

# It's Up to Us to Implement the Learning Policy

BY DON JACOBSON

**P**ublication of its new Learning Policy in September 2023 was a watershed moment for the State Department. For the first time, the department's leadership has made the creation of a culture shift regarding training and education an explicit priority. Achieving this goal would be transformational, as it would significantly enhance the capacity of our organization while fostering motivation throughout our ranks.

The Learning Policy includes a number of important components that are a big step forward, such as 40 hours of professional development per year for all direct hire employees, eligible family members, and locally employed (LE) staff. It also encourages widespread use of individual development plans (IDPs). These measures provide a firm foundation, but we cannot allow them to become mere box-checking exercises.

Culture is the cumulative effect of individual behaviors, so creating a "learning culture" will require we achieve a critical mass of managers who make developing their people a central part of how they lead.

My favorite definition of leadership comes from John Mellecker, a former



*Don Jacobson joined the Foreign Service in 1992 and has led some of the State Department's largest consular operations, such as those in Mexico, Brazil, and India. He currently serves as acting deputy assistant secretary for passport services.*

**It is important for managers to model a commitment to continuous learning.**

financial services executive: "Leadership is the creation of an environment in which others are able to self-actualize in the process of completing the job." Below I outline eight practices managers can use to develop the next generation in the process of getting the job done.

## **PRACTICE #1** **Hold One-on-One Meetings**

Weekly (or biweekly) one-on-one meetings are a leadership superpower. One-on-ones are a great way to get to know your direct reports and learn about their strengths, motivations, and goals. Done well, these meetings can foster psychological safety, which is necessary for candor and strong teams. (Candor is like oxygen for an organization.)

Regularly scheduled one-on-ones are also a critical tool for ensuring we are getting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability right. Our priority as managers should be to get the best out of every employee. Weekly one-on-ones enable us to get to know every one of our direct reports and ensure they feel seen and have opportunities to discuss their ideas and professional development with the boss.

I have encountered employees who go months without a one-on-one conversation with their boss. This makes them feel invisible, which is a *horrible* feeling.

Weekly one-on-ones do require a time commitment, of course, so it's important to put them on the calendar. Early in my career as a manager I realized one-on-ones would be useful, but I failed to put them on my calendar. As a result, they got squeezed out by the press of day-to-day work.

Once I started scheduling them, I found that they saved me time because we were able to identify and solve problems when they were still small. I now spend much less time putting out fires and more time engaging with my people.

Researcher Steven Rogelberg estimates that half of all one-on-one meetings are conducted in an ineffective manner, so it's important to learn to do them well. I highly recommend Dr. Rogelberg's book *Glad We Met: The Art and Science of 1:1 Meetings* and his November 2022 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Make the Most of Your One-on-One Meetings."

## **PRACTICE #2** **Make It Safe to Ask for Help**

During my first "get to know you" one-on-one with each employee, I share that I have three pet peeves: "Rudeness to Our Customers, Rudeness to Colleagues, and Not Asking If You Don't Know How to Do Something." That last one is designed to counter a common

fear among new FSOs that it is not safe to show they don't know everything.

Our work is complex, and no one was born knowing how to do it. Asking for help is a sign of strength and courage, while failing to do so can waste time and create the need for unproductive re-work.

### PRACTICE #3

#### **Delegate Effectively to Develop Your Employees' Skills**

Managers often fall into the trap of not delegating because they believe it is easier to complete a task than to delegate it. That may be true in the short run, but if we persist in doing things that others would benefit from learning, we will be ridiculously busy while our teams are frustrated and underdeveloped.

Effective delegation does take some time up front, but by making that investment we can help our team members improve their job skills and motivation—and we, as managers, will have more time to think strategically and develop our team. Two helpful (and short) books about delegation are *The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey* and *If You Want It Done Right, You Don't Have to Do It Yourself!*

It's important to remember that delegation involves a conversation, and the employee needs to leave that conversation with a clear understanding of the desired outcome, how the task ranks with other priorities, when it is due, and how to get help if they become stuck.

### PRACTICE #4

#### **Invite Innovation**

My first supervisor in the Foreign Service put in my work requirements that he wanted me to take a hard look at the whole operation and make recom-

mendations for improvement. I took him literally and had a blast with it.

I proposed many ways to make the operation more efficient or improve service. Not all my ideas were ready for prime time, but it was incredibly motivating to know that my supervisor was open to my ideas—and exciting to see some of them make a difference.

I found that practice so motivating that, when I became a manager, I wanted my officers to have that same feeling. I put that mandate to look for better ways of doing things in the work requirements of all my officers once I became a supervisor and have continued that practice throughout my career.

When I started managing frontline supervisors, I added a line in their work requirements saying that I expected them to elicit innovative ideas from their teams. I wanted to make sure they didn't quash good ideas from the front lines.

This practice is also a great way to grow leaders. Effective leaders take ownership of their sphere of influence and work with the team to make things better. Getting more junior employees in the habit of identifying problems and *owning* them prepares them to do the same when they are in positions of leadership.

The experience of implementing their innovative ideas also gives them valuable practice working across organizational boundaries, influencing others, and obtaining resources.

### PRACTICE #5

#### **Give People Feedback to Help Them Succeed**

Giving feedback is a fundamental part of every supervisor's job. When preparing to deliver feedback, it's important to approach the conversation with the intention of *helping the employee be*

*successful*. Be curious about what led to the behavior requiring correction. It's important to remember that we do not know what is going on in the lives—or heads—of other people.

Just deliver the feedback and then let them talk. If you start with anger or a punitive mindset, the conversation is likely to harm the relationship and/or cause performance to deteriorate further.

Avoid making the feedback feel like a personal attack. Adjectives like “unprofessional” or “lazy” will simply make the person defensive and resentful. Pare the message down to its essence: the specific behavior you observed and the impact that behavior had.

It's also important to make the feedback future-focused (i.e., explain what behaviors you want to see going forward). If you only focus the conversation on what the employee did wrong, it may feel like you are punishing them.

Also, don't forget to give positive feedback. Even the best employees may become unsettled if they aren't sure where they stand with the boss. Gallup's research indicates that employees benefit from having positive interactions with their supervisor at least weekly.

### PRACTICE #6

#### **Host Professional Development Days**

Since 2005 the Bureau of Consular Affairs has asked consular sections around the world to set aside one day per month for professional development. Consular Development Days can include brainstorming sessions, formal training sessions, guest speakers, team activities, and time for special projects. We have found that the busiest sections often need this time the most—and productivity typically increases the rest of the month because this practice

## Investing in the development of the department's next generation is the most sustainable way to accomplish our mission.

creates space for process improvement and upskilling.

If you start carving out time for professional development each month, it is helpful to delegate the planning to a nonmanager. Managers tend to be very busy, and this can be a great developmental opportunity for members of the team. If a full day of professional development sounds like a luxury, start with half a day each month and assess the impact over time.

And, yes, it's also important to send people to training at the Foreign Service Institute. Formal training is a critical part of our development. However, it's only one piece of the puzzle—and one that only a limited number of people can access when assigned overseas.

### **PRACTICE #7** **Use Individual Development Plans**

One major element of the Learning Policy is 40 hours a year of developmental time for every department employee, including direct hires, EFMs, and LE staff (where permitted by local law). It's important to be strategic about how employees use this time. IDPs, which are also recommended by the Learning Policy, are a great way to do so.

IDPs are widely used by the department's Civil Service employees but have rarely been used in the Foreign Service. Let's change that. An IDP is a nonbind-

ing agreement between the employee and their supervisor that outlines the employee's learning goals and planned developmental activities for the next year or two.

The employee should create the first draft and then discuss it with their supervisor. The supervisor's role is to ensure that the activities on the IDP align with both the needs of the organization and the developmental needs and goals of the employee.

### **PRACTICE #8** **Learn Constantly**

It is also important for managers to model a commitment to continuous learning. One way to do that is to establish a disciplined habit of professional reading. Read about leadership and/or become a devoted student of the issues you are working on (including the history and culture of the country where you serve).

Another great source of learning is to reflect on—and derive lessons from—the biggest challenges you have faced, whether it was a major crisis, a huge management challenge, or a bad boss. Bad bosses can be phenomenal sources of learning. The lessons are painful, but they can be transformational if you reflect on them and commit to creating a positive climate for the people working for you.

Sometimes it will be useful to seek outside leadership opportunities

Speaking Out is the *Journal's* opinion forum, a place for lively discussion of issues affecting the U.S. Foreign Service and American diplomacy. The views expressed are those of the author; their publication here does not imply endorsement by the American Foreign Service Association. Responses are welcome; send them to [journal@afsa.org](mailto:journal@afsa.org).

through volunteer work or hobbies. The first time I served in Washington I was in a nonsupervisory role. I missed leading teams, so I sought leadership opportunities outside of work.

Leading in a volunteer context provides a whole different set of challenges, because you have no leverage over the other volunteers. I learned a lot about engaging people and the importance of asking them directly to contribute in specific ways.

Finally, ask for feedback. We all have blind spots. As leaders we can have the best of intentions, but there is inevitably a gap between our intentions and our impact. Feedback is the only way to find out what that gap involves.

### **What About Results?**

Ultimately, of course, our goal as leaders is to accomplish the State Department's mission: To protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive. *How* we do that matters.

While it is tempting to take shortcuts in the interest of achieving short-term goals, investing in the development of the department's next generation is the most sustainable way to accomplish our mission and creates an environment in which our own employees can thrive. Let's work together to build a learning culture at State. ■