Quick Answer: How Do Connector Managers Develop Exceptional Software Engineering Talent?

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Initiatives: Applications and Software Engineering Leaders; Software Engineering Strategies

Software engineering leaders struggle to effectively coach exceptional engineers and engineering managers. To develop exceptional team members, they should apply the Connector manager approach to build connections at the individual, team and organizational levels.

Quick Answer

How do Connector managers develop exceptional software engineering talent?

Use the Connector manager approach to:

- Really get to know your employees
- Make development a team sport
- Ensure better — not just more — connections

More Detail

The Connector manager approach is a very effective management style for developing exceptional employees. In our 2017 Manager Effectiveness Survey study, we found that the Connector manager approach can improve employee performance by up to 26% and can triple the likelihood that employees will be high performers. In our recent analysis of social media discussions to identify traits of a connector engineer manager, we found that engineering managers need to have the following three attributes in order to build great teams: ¹

- Provide development feedback (23% of mentions)
- Ability to foster team collaboration (52% of mentions)
- Amplify networking opportunities for personal development (20% of mentions)

To develop exceptional engineers and engineering managers, software engineering leaders must apply the Connector manager approach across three levels: the employee, the team and the organization (see
**Who Are the Connectors and What Do They Do?**

The Connector Manager Approach

- **The Organization Connection**
  Ensure better, rather than more connections
  - Connectors ensure quality development connections outside of the manager and team.

- **The Team Connection**
  Make development a team sport.
  - Connectors promote reciprocal and real-time development within the team.

- **The Employee Connection**
  (Really) get to know your employees.
  - Connectors tailor development to employee needs and interests.

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**Really Get to Know Your Employees**

Software engineering leaders should tailor each employee’s development plan based on their needs and interests, aligned to the strategic goals of the organization. They should ask each employee:

- What are your long-term career aspirations?
- Have your goals or needs changed since we last met? If so, how and why?
- What progress have you made on your development goals, and what support do you need from me?
- Are you interested in developing in your current role or a new role?
- What specific skills do you want to learn, either within your role or in future roles?
Because an employee's development needs and goals often evolve, software engineering leaders should regularly meet with each employee to reassess their current career aspirations, identify new development opportunities that are aligned with the organizational goals and objectives.

Make Development a Team Sport

By strategically connecting their employees based on each individual's knowledge and skills, software engineering leaders can enable reciprocal learning and real-time development. This crosspollination of skills enables software engineering leaders to save time while effectively sharing knowledge across their teams.

To connect team members in a way that enhances learning and development, software engineering leaders should:

- Conduct a survey to assess each team member's strengths and skills proficiency, and identify areas that could improve with greater collaboration between team members.
- Share individual and team development goals with each team member to identify development opportunities that are reciprocal, relevant and aligned with changing work needs.
- Use skill profiles to pair employees with opposing strengths and development areas.
- Identify advocates on the team who are committed to learning from each other. Champion their efforts and connect these advocates with team members who are reluctant to change.
- Encourage collaborative team practices such as pair programming, for fast and high-impact learning.

To maximize the benefit of these interteam connections, software engineering leaders must assign clear collaboration responsibilities to employees and managers and create a team code of conduct that outlines the principles of effective collaboration.

Ensure Better — Not Just More — Connections

Software engineering leaders play a critical role in providing their employees with high-quality connections that will help them access the coaching and development opportunities they need. These connections empower employees to expand their networks and gain valuable development experiences beyond their immediate team.

To build an effective employee development ecosystem across the organization, software engineering leaders should:

- Focus on building high-quality employee development connections (quality over quantity).
- Build informal learning programs such as communities of practice.
Teach employees how to learn from new connections by helping them develop better conversational habits and experiment with different approaches.

Identify course-correction opportunities if connections are not productive.

Match employees with complementary strengths to develop skills and behaviors across teams.

Equip managers with robust partner selection criteria to facilitate connections.

Hold periodic discussions with stakeholders to understand the effectiveness of the networking program.

Invite individuals from all functions to volunteer as a coach to increase the likelihood that employees will find a relevant coach.

Evidence

The Gartner 2017 Manager Effectiveness Survey includes data collected from more than 7,000 employees and managers across 25 industries, 18 functions and six regions. Respondents answered questions related to managers' development activities and effectiveness. We defined a manager as someone responsible for the performance and development of at least one direct report.


Collaboration involves cross-functional interactions between teams to understand the non-technical aspects and processes of software development, different working styles and communication levels. Mentions focused on the need for engineering managers to provide feedback to their team members around behavioral and communication styles. Engineering managers need to encourage their team members to own their career progression. One-on-one sessions to provide course-corrections and encouragement were also mentioned to be effective. Intra-team networking sessions on non-technical subjects and personal development were also mentioned on social media to increase team engagement. Engineering managers need to understand their team members at a deep level. They should clearly highlight their team members’ achievements, skill sets and development opportunities to their peers and thus build a resource network that can be leveraged by everyone.

Social Media Analytics Methodology

Gartner conducts social listening analysis leveraging third-party data tools to complement or supplement the fact bases presented in this research. Due to its qualitative and organic nature, the results should not be used separately from the rest of this research. No conclusions should be drawn from this data alone, as it may not be entirely representative of the market. Social media data is from 1 April 2019 through 31 March 2021 in all geographies (except China) and recognized languages.
Analysis was conducted across 4378 social media discussions on platforms that include Twitter, Facebook (publicly available information only), aggregator websites, blogs, news, mainstream media, forums and videos (comments only); unless and until specified.

The Team: Fahim Talmeez and Ritesh Srivastava from the Social Media Analytics Team contributed to this research.

**Recommended by the Authors**

*Connector Manager Training I: The Employee Connection*

*Connector Manager Training II: The Team Connection*

*Connector Manager Training III: The Organization Connection*

*The Connector Manager: Leading Through Disruption (Presentation Slides)*

*How to Help Software Engineering Teams Modernize Their Application Development Skills*

*Foster Communities of Practice to Ensure Successful DevOps*