

Talent

The Holy Grail Within

"One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul and yet no one ever comes to sit by it. Passers-by see only a wisp of smoke from the chimney and continue on the way."

Vincent Van Gogh

Our attention was caught the other day by a managing partner who told us she was immersed in what she called "the war for talent". She went on to decry the "talent vacuum" created by high numbers of retiring employees combined with a shrinking core of new "talent" – younger people willing and able to don the leadership mantle and take on the responsibilities and sacrifices it requires.

She did have one source of hope, however – a few exceptional individuals hand-picked for possessing the right stuff, her "talent pool." And she wanted us to meet them over a drink, a talent-pool party, one might say.

After meeting the chosen few, the problem with this "talent pool" was apparent. It was not so much a talent pool as it was a talent *show*. The "talent" this group possessed was in fact a well-honed facility for calling their superiors' attentions to their every accomplishment: postured humility and well-cloaked hubris; lots of polish on thin leather. And the most damaging aspect of such a talent show is that others in the organisation can only sit back and watch the comedy, or tragedy, unfold.

In speaking with one of these fast-rising stars, we couldn't help but be impressed by the clarity of his ambition to become the youngest vice president in the company's history. His IT skills, given the company's long-range plans for technical dominance, positioned him for a meteoric rise. Curious about his leadership abilities, we posed the acid test: "How many of your current team members would you like to see becoming CEOs some day?" The question provoked a look of complete discombobulation, as if we had not comprehended his vision. His face displayed how puzzled he was that we somehow didn't understand that *he* was the lead actor, and that his team members were extras, well paid ones, at that, bussed in daily to support his starring role, not stars themselves.

Our Preconception that Talent Is Found in the Few

The expression "war for talent" grows out of an assumption that there is a shortage of talent. A treasure trove held mysteriously among a fortunate few. Like oil, talent becomes a vital commodity that must be searched out, mined and leveraged for the benefit of the masses.

The biggest problem with assumptions is that we too often act on them, and the actions we take determine the results we get. Believing talent is a precious commodity, we invest inordinately in it. We squabble over the possession of it, while our audience i.e. the real talent pool that is our organisation looks on. The idolisation of talent too often results in unwarranted arrogance among the idolised and loss of confidence from others whose contributions go unrecognised. Ten years ago, we conceived, designed and conducted programmes in which teenagers from tough socio-economic realities (the "Community

By Ian Chisholm,
Bradley Chisholm
and Mark Bell



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Stream") were paired with executives from business and government (the "Corporate Stream") with the disconcerting task of coaching each other. "Corporate Stream" sponsor organisations saw this as a way to develop the leadership presence of their "talent" in the context of community, outside the protection of titles or hierarchy.

A decade on, young adults from the Community Stream believe that helping to create value for another adult was an important gateway into their own responsible adulthoods. And members of the Corporate Stream retain even stronger opinions. Many report that it was the most potent leadership development experience they have ever undergone, and that they now routinely work towards inviting and encouraging talent from all corners of their organisations and communities.

Those who excelled in this work, from both Streams, truly engaged in it. They risked, they focused, they practiced, and they took critical feedback from us and from each other sincerely to heart. They challenged themselves. They supported each other. They eschewed their respective tribal attachments to "talent pools" or "tough realities" and committed themselves to a new tribe, one that believed talent was everywhere they searched.

Talent is an ecology of factors involving gifts and natural abilities, intuition and self-trust, deep-tissue personal experience and stories marked by opportunities to perform, survive, gain insight and to practice. If there is a perceived shortage of talent, it is because we do not perceive closely and accurately enough. One must believe in, observe and trust peoples' talents in the same way that the operator of a sailboat must learn to read the wind by watching closely for the delicate, subtle patterns that wind makes on the water.

Our Preconception that Talent Is Something by Itself

Notwithstanding the tropes commonly used in reference to talent, what we know about talent is that it is not absolute ("She is definitely high potential"), binary ("He's got it; she doesn't") or a silver bullet ("We need to infuse some talent into this equation"). Proclamations like these often serve as design principles for talent initiatives, and metrics-minded executives who question the outcomes expected from these approaches tend to be labelled as myopic and lacking in creative vision.

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We need a swift kick in our assumptions. We need to resist the prejudice that says “We can’t tell you exactly what talent is, but we know it when we see it”. Leaders who genuinely understand the talents of others take careful note of people in situations and can outline what someone has promise and potential for. Further, they can explain how someone is talented with the same deftness and alacrity as when they explain where someone is putting effort in at the edge, working to get better at something particularly awkward or challenging.

Moreover, having identified and categorised what they have observed, these leaders deliberately assign meaningful work and challenges for their people, challenges linked to specific, core strengths. They connect apprentices to masters, masters to each other. When team accomplishments are achieved, they dig deeper to identify the network of abilities that came together to enable the success.

We are not short on talent; it is an inherent part of being human. What we lack is people who have a feel for the talents of others, the believers, the sensors, the inviters of talent and the designers of meaningful work that allow us to contribute our talents alongside the talents of others. As Isaac Getz so artfully explains in his article, “Becoming a Liberating Leader”, in this publication, to become one of these leaders we must, as Bob Koski* did, begin with the way in mind.

In another setting a few months ago, a CEO explained why he had asked a group of people, younger and older, emerging and seasoned, from all corners of his organisation, to attend a meeting. He said to them: “You are here because you are NOT the best, nor are any of you struggling. Each of you has a record of solid results, but rarely are any of you the best at the things we commonly measure as performance in this organisation. BUT, we have noticed that you do something else. You consistently position others to accomplish things they have never done before. Others raise their game around you. Your talent seems to be one of authoring stories even though you set up other people to play the featured roles. We need to learn from you, and for you to learn from each other.” We are not short on talent as much as we are short on the kind of leadership that can see it and leverage it. The conversation with this CEO’s organisation has only just begun.

* The late Robert Koski, the maverick mechanical engineer who co-founded, the highly successful, Sarasota-based Sun Hydraulics, a company with no executive titles and a bottom-up management system.



Ian Chisholm and Bradley Chisholm are Partners of The Roy Group www.roygroup.net (Canada and U.S.) Mark Bell is Managing Partner of re-find the future www.refindthefuture.com (U.K and Europe)