

# Tackling the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Talent Challenge

*By Roger Young*



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One key challenge faced by organizations around the world is engaging today's talent to achieve tomorrow's business results. This is not a small feat, especially considering the multitude of global challenges which are changing the way we work. Operating in a connected global economy, the changing workforce, technology, social media, and cost-saving pressures are a few of the drivers impacting how we work and, thus, how we manage talent.

Talent Management, according to the Society of Human Resource Professionals, is:

- ◆ A holistic approach to optimizing human capital, which enables an organization to drive short- and long-term results by building culture, engagement, capability, and capacity through integrated talent acquisition, development, and deployment processes that are aligned to business goals.

Gary Hamel explains in his book titled The Future of Management, today's organizations were designed more than a century ago for one key purpose: to mass produce products. The skills required during this era were clear, defined, and thus easily measured and enforced. Fast forward to the 21st century and our focus has shifted. Sure, we still mass produce, but today is deeply marked by the struggle to mass produce new ideas and then turn those ideas into customer value.

Acquiring, developing, and deploying talent is only part of the solution. The broader solution (and opportunity) lies in our ability to harness the collective capability of individuals, teams, and organizations. To do this, organizations as a whole must function efficiently; this requires a system that supports talent management and high performance. Without this, even the best performers falter.

The following sections present recommendations for enhancing organizational performance by focusing on talent, including the system in which that talent operates.

## Mission and Vision

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Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to work with one of the world's top cancer research institutions whose mission and vision is to eradicate pediatric cancer. Walking through the hallways, I witnessed children suffering from the harmful effects of chemotherapy and parents from the harmful effects of unimaginable stress and worry. There is one of the most compelling missions and visions that I have personally witnessed. I was, however, shocked to learn that employees often overlooked what they were fighting for even though that fight—the fight against cancer—was around them everyday.

### Talent Management Opportunities

- ◆ Remind people of the bigger picture and do it regularly. Perhaps you work for an organization with a mission and vision as powerful as that described above. Perhaps you do not. Regardless, people must continuously be reminded of the bigger picture.
- ◆ Connect the Dots. Do not assume that people understand how they connect to the bigger picture. If they do not know how they connect to the bigger picture they will not realize the value of what they do. Do this frequently.

- ◆ Tell stories. Better yet, get senior leaders to tell stories that drive home the importance of the mission and vision. Stories are a powerful tool for connecting with and influencing people because people can relate to and remember them.

## Direction Setting

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I recently had the opportunity to work with the CEO of a large multinational organization. His challenge was not in determining where the organization was headed, who was leading it, or how they would go about achieving it. He had already decided this. Rather, his challenge was in gaining commitment from each team member which would in turn produce the energy needed to drive this strategy. It was not that people were non-compliant. The issue was that people would give the traditional head-nod and then proceed to do what they had to, not what they were capable of.

### Talent Management Opportunities

- ◆ Make sure the direction is clear, compelling, and supported—especially at the top. Ask people to articulate what the direction is using their own words including the actions they are taking to support this direction!
- ◆ The how is often as important as the what. The process of how you go about defining where the organization is headed, who will be leading it, and how it will be achieved is likely as important as the answers to those questions. If you want commitment, ask people for their input. If this is not possible, tell them how the decisions were made, or will be made, and why they are necessary.
- ◆ Build and manage an integrated talent management system for acquiring, developing, and deploying talent. In addition to knowledge, skills, and abilities, the integrated system must include and support the values that drive the organization's strategy. Note: imagine if Enron had lived and breathed integrity as a core value!

## People

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I recently worked with the head of human resources (HR) on a common HR challenge. The challenge, HR was seen as reactive, transactional, and tactically focused. Thus, they did not have time to focus on strategic issues since they were too busy “taking and filling orders.” One of the opportunities (there were many) was that the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of the HR staff were not aligned with the goal of being a trusted, strategic business partner.

### Talent Management Opportunities:

- ◆ Have a clear vision and strategy that aligns to the bigger vision. Then, make sure you have the talent required to achieve that vision.
- ◆ Make sure the talent systems are aligned and support the strategy. If individual performance is desired, establish individual performance measures. If team results are required, establish team performance measures. If a combination of each is required, establish a combination of the two.

- ◆ Hold people accountable for managing talent, especially leaders. Let's face it, not everyone is a high performer. If performance evaluations consistently indicate exceptional performance of all employees, then this should be substantiated with behavioral and performance data. If someone is doing only what's expected of him or her, then the evaluation should reflect this.
- ◆ Do not be afraid to say no. This is tough. But, if the strategy is clear and people know where the business is headed, as well as where the business is not headed, then saying "no" is easier. And, it frees up people's time to focus on those strategic issues that matter most.

## Systems, Processes, and Tools

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The head of talent management in a large pharmaceutical company recently contacted me with a specific request. He was looking for a 360-degree tool to assess employee's development needs. Upon further inquiry, I learned that he was under tremendous pressure to increase sales, expand market share, and reduce attrition. Being curious, I asked why people were leaving. The answer: better pay, promotion opportunities, and the one that surprised me, "they wanted to continue selling."

I later learned that much of the attrition was internal—people moving to other internal sales forces for slightly more pay, status, larger territories, perceived promotions, etc. The issue was not only developmental—the system that required people to move to a new organization either internally or externally if they wanted to stay in sales. We eventually got to the 360-degree assessment, but not until we fixed the system responsible for the behavior (and results).

Talent Management Opportunities:

- ◆ Ask employees to identify their biggest barriers to doing their jobs. Or, asked another way, ask them "if they could change anything about their job or the organization, what they would change?" Remember, systems drive behavior.
- ◆ Make people a part of the solution. Solicit improvement ideas for how to improve organizational systems and processes from people at all levels, including those directly impacted by those systems and processes.
- ◆ Encourage people to challenge the way things are done. Just because it has always been done a certain way does not mean that it is the best way.
- ◆ Ensure that systems (and processes) are aligned with the desired behaviors. If individual performance is desired, compensate based on individual performance. If team results are required, compensate based on team performance. If both are required, compensate based on a combination of the two.

## Organizational

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As technology continues to advance at a dizzying pace, the world will continue to shrink. Video conferencing, cloud computing, corporate and individual blogs, Twitter and several other social

media venues continue to reshape how companies connect people and take advantage of the intellectual capacity of internal—and external—talent. Also, how we assemble and lead teams—including virtual teams—will be vitally important. Being truly global requires more than having offices located around the globe. Being a global organization means having integrated systems and processes that manage the flow of work, ideas, products, services and talent.

Talent Management Opportunities:

- ◆ Create a special task force charged with staying current with the latest social media trends. Charge the task force with researching and suggesting possible talent management and organizational opportunities. For example, LinkedIn is being used more and more to recruit talent, blog, and otherwise keep talent connected.
- ◆ Create real-life learning opportunities, including global ones, and build a team to fix it! People learn when they are able to interact with one another, especially people with different backgrounds, areas of expertise, experience, and points of view. Pair people up so that they can learn from each other while trying to solve a problem that benefits the organization.

To manage talent, we must consider the larger system in which that talent exists. When managed effectively, we are able to harness the collective potential of individuals, teams, and even the organization to achieve the impossible. This is the potential of people, made possible by organizations, which is made possible by effective talent management.

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