Leaders Developing Leaders at IBM

BY DEANNA HARTLEY

As technology and business processes continue to evolve at an unprecedented rate, IBM's Ted Hoff strives to keep the tech conglomerate at the forefront of innovation by investing in time and resources to enable employees to stay ahead of the curve.

Leaders develop leaders. That's IBM's corporate mantra for its approach to developing its nearly 400,000 employees around the globe.

Ted Hoff, vice president of the Center for Learning and Development at IBM Corp., not only propagates this business model, he considers it integral to the success of raising up a new generation of leaders at the tech conglomerate.

"We bring IBMers in to develop other IBMers — and not just hierarchically; we also [have] peers developing peers," Hoff said. "We regularly foster approaches in which we bring leaders in to formally organized sessions — whether it's in-person, face-to-face sessions or delivered virtually over technology. We have a proactive process of mentorship at IBM so that [an employee] can gain support from not only a direct manager but also from people outside [their] management chain."

This approach allows leaders to develop themselves even as they develop others, he explained.

Hoff's multifaceted role at IBM has evolved since he started working at the company eight years ago, and it can be categorized under broad functions.

First off, he has assumed responsibility for the management of all leadership placement and succession planning, as well as the development of the benches and pipelines, which includes managing plans that are created to fill what he refers to as "critical gap leadership roles" and involves finding individuals with the right capabilities — either within the IBM family or externally.

Executive recruiting is another facet of the business that Hoff has taken on in recent years. "[It] logically fits within the overall responsibility of identifying the people who potentially may fill certain roles, so if we don't have the right pipeline at IBM, we can go to the outside," he said. Hoff added that this also involves the "identification of places where we think we need increased diversity of thought or where we proactively want to bring in an outsider."

In addition, Hoff has full HR responsibility for all of the global support functions, including finance, legal, marketing and communications, strategy, human resources and the CIO's office.

The learning and development function at IBM has served to facilitate processes such as leadership and executive development. In fact, during Hoff's tenure at IBM, learning and leadership development have been completely integrated within the company.

"We start with the client: What does the client want? What do they value? We then go from that to asking; what kind of people do we need to serve the client?" he said. "We identify what kind of people we need and look at who we have and don't have, and we have a managed process of defining the pipeline of people who could potentially fill certain roles.

"We reach down throughout the organization to identify [individuals] who could potentially serve those roles and engage them in some guided suggestions as

to how they can develop themselves to potentially serve those roles — and that's where learning comes in."

In keeping with its commitment to leadership development, the company underscores work-based opportunities at IBM.

"We're constantly trying to help people see what kind of work opportunities they can get and what kind of support they can [muster] as well as what courses [and] e-learning modules they can take and what kind of virtual world engagement they can engage in," Hoff said. "We have a pervasive set of learning opportunities for [employees], but they're all organized around people's work and around what potential role [they] are likely to play in IBM."

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Network Learning Model

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After all, tapping into current IBMers, who are essentially walking repositories of invaluable knowledge, is a crucial component of learning at the organization.

IBM takes the position that people learn from their colleagues. "They learn through work [and] they learn through working with people who are doing similar work," Hoff said. "The company [has tried different] approaches for mentorship and support systems, but it has become dramatically more pronounced and enhanced [in our] recent history as we have sought to leverage the opportunities around social networking to have people learn from each other."

An example of this is an initiative known as the IBM Technical Leadership Exchange.

"[It's] an exchange of technical IBMers and deep technical thinkers who come together to understand what IBM can do to enable government clients to be smarter in the way they serve their citizens," Hoff said. "There's a big initiative we call Smarter Cities around

traffic management, water management [and] how you can have smarter electric grids.

"In order to be able to provide these smarter solutions, we have to be able to do some technically advanced things, and the way technical people at IBM will learn is from each other and from the thought leader who's developing a new solution who can then engage in an exchange with someone from another country — like China or India. The person developing the solution will learn from the person who's explaining the challenge they [face] in a different country and the person in that country will learn the deep technical know-how [of] how they can implement the solutions."

This networking learning approach allows for enhanced global learning by allowing individuals to learn from IBMers around the world.

"[This approach] allows for deep applied learning beyond just knowledge exchange at the first level — you start to get into real situations, real applications and people can therefore go deeper," Hoff said. "It provides energy to the learning process because instead of being part of some learning program based upon a facilitator, IBMers are now engaged in learning from their colleagues who are working on similar issues."

In addition to formally organized courses around social network-based learning, IBMers take advantage of blogging and different social networking capabilities the company builds for itself.

"We find that any way IBMers can learn from each other is supporting our advancement of the workforce," he said.

The company has harnessed the power of Web 2.0 and social networking to make learning expansive in its presence across the company, Hoff explained.

"We are constantly trying to see how we can command the attention of people to learn from each other, to engage in these networks to get to know each other, and to work together through collaborative tools [that allow them to work] across boundaries [and] time zones," he said.

L&D Critical to Innovation

Even as the economic downturn likely wreaked havoc on many companies' training budgets, an organization like IBM — which competes on innovation — recognizes the importance of investing in the development of its employees.

"Embedded in our DNA is an understanding that if we're going to compete on innovation, we have to enable IBMers to remain on the cutting edge," Hoff said. "We have, by and large, maintained our investment because we are always looking to do something new for clients, and if we're looking to do [that], IBMers have to know what the new thing is and how

they can be smarter in serving our clients," he said. "It's not just a good thing to do; it's essential for our business model that we continue to develop IBMers."

The Future of Learning at IBM

The company recently developed a system called IBM Career Smart, which defines job roles within IBM as well as a set of capabilities that IBMers will need to serve in any particular role.

"The premise of the system is that to serve in a particular role, you need to be a deep expert in some field, such as an IT architect, but you're also going to need capabilities that go beyond developing architect solutions," Hoff said.

"You will probably need capabilities in engaging with clients, and in a holistic way we're helping people see how they can have the whole gamut of capabilities — where they will be deep experts and where they need some level of expertise in order to succeed."

This approach is designed to ensure that an individual's skill set isn't too narrow.

"It [also] gives people a chance to look at how they can take their current set of capabilities and potentially use it for a change in their career," Hoff said. "We have this application that allows you to match your capabilities against other roles — so someone who is an IT architect could potentially move into a role around being a business consultant. If they have strong client engagement capabilities, strong business acumen, know how to develop deep architect solutions [and] have gained some experience in an industry such as health care, and then choose to become a consultant in the health care industry, they could."

What IBM does is provide these individuals with career guidance on how they can gain the right experience to make the shift.

Hoff said, "This career guidance will provide yet another energy booster to encouraging and enabling IBMers to develop themselves by understanding how they can gain the right experiences and engage the right learning initiatives to be able to move their career forward." CLO