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# Beyond Tenure: Building Managerial Competencies through Developmental Assignments

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# Beyond Tenure: Building Managerial Competencies through Developmental Assignments

## **Abstract**

### Key Findings:

- The developmental quality of job assignments is critical for building managerial competencies. What matters most isn't how long junior managers have been in an assignment, but the nature of that assignment.
- Not all junior managers take advantage of such job assignments. Managers with a strong learning goal orientation—who view challenging tasks as opportunities to learn—are more likely to be in highly developmental job assignments, provided they have access to them.
- Certain managers gain more from developmental assignments than others. Managers with stronger learning goal orientations gain more from highly developmental assignments, in terms of competencies, than those with weak learning goal orientations.

## **Keywords**

talent management, training, development

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

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# **R**esearchLink

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## Beyond Tenure: Building Managerial Competencies through Developmental Assignments

### THE TOPIC: DEVELOPING MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES

Today's managers must successfully adapt to changing demands and situations, manage multiple peer relationships, set and implement agendas, and cope with stress and uncertainty. Companies are investing heavily in developing future leaders who can handle these ever-shifting responsibilities. That development rests on the ability of managers to learn critical competencies in preparation for higher-level positions. Increasing evidence shows that managers learn such competencies through work experiences.

Many companies use job assignments to groom high-potential managers for advancement. But when organizations invest in junior managers, they want to ensure a payoff: that a specific assignment will, indeed, develop competencies necessary for effective management.

This study examines the link between highly developmental job assignments and building managerial competencies, as well as the effect of managers' characteristics on seeking out such assignments and learning from their experiences.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ The developmental quality of job assignments is critical for building managerial competencies. What matters most isn't how long junior managers have been in an assignment, but the nature of that assignment.
- ◆ Not all junior managers take advantage of such job assignments. Managers with a strong learning goal orientation—who view challenging tasks as opportunities to learn—are more likely to be in highly developmental job assignments, provided they have access to them.
- ◆ Certain managers gain more from developmental assignments than others. Managers with stronger learning goal orientations gain more from highly developmental assignments, in terms of competencies, than those with weak learning goal orientations.

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*The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high-performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.*

## THE STUDY QUESTIONS

In this study, researchers asked the following questions:

- ◇ Do job assignments containing developmental aspects that challenge and broaden a manager's current capabilities (i.e., high developmental quality) lead to higher competency levels, above and beyond the effects of tenure?
- ◇ Does the learning goal orientation of junior managers (i.e., pursuing goals by seeking to develop competence through gaining new skills and mastering tasks) affect how likely they are to pursue highly developmental job assignments? And to what extent does access to these assignments matter?
- ◇ How do junior managers' learning goal orientations affect how much they learn from highly developmental job assignments?

This is one of the few empirical studies to examine and show a relationship between developmental job assignments and managerial competencies. In addition, the researchers used multiple data sources to enhance the validity of their findings.

## THE RESULTS

*Managers in assignments with high developmental quality were rated by their supervisors as having higher competency levels.* The researchers also tested whether managers were rated more highly simply because they had a prior history of promotion into these assignments, but this was not the case. Therefore, this relationship was the result of the nature of the assignment, not the manager's prior promotion history.

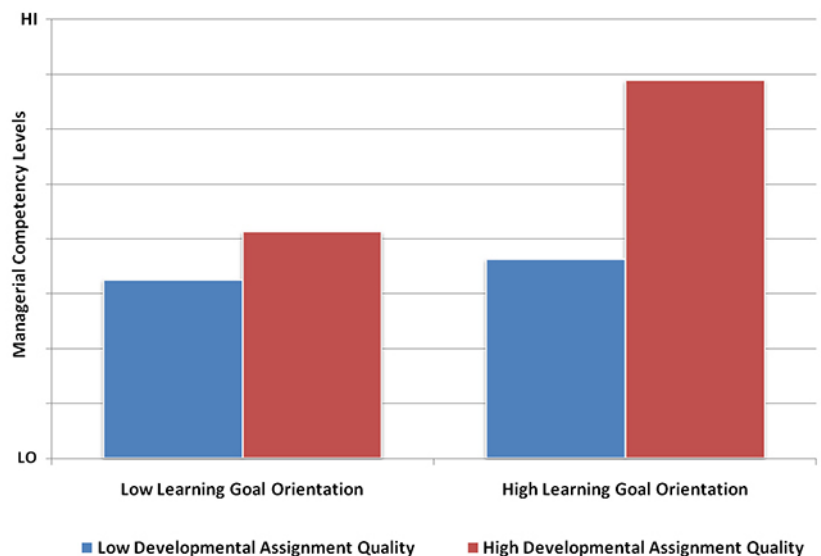
*Managers with stronger learning goal orientations were more likely to be in highly developmental assignments, provided they have access to them.* In contrast, for managers who perceived they had less access, learning orientation was not related to the developmental quality of their assignment.

*Managers with stronger learning goal orientations gain more—that is, achieve higher levels of competency—from developmental assignments than those with weak learning orientations.* This relationship goes beyond the influence of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and time in the job or with the company.

## THE TAKEAWAY

How can HR practitioners build managerial talent through job assignments?

- ◇ Place junior managers in highly developmental job assignments:
  - » Such assignments should provide managers with opportunities to learn new skills, behaviors and viewpoints. According to McCauley et al. (1994), features of highly developmental assignments fall into five main dimensions: 1) tackling unfamiliar responsibilities, 2) creating and managing change, 3) handling high levels of responsibility, 4) managing lateral interactions with others, and 5) managing diversity.
  - » Create development plans for managers to systematically—through assignments and rotations—increase managers' exposure to developmental job assignments.
- ◇ Assess and capitalize on junior managers' learning goal orientation:
  - » Encourage a learning orientation in high-potential managers by emphasizing development, using learning goals to measure their progress, encouraging experimentation and learning from failure, and providing ongoing support.
  - » Help junior managers see that they have access to developmental assignments.



## THE DATA SOURCE

The researchers examined survey responses from 218 junior-level managers in a part-time, U.S. MBA program at a large university, and 215 of their supervisors.

First, junior managers were asked to assess the developmental quality of their current job assignment. To do this, researchers used the Developmental Challenge Profile (DCP; McCauley et al., 1994) and asked managers to indicate how well each survey statement described something they faced in their current jobs. The DCP uses the following 10 dimensions to assess the developmental quality of managerial job assignments:



Second, researchers assessed managers' learning goal orientation. Managers with a learning goal orientation see challenging tasks as opportunities to learn. When faced with such challenges, these managers choose more difficult tasks, continue and increase their effort, if necessary, and use task-oriented problem solving when facing setbacks.

To determine their level of learning goal orientation, researchers asked managers to rank certain statements, such as: "I often look for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge."

Third, researchers used three survey items to determine how managers perceived their access to obtaining highly developmental assignments. A sample item is, "I have had good opportunities for getting developmental assignments/jobs while working at the company."

Finally, to measure managers' competency levels, researchers asked their supervisors to rate them across six competencies: 1) broad business knowledge, 2) courage to take a stand, 3) ability to bring out the best in people, 4) insightfulness, 5) commitment to success, and 6) ability to act with integrity.

## THE RESEARCHERS

This study was conducted by:

- Lisa Dragoni, Assistant Professor of Human Resources Studies at the ILR School (Industrial and Labor Relations), Cornell University
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- In-Sue Oh, Assistant Professor in the Department of Strategic Management and Organization, University of Alberta School of Business

**For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see:**

*Dragoni, Lisa, Tesluk, Paul E., Russell, Joyce E. A., Oh, In-Sue. (2009). Understanding Managerial Development: Integrating Developmental Assignments, Learning Orientation, and Access to Developmental Opportunities in Predicting Managerial Competencies. Academy of Management Journal, 52, 4, 731-743.*

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