

Leading Top Talent in the Workplace

By Olivier Serrat

The Best at Something

In the 21st century, certainly in organizations, one has to be the best at something; it is no longer enough to be good—or pretty good—at a number of things. For decades, organizations felt comfortable with policies, strategies, structures, systems, and business processes that kept them in the middle of the road—it made sense: after all, that is where clients stood or sat.

These days, however, the middle of the road is the road to nowhere: there is so much change; there is so much pressure. There are so many different ways of doing everything that business-as-usual is dead. Notions of being an honest broker, a family doctor, or a “Really Useful Engine”, pace Thomas and Friends, are antiquated.

It is time to rediscover the power of work and forge better ways to lead or compete—but in both instances succeed—with those who, typically with creativity and innovation or, some prefer, imagination and invention, do the intellectual work that matters most. Excellence is impossible without top talent, aka chief possibility officers.

Now You See It ...

Talent is a marked innate ability, aptitude, or faculty for achievement.¹ Since there is a myriad of possible productive applications,² organizations will find greater value if they



Organizations once distinguished themselves by their systems and procedures. They now need distinctive ideas about their objectives, their clients, what their clients value, their results, and their plans. For that, they need top talent.

¹ Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman define talent as a recurring pattern in thinking, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman. 1999. *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. Simon & Schuster.

² A simple taxonomy would list four types, namely, talent to (i) imagine new possibilities, (ii) champion new ideas, (iii) encourage buy-in and commitment, and (iv) make certain that projects and programs are completed.

formulate their own definitions of what talent and talent management are.³

On the other hand, top talent begs no interpretation (even if it cannot be perfectly identified): it is the natural hallmark of the “clevers”, high flyers, mavericks, prima donnas, and superstars whose recurring individuality—honed and fortified by application and practice—infuses performance with a distinctive (and not infrequently disruptive) dimension.⁴ Borrowing from Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones,⁵ top talent is those individuals who have the potential to create and deliver disproportionate amounts of value from the resources made available to them and are therefore of most value to an organization. If intellectual capital drives today’s knowledge economies, this brings with it an increased dependence on the highly talented people who generate it.

Research shows that superior talent does not just happen ab ovo: it is a combination of our genes and our physical and social development that imposes boundary conditions on what we can do easily or not.⁶ Top performers come into being because, to a very high degree, they (i) study and understand what their talents are, this being distinct from what they can learn; (ii) make resolutions and set goals to strengthen themselves; (iii) implement talent development projects and mark out daily, weekly, and monthly indicators of progress; (iv) re-strategize based on emergent learning; and (v) take time to salute their own efforts, steps, and attainments.

Men of genius do not excel in any profession because they labor in it, but they labor in it because they excel.

—William Hazlitt

... and Understand its Characteristics

Smart people are the motive power of the knowledge economy and every organization faces challenges in managing⁷ and leading them. Most people look up to their leaders; top talent knows its deeply embedded life interests⁸ and, through the organization, focuses on what value it can bring to the equation. Therefore, leading top talent in the workplace begins with the understanding that a rapport with them must be an association of interdependent equals,⁹ over whom leaders have limited real authority. It takes relationship, discernment, and deep conversation to get to the heart of top talent and use it organizationally. Why? First, as Jeswald Salacuse explains pithily,¹⁰ the talent of mavericks always means that they have options outside the organization; those options give them a strong sense of independence. Second, top talent has a formal or informal proprietary interest in the organization (and may have played a role in selecting its management); in consequence, they

Most Americans do not know what their strengths are. When you ask them, they look at you with a blank stare, or they respond in terms of subject knowledge, which is the wrong answer.

—Peter Drucker

³ In the common parlance of talent management, natural abilities and traits are considered together with knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Proponents of talent management take a more inclusive, whole workforce, approach to talent “pools”. Whatever the approach, mindful attention to the talent needs of organizations is clearly needed if they are to survive strategic and operational challenges. Conventional organizations have no talent management policies, strategies, or formally developed practices; talent management, if it occurs at all, is informal and incidental. In high-performance organizations, talent management informs and is informed by corporate strategy; individual and pooled talent is understood and considered.

⁴ The world of sport appraises talent all the time. When a team manager speaks of a star player, he is talking about who scores the most points, who blocks the other team most often, or who the supporters (and other players) identify as essential to success.

⁵ Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. 2009. *Clever: Leading Your Smartest, Most Creative People*. Harvard Business School Publishing.

⁶ Being exceptionally talented does not negate the requirement for application and practice. They will refine the talent so that it may power the reliably near-perfect concretization of strength. Without application and practice, talent broods; without talent, application and practice do not engender as much benefit. Sad to say, in complicated or complex environments, no amount of hard work or training, nor coaching and mentoring, can ever make up for performance gaps if the talent required is not there in the first place. (But they will unlock or help realize related potential.)

⁷ Some say the term “management” is a misnomer—top talent cannot necessarily be managed—and that it is a matter of enablement.

⁸ Timothy Butler and James Waldroop have identified eight deeply embedded life interests: (i) application of technology, (ii) quantitative analysis, (iii) theory development and conceptual thinking, (iv) creative production, (v) counseling and mentoring, (vi) managing people and relationships, (vii) enterprise control, and (viii) influence through language and ideas. It is common to have more than one; indeed, many exist in pairs. Timothy Butler and James Waldroop. 1999. Job Sculpting: The Art of Retaining Your Best People. *Harvard Business Review*. September–October.

⁹ Effective one-on-one, personal communications that promote interest-based relationships are the fundament of that, masoned by willful skill, not formal authority.

¹⁰ Jeswald Salacuse. 2006. Leading Leaders: How to Manage the Top Talent in Your Organization. *Ivey Business Journal*. May–June. Available: www.iveybusinessjournal.com/view_article.asp?intArticle_ID=632

Everyone takes the limits of his own vision for the limits of the world.

—Arthur Schopenhauer

can think that the leaders are beholden to them, not the other way around. Third, top talent has its own followers and constituencies, whose loyalties and respect powerfully influence their behavior. Fourth, top talent often has loyalties to institutions outside the organization they work in; the signals they receive from these usually influence them more than anything the leaders can say or do. Fifth, top talent does not conceive of itself as a follower; it sees itself as a leader and wants to be treated as such. Last,

because of its special value to the organization, top talent usually feels entitled to special access, benefits, and privileges (and constantly negotiates for that).

Redesigning Work

When there is no choice but to explore and exploit opportunity, organizations must unleash their full creative and innovative potential. To imagine without limits answers to the question “What if ...?” they must use tools, methods, and approaches that both empower and nurture possibility and reveal the immediate significance and potentiality of what is then found. Heeding Alexander Manu,¹¹ this is not about how one should fit imagination to business; conversely, it is about how one can fit business to imagination.

One might think that is easier said than done. But there are good examples of successful renegade thinking to invent the future of management.¹² There is also much open and fertile ground in top talent. Paraphrasing Alexander Manu, they, more than anyone else, intuitively understand that before one learns to manage the “how”, the “what” needs to be conceived. What is more, they have the ability to reveal the “why”, thereby joining the “how” and the “what”, that is, the means and the meaning.¹³ To develop distinctive ideas about their objectives, their clients, what their clients value, their results, and their plans, organizations need top talent. To solve wicked problems,¹⁴ they must recreate themselves as organizations of choice for mavericks, not merely make adaptations of no great shakes to existing setups. Albert Einstein said it well: no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. And who better to resolve wicked problems than mavericks?

The best way to predict the future is to invent it.

—Alan Kay

Leading Clever People

Wicked problems in urgent need of solution call for new ways in the workplace. For sure, human resources divisions must shift the focus of what they do, e.g., measuring cost per hire, or the impact of initiatives on skills and attitudes, to the quality of the talent decisions they support.¹⁵ How can you lead people who know their worth, are organizationally savvy, ignore corporate hierarchy, expect instant access, are well connected, have a low boredom threshold, and most likely will not thank you? Above all, since first-level managers (not to excuse

¹¹ Alexander Manu. 2007. *The Imagination Challenge: Strategic Foresight and Innovation in the Global Economy*. Peachpit Press.

¹² Management 2.0 considers questions such as: What are the design flaws that prevent an organization from changing (until that can only be done by coup) and inspiring the joyful imagination and commitment of their employees? What are the grand challenges that need to be addressed if we are to create organizations that are as adaptable as their environments and as human as the people who work in them? What might answers to these challenges look like, and are there experiments that could help push through the limits of management-as-usual? What can be done to speed up the evolution of management in the future? See Gary Hamel. 2008. *Renegade Thinking*. *Labnotes*. No. 9.

¹³ Timothy Butler and James Waldroop see that deeply embedded life interests are long-held, emotionally driven passions, intricately linked with personality and thus born of an indeterminate mix of nature and nurture. They propose job sculpting, not standard operating procedure, as a means to better match people to jobs.

¹⁴ The term “wicked problem” was coined to denote a challenge that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize. (Moreover, because of complex interdependencies, efforts to resolve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create others.)

¹⁵ For sure, talent decisions can be made with the same level of logic and rigor as others. To begin, however, one must understand the psychology of work satisfaction. Wicked problems that top the list include balancing long-term goals with short-term demands, predicting returns on innovative concepts, innovating at the increasing speed of change, winning the war for world-class talent, combining profitability with social responsibility, protecting margins in a commoditizing industry, multiplying success by collaborating across silos, finding unclaimed yet profitable market space, addressing the challenge of eco-sustainability, and aligning strategy with customer experience. See Marty Neumeier. 2009. *The Designful Company: How to Build a Culture of Nonstop Innovation*. Peachpit Press.

top- and middle-level managers) are primordial to engagement, a new type of leader, one that neither lacks self-confidence nor imagination,¹⁶ must emerge. He or she will

- know how to discover and learn, and manage and inspire discovery and learning in others;
- grasp how to identify and validate ideas, and transform them into opportunities; and
- nourish and trigger the imagination of individuals in teams, and translate the results into innovations that benefit organizations and society at large.

Of course, then, one cannot exactly lead top talent hands on. But one can be a guiding force in their lives. Your job is not to be smarter than them, for they will almost always know their specific domains better than you; rather, it is to make sure you provide sociability, infrastructure, credibility, resources, and rewards. Your job is also to remove what obstacles stand in the way of their doing their best. The advice Rob Goffée and Gareth Jones proffer is to lead with a light touch, listen to the silences, tune in to leadership, explain and persuade, use expertise, give space and resources, tell them what but not how, provide boundaries, give people time for questioning, offer recognition and amplify achievements, encourage failure to maximize learning, protect clever people from the rain, assign real-world challenges with constraints, talk straight, conduct and connect, and recruit more talent. If, some will say, this should apply to any segment of personnel, the fact that it still does not underscores how far we have to go before we can talk about leading in clever organizations.

Further Reading

ADB. 2009. *Harnessing Creativity and Innovation in the Workplace*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/harnessing-creativity-and-innovation-in-the-workplace.pdf

———. 2010a. *A Primer on Talent Management*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/primer-on-talent-management.pdf

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Alexander Manu. 2007. *The Imagination Challenge: Strategic Foresight and Innovation in the Global Economy*. Peachpit Press.

For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

¹⁶ Insecure or unimaginative managers neither attract nor retain great talent; quite the opposite, they diminish their team's ability to get results.

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Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions