

HUMANEMENT

# WHICH FUTURE WILL BE YOURS?

By Mark Brenner



Imagine you have a crystal ball that shows you two very different futures for your company. One scenario is the dark and hopeless state of an organization that lost the war for talent. Financial statements are red with the company's lifeblood, closed business units lie in ruins and battle-scarred leaders are desperately trying to rally the last few survivors of a crippled work force with only stone-age weapons at their disposal.

But, as you continue to gaze into the crystal ball, you see a vision of a company that won the war for talent. Most competitors have been defeated, and proud

leaders are displaying their medals as they summon engaged teams to capture even greater market share.

Now, imagine the crystal ball has a rewind button that you can press to learn exactly how either future came about. You can play each story back to see what mistakes you need to avoid and what steps you must take today to have the right talent in place to win the war.

Although such a tool has not yet been invented, it's actually not that difficult to build your own crystal ball, in sense. You can assemble it using the parts of the people value chain (PVC): talent attraction, targeted recruiting, high-accuracy hiring, proactive on-boarding, talent identification, performance enhancement, career acceleration and succession management.

Applied correctly, these components will assemble themselves into a crystal ball that will predict a positive future for you. In previous columns, you learned how to implement best practices for attracting, hiring and on-boarding best-fit candidates. This column adds the next segment – the identification of talent for development – which really is all about discerning and responding to the future.

## Shifting Perspective

Before you can identify and develop the right kind of talent, two shifts in perspective are necessary. One is strategic, the other tactical. The first is represented by today's emerging trend away from the narrow process of succession planning, and to the more all-embracing and integrated one of talent management.

Rather than focusing on identifying a replacement candidate or two for a given, high-value position, the new approach aims to create a broad pool of high potentials throughout the organization. These people can be developed more expansively and, as a result, they will have much more "placement flexibility." Of course, this sets a high tactical bar for the talent identification phase of the PVC because it requires a long-term perspective, significant investment and focused action, as well as a disciplined, programmatic approach.

The tactical shift requires each manager to move from performance evaluation to performance management and then on to true performance enhancement. For the vast majority of organizations, creating and institutionalizing a genuinely robust performance-enhancement system has been an ever-elusive holy grail.

There can be no doubt that an individual manager's finesse in the areas of advising, mentoring, coaching and generally nurturing high potentials is the prime factor in effectively developing and retaining them. However, making the necessary shift is a hugely difficult transition for most managers.

First, it calls for a high emotional intelligence quotient, which is no small feat. Second, the advising, mentoring, coaching and nurturing of high performers demands the discipline of an ongoing performance management process – not a single, annual event. In other words, the manager and a high-potential employee regularly engage in focused and candid conversations about his or her performance and its implications for further development in the future.

## **Delivering Winners**

Your mission, vision, core values and “strategy execution blueprint” – along with a solid handle on where your industry is headed – are the main components of your strategic guidance system for talent identification and development. Once you understand how these components translate into cultural, leadership and talent-management requirements, you can make a strong case for talent management throughout the organization, align all levels of management with the requirements and hold them all accountable for delivering on the implications.

That delivery, however, depends on the accurate use of a powerful weapon: a leadership competency model that captures the essence of your mission, strategic imperatives and talent requirements. Acting as a gyroscope, it describes and quantifies the management and executive profiles you will need in specific high-value roles in the years to come.

Use of this weapon, in turn, requires a management culture that is skillful in assessing and managing performance. Managers need to know the markers of potential (characteristics like being a learning athlete, or a person who continuously seeks feedback and new experiences; leading people in delivering results; managing in the face of ambiguity; piloting through change; and being trusted, respected and respectful of others) so they can identify high potentials – proactively, systematically and as early along the career arc as possible.

The answers to the following questions will render a graphic profile of the high performer of the future:

- What are the mission-critical outcomes this role needs to deliver the organization’s strategic business goals in the next several years?
- What results will outstanding performers produce that average performers will not?
- What behaviors will extraordinary performers display to produce this set of important job outcomes?
- What will distinguish the behavior of outstanding performers from average performers in the years to come?

Once high potentials have been identified, you can take measures to accelerate their development as much as possible. Be clever and resourceful about exploiting the learning value of stretch assignments to maximize acceleration, along with the full array of other development modalities, such as mentoring, executive coaching and action learning.

There is hardly a better long-term investment that leadership can make in its organization than taking a disciplined and comprehensive approach to discovering and nurturing all the talent that is seeded throughout the enterprise. Talent scouting the organization for high potentials must become institutionalized to the point that it becomes a core internal business process.

Like any other critical process, this requires a solid infrastructure (such as an IT talent management platform) and leaders and managers who consider talent scouting a part of their job description. Only then can the organization win the war for talent.

## **Inventing the Future**

In a study conducted by Towers Perrin of several hundred companies worldwide (Talent Management: The State of the Art, 2005), fewer than a third used a formal process to identify, deploy and develop high-potential leadership talent. In the midst of the war for talent, two-thirds of companies are woefully neglecting a most vital imperative. They expect their troops to fight without leadership support and in the absence of adequate systems and infrastructure.

And, where there is no leadership commitment, managers don’t “own” talent identification and development. Insufficiently prepared to execute in the territory of performance management, assessment and development, they rely on a mechanistic approach and make subjective decisions.

When it comes to building a competency model that captures the essence of your mission, strategic imperatives and talent requirements, its specifics are less important than the process your organization goes through to derive it. One of the greatest benefits of this exercise is the overall alignment and level of commitment it generates.

However, the first critical step in cascading the talent identification imperative to all of management is a visceral level of ownership on the part of the leadership team. When that ownership is as strong as management’s commitment to execute on it, the talent identification and development process becomes a strategic, mind-stretching regimen that can truly invent the best possible future. **USBR**

*Mark Brenner is chairman of the Global Consulting Partnership, a company that provides leadership development and organizational performance solutions for corporations, professional service firms, nonprofits and closely held businesses. For more information, visit [www.tgcpinc.com](http://www.tgcpinc.com) or call 610-975-9110.*