Critical Elements of Effective Talent Development Programs

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Abstract

The talent of an organization's staff members represents a key aspect of its present effectiveness as well as its future viability to be productive and competitive. Talent is the knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by staff members who have an edge through creativity, thinking outside the box, and possessing unique methods for solving complex problems. Learnability and the agility to effectively work through changing environments are key talent attributes of staff members. For organizations to be successful, their leaders must utilize talent development programs for staff members to increase the likelihood of maximizing current productivity and future relevancy.

Keywords: talent development programs, competencies, talent assessment

Why Have Talent Development Programs?

"The real goal of leadership [talent] development goes to the heart of an organization—to create a strong, sustainable pipeline of high-performing leaders at all levels" (Clark, 2016, p. 244).

More than ever, leaders in the future must be able to "thrive amid complexity and change" (Clark, 2016, p. 244). In his renowned book, *Reinventing Talent Management*, Lawler (2017) states that "both the degree and rate of change will continue to increase [for organizations]. Most of these changes have significant and profound implications for how talent should be managed" (p. 1). As Lawler also observes, "The challenge is to create organizations with talent management systems that are capable of responding to these changes" (p. 14).

Carter (2010) defines talent as staff members who possess special aptitude and faculties with an edge toward creativity, thinking outside the box, and unique ways to solve problems (p. xiii). According to Cappelli (2008), talent means that staff members are competent by possessing "the ability to react and respond quickly to new opportunities" (p. 231). Carter advocates that leaders needed for the future

> must be nimble, creative, and ready to abandon the old reliable methods when challenged by new paradigms. The performance of a task by rote inevitably leads to decline and irrelevance; talent is what infuses the human experience with dynamism and creativity. (p. xiii)

For organizations to be competitive and successful now, and to thrive in the future, their leaders must establish effective talent development programs. In the US, companies such as Motorola and General Electric are organizations that, while once very successful, lost their competitive edge. Flexible, future-oriented staff members that are agile and creative are needed not only in private sector organizations, but also in non-profit, not-for-profit, and government organizations.

As a side note, the focus on talent development does not preclude the importance of Duckworth's (2016) concept of *Grit*—passion and perseverance, coupled with effort, in a staff member's development (Bartz, 2018).While Duckworth indicates that passion, perseverance, and effort often are more crucial than talent in the context of development, she does not discount the importance of talent. Duckworth notes that "talent—how fast we improve a skill—absolutely matters" (p. 42). Duckworth also stresses the importance of effort when she states, "Effort factors into the calculation [of achievement] twice . . . effort builds skills. At the very same time, effort makes skills productive" (p. 42). Sorenson and Pearce (2018) observe that effort plays a vital role in performance, but when motivation and effort are equal, the more talented person will perform at a higher level. The point is that the philosophies of *talent development* and *grit* can work in concert to enhance a staff member's development.

Selected Factors to Consider for Planning
Talent Development Programs

"The mark of highly desirable talent is skill agility rather than a skill set" (Henriksen, 2018, p. 139).

Three major challenges to effective talent development planning are: (1) false positives, (2) hidden negatives, and (3) predicting rather than preparing (Gotte & Wilde, 2016). "False positives are simply talent decisions that are too good to be true" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 224). False positives mean that an inaccurate or *false* judgment is made of a staff member's capability to develop talents even though previous *positive information* indicated the likelihood of success. To avoid false positives, it is critical *not to assume* that a staff member's current effective performance (and the talents related to it) will automatically lead to further talent development so that a more senior position in the organization can be effectively performed.

Multiple sources must be used in assessing a staff member's present talent to avoid misjudgment, as well as having a clear understanding of the talents needed to be acquired to perform effectively at a more senior position in the future. An assessment of the staff member's capability and motivation to master or extend talent areas for effective performance at a more senior level is crucial. Resilience, a hidden virtue often difficult to spot, is also an essential talent for future leaders because it often "differentiates between people who do vastly better than expected—and those who turn out to be severe disappointments" (Anders, 2012, p. 21).

"*Hidden negatives* are the fatal flaws or career derailment factors [of candidates] that make talent unsuitable for bigger jobs, but are not clearly present or considered" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 224). Examples of hidden negative flaws in staff members mistakenly included in talent development programs are poor interpersonal skills, inability to change, failure to build strong teams, and the inability to develop talent in those supervised (Gotte & Wilde, 2016). A fatal flaw composed of hidden negatives is depicted in the Johari Window Model of awareness as *unknown*

or *façade* because it is not readily apparent to those with whom the staff members work (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Unfortunately, when the staff member completes a talent development program and is selected for promotion to a new position, the fatal flaw is no longer "hidden," but apparent and impedes performance.

Sometimes a staff member's hidden negatives are unintentionally overlooked because of extreme strengths in other areas. The use of 360-degree assessments—also known as *multisource feedback*—in the selection process for participation in a talent development program is often helpful in identifying the fatal flaws reflective of hidden negatives (Fleenor & Taylor, 2018). Henriksen (2018) advocates that 360-degree assessments have matured such that respondents' biases are mitigated and that responses are based on the staff member's actual behavior.

"*Predicting rather than preparing* describes the dangerous assumption that avoiding false positives and surfacing hidden negatives alone will be enough to produce a great supply of ready-now talent down the road" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 224). Unfortunately, predicting is often done with a limited understanding of the talents needed by a staff member to perform at a more senior level position because it is assumed that the competencies now needed for the senior position will be the same competencies needed in the future. Predicting is often erroneous because of the changing economy, business environment, and factors that are not even currently on the radar screen.

Learnability is a huge asset for advancing staff members to be successful in positions higher up in the organization because staff members with this attribute can adjust to the changing needed competencies in the future to maintain effectiveness (Henriksen, 2018). Henriksen (2018) defines learnability as "the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt skill sets [competencies] to remain relevant for the long term" (p. 139). Regarding candidates for talent development programs, Anders (2012) observes that "we don't just care about what you can do today; what we really want to know is what you *can learn tomorrow*" (p. 11). Learnability can be assessed by the Learnability Quotient™ that measures:

1. *Intellectual*: How motivated or willing is the staff member to learn or understand things better?
2. *Adventurous*: Does the staff member have an intrinsic desire to explore and try new ways of doing things?
3. *Unconventional*: Is the staff member willing to challenge the status quo? (Henriksen, 2018, pp. 144-145)

Holistically, the three challenges for planning talent development programs—false positives, hidden negatives, and predicting rather than preparing—can be counteracted through careful assessment of staff members selected to participate by identifying those who are "flexible players who can grow into multiple roles" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 225). It is crucial to identify highly motivated *upwardly mobile candidates* likely to be successful in future senior positions through: (1) discussing career candidly and in-depth with them to understand the *context of past successes* (and failures) and the likelihood of future successes, (2) utilizing state-of-the-art talent development planning techniques, and (3) understanding that the talent development process must be agile and malleable over time in order to be successful (Gotte & Wilde, 2016).

Using Competencies as the Foundation
for a Talent Development Program

"Competencies are at the center of integrated talent management [programs]" (Loew, 2018, p. 78).

Many organizations utilize competencies to define the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO's) needed by staff members to perform effectively and have a significant positive impact on the organization's success (Lowe, 2018, p. 74; Dalziel, 2018, p. 50). "Competencies are one of the building blocks in a talent development model" (Berger & Berger, 2018, p. 7). Competencies are not tasks, but the outcomes expected from staff members performing job responsibilities and being accountable for doing so (Dalziel, 2018).

Competencies must be worded such that a staff member's performance against them is observable and, thus, measurable. Competencies also have to be "learnable" by staff members and serve as anchors for the basic content of a talent development program (Ruyle, 2018; Loew, 2018).

Ruyle (2018) advocates that, "We learn most of what we need for success by doing a job" (p. 62). This means that competencies need to be broken down into descriptors of varying levels of effective performance with descriptors for each level. These levels are called *competency scales* and are "based on noticeable differences to describe how people could display different levels [of performance] within the same competency" (Dalziel, 2018, p. 50). For example, scales of performance for competencies could be described as unacceptable, basic, advanced, or superior.

The three basic methods for an organization to develop competencies are: "(1) outsource development to vendors, (2) customize existing commercial materials (often called "off-the-shelf") from a vendor, and (3) build the competencies completely in-house" (Loew, 2018, p. 83). A difficulty of the competency approach to building a talent development program is that the competencies may become obsolete in the future. This results in developing talent that may serve the organization well now, but be ineffective in keeping a competitive edge in the future. Even with this limitation, the competencies approach to developing talent in an organization "continues as the nucleus of every high-performance talent strategy and culture of excellence [program]" (Loew, 2018, p. 85). To counteract obsolescence in competencies, infusing attributes that will stand the test of time (e.g., learnability, agility, resilience, and solving complex programs) is beneficial.

Effectively Using Talent Development Assessment Tools

Talent assessment strategies should be guided by three factors:

First, the identification and development of agile leaders who can navigate change and build an organization capable of constantly reinventing itself. Second, identifying individuals with *learnability*, that is the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt their skill sets to remain relevant for the long term. And third, *employability*—the ability to gain and maintain a desired job over the long term—will no longer depend on what individuals already know but on what they are capable and willing to learn. (Henriksen, 2018, p. 139)

When using a comprehensive talent identification assessment program through partnering with expert consultants, outside vendors, or an organization building its own program, common obstacles to overcome are: "(1) ignoring cultural fit, (2) designing the assessments without the overall objective in mind, and (3) over-relying on assessment analytics" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, pp. 226-227).

Ignoring Cultural Fit

The obstacle of ignoring cultural fit can be countered by assuring that the assessment process is transparent so that potential candidates have their apprehensions minimized by a clear understanding—in advance—of how the talent development process will work. This includes: (a) creating an openness about assessment instruments and processes, (b) identifying what people (who) will be involved in collecting assessment data, (c) describing how the assessments will be administered, (d) noting who will view data, (e) explaining how data will be used to determine participants, and (f) describing how the data will be used to assess the developmental needs of selected participants. It is critical that all people associated with the aforementioned factors are well-trained, professional in their actions, and adhere to confidentiality when participants are assured of such (Gotte & Wilde, 2016).

Designing the Assessments Without the Objective in Mind

The objective of a talent development program is a "talent-ready leadership pipeline" of staff members capable of occupying more senior organizational positions in the future (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2011). One should not become distracted by this simple, but challenging, objective. Make certain that the desired outcomes for the talent development program are crystal clear (Gotte & Wilde, 2018). The predictive validity of all assessments must focus on this objective. The selection of each assessment to be used must be driven by the question: "How does this assessment contribute to the likelihood of providing competent candidates ready to assume more senior leadership positions in the future?" Consultants and vendor representatives will be more than willing to propose assessments frequently used in the talent development programs elsewhere. This does not mean that such assessments automatically meet the needs of your organization. "Buyer beware!"

Over-Relying on Assessment Data Analytics

"While incredibly valuable, even the best assessment tools and methodologies offer imperfect predictors" (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 227). Analytics have received considerable attention—and success—over the past decade in various organization types as exemplified by professional sports franchises. The astute user of analytics knows that caution must be paid to results based on *relationship data* as compared to data demonstrating true *cause-effect* results. Boudreau and Lawler (2016), proponents of using analytics for decision-making regarding talent development programs, note that "talent analytics remains underdeveloped and underused" (p. 180).

It is crucial for decision-makers to step back from the volumes of assessment data and holistically *contextualize* the data with other known information separate from assessments. This means "looking for patterns across an employee's profile as well as against the desired standards

[competencies]" for effective future organizational leadership positions (Gotte & Wilde, 2016, p. 227). For example, it is essential to determine if candidates excel in the realm of organizational specific (e.g., unique experiences and knowledge), attributes likely to enhance future learnability (Masa'deh, Yassin, Shatnawi, & Obeldat, 2018).This contextualization should be done as a group process among key leaders in an organization in a "give and take" environment in which opinions are *evidenced-based* to the extent possible.

Conclusion

Talent in the form of staff members' attributes that make an organization effective today, and will keep it vital in the future, is the foundation of an organization's existence. Establishing state-of-the-art talent development programs so that staff members can be their best now and in the future is crucial to all organizations. Talent development programs are often based on identifying the competencies needed by employees currently as well as those that will be needed in the future. Such competencies should guide the assessments used in selecting talent development programs and diagnosing the organization's development needs. These assessments and the use of the data flowing from them must be reliable, valid, bias-free, and produce meaningful information to serve as a foundation for an effective talent development program.

Developments in the last decade have led to selection methodologies such as the following that may alter the ways in which candidates are assessed for talent development programs: "(1) digital interviewing and voice profiling, (2) social media analytics and web scraping, (3) internal big data and talent analytics, and (4) gamification" (Chamorro-Premuzic, Winsborough, Sherman, & Hogan, 2016, p. 6). Charan, Barton, and Carey (2018) advocate that "talent technology" via software applications will elevate the ability to identify and support talent development even more in the future (p. 7). It is crucial to realize, though, that *data-driven* talent development decision-making does not automatically exclude factors such as behavioral capabilities, personal preferences, and aspirations of staff members (Caplan, 2013).

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Organizations with effective talent management programs, the survey reveals, have a better chance than other companies of outperforming competitors. But strategic rapid talent allocation is not an easy feat. Managing the flow of people to new projects requires an in-depth understanding of roles and evolving skills requirements. Yes, managing talent supply is a complicated endeavor, and HR is in the best position to understand the many curveballs it entails. However, at most organizations, the process that supports this (headcount planning) is not driven by HR. It is precipitated by the annual budget cycle, when Finance provides the cost and headcount limits for each department. Talent Management: A Critical Review. Prathigadapa Sireesha, Leela Krishna Ganapavarapu. 1,2Associate Professor MBA (HR) Kolej Gemilang (Malaysia). Talent management broadly refers to strategic HR programs designed to maximize workforce productivity. The field of talent management covers a range of HR functions focusing on attracting, retaining, managing, and developing high quality workforces. It includes performance management, staffing, compensation, learning management, employee development, and succession planning. most difficult elements of talent management. It is about giving employees information that both increases their awareness of what they need to change and increases their confidence in their ability to change. Feedback is not. Building critical-talent pipelines is the process of • Assessing internal and external talent pools • Determining the gaps between available and needed talent • Identifying the best strategies for developing and acquiring the talent to fill those gaps • Executing, monitoring, and refining pipeline strategies Although these talent management practices take place within organizations, these activities occur in the context of the broader business landscape. Training and development programs. 23 36 27 13. Do we have the right assessment programs in place for external candidates and internal employees that will reliably identify the best people for critical positions? • How do we define and implement the development programs that will prepare employees to step into critical roles? 4.