



Stretch
Assignments
Give Employees
Room to Grow

BY KATIE DAVIS

Insulating a modern local government from shocks and stresses requires public managers to marshal as many resources as possible. One valuable resource that governments might be overlooking, however, is existing employees. A focus on recruiting top talent is important, but so is the potential of existing talent. One way managers can maximize the efforts and abilities of their employees while also providing work that is interesting and engaging is to provide stretch assignments.

WHAT IS A STRETCH ASSIGNMENT?

A stretch assignment is a specific task taken on to develop experience and/or expertise outside an employee's comfort zone or regular routine. When employees take on stretch assignments, they meet new mental challenges, increasing their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

At the same time, it's important not to overdo it. An assignment that pushes employees just outside of their comfort zone creates the ideal conditions for growth, but if the assignment pushes employees to the point of extreme stress, any benefits will be greatly diminished. Employees will likely regard too much of a stretch as a source of frustration instead of a positive experience.

The element of stress, in moderation, is an effective way to truly advance skills and abilities. Exposure to manageable stress by assigning a challenging new task pushes individuals to develop new expertise while gaining confidence. Additionally, the practical knowledge and new perspective gained from the stretch allows individuals to become more adaptive and resilient in both their current and future roles.

THE BENEFITS OF STRETCHING

Stretch assignments offer many potential benefits, including cost savings, increased organizational resiliency, and improved employee retention.

Cost Savings. Stretch assignments are a cost-effective way to increase the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees. Organizations spend a considerable amount of time and money attracting and training employees, and hiring the wrong person can be expensive. Instead of focusing on

attracting new people, stretch assignments focus on ways in which current employees can do new things—which often proves to be a smart investment.

Organizational Resiliency. Stretch assignments can help increase organizational resiliency in times of planned and unplanned change. Many organizations are concerned with succession planning, which involves identifying emerging leaders and grooming them for positions with greater responsibilities. A stretch assignment is an ideal complement to succession planning because it allows individuals to develop the necessary skills for positions with increased responsibilities before actually moving into those roles. Additionally, employees often bring a fresh perspective to those tasks, which may uncover new and better processes. Stretch assignments can also lead to a more agile workforce, as existing employees who become more familiar with responsibilities outside the scope of their jobs can take on those responsibilities if the need arises.

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Employee Retention. Stretch assignments are a way to motivate and engage all employees at every level of the organization, helping them to see that they are valued and creating greater job fulfillment for individuals. This is because the autonomous and challenging nature of a stretch provides the ideal environment to reach a state that researchers call “flow,” in which one is completely absorbed in

the task at hand, achieving an energizing and enjoyable state. Stretch assignments can also allow for additional networking, allowing individuals to build social capital and become further vested in the organization. There are organizational benefits as well, especially when traditional motivational incentives like promotions or pay raises are unavailable or ineffective.¹

The State of Washington, for example, uses stretch assignments as part of its employee retention strategy. Having concluded that the quality of the job experience drives commitment, the state focuses on creating a positive environment where employees feel engaged in meaningful work. A lack of perceived growth opportunities was seen as a significant cause of employee turnover, so the state focuses on finding the best way for each individual to grow, based on the competencies to be learned the employee's interests.

These techniques also help prevent the snowball effect of employee burnout from increased workloads caused by higher attrition. The state estimates that its turnover costs total more than \$75 million per year, so while implementing these strategies takes work, the benefits gained from retaining employees greatly exceed any associated drawbacks.²

IMPLEMENTATION

Like any other tool, stretch assignments are only valuable when properly executed. The experiences of three local governments—the City of Roanoke, Virginia; the City of Redmond, Washington; and the City of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan—suggest that careful consideration and planning should occur along the steps discussed below.

Identify the Individual. Organizations tend to go to the same people over and over—the ones who have demonstrated success with past projects—but doing so will likely overlook the potential of other employees. According to widely cited research by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, a person's knowledge, skills and abilities are not fixed attributes.³ (For more information on this concept, see “Applying Professional Developmental Tools to Employee Engagement” in this issue of *Government Finance Review*.) Rather, they are something that can be enhanced and cultivated over time, with practice and encouragement.⁴ Organizations are potentially sitting on a goldmine of employee capacity; all that is needed to unearth it is the willingness to develop this potential.

It can be difficult to identify potential in individuals who have not been given the opportunity to stand out. One way to find out which employees are ready to take on a stretch assignment is to discuss goals during performance reviews or other one-on-one conversations. This helps managers understand what skills an individual wishes to develop and the aspirations they have.

Select an Assignment. The scope of potential stretch assignments is virtually limitless. The task should be customized to suit both an individual's current skill set and those that he or she wishes to develop. The ideal stretch strikes a bal-

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ance between boredom and anxiety for the individual. To achieve this, aim for a task that you think the individual has a 50 to 70 percent chance of successfully completing.⁵

One approach is for the employee to take on a task that is within the normal day-to-day operations of his or her work unit, but outside his or her existing responsibilities. For example, the employee might swap tasks with a coworker at the same level to gain a greater breadth of experience. Or the employee might take on a task

that would normally be associated with a more advanced position. The important thing is that the individual must have some freedom to determine the best course of action to reach the desired result; if the assignment lacks autonomy, the benefit for the individual will be dramatically decreased.

In the City of Redmond, for example, an accountant was given the opportunity to take a lead role in the budgeting process. The assignment included organizing and leading meetings, as well as presenting results to city management and elected officials. While this is a recurring task, there is no proscribed method for carrying it out, giving the individual the freedom to determine how to most efficiently and effectively reach the desired outcome. The accountant was also offered training and support by management.

Another approach to stretch assignments is to look well beyond tasks that are related to an individual's current position. For example, the City of Roanoke assigned an individual from its E-911 Center to help identify performance measures as part of the city's overall budget process. Opportunities outside an individual's department, or even outside his or her field, may allow for even greater growth and agility. The International City/County Management Association has taken this notion a step further with a program that allows individuals to participate in stretch assignments for other government agencies.⁶

In either case, the assignments do not need to be all or nothing undertakings. If the entire project is too much and would push the employee into the “burnout zone,” he or she could instead take on a piece of the project that is appropriately suited to the person's skills and goals.

Failure should be acknowledged as an acceptable outcome. Everyone involved with the stretch assignment—direct managers, staff associated with the assignment, and the individual—needs to understand that it is a learning experience and that all parties benefit from new insight gained, even if the desired output was not achieved. Avoid using a project for a stretch assignment if its success is “mission critical” for the organization or if the timeframe for completion is very short.

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Consider Organizational Goals.

Ideally, a stretch assignment should be aligned with the goals or needs of the organization. This keeps the project from becoming busy work, which will be insignificant to the organization and will do little to challenge or inspire the individual. An assignment that is truly useful to the organization is more likely to be made a priority, rather than getting cast aside in favor of “real work.”

For example, the budget process for Roanoke invites individuals from across the organization to participate in the review and recommendation of budgetary items. To augment this practice, an individual who already participates in the process worked with department managers to improve the performance measures used in the budget review. This stretch assignment role has helped establish a baseline practice for the collecting and monitoring of key performance data to discover where inefficiencies may exist. Completing the assignment not only improves the budgeting process, but also dovetails nicely with the city’s desire to improve all of its business processes using Lean methods.

Sometimes employees’ jobs don’t provide them with a strong connection to the larger purpose of the organization. In these cases, stretch assignments can provide a welcome opportunity to engage in work that had an obvious, direct connection to the larger mission of the organization. For example, in the City of Saskatoon, all individuals in the finance department were asked to participate in strategic planning sessions. This allowed employees to directly contribute to organizational goals and to provide input from their own perspectives.

Communicate the Plan. Once the assignment has been selected, the next step is to clearly communicate the parameters of the assignment, the desired output, and the time commitment involved. Specify the extent of the employee’s decision-making authority, such as entering into a purchase agreement with a vendor. Then ensure that the employee is a willing and eager participant by clarifying that the assignment is voluntary and he or she has the option to decline the assignment without any negative impact on their job.

Also communicate with the individual’s immediate supervisors, who will be understandably concerned with getting the day-to-day work completed, and who might feel pressure to ask the employee to defer work on the stretch assignment. The immediate supervisor needs to understand the importance of ensuring that the employee is supported and allowed sufficient time to devote to the stretch assignment.



Consider Assigning a Mentor.

A mentor can guide the individual's decision making over the course of the assignment. An ideal mentor would be someone with experience that applies directly to the challenges of the stretch assignment. This could be the individual's supervisor, although not necessarily. The most important consideration is that the mentor be able to provide advice, not instructions.

Mentors provide immediate feedback, potentially alleviating some degree of uncertainty and providing perspective. Individuals should also be encouraged to seek the counsel of more than one mentor. For example, one person may provide insight directly related to the subject of the stretch assignment, and another may help the individual prioritize tasks and balance duties.

CONCLUSION

Presenting employees with challenging, but achievable, tasks increases engagement and thereby increases satisfaction. More engaged and happy employees are less likely to seek employment elsewhere, minimizing costly turnover

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and creating a more dedicated and experienced staff. Stretch assignments effectively allow organizations to optimize resources and maximize the potential of existing employees. ■

Notes

1. Daniel Pink, *Drive* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009).
2. Retention: Positive Work Environment, Washington State Department of Enterprise Services (dop.wa.gov).
3. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House, 2006).
4. Carol S. Dweck, "What is Mindset."
5. Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, "Position Yourself for A Stretch Assignment" *Harvard Business Review*.
6. "Management Talent Exchange Programs," International City/County Management Association.

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