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Dear Reader,

I have many times wondered at the magic of asymmetry. Just think of this: you may have reflected on several occasions about the lack of attention your boss was giving to your "real" talents, to your passion and strengths -- maybe even wondering if he/she KNEW what they were. You may have felt upset on some occasions about how others seem to know exactly how you should manage your decisions, your life, and yet they seem so ill-equipped to handle their own. Conversely, you may have not given too much thought to what makes your direct reports "tick", or maybe you feel pretty sure you know the answer, even if you haven't heard it recently from them. Even without knowing all the details of their lives, it seems pretty natural and easy to know what they should be doing, how they should be handling their decisions and lives... A toast to asymmetry, which keeps us in the dark!

This month, some reflections on how to get the best out of the people that report to you.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy

Editor

**Quote of the Month**

*"Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things."*

*Denis Diderot*

*French author and philosopher (1713 - 1784)*



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# DEVELOPING PEOPLE

By Isabel Rimanoczy

**A** few days ago I had a meeting where I was asked what can be done to help leaders develop their people. This triggered some reflection, and I came up with a Quick self assessment questionnaire:

***When did you have the last development-focused (NOT performance Review) conversation with each of your direct reports (DRs)?***

	6 months ago or less	between 6 – 12 months ago	over 1 year or never
DR 1			
DR 2			
DR 3			
....			

***If someone asked you what the professional aspirations are for each of your DRs, how accurate would be your response?***

	My assumption/my opinion	What I heard from them	Don't really know
DR 1			
DR 2			
DR 3			
....			

***If someone asked you what the passions and preferred tasks are for each of your DRs, how accurate would be your response?***

	My assumption/my opinion	What I heard from them	Don't really know
DR 1			
DR 2			

DR 3			
....			

***Have you seen the Individual Development Plan for each of your DRs?***

Yes for all	I've seen some of them	I don't think so
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Once you have answered these questions, you will have a good assessment of how well you are doing in terms of understanding how well or little you are in touch with developing your direct reports.

You probably noticed that the questions don't even ask what developmental actions are being taken by your department or those in which ones your direct reports are currently involved. Why is this not important?

**Development is more than taking courses**

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, to "develop" means to "unroll, unfold". If we want to connect our ideas for developing people to this meaning, we could think of helping others to uncover, or expand their capabilities and skills. It has both a reference to something that is already there, waiting to be tapped into, and something that could become much larger, more important or profound. While courses can often serve this purpose, the key is whether the course or workshop is anchored in a passion, an interest or an area an employee is keen to explore.

Now look back at your own training or developmental experiences, and count how many have met that basic criterion for you. You should not be surprised that the most interesting, intriguing, transformational, and meaningful ones were those that you felt passionate about... What a coincidence!

(Certainly you may recall memorable development experiences that were meaningful because of your exchanges with others, because of your interactions with people you met, not necessarily because of the content. We are not referring to those here).

This brings us back to the point made above, that it is less important to see if people are enrolled in developmental activities, and which ones, and far more important to pay attention to the areas each individual is interested in developing.

This may sound counterintuitive: Does it mean you should let everyone do whatever he/she wants? Does it mean there should be no recommendation, no professional or performance related requirements, no "areas of improvement" listed in the performance review? No, of course not. We're suggesting that the emphasis be on understanding and identifying interests before selecting any solution.

May be it is not counter-intuitive, but counter-cultural. We are brought up in a culture that has mapped out from an early age what we need to learn, how it should be taught and when. Yet, our

successes mostly relate to what we are good at, what we are enthusiastic about, to our strengths and those areas of natural interest that we decided to pursue. Our intuition is wise: it points out what we need to do. This is not always what we are told to do.

This approach is not new: David Cooperrider, from Case Western University, has identified the importance of going with what works best, rather than trying to focus on what is going wrong. He calls it "Appreciative Inquiry". This perspective has further been researched by the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) developed at the University of Michigan, focusing on the positive dynamics (such as strength, resilience, vitality, trust, and so on) that lead to positive effects in productivity and performance in individuals and organizations.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **What is, then, a leader's role in developing his/her direct reports?**

If you filled in the opening questions and you concluded you could be doing better, there are a few things you can do.

### **1. Take some time.**

Make time to have an informal conversation with each of your DRs. Announce the outcome you want: to hear what their developmental expectations are, what their passions, preferred tasks and areas of work are, what their professional dream is, and to figure out jointly how you best can help. By announcing it you will give them time to reflect on it. Don't take it for granted that everyone is very clear on those matters, nor used to talk about them, or prepared to ask explicitly for support.

### **2. Give some time.**

Don't schedule your conversation too soon after your suggestion so they have time for preparation. Don't schedule it too far away, because it might give the impression that the discussion is not important. Ask what would be a convenient time from their perspective.

### **3. Establish a positive environment.**

Find a place that contributes to a good conversation, avoid telephone interruptions, people stopping by or noisy places, and contract how much time you will allocate for the conversation.

### **4. Restate the outcome,**

and check if the person has some additional expected outcomes.

### **5. Ask open questions and then just listen.**

Ask only clarifying questions, to deepen your understanding..

### **6. Suspend your judgment as much as you can.**

The less judgmental you appear, the more likely you will hear what the other really


thinks.

## 7. Address the differences

If what you hear does not match the current tasks, job profile or future career plans you had for the person, share that fact and see if the other has a solution, or if the solution has to be found together.

## 8. Know your limits

Remember that, although you may think you know what the other needs -- what you would like the other to become, what you think is best for him/her --this will never be enough to change a person's preferences and passions.

You will be more successful helping your direct reports or mentees to uncover and unfold their own talents, than in directing, persuading, pushing or convincing them to go in the direction you think is best. After all, developing is really about just that: unfolding and unrolling. 

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[\[1\]](#) Laura Morgan Roberts, Gretchen Spreitzer et al. "How to play to your strengths." Harvard Business Review, January 2005, p. 75-80



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