

## **The Middle Management Perspective at Shell**

Royal/Dutch Shell group is an integrated oil and gas company headquartered in Holland, with principal centers in London, The Hague, Singapore and Houston, as well as operations in more than 100 countries. In terms of revenue, it is the largest company in the world, generating more than \$435 billion in 2009. Shell employs approximately 100,000 people, with about 22,000 based in the United States, where 20-30 percent of its resources are concentrated. Human resource professionals in the U.S. number somewhere between 350 and 400.

The human resource function at Shell is broken into three areas:

- Centers of Excellence: focusing on compensation, learning and talent;
- Shared Services: based in Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Krakow; and
- HR in the Business: subdivided into 1) global/regional strategic units that focus on senior talent, functional learning, HR strategy and organizational effectiveness and 2) HR Operations, which is country-based and enables global business HR strategies to be effectively deployed and integrated in those countries.

The development model for human resource and other professionals within the organization has historically assumed graduate recruitment and long term retention, with service lengths of 25, 30 or even 40 years not uncommon. Often, recruits enter with Master's level qualifications and expect assignments that require geographic mobility within the U.S., but recently this has expanded to include the expectation of overseas assignments as well. The move toward a globalized business model began in the late 1990's and has dramatically accelerated since

2005, impacting the manner in which the organization is led and employees are developed.

Six middle managers at Shell participated in the needs assessment interview process, responding in detail to a set of career development questions derived from the work of Knowdell (1996) (see Appendix). Overall, these middle managers have a conceptualization of career development that aligns with Knowdell's Partnership Model (1996). Middle management respondents view career development as the "co-responsibility" of the employee and the organization. They liken the organization's role to that of a guide or navigator and stress the importance of the individual taking ownership of career decisionmaking. These respondents believe individuals must continue to make such choices throughout the span of their careers. "There is no longer such a thing as a career for life," commented one respondent.

Two of the middle managers stated that one of Shell's goals is the perpetuation of a culture of learning within the organization and that this is the foundation of its career development program. Respondents time and again referred to the identification and filling of skill gaps as a major part of career development. This is done at Shell through supervisor review and through the assignment of tasks meant to help employees develop targeted skills.

People "perform best when they can actively discover and define the role that will tap their deepest passions and skills and the conditions required to succeed" (Athey, 2004, p. 7). Job satisfaction, motivation and worklife-personal life balance were also perceived as primary concerns that determine the path of one's career development.

Respondents felt that it was the job of the organization to assist employees in looking ahead to potential future assignments and in finding ways to prepare for them.

Knowdell (1996) asserts that middle management seeks an alignment of career development with existing systems within the organization and an integration of CD with other duties and functions that fall under the HR umbrella. Career development at Shell is handled by a small staff of work process owners in connection with an already-existing network of human resource professionals who are part of the human resource function known as HR in the Business. Mid Managers feel that HR in the Business provides important guidance to line managers and supervisors. Interestingly, among the jobs of HR in the Business is the provision of functional learning opportunities and the monitoring of senior talent. It would then seem that any career development assistance from HR in the Business would focus mainly on opportunities designed for those who have the potential of moving into key management positions at Shell. Middle managers stress the importance of keeping career development simple, straightforward and individualized as opposed to a bureaucratic, one-size-fits-all approach. One respondent went so far as to reject the term “program,” which to this person denoted something gimmicky and unserious.

Virtually all of the respondents felt that some amount of career development was appropriate for employees at all levels within the organization, though, again, their answers seem to point to an organizational focus on professionals with management potential. Middle managers at Shell believe career development is needed most by those at their own level. The majority of respondents stated that “high potential mid managers,” those perceived of as upwardly mobile within the organization, were the main focus of

career development. Career development opportunities include assignments that take into consideration their interests while at the same time grooming them for key positions within the organization. The more “big picture” the duties and responsibilities, the greater the need for career development, according to respondents. One respondent used the term “succession planning” when discussing these issues. Most respondents describe a symbiotic relationship at Shell between middle managers and the organization, which depends upon them for its future stability and success.

Respondents also believed that it was important to provide consistent career development opportunities for young professionals just entering the field. The middle managers view this group as needing the most guidance in order to gain a solid footing within the organization. Relating the good of these employees to the good of the organization, respondents felt that without the direction and nurturing of Shell, young employees were more likely to become frustrated and look for employment elsewhere. This aligns with Knowdell’s (1996) assertion that, “in most organizations, it is within this group of young professionals that the most visible payoff is going to occur” (p. 25) when an organization invests in the career development of its employees. The middle managers also advised that young employees should be given the time to grow in their current positions before their aptitudes and potential are assessed.

Just as Knowdell (1996) advises that supervisors and line managers need to be heavily involved in the career development of their employees, Shell’s middle managers perceive the supervisor’s role as being absolutely crucial to the success of the process. Respondents view supervisors as the “face” of career development. “They should own the role from cradle to grave,” replied one respondent. Athey (2004) suggests that

organizations should “kick off their talent strategies by first examining the deployment and development of the people tasked with leading others” (p. 4). Middle managers at Shell believe that only supervisors have the relationship, the perspective, and the consistent access to their employees to bring about an effective career development program. They feel that supervisors should receive the appropriate training to act as mentors and coaches, to provide non-threatening feedback, to enhance motivation, to identify competencies and skill gaps and to aid the employee in choosing assignments that can help the employee to fill those gaps. In fact, mentoring by supervisors was mentioned again and again throughout the interview responses as a key aspect of a career development program. Of special note was a point made by more than one respondent—that supervisors must not simply go through the motions, but instead must exhibit a genuine interest in the career satisfaction and motivation of employees.

## **Career Development Perspectives: Middle Management**

*This project is a part of the Spring 2010 Career Development graduate course in Educational Human Resource Development, School of Human Resource Development, Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas. Your anonymous information will be used to further the understanding of career development.*

### **Overview:**

Career development is no longer a single decision as to one's career path. Today's organizations are far less hierarchical, and careers are no longer steady and fixed. In a world of ever-changing technology and global markets, employees must be active in controlling the direction of their careers. Career development is the process that enables employees to prepare for and take advantage of career opportunities as they emerge.

Within an organization, conceptions regarding career development often depend upon the organization member's point of view:

- Employees may see it as a means to move up within the organization, a way to obtain the training and skills to keep moving along one's career path.
- First-level managers and supervisors may think of it as a way of increasing motivation, productivity and retention among their employees.
- Middle management may see it as one of many systems that fit together within the organization, integrating with other related human resource functions.
- Top management may see it as a tool for identifying potential new managers as part of succession planning for the organization.
- Human resource professionals may systematically take on all of these views and the way each fits with the other within the organization.

**Questions for Middle Management** (Knowdell, 1996, p. 36)

*Please answer the following questions from your own perspective in as much detail as possible. All information will be used without reference to organization name or name/position of organization member. Thank you for your participation.*

1. What is your view of career development?
  
2. What specific problems or issues should career development address?
  
3. What specific groups or classifications of employees need career development most?
  
4. Are there specific tools or techniques that should be used for career development?
  
5. Are there specific tools or techniques that should be avoided?
  
6. How should the program be staffed?
  
7. What role should supervisors and managers play in employee career development?