

# The Four Career Concepts

Managers can learn how to better develop their people by learning how they're motivated.

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Becoming an effective “people developer” is a way of differentiating yourself as a leader among managers and can revive your professional sense of purpose. Research on effective leadership and being a good developer of your staff consistently shows that managers must understand each employee’s motivations and manage him accordingly. One size does not fit all. What works for one person does not work for the next. This is common wisdom. But how effective managers do this is harder to pin down.



The “career concept” is one way to help you better understand your employees and, therefore, get more out of them. This approach is based on the work of Michael Driver, Ph.D., professor of organizational behavior and director of the management assessment program at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. The premise is that everyone has a concept of career success that was programmed into his psyche from as early as childhood or at the beginning of his professional life. Each person’s career concept is derived from such things as parents and family, national culture, company culture, a mentor or even birth order.

## Four Concepts

The framework posits that there are four distinct career concepts. Each is unique, and no single career concept is right for everyone. Of the four, the first two have been intuitively known for some time; the final two more recently have been recognized and apply to many people in the workplace.

- **Linear.** To the person motivated by the linear concept, success only comes from moving up the corporate ladder. While prevalent in the United States, this proves to be a difficult concept to yield continuing success. Movement up the organizational pyramid provides fewer positions into which to advance. Many who carry the linear concept are frustrated. Many leave positions of influence when they become “topped out.” The “de-layering” of organizational levels of the 1990s left many linears disillusioned. For many, it is an emotionally brutal concept.
- **Expert.** Success for the person motivated by the expert concept is being known as the best among his or her peers. This includes the craft worker who yearns to be the best welder at Amalgamated Inc. It is also the trial lawyer garnering community recognition for a high-profile case, the surgeon with national recognition for an innovative procedure or the accountant with the most knowledge in the department of accounting rules. Those who carry the expert concept may have been told in their youth to “grow up to be good at something.” Their parents or grandparents may have been influenced by the Great Depression, during which the employees who kept their jobs were often the ones with the best skills.
- **Spiral.** Success is being able to move from one position to a related but often broader position, usually every five to 10 years. Broadening is the key. A spiral’s parents may have taught him to be “well rounded.” New positions are a natural extension of the prior work. This is the engineer who migrates into project management and then to capital budgeting and eventually to corporate budgeting functions. Spirals amass a vast amount of knowledge and experience.

Many spirals in mid-career feel a strong desire to share the massive knowledge with others. This leads some spirals to leave large companies to become consultants or teachers.

- **Roamer.** Success to the roamer is being able to change jobs often. Movement is more frequent than spirals, perhaps every two to three years, and the succeeding jobs are often unrelated to past professional experiences. A roamer may move from funeral director to draftsman. These are often people from the extremes of economic backgrounds who don't value security. They either were raised in an upper-economic stratum and presume money will always be there or were in a poorer economic environment and know they can survive on very little.

Roamers can play key roles in companies that are expanding, both geographically and into new markets. They make good startup people. Roamers tend to value work with high people involvement.

Each career concept has a set of underlying motives. These are the things that make people happy at work and energize them. Linears are motivated by power and achievement. Experts seek expertise and security. Spirals value growth and creativity. Roamers are passionate about variety and independence.

Unfortunately, many people have a particular concept of career success wired into their belief system, but they have strong underlying motives that tie to another concept. Such a misalignment between concept and motives could lead to chronic dysfunctions, such as discord, despair, lack of motivation, cynicism and frustration.

As one common example, consider the well-rounded son of a high-profile executive who is truly energized by growth and creativity. He may believe he needs to be "successful" like dad and focuses on climbing the ladder, but he does not have achievement and power as his primary career drivers. This perceived need to climb ever higher and the resultant constant gamesmanship of company politics impede his stronger desire of continued growth and the opportunity to apply his experiences creatively. He is setting himself up for failure.

If an employee has a set of motives that do not fit his concept of career success, he can more easily change his concept of success than the underlying motives to achieve alignment and end these dysfunctional feelings and behaviors. In the prior example, if the son of the executive understands that creativity and growth are most important, he can change his career plans to provide logical growth into broader areas, dropping the perception that "up" is the only source of success. Such recognition of misalignments and subsequent actions to achieve alignment can re-energize and refocus employees in a dramatic fashion.

### Applying the Framework With Individuals

How do you apply this framework to your everyday management? First, find out your employees' career concepts and motives, and then take action.

During formal performance assessments, managers should include the need for each direct report to provide a personal development plan for both short-term and long-term planning horizons. Look here for clues of each person's career concept.

One-on-one informal discussions are also usually more valuable than formal reviews. The former provide open dialogue outside of the formal performance management time between you and your direct reports on development and particularly career perceptions. Good people developers schedule such meetings regularly. Managers easily can ask a revealing question, "How do you become successful at this company?" An employee's response should divulge much about his career concept, not necessarily his underlying motives. More probing open-ended questions may be necessary to understand the employee's motives: "What type of work makes you feel proud?" "What has brought you the most satisfaction at work recently?" or "What gets your motor revved up each morning?"

Once you determine which career concept fits each employee, you can begin to develop each one accordingly. For instance, for those with linear motives, managers can provide leadership training; delegate leadership skills-building opportunities, such as budget preparation; and provide projects in which an employee can test and hone his leadership skills.

For employees with expert motives, managers should provide training that deepens their expertise. Experts can be encouraged to write for industry journals and attend related technical conferences. Experts should be warned that the market may eventually not value their expertise and flexibility in such events. They may even have to find new areas of expertise to develop.

With an employee who has spiral motives, managers should look for rotations requiring broader skills. Special creative projects in new areas of the company, particularly those on cross-functional teams, also are good assignments.

And finally, for those with roamer motives, managers should plan for these employees to move on at agreed-upon times after they have had a chance to contribute to the department. Managers should be aware of company strategic moves and communicate them to roamers who like to be involved in something new.

For the linears, spirals and roamers, managers should strike a deal to “advertise” for these employees after they have had sufficient experience and performance in their current job. Yes, people developers lose good people. They also have a long line of good people clamoring to transfer in.

### **A Broader Application**

Think about the employee dysfunction that companies have set up as they have re-engineered departments over the past decade. Re-engineering is often synonymous with de-layering, increased spans of control and multi-tasking of front-line positions.

The linears are frustrated with the reduction of levels to climb. The experts are feeling a major loss from being forced to multi-skill, essentially out of their field of expertise. The spirals, on the other hand, are happy with the opportunity to grow in a new multi-skilled position, and the roamers are happy for the redesigned jobs, in general. Managers who must staff departments in such a situation would be well served by knowing the motives and career concepts of the people they have before assigning positions.

A few months ago, I was facilitating a four-day change management workshop for a large company. One participant came in sporting an attitude right from the opening session. On the second day, we introduced the career-concept framework. His demeanor suddenly improved near the end of the third day. On the final day, each of the 50 participants was asked to share his or her experiences of the workshop with the entire group. My colleagues and I were wondering what he might say, given his lack of cooperation for most of the conference. We were delighted as he told us he had discovered he was a roamer. He had been doing the same job for several years and was miserable. On the third day, he slipped out and called his supervisor to explain his new understanding of his needs. To his credit, the supervisor took it seriously and was able, right on the phone, to suggest a new assignment in the same department with the understanding that in a year or two he would see if another rotation was available. He told us he was very happy about what he learned about himself—that it was OK to be a roamer among a department of experts—and he was optimistic about the future. He admitted privately that he had been earnestly looking for work outside the company before the conference. His cynicism was gone. The framework helped a company retain a valued employee.

Developing people, one of the key roles of true leadership, is most easily done when a manager understands his or her people's career perceptions and underlying motivations, and facilitates their alignment.

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