



Botswana's got talent

By Stuart White
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'Talent Management'. It's a phrase that's on everybody's lips. Hardly a day goes by when one of my consultants doesn't get a request for something related to it. Everyone, it would seem, wants to recruit and manage their talent and is eager to sign on the dotted line to make it happen. It's a typical response to new fads - everyone wants to be seen to be doing it and no-one wants to appear out of the loop. My experience however is that most people bandy the words around loosely and drop them into any HR conversation but they don't really know what they are talking about. According to a recent article in Harvard Review, too many bosses' ideas of talent assessment amount to nothing more than "a lick-and-sniff dog test. It's all about whether they like someone." Nothing new there, then.

For some, talent management is simply a spin on performance management. Yet others realise its connection to such important practices as succession planning, but fail to crystallise how investing dedicated attention to it today can have an impact on the organisation tomorrow. What HR professionals and line managers aren't getting is exactly what Talent Management is. They also fail to realise that it's the height of sophistication and can't be built on the back of a poorly-run operation with unsophisticated and outdated systems, processes and approaches to work. Let's get one thing straight, Talent Management is not just about attracting people to work with you and then locking them in. Talent doesn't stay or at least won't exist long in poorly-run companies - it will simply find the means to break out. Talent Management only happens when it chooses to stay because everything else is in place like decent training, coaching, mentoring, recruitment, etc.

So why is there a preoccupation with talent and why is it so vital in business today? Well thank goodness that finally companies are recognising that the mantra "people are our biggest asset" is actually true. We heard it said by management a lot in years gone by but the slogan tended to be ahead of its time with no-one REALLY believing it - we knew this because it was given lip service, used as a slogan and not a way of life.

Talent Management was often seen as that set of initiatives which distracted from revenue-generating activities. So much so that senior managers' lack of high-quality time spent on it was cited as the number one obstacle preventing talent management programmes from delivering business value (McKinsey Quarterly, 2006).

As business has become more sophisticated, global and challenging – coupled with a switch from manufacturing to value-added services – it becomes glaringly obvious that a company's competitive advantage is likely to be associated with its culture and its people and this is the territory of talent. People with specialist skills are hard to find and with the nature of work dramatically changing (think mobilising minds, flexible performance, disappearance of the traditional social contract of loyalty in exchange for security), you have to ensure you get the people you need into the business to keep it ticking over. Each year it gets harder and harder to attract and retain good people – try and find a top notch HR person these days – it's really not that easy, not to mention project managers, engineers, strategy personnel, etc.

To really understand the value of talent is to comprehend that companies can copy almost anything that others are doing. Products can be duplicated in minutes, along with what is listed on the service menu – but it's trickier getting the 'how' this is delivered down part and that's where people come in. A company's culture and people are the two hardest things for rivals to imitate quickly, and this is why you have got to manage the talent lest it runs off to your rivals.

If you want to be a talent-powered organisation, the starting place is not in the managing of the talent. Firstly companies must challenge themselves to inculcate a talent-friendly environment with proper initiatives put in places to develop the right talent in the right way and then mobilise it effectively to serve the strategic needs of the company. Read this to mean 'STRATEGY PRECEDES TALENT MANAGEMENT' – horse first, then the cart. You also have to be measuring what's there at the moment - understanding what you have got and what you have not! In Botswana many companies want to jump these two steps; strategy and stock take. This is akin to taking a child ready for school and starting them in Form 2 of secondary school instead of grade one at primary school. It's backwards, doesn't make sense whatever way you look at it, and it's bound to end in tears before bedtime.

Even in the best-run organisations, there's always something a bit mysterious about "talent". When companies set ambitious goals but can't spell out a precise roadmap for achieving them, they usually end up hoping that an extra splash of managerial wisdom or technical know-how will make everything work out. In such situations, talent becomes clearly defined only after the fact. It starts with identifying WHAT constitutes leadership success in the business. Assuming that great leaders are a source of sustained competitive advantage and the company exists to deliver economic returns – this means the true measure of great leaders would be sustained business results in the company's chosen markets. Now this is a different approach to one that purely looks at a person's competency list. The competencies which a person has are useless (they're only potential) if they are not translated into business results and business impact.

Itraorg explains it like this: "certain aspects of talent management can be viewed the same way we look at a business." For instance, take a business with multiple business units. Expecting certain return from each unit, attention is paid to which ones are: underperforming, remaining flat, delivering modest return, or consistently exceeding expectations. Adjustments are then made to course-correct or further invest where necessary. The same set of expectations is applied to internal talent. To ensure business growth is not compromised by focusing all efforts on a single revenue stream, diversification is secured with different product lines, complimentary services, etc. With talent, this is achieved by bringing in people with different skill sets, temperaments, and points of view, amongst others. This way, a mix of analytical, creative, and general management tracks among the employee population is available to be placed in appropriate roles to shore up and expand the areas of strength and turn around those of stagnation or weakness.

But as Bill Gates said, it all comes from the right hire. Think of your talent search as the corporate equivalent of the X-Factor, with your HR team as Simon Cowell and his fellow judges. And above all, after they've made their choice, don't skimp on all the post-win back up and promotion to ensure the winner turns into a long-term superstar, not just a one-hit wonder or worse still, an overnight success who ups and leaves you for another recording label.

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