

Writing Good Developmental Recommendations

Writing good developmental recommendations takes thought and a little artistry. Here are some tips for recommendations that work.

- **Focus on behavior**

People often jump from what they see to judgments about behavior. For example, we describe someone who pushes for their ideas as “opinionated.” It’s much easier to understand and change the behavior of pushing than the character judgment.

- **Build toward the target skill**

Most complex skills build on more basic skills. For example, active listening means to make eye contact, nod or indicate listening, avoid interrupting, and then paraphrase what you hear. Break each skill out.

- **Address just a few needs**

Most people have good intentions, but too much to do. It’s why we normally fail with New Year’s resolutions. A good developmental plan is brief, behavioral and targeted towards one or two primary developmental needs.

- **Emphasize what the person can change**

We all have personal styles and quirks. Look for those behaviors the person can track and do differently. I may not be able to easily change my sense of humor, but I can think about when I use it.

- **Illustrate the consequences**

Behavior change is a choice. Do I want to be more specific and direct with work assignments? I might if I recognize that people will flounder less and ask me fewer clarifying questions.

- **Involve the person’s boss**

Developing yourself can be lonely and difficult. A boss can be a strong source of encouragement and feedback. Many times bosses are very willing to help once they understand how.

- **Catch ‘em in the act**

Some of the most useful feedback comes immediately after a person does something. Build immediate feedback into your plan to help the person learn. If the boss isn’t there to observe, ask a friend or coworker to watch what the person does. Then debrief soon afterwards to keep the information fresh.

- **Give people room to fail**

Adults learn by doing. Sometimes a person has to fail with their plans before they’re ready to try something different. You can predict a likely disaster, but let nature take its course. They may be more ready to listen afterwards.

- **Remember, learning is hard work**

As adults, we forget how difficult it is to learn. Remember the first time you visited someplace completely unfamiliar? Finding out where things were and how to get around probably was at least a little stressful and frustrating. Empathize with the learner. They’re trying hard. Give them credit...and pointers.

Good developmental recommendations aren’t difficult to write. The best ones are specific and well-thought-out. The time you take will be worth it.