Up isn’t the only way to go if you’re seeking to advance your career. Lateral, or even downward, moves can be just as beneficial to achieving your career goals.
The past decade has ushered in dramatic changes to the way we communicate, collaborate, and compute. Yet most managers and employees alike are stuck in a time warp when it comes to career development. They have old-fashioned images of advancement up some corporate ladder to that corner office in the sky—a mindset that’s out of sync with today’s business reality. No wonder career development is such a challenge and disappointment to many.

Escaping the time warp requires coming to terms with how things really operate in the workplace today.

The organizational belt-tightening and delayering that have occurred during the past several years have left far fewer leadership positions. The upper layers of the pyramid (which have always been slimmer) have become a mere sliver. Say good-bye to the career ladder.

The predictable progression from one established position to the next has given way to career patterns. These are more fluid, flexible, and responsive to the needs of the business and the individual. Say good-bye to limiting career paths.

We’ve moved beyond work-life balance to work-life integration. The convergence of technology and communication has blurred the lines for many between work and home. Say good-bye to checking your personal life at the door.

A growing number of workers have come to the realization that they can’t have it all—or at least not all at one time—and are not willing to sacrifice important parts of their lives for a job. Increasingly, people are deciding that work has to work for them.

To develop oneself, or anyone else, in today’s workplace requires that we say hello to a new way of thinking about how careers happen—through a series of moves around, down, up, over, and around again. Today’s career development looks more like a rock-climbing wall than a ladder.

The career climbing wall is expansive, offering a wide selection of spots to explore and enjoy, and a nearly unlimited combination of moves in every direction—toward one’s vision of career success.

Advancing the notion of advancement
The climbing wall metaphor only works...
if we shift our mindset about what career progression and advancement really mean in today’s environment. If you’re like most people, you’ve been brainwashed into thinking that advancement means moving up in the organization: taking on more responsibility, managing larger staffs, and earning more money.

However, advancement today means moving forward and toward one’s very personal definition of career success. Onward and upward has been replaced by forward and toward.

Do you know:
• how your employees define career success?
• what kind of work they want to be doing?
• what they want to achieve?
• what talents they yearn to leverage or activate?
What about you? Ask yourself the same questions:

- How do you define career success for yourself?
- What kind of work do you want to be doing?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What talents do you yearn to leverage or activate?
You’re in good company if you struggled with your own answers. You’re in even better company if you don’t know how your employees would answer. So, is it any wonder that career development is challenging? Most managers are flying blind.

Employees need to come to terms with what advancement means to them, how they personally define career success, and what they’re advancing forward and toward. Then they need to let you in on that secret if they want your help and support.

As a result, some of the most important conversations you’ll have with employees involve clarifying their definition of career success. A profound and thoughtful dialogue can be sparked by asking simple questions such as:

- Where do you see yourself in two, five, or 10 years?
- What do you want to be doing?
- How do you want to be doing it?
- With whom and under what circumstances?
There simply is no cookie-cutter approach for the customized, personalized, tailored, just-for-me plan that advances each employee’s unique career goals.

**Up, down, and all around**
Understanding the employee’s definition of career success is the first step. Pursuing that definition can happen through any number of moves in a variety of different directions. Getting there may mean promotions to higher positions, lateral adjustments, or steps that gain valuable experience that in the past might have

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**Wisdom From the Wall**
The climbing wall is an ideal metaphor for career development, offering many interesting parallels and insights.

**Climbing Wall Wisdom 1:** The top doesn’t have to be the goal. Frequently getting across or to a specific spot is exactly what you’re looking to achieve.

“I’m happy at my current level. I don’t ever want the headaches of being the boss. But I also don’t want to stagnate where I am. I need to keep figuring out the next challenge, the next place I can make things happen.”

—Technician

**Climbing Wall Wisdom 2:** There are countless ways to get from point A to point B.

“I’ve reinvented myself several times over my career. Moving from sales to operations and now to customer service sure wasn’t the straightest path, but I picked up exactly what I needed along the way.”

—Customer Service Supervisor

**Climbing Wall Wisdom 3:** Sometimes getting to your ultimate destination requires a move down the wall a bit.

“I really wanted to work in product development but knew I’d never be successful (or even considered) because I hadn’t spent time in the trenches with the customer. So, I consciously downgraded my job title to get the experience that I needed. And it all paid off in the end.”

—Product Manager

**Climbing Wall Wisdom 4:** You can choose safer or riskier moves, and more or less secure foot- and hand-holds, depending on the conditions that present themselves.

“When my youngest child became ill, I knew I couldn’t keep up with the demands of my business development group. I had to make a decision. I’m grateful that my manager was open to helping me find another position with more regular hours. Now that everything is settled at home again, I’m happy to be back to my previous frenetic pace.”

—Director, Business Development
Advancement today means moving forward and toward one’s very personal definition of career success. Onward and upward has been replaced by forward and toward. 

been considered down or backward.

Up is what immediately comes to most people’s minds when they think about career advancement. And, although there may be fewer opportunities closer to the top, vertical moves remain important and necessary. Organizations thrive when they have a pipeline filled with skilled internal candidates prepared to take on the challenges of the next level.

But up is not the only way to go for employees looking for growth. In fact, in these days of flatter organizations, a lateral move is often the new promotion. Sideways isn’t sidelined; it’s quite the opposite. Increasingly, becoming knowledgeable about more of the organization is an asset.

Taking on a role at a similar level on the org chart broadens perspective. It encourages a more holistic view of the business. It activates a new and expanded network. And it builds agility, which is king in today’s economy.

Recalibration is another option, although it won’t win popularity contests with employees. How can you help others to understand that moving from one level to another that may be considered lower organizationally is valid, honorable, and frequently strategic? (Answer: Begin by believing it yourself.)

Sometimes the smartest move—and the fastest way forward—is to intentionally take a step back on the org chart. Consider the following story of an engineer who made such a move.

“I saw the writing on the wall. My division had a first class ticket to outsourcing. I wanted to stay with the company—and looked forward to leading bigger projects eventually. So, I moved over to another division. I went from managing three people to being an individual contributor again. I have to be honest ... my ego took a hit for a while. But I established myself quickly and learned a lot about a whole new group of customers. It was exactly what I needed to get me where I am today.”

It can be a hard sell, but recalibration is frequently the best way for employees to progress forward toward their goals. Managers have to help employees see that it’s not downshifting. It’s just changing lanes, sometimes avoiding the traffic, and seeing new scenery in the process.

Time to redefine and climb

Evolving workplace realities demand that we constantly redefine how to approach important business issues. And nothing is more critical to business today than ensuring a highly developed and highly engaged workforce.

Managers who want to bring career development into the 21st century right alongside communication, collaboration, and computing need only to think differently about the activity to update and completely transform how they help others grow. Losing the ladder and adopting the mental model of the climbing wall is the first step.

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Supporting the Climb: Four Don’ts

What does help and support look like around today’s career climbing wall? What’s the manager’s role?

Don’t climb the wall for others. This is the employee’s journey. You are a knowledgeable guide who can help others consider options and routes. But you’re on the ground and they’re the ones on the wall.

Don’t direct others to specific footholds. Help others explore different paths toward an objective, but remember that employees own their careers. Where they’re going and how they’ll ultimately get there is up to them. You’re a resource who can offer clarity from your unique vantage point or perspective, pointing out formations or possibilities the climber may not see.

Don’t assume and behave as though everyone should plant a flag at the top. Only so many people can reach the pinnacle of the organization. In fact, only so many people want to. Effective managers help others appreciate the vastness of the wall and the interesting and exhilarating routes in every direction.

Don’t leave them hanging there alone. Even experienced climbers shouldn’t go solo. As a manager, coach, or mentor, your involvement is critical. Sometimes all that’s needed is a word of encouragement to help employees reach out and explore new holds. Other times, you’ll hold the harness rope so you can relieve a little weight and let them soar—or provide the support required to come down safely.
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