency. The task and competency assessment rating tools may also be utilized as a 360-feedback method to determine where a manager is and where they need to develop.

Some organizations will combine this model with a formal mentoring program (Kram, 1988). Organizational outcomes are enhanced when this model supports and enhances a formal mentoring program. In other words, institutionalization is possible via a formal mentoring program. The ultimate goal is continuous progress toward management development with ongoing feedback and support.

Coaching managers by providing an outside contact to provide instruction and insight is a very popular form of development. The proposal made here is not inconsistent with that approach and could possibly be adapted to those forms. The type of organization (e.g. for-profit, not-for-profit, organizational size, industry, and so on) may also be a limitation for this proposal (Morrison and Brantner, 1992). Both coaching and type of organizational context need to be considered in the future.

Organizational culture and the fit of individuals into that social system is frequently mentioned as a result of organizational commitment processes. We believe that on-site management development will lead to increases in organizational commitment and then conceivably to a stronger organizational culture. This process may lead to a perception of greater opportunity for organizationally provided career management, which has been related to greater career success and greater organizational commitment.

Encapsulation is a major argument against off-site job training. Certainly one can argue that even the best designed computerized training program may simply lead to employees just clicking through the program (Robbins and Judge, 2007). With developmental managerial assignments the generalization of the training to actual

implementation makes encapsulation a moot point. Perhaps even more important is the fact that individual managers will see their own plan for career development map perfectly onto the organizations plan for management development. That may be one of the strongest reasons for pursuing this type of development.

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