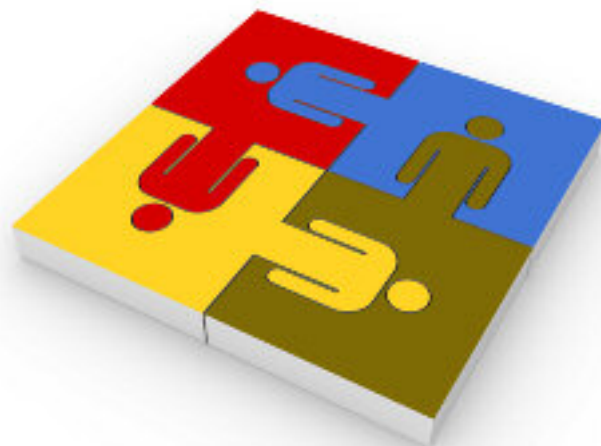


# Inside Leadership



To get your Talent Management strategy in tune, you need to take it from the top.



Graham Morris, Managing Director at HRM Recruitment Group talks talent management and the need for your CEO to be its champion.

“What is the one question you know your manager will ask you when he calls? “

We ask this question as part of our leadership evaluation process for executive roles. While clearly it is not intended to offer any deep psychological insight to a candidate, the answer does generally give a picture of the priority and focus that the candidate works under.

The point here of course, is that in most cases, executives are unlikely to focus on something they don't believe their leader is watching. The CEO's agenda in most organisations, determines not just how executives

focus, but his or her priorities too. So how often is your CEO or leader asking you or your senior managers about their talent management strategies and deliverables?

The economic and financial crisis of the last number of years has created a leadership climate in many organisations, aggressively focussed on cost reduction and revenue generation. For many businesses, the inherent risk is that these blunt factors become the only performance measures in real terms and that complex strategic issues, such as talent management do not return to the strategic agenda of the business.

Some of the Irish banks, although not all, are typical of this problem. Faced with catastrophic losses and need for radical change, the controlling dimensions through which managers are being managed has narrowed to the point that future talent needs are not being future planned for and is fundamentally today being ignored.

Such leadership patterns are more likely to add to the problem than solve it. Most organisations are working through some form of business transformation, working towards a new business model, implicit in which is a need for new types of skills and talent.

An abundance of research shows, that companies who create legitimate talent strategies as extensions of their business strategies outperform their peers that don't, in every form of financial measure. So what prevents organisations from applying a deliberate and appropriate amount of resources to the development of a strategy in such a key area?

Mary Kay Vona, Vice President, Aon Hewitt in Seven Tall Tales of Talent Management, describes a number of poor leadership practices that prevent organisations from grasping the talent reality. Of these perhaps the most endemic in Ireland, is the seventh, the belief that blinkered leaders hold "In the current economy, people are fortunate to have jobs...talent is always available".

As recruiters we shy away from organisations with this outdated perspective on the labour market. It screams of a business being out of touch with commercial reality and generally reflects on how they treat or regard their own employees. For an organisation to shift from the depths of that position to the performance heights of having a robust and aligned talent management strategy is a significant journey. Talent management will not work unless the CEO has this central to his or her strategic planning and the questions they ask of their reports.

In simple terms, the journey begins with the leadership team building an accurate process to gather information

on the businesses current talent levels, in partnership with the teams, groups, functions or departments in which this talent currently resides.

This picture when overlaid against future talent needs begins to raise strategy supporting questions. What are the employee development options? Are there potentials for relocation? Do we have cross functional learning programmes? Who will be developed, how and in what roles will they ultimately be placed? When will they be ready for them? It seems simple and yet of course it requires a complex solution that the entire leadership team can support and work through.

Professionals in the field of talent management, describe a number of potential derailers to successful design and execution of talent management strategies. The first of these is described as inaccurate or inconsistent information from the areas in which the talent is currently based. This occurs for several reasons, from the inability of managers to interpret the data they are reviewing to simple empire protection. As with many aspects of strategy formulation, leadership teams with a high number of operational leaders, sometimes find it difficult to move away from current performance perspective to focus clearly on future needs, adopting a not-broken, don't- need-to-fix attitude.

Aside from positions ranging from defensiveness to self-promotion, executives frequently to not apply

sufficient analysis to gaps and development needs, placing too much emphasis on strengths in their overall evaluation. The CEO clearly has a significant role to play in this to ensure that ideas, suggestions, positions and opinions are adequately tested and challenged.

While strategic HR may well be the primary developer and co-ordinator of strategic response, the CEO's continuous promotion and support of talent management is the air the strategy breathes to be successful. Visible commitment, time and energy are essential on his or her part to the organisation being able to address this significant business challenge. It is the CEO's responsibility to champion talent management and to evaluate current performance throughout the organisation. He or she must set clear expectations for performance and establish objective measures that are relevant at all levels of the organisation.

Ultimately, talent management needs to be so embedded in their agenda, that when a CEO calls or meets one of their direct reports, this is the question, that person expects to be asked.

**Graham Morris is Managing Director of HRM Recruitment Group. Domestic and International Talent Search.**