

CHAPTER EIGHT

Developing a Career Path for Recovery Support Specialists

1. Introduction:

“You are never too old to set another goal or dream new dreams.”

-C.S. Lewis

“In today’s diverse, global, and technologically savvy work environment, careers are no longer perceived as strictly vertical movements up the rungs of a ladder. Instead, a more appropriate metaphor for one’s career path is a rock-climbing wall. You can go straight up the rock face, climb at an angle, or you may choose to go up for a while, move over to find a different path, and then continue on.”

-ILRHR 6640, Case #3, Jing Cao & Desiree Thomas, 2013, Cornell University

Career paths and career ladders are two ways of looking at how employees can develop and progress within an organization. Traditional career ladders presume that employees aspire to gain higher ranking positions as determined by levels of responsibility, titles, and compensation. “Moving up” in the organization is often characterized by a person climbing up the rungs of a ladder. While at times they may resemble a traditional ladder, career paths can also vary substantially and can take on many forms over time, including horizontal lattices, a rock-climbing wall, or a stationary position within a formal organizational chart.

In the early part of the 20th Century, career choice and career progression were dictated by tradition, socio-economic status, family, and gender. For most men, career choices - and status within those careers - were determined by what their fathers and other male family members had done before them. Career choice options were even more limited for women and people with mental illnesses and disabilities by convention and social mores.

Today, employers are discovering the benefits of providing career growth opportunities for all employees. A collaborative employer/employee career development strategy provides a mechanism for enhancing employee skills and knowledge. The strategy should include job mastery, promotions, and even transfers to new and different positions as key components. Creating career development strategies with employees impacts the organization by improving morale, job satisfaction, motivation, productivity, succession planning, and responsiveness in meeting departmental and organizational objectives.

A collaborative career development strategy takes into consideration a paradigm that emerged in the 21st Century. This paradigm does not have an expectation of lifelong employment with individual employers, but rather an expectation of employees taking control of their own career paths. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of “company lifers” is dwindling and the average employee tenure has fallen to 4.6 years. Furthermore, the median tenure for employees between the ages of 25 and 34 is only 3.2 years.

Just as with other careers, individuals working as RSSs have varied aspirations as to how long they plan to stay with their current employers, when and where they move into a new position, and what their ultimate career goals look like. Mapping out the RSSs' career path through a collaborative career development strategy is an effective way to incorporate your agency's overarching recovery support program plans with the employment needs and aspirations of your RSSs. Connecting the RSSs' roles, talents, and goals to your new employment paradigms provides several benefits. You increase the likelihood that a stronger and more complimentary connection will form between your RSSs and your organization for whatever number of years you are fortunate enough to work with them. These connections enhance the RSSs positive bond with the organization. The RSSs feel secure enough to openly and honestly share their career objectives with their supervisors. They also develop a sense of value and worth as an integral part of the agency.

2. Best Practices - Successfully Developing Future Career Opportunities for RSSs

"My job is not to be easy on people. My job is to take these great people we have and to push them and make them even better"
-Steve Jobs

Not everyone at Apple agreed with Steve Jobs' leadership style or some of the ways he "pushed" employees to improve their performance. However, employers who recognize the "greatness within" and encourage employees to pursue their dreams as part of a formal career development program are more likely to have a productive workforce than those who do not invest the time in formal employee development efforts. Here are some proven ways to achieve greater success with Recovery Support Services staff:

- a. Respectfully communicate your agency's career development philosophy to all employees. This will help pave the way for RSSs to fully embrace their goals. From the time they are hired, be particularly careful not to make any statements which could suggest to your new RSSs that they should "simply be thankful to have a job." Some questions to explore with your management team include:
 - i. Have we clearly defined the differing roles of employees and supervisors in forging career paths for RSSs?
 - ii. What evidence can we show that our agency supports career advancement for all employees, no matter what that means to them, including RSSs?
 - iii. Do we encourage RSSs to explore and map out their own career paths?
 - iv. Are we taking into consideration the special interests and talents of employees that go beyond those applicable to their current positions?
- b. Support the RSSs and their supervisors with the needed tools, guidelines, and incentives which ensure that both parties are committed to their career development plans. Career management resources include:
 - i. Training for managers to assist them with learning how to become better career coaches

- ii. Employee self-assessments
 - iii. Career discussion guides
 - iv. Diagrams to visualize various positions along the career path
 - v. Sharing the organizational chart with all employees
- c. Support communities that foster collaboration among employees, such as:
- i. Informal common interest groups
 - ii. Social media platforms
 - iii. Networking events where RSSs can hear success stories from fellow-RSSs who have moved onto a new career path.
- d. Identify talents and expectations within the RSS role, giving RSSs a clear picture of how they might move forward. Define expectations of each function of their job, so they will have an accurate, attainable goal for how to get from “Point A to Point B”. Focus on their natural abilities and strengths that may lead them to making a decision to forge a rewarding career path.
- e. Incorporate forward-thinking training and development for your RSSs. This process begins with asking the question “what training opportunities are made available to help the RSSs pursue their long term career aspirations?” It also involves having them participate in planning and training that goes beyond the minimum requirements for RSSs and encourages them to use and develop their unique talents, interests, and creativity.

Opportunities for development may include leadership training courses, participation in cross-functional teams, taking an adult education course, and brainstorming with RSSs from other agencies. These experiences provide the opportunity to explore and develop mastery of skills that will help prepare the RSS staff for the next leg of their career journey. A more well-defined path is likely to emerge through the process of supervisors and RSSs co-evaluating their experiences and observations.

3. Agency Exercises

a. Agency Checklist to Identify Current Progress

Check any of the following you already have in place:

- _____ Communicate to RSSs and their supervisors that you encourage the advancement of their career goals and dreams
- _____ Support RSSs and their supervisors while embracing their vision and goals
- _____ Provide opportunities for RSSs to explore work options within the agency

- _____ Redesign work and schedules to accommodate increased flexibility
- _____ Develop and implement strategies for identifying and growing the talent within the agency
- _____ Enlist career advisors and/or mentors within your agency or through another agency, to assist RSSs with career development questions
- _____ Provide RSSs with tools to help them complete required training and development to meet the agency's and their own goals on their career path
- _____ Offer training or provide templates for RSSs to facilitate regular discussions with their managers regarding career development
- _____ Reinforce activities that augment the career path with yearly goals or performance appraisals by RSS supervisors
- _____ Provide tips to managers to customize RSS's Individual Development Plans (IDPs) that reflect meaningful, realistic, attainable career goals
- _____ Communicate to all employees the career path tools available to them

4. Processes for RSSs, their supervisors, and program manager to consider

- a. Establish clear strategies for how RSS talent can and will be utilized from within your agency for overall effectiveness of the organization.
- b. Keep abreast of each RSS's career path goals and progression, encouraging the RSSs to think in terms of job enlargement opportunities.
- c. Guide RSSs and their supervisors to help them align the RSSs goals with the overall goals of the organization.
- d. Provide appropriate training for RSSs to reach their career goals.
Examples of strengths relevant to this area:
 - i. Agency already has an established career development plan which can be expanded to incorporate RSSs
 - ii. Career development goals are included in employee performance reviews
 - iii. The agency has budgeted funds to assist RSSs with their training needs

List your agency's strengths:

Examples of potential goals you may consider:

- i. Update agency career development plan to include RSSs
- ii. Add the establishment and monitoring of career development goals as a required component for all employee performance reviews
- iii. Establish a specific line item within the agency's annual operating budget for RSS training

List your agency's goals:

What resources do you currently have that will help you reach your goals?

How do you/your staff feel about your goals?

- 5. Challenges you might encounter as you work toward your goals:
 - a. Reluctance from RSS supervisors who may see the movement of RSSs onto another career path as a loss to their department rather than a gain for the entire organization.
 - b. Lack of confidence on the part of the RSSs to move into new areas of expertise.
 - c. Lack of training resources and time to train both RSSs and their supervisors.

What methods can you use to overcome these specific challenges?

How will you celebrate when you reach your goals?

Resources:

Cornell University ILRHR 6640, Case #3,
When Developing a Career Path, What are the Key Elements to Include?
Jing Cao & Desiree Thomas, April 12, 2013