CAREER PLANNING – HOW TO MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU? – TIPS FOR PROGRAMMERS, MANAGERS AND SENIOR LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Most employees depend on their employer's processes to define their career progress and career ladder. Realizing these expectations, many organizations have taken the responsibility of investing in employees' career planning. But, do we need to depend on others for our career growth? Do we need to depend on management or organization's initiative to plan our career? Do we feel that these initiatives are producing the results to the satisfaction of associates? Do we use them effectively? This paper will provide tips to approach career planning which can result in individual employee satisfaction and organization wide positive impact.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes 3 step process of career planning (Vision Statement, Goal Setting and Action Plan) and ways to review, seek feedback and manage career progression. This paper also provides tips to manage career plans for high performing individuals along with tips for individuals to manage their own career. Career planning is not just for associates who aim for meteoric rise but for all who aspire to advance in their career. If career planning starts with a notion of title advancements, then it is destined to disappoint many associates. Career planning is an ongoing process of evaluating and reviewing career objectives and adjusting the approach to align with personal & professional priorities as well as with job market changes. Most of the employees may be having career progression discussions with their supervisors but as long as these are not approached with documented process, over the time this initiative will lose its steam.

VISION STATEMENT – FIRST STEP OF CAREER PLANNING

Many of us have seen Vision statements of organizations we worked at and many have not deciphered how that fits to our own career. The words might have become so ubiquitous in our personal and professional life that many stopped paying attention to the implications of this. Vision statement provides the focus and sets long term priorities for an organization. This applies to individuals also. We all need to set our vision for our professional achievements which take into account our priorities and personal preferences. So irrespective of if your organization has any form of career process or not, individuals need to write down their vision of professional pinnacle they would like to achieve. Some may have this clear vision from very early days of their professional life and some may get to this place over the years. The picture of the vision may change as individual progresses through their career and it is ok to alter your vision based on your new priorities and realities.

Tips I would like to offer programmers of any level while setting up visions are :

1. Never set a vision that sounds like a title. Example – I would like to see myself to be CEO of Abcxyz, inc.
    Problem with this vision is, titles and companies can change and what you think you wanted to accomplish may change or can become irrelevant.

2. Set a vision that has role you would like to see yourself playing. Example – would like to see myself providing strategic direction and organization wide operational leadership to an organization.

3. Be clear about what skills, traits and knowledge level needed to be living this vision.

4. Don't be compelled to put a fixed timeline for achieving your vision. Timelines are important while setting up your goals, which we will discuss later, but vision is for a long haul.

5. Discuss with your mentors, supervisors and senior leaders in your organization to better understand the direction industry/market is heading and how you need to re-adjust vision to align with these changes.

6. There is no rule that your vision should match with the vision of the organization you are working for. It will be of great help for you if they match.

7. Don't outsource your vision development work; there is no faster, cheaper and easier way to do it.

8. Always remember, Vision statement is not about fancy words, it is about your true passion and intent.

Your passion for a cause or dream for greater good should drive you to setting up a vision that fulfills your ambitions and provides you professional satisfaction. Once you are satisfied with your career vision statement, next step is to put a plan in place to realize this dream/passion.

GOAL SETTING – STEPPING STONES TO REALIZE YOUR DREAM

To lay a path to fulfill your vision, you need to start with a reality check of strengths and abilities. But conventional wisdom nudges us to adjust our dreams based on our strengths and weakness. Many talk about setting practical goals but this definition of practicality varies with individuals. There are abundant examples of people who defied conventional career progression paths and embarked on uncharted career paths to success. Current strengths (or lack there of) shouldn't limit your vision but encourage you to work aggressively on setting up more challenging goals. The goals you set for yourself may define your destiny.

As part of evaluation of your current strengths and areas of improvements vis-à-vis your long term vision, you need to write down your strengths. This is the toughest part of the process as self-evaluation is often difficult and involves defying ego. As you have identified skills, traits and knowledge are needed for fulfilling your vision, evaluating your current strengths and writing down, will help in setting up clear goals to bridge the gap of strengths. Often it is the interpretation of strength of skills that makes individuals either over rate or under rate their abilities. If an individual approaches this documentation process similar to annual review self evaluation, then it is likely that individual won't represent a true picture. As annual review process tends to be very stressful due to its growth/compensation implications, individuals will be defensive about their strengths.

Tips I would like to offer to individuals and organization leadership regarding goal setting

1. Avoid discussing Individual Development Plan and corresponding goals as part of annual common performance reviews. Annual review period is to measure an employee's performance against job requirements and organizational goals. The goals present in the annual review document represent what organization would like to see an employee achieved vis-à-vis organization goals.

2. Be clear about your strengths and it is advisable to be reviewed by manager/senior leader for feedback. Don't fall into the trap of measuring yourself to just people around you. As you grow in your career, there may not be too many around you to compare yourself.

3. It is advisable to do a skip level review of Individual Development Plan for high performing employees. This allows senior leadership of any organization insights into potential future leaders or Subject Matter Experts (SME). I would suggest that senior leaders review strengths and goals documented by high performing individuals. As goals setting is a key part of development plan, any positive intervention by senior leadership of organization will go a long way in retaining top talent.

4. It is advisable to set and track not more than 3 goals at any given point of time. In the excitement to reach vision in a hurry, long lists of concurrent goals leave any individual to lose focus and lose ability to master skills needed.

5. When documenting goals, clear description of each goal needs to be documented. This allows the clarity needed while working on developing action plan for these goals.

6. Along with description of goal, needs to have a measurement of progress of the goal. It is important to know where a goal starts and where it ends.

7. Goals need to be objective in nature. Example - If you are looking to be a global operational leader in an organization and you have realized that your strength is not in the area of inspirational leadership, your goal should be "Learning the art of inspirational leadership" instead of "Completing training in Inspirational Leadership". Completing a training course will help in understanding the topic well but it wouldn't alone close the gap of knowledge and experience.

8. Goals need timely review. Make sure to discuss and ask for feedback from your manager. Make best use of your 1x1 meeting with your manager to extract support for your goals. Seek opportunities to enhance the required skills to attain your vision.

9. You need to show your commitment to career goals set by you before expecting your organization to provide support. Every organization is looking for win-win situation where employee supports organization goals and in return organization reciprocates. Understanding this organizational behavior is essential for individual success.

10. Don't be in a hurry to close one goal and move on to next one. Please make sure that you have addressed all aspects of the goal before moving on to next one.

The process of goal setting can be a tedious task but done well, it can help you on your path to attaining the set vision. No goal works alone and it should be accompanied by very good action plan. Goals provide you the direction but throughout this journey you need to cross a few milestones to measure your progress. It is time to explore the process of developing action plan.

ACTION PLAN – REACHING YOUR GOALS

Action plan in the part of your Individual Development Plan where real action happens and here is where you need support from your organization and manager. Each goal can consist of more than one action plan and each action plan needs be finite enough to complete and measure. Action plan is the place where you would keep track of timelines and set target timelines.

Tips to developing action plan:

1. Set of action plans for each goal is needed. The activities under action plan need to be actionable i.e. measureable.

2. Each action plan should have start date and end date for planning purposes.

3. Try to look into your organization's Learning Management System to identify trainings that can help with your action plans.

4. Your technical learning action plans can also be addressed through PharmaSUG trainings and archived presentations.

5. If your action plan includes learning leadership skills, seek out mentoring from senior leadership within your organization.

6. When seeking out support from leadership, make sure that you exhibit your intent to follow-up on the learning and action items suggested by leadership.

7. In your excitement to meet your goals, never place organization's goals at lower priority. This will not help you in getting adequate support from organization.

8. Please keep version/list of your prior action plans even though you have completed them and removed them from active action plan list. This eliminates future re-dos.

9. Never lose an opportunity to support other departments as this helps in building cross functional work experience. This experience can allow for vertical growth in the future.

10. Try to include action items which allow you to understand finance aspects of the business.

PUTTING ALL THE STEPS TOGETHER

It is important that after all these steps are put together, an overall review of the document needs to be performed. This allows you to make sure that the intent and the content flow well Vision statement to Action Plan steps.
Here is a sample of how career planning document would look like.

Name: Vijay Moolaveesala	**Current Role:**
Date:02JAN2014	
VISION STATEMENT:	

Strengths	Explanation
SAS programming	Ability to use SAS for any complex data analysis and manipulation.

Goals	Description
Learn to manage remote staff	Ability to work, delegate, review performance and support remote staff – measure of progress of this goal is from direct feedback from remote staff

Action to support Goal1	Start date	End date
Training on "How to use existing technology tools to effectively communicate with remote staff"	01FEB2014	01MAR2014

CONCLUSION

Career planning is a process that needs time and care to be effective. Individuals need to seek help from their supervisors to develop an effective career plan and supervisors need to use this opportunity to develop their staff. Career planning process will have positive impact on overall success of any organization. As a career sensitive and actively developing employee also understands that his/her career progression is tied to the success and growth of organization he/she working. An organization that provides supportive environment for career growth can retain and attract highly talented employees.

Organizations shouldn't just stop at encouraging career planning but need to review job descriptions and put in place career ladder structure. Career planning approach can be one of the ways to develop future leaders in the organization and a better way to identify key successors.

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