TALENT MANAGEMENT – THE BELBIN WAY

The Pressure is on to Achieve More From Less

When I was building my first business in the 1960's the world of work was so different from today. This was probably best summed up by the flippant answer to the question "How many people work here?" being "About half of them!"

While not offering a view on how factually accurate this was I am absolutely sure that much more is required from far less people in today's lean organisations. Charles Handy summed it up well in his book *The Empty Raincoat* when he offered the equation of ½ x 2 x 3 = P to explain the people management strategy of a large pharmaceutical company.   Handy explained that the equation represented half the number of people being paid twice as much to produce three times as much which equalled Productivity and Profit.

In 1994 when the book was published this was quite a thought provoking and, possibly, a slightly controversial view. Fifteen years or so on though it's probably understating the situation in terms of what organisations need to do merely to survive.

Breaking out of survival mode

Being locked into a permanent mode of survival however is not sustainable as a long term strategy as motivation is likely to deteriorate and the best people are likely to leave for more fulfilling opportunities.

Many organisations seek to gain an advantage over their competitors by striving for technological advantages and this can indeed yield good results in the short term. However, the fact is that with communications being so rapid and globally encompassing any technological advantage will soon be noticed and emulated by others thereby negating the advantage.

So what is the key to gaining advantages that are sustainable? Well, I would argue very passionately that it is through the talents and motivations of a company's employees. After all, this represents one of the biggest investments and, arguably, the most variable performance factor for any organisation.

Broadening the definition of talent

So how do we go about eliciting these natural talents and motivations? Much has been said and written about talent management but the truth is that it can be very difficult and laborious to progress it from being a philosophy to a beneficial workable process.

Frequently the solution to this dichotomy is to focus on the more obvious and conventional manifestations of talent such as demonstrable skills, qualifications and past accomplishments.

Many organisations also further simplify things by narrowing the definition of talent by adding a caveat. For example, "Identifying people with a talent for leadership."

While I acknowledge that there may be some advantages in deploying strategies along these lines I am of the opinion that if it ends there we may miss some real talents. To illustrate this I would like to draw on an example used by Kjell Nordström[i], Associate Professor of the International Business Institute, Stockholm. During a workshop we were jointly conducting

for a major international oil company I was fascinated to listen to how Kjell differentiated between *Articular* and *Tacit* knowledge. He cited an example of how his own position relied very much on his *Articular* or conventional knowledge being recognised while his father demonstrated high levels of *Tacit* knowledge. Kjell illustrated this by describing how his father always seemed to know where the fishing would be best when they went out on the lake together. He proclaimed that his father probably could not explain how he could do this with such amazing consistency and would certainly not be able to write and explanation of his methods. It was a good demonstration of *Tacit* knowledge however.

Although Kjell was using the term *knowledge* for this anecdote the moral behind this story is that when assessing personal qualities and attributes we should look beyond the obvious. It is frequently the less obvious qualities people possess that lead to outstanding contributions and successes. Just as Nordström made a case for valuing *Tacit* knowledge I would like to make a similar case for identifying and valuing the less obvious manifestations of talent. For this purpose I would like to define talent as: *A natural endowment or ability of a superior quality that can be productively applied.*

This definition embraces the obvious and the less obvious and it is the latter I would like to concentrate on for the remainder of this article.

The importance of valuing the less obvious elements of talent

It is my proposition that it is often the less obvious manifestations of talent that may not be fully identified, valued or utilised. Yet, these can be the very factors that that make a person stand out from the average and become outstanding in their field. We can see evidence of this all around us, in business and sport. It is a fact that despite people undergoing the same training, coaching and education different outcomes and performance standards will result.

Focusing solely on using training records, qualifications, levels of knowledge or understanding therefore and rating people on the basis of this is unlikely to have high coherence with standards of performance and efficacy.

The truth is that people will have different priorities and motivations when it comes to learning and developing skills. Some may find learning and accumulating knowledge is itself a pleasure and highly motivating, while others may only pick out one or two of the key learning points and strive relentlessly to ensure they lead to worthwhile outcomes.

If these observations resonate well with your experiences you might well ask, "How can we go about eliciting these less obvious qualities?" The answer is, "With great difficulty." if we try to adopt an all embracing methodology that tries to seek out every facet of talent.

That is why I advocate organisations make a start using a relatively simple approach by adopting a methodology that elicits the presence or absence of a relevant range of workplace talents manifested in the way people behave. The reason I advocate using a behavoural evidence approach is because behaviour is observable while trying to elicit the causal influences of people's behaviour and motivations can be very complex. One might also conclude that trying to elicit what caused a recurring pattern of behaviour may not be of great relevance anyway.

You can do this by defining your own set of important behavioural characteristics and devising the methodology and technology or you can make a start by using an off the shelf system such as the Belbin Team Role behavioural profiling methodology.

Using the Belbin[ii] model as an integral part of talent management

The original Belbin model was primarily focused on the performance of teams and used eight clusters of behaviour Dr Meredith Belbin[iii] identified as being required in a high performing team. These clusters of behaviour were called Team Roles. Subsequently a ninth Team Role was added and the Self Perception Inventory (SPI) was developed to elicit a person's natural Team Role tendencies.

Over a period of 30 years or so the Belbin model has been extended and refined to allow observer feedback to validate the SPI and an advanced expert computer system developed to process the data and provide a range of individual, team, job and organisation reports. These can be used to enhance individual and team effectiveness, personal development, career planning and recent refinements and developments have made Belbin a natural and highly cost-effective component of talent management processes.

For example, if we accept that creativity is a typical manifestation of talent the Belbin methodology will enable us to find the most creative people in seconds.

The report in Appendix i shows an example of the profile of someone with the *Plant* profile. The behavioural cluster or Team Role Dr. Belbin identified as being creative, imaginative, and a radical thinker. When studying this report note how there is a high coherence between self perception and the perception of observers. This means we could be highly confident that the person is indeed a *Plant*.

The Interplace computer system, now entering its seventh generation, enables users to identify strong examples of each of the nine Team Roles (see Appendix ii for a summary explanation.) in seconds. Whether we are seeking someone who will relentlessly drive things through to a successful conclusion or a person who will anticipate problems that may be encountered and avoid reckless and ill conceived courses of action the information is readily available.

By identifying, recording and accessing the natural talents embodied in the Belbin Team Role model existing talent management practices can be greatly enhanced. There is even a facility for defining the Team Roles required for a specific job or work activity and doing a gap analysis between the job and the prospective or existing jobholder.

In conclusion, may I emphasise that I am not proposing that the Belbin methodology is used as an all embracing talent management process. However, it does offer a good starting point or provides an enhancement to existing processes for eliciting important personal characteristics that are not otherwise readily identified but have proven to have a high impact on individual, team and organisation performance.

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[i] Kjell Nordström is the joint author, with Jonas Ridderstråle, of *Funky Business*, a book that offers a different perspective on knowledge and talent.
[ii] The Belbin Team Role behavioural profiling model is the copyright of Belbin Associates, Cambridge UK.
[iii] Dr Meredith Belbin's experimentation and development of the Team Role model is explained in the book *Management Teams – Why they Succeed or Fail*.