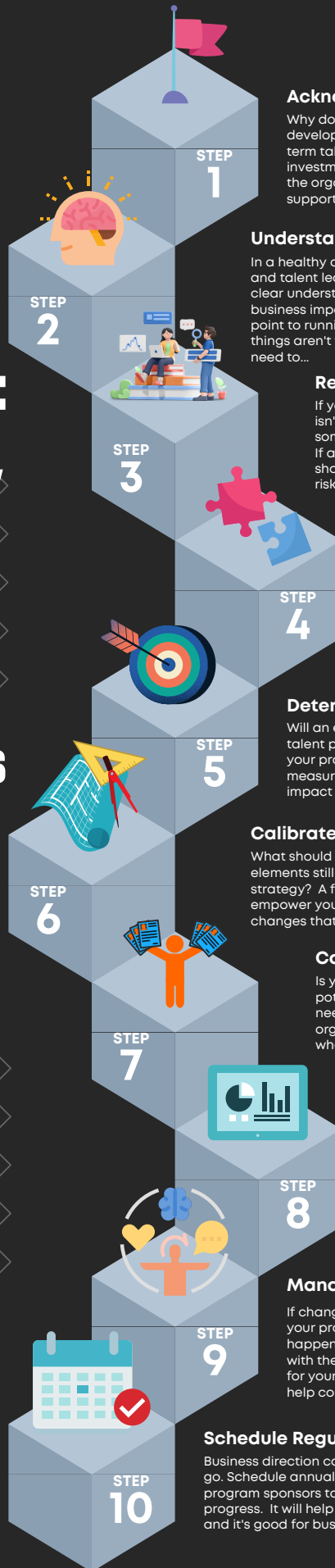




# The Roadmap: Aligning Early Talent Programs with Business Strategy



## Acknowledge the Strategic Anchor

Why does your program exist? Structured early talent development programs are typically a mid-to long-term talent development tactic. They are an investment and need to be regularly recalibrated with the organizational business strategy that they support.

## Understand the Current Business Strategy

In a healthy organization, leaders set strategic direction, and talent leaders create a talent plan to support it. A clear understanding of your organization's mission, business imperatives, and current direction is the starting point to running a healthy early talent program. If those things aren't well-formulated or communicated, you will need to...

### Research

If your organization's current business strategy isn't clear, you need to uncover it (perhaps using some of the methods listed in the following pages). If a business strategy doesn't seem to exist, you should make your program sponsors aware of the risks this poses to your program's success.

## Determine the Talent Needs

From the business strategy flows the talent plan; an assessment of the people and competencies needed to achieve the organization's objectives. What skills will be needed? By when? How will the organization get the right people ready at the right time?

## Determine Program Suitability

Will an early talent development program fit into this talent plan? Is it the best option? If so, clarify why with your program sponsors. Identify and agree on measures that will reveal the program's progress and impact at regular intervals.

## Calibrate Program Structure

What should your program look like? Do its design elements still align with the existing business strategy? A firm grasp of the business strategy will empower you to uncover and advocate for any changes that may be required.

## Calibrate Participant Profile

Is your program bringing in people with the right potential to develop into what the business needs to achieve its current strategy? Is the organization prepared to accept and integrate what the program produces?

## Gather Data

A calibration exercise is a great time to secure agreement with leaders on program performance metrics, if you haven't already done so. What will you measure and where will the data come from? Data and a firm grasp of the business strategy are the bedrock to justifying program continuation or change.

## Manage Changes

If changes are necessary, what will be the impact on your program's brand and community? What will happen to upcoming graduates who may not align with the new talent plan? Good change management for your program's community of stakeholders will help continuity.

## Schedule Regular Recalibration

Business direction can change. Leaders come and go. Schedule annual alignment meetings with program sponsors to review metrics and program progress. It will help your program remain relevant and it's good for business.

# EARLY TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM RE-ALIGNMENT

## Background

Early talent development programs are typically longer-term, strategic solutions to business and workforce challenges. Because much of their value is *anticipated*, rather than immediate, it's important that programs stay tightly tethered to where the business is headed. As business strategy evolves, programs should evolve with it to stay relevant.

This document is an overview of how to calibrate (or re-calibrate) an early talent development program to an organization's strategic business plan. It is derived from the ideas and experiences of [LDP Connect's Enterprise Council](#) members - a body of senior early talent development professionals who meet regularly to collaborate on strategic issues in the space.

Here are a few key reasons why regularly aligning your program's objectives to business strategy is considered a best practice:

- **Change is constant** - Markets, leaders and plans seem to be changing with increasing regularity. If programs aren't focused on supporting leadership's current vision of the organization's future, they lose value.
- **Early talent programs can be expensive** - Because of the investment required, stakeholders need a clear picture of the anticipated return. As custodians of an investment, program managers are often called upon to justify the program whenever there are budget cuts, new leaders, or a high-profile mis-step related to the program.
- **Brand is important** - A program's community of supporters needs to unite on what the program stands for so that they can work towards the same objective.
- **Calibration conversations lead to data conversations** - Many program managers struggle with using data to determine and demonstrate program performance. Re-calibration conversations are an opportunity to reach agreement with sponsors on what metrics will show progress.
- **Data empowers program managers** - Data and a firm grasp of the business strategy are the bedrock to demonstrating the success of a program or proposing to change it. With this information, program managers are *empowered* to act and influence.

## UNCOVERING **BUSINESS STRATEGY**

The business strategy of the organization your program supports (company, division, department, etc.) comes from its leaders. It is forward looking, and unites team members around a vision for where the organization is going.

A business strategy will generally contain an **overall mission, supporting imperatives and the values the organization stands for**. In some organizations, these items are well-developed, well-communicated and well-adopted. In other organization, not.

If you work for an organization where the business strategy is not clear, you should try to uncover it. Doing so can be as easy as setting up a meeting with a leader - particularly if the leader is your program sponsor. If you don't have that sort of access to leadership, you may need to get creative:

- **Recruit colleagues** who do have access to be your proxy.
  - Can that person request a meeting with leadership and bring you along?
  - Can you run a program calibration session with HR leaders and ask them to bridge the gap to senior leadership?
- Ask senior management directly **in an open company meeting**.
- **Join an earnings call** (where senior management is often asked about future plans by analysts.)
- **Invite a leader to speak to your program associates**, and suggest that he/she speak about the organization's business strategy.
- **Research** (annual report, marketing materials, etc.)
- Can you **turn this into an opportunity** to *build* a deeper relationship with leaders?

If you find that the business strategy either doesn't exist or that you can't get access to it, it's important to *make sure that leadership understands the risks* this disconnect brings to the program's future value, and the futures of the existing participants. (Some of these risks are mentioned in the preceding page.)

A FORWARD LOOKING

# TALENT PLAN

From the business strategy comes the talent plan to support its execution. All leaders should feel a sense of ownership to continuously develop talent - even if human resources is the official custodian of the talent plan.

A talent strategy addresses both the immediate needs to execute a business strategy, and the longer term needs for when the organization becomes the intended future version of itself:

- What skills and competencies are needed to achieve the strategy?
- What sort of person should we be hiring?
- How will that person be developed into what's needed?
- By when do we need this talent ready to go?

As a resident expert in developing fresh talent, it's important that you be involved in conversations about the organization's talent strategy. Regardless of the current business strategy, early talent development initiatives impact an organization's future, and should feed elegantly into other learning and growth programs. Push for a seat at the talent planning table!

How might a talent plan reflect a business strategy? A business strategy focused on growth into new markets, for example, might require a talent plan focused on attracting and developing employees who are entrepreneurial and comfortable with risk. While a business strategy focused on rebounding after a crisis might call for building employees who are resilient and creative in finding ways to turn bad situations around.

## **Does a structured early talent development program fit into your talent strategy?**

**It may or may not, and you should approach the question with an open mind.** Some leaders will prematurely prescribe the creation of "a program" simply because it offers a visible way to demonstrate effort to grooming talent. Work with your leaders to determine *why* an early talent program is (still, for an existing program) the best way to support the current talent plan.

- Can we find the right people on campus?
- Can our infrastructure support their development into what we need?
- Can we develop the right competencies and skills in the required time horizon?
- Will we be able to demonstrate success with data?
- Can we flex later if we need to?

## ADAPTING THE PROGRAM PLAN

Your early talent program is a tactic to support the overall talent strategy. If you've reviewed the questions above, and determined that having a program makes sense, then it's time to align the elements of the program with the talent strategy. (LDP Connect has a [model of standard elements](#) in a program that you can reference in creating alignment.)

Adapting a program to the current talent plan may involve making small or wholesale changes to the following:

- **Program structure** (rotations, length, etc.) - Will the program yield "fruit" when the business needs it?
- **Program size** - How many people do you expect to be able to produce with the program per year? What impact on the talent plan will that make?
- **Curriculum** - How will the program develop participants?

Apart from program characteristics, there are less tangible elements of the program that may need to be recalibrated:

- **Degree of self-direction.** What will participants be expected to "own."
  - Rotation matching
  - Mentoring
  - Uncovering position post-program
- **Extra-curriculars**
  - Service
  - Assistance in running the program
- **Brand - What does the program stand for?**
  - Internal perceptions (stakeholders)
  - External perceptions (recruits)

Importantly, you need to define what will be measured to evaluate progress and how you will actually *get* the data. Many program managers complain about not having access to the data they need. Even if this is the case for you, it's important to gather metrics on *something*. If business direction changes again (and it will), your metrics will help show that the program still produced value. Data will also help you determine areas where you can pivot to the organization's new direction.

## IN CONCLUSION

# KEY OBSERVATIONS



Here are some final observations that can guide you on this journey:

- 1. Schedule regular re-calibration meetings** with your program sponsors - *annually at a minimum*. You are the product manager of your program, and you should be reporting on its ROI regularly. Create check points and milestones that lead to ongoing conversations about your program's progress. Here's a possible schedule:
  - a. Annual Review - Current business strategy and program alignment
  - b. Quarterly review - Assignment planning, curriculum, accountability, progression of alumni, particular high performers, what's happening now in the program (recruiting, rotating, etc.)
  - c. Ongoing data gathering - Retention, performance, class comparison by year, progress on learning journeys, evaluation of participant experience. (For ideas on program metrics, see [this document](#) in the LDP Connect library)
- 2. Beware the executive who prescribes a program** before diagnosing the challenge to be addressed. An well-conceived "program" must be more than just a tangible symbol of effort to address a problem.
3. Generally speaking, programs typically **produce specialists or produce generalists** (or "athletes.") Reach agreement with leadership on which your program is focused on developing. Hiring managers must integrate your program's graduates into their teams, and those looking for specialists, for example, won't like having to hire generalists.
4. If a program isn't aligned with business strategy, it needs to **change or go away**. A program manager's data and scheduled recalibration meetings are the tools by which both of these can occur.
5. Perhaps the **most difficult part of re-calibration is leading and managing changes** that are required for realignment. Stakeholders may resist these changes. Again, the data and the business strategy are the best tools to use in leading changes.
6. Some programs will naturally die without re-calibration when **execs "vote with their feet" by gradually cutting resources**. It's best to change programs before this happens. When programs die through neglect, all stakeholder suffer.
7. You should **feel empowered to re-calibrate and make changes**. Uncovering and influencing talent strategy is something early talent leaders should have the authority and ability to do. And sometimes, power needs to be seized!
- 8. Don't fear "meddling"** by sponsors/executives. Although sometimes annoying, their involvement means engagement, and makes alignment easier to achieve and maintain.