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Strategically talented

An organization, whether it's in the business of building houses or building smartphone apps, running a transportation company or running a school board, must have clarity of purpose — a clear explanation of its value. To achieve this, it must have a solid strategy — a clear plan showing how it will achieve that value.

Morgan Smyth
Leadership in Action

In order to convincingly execute on this strategy, it must also have the right people.

Michael Couch refines this last part even further by stating an organization's most valuable asset is having "People with the right skills in the right roles doing the right things at the right cost."

He also claims an organization's strategy is more valuable than its people because strategy is the framework that guides the choices that determine the nature and direction of the organization, including what kind of people are needed. Talent management has no value unless it drives strategy. So it's strategy first, people second. He calls this concept "Competing through people."

Make sense? Of course it does, yet very few organizations are successful at achieving this. Why? Because we live in a different world now and organizations just haven't kept up with the times.

Managers came into vogue back in the industrial era when managing a relatively steady-state environment, such as running a production line, was important — the Peter Drucker days.

We have since transitioned into the much more dynamic, uncharted "knowledge" era where most industrial jobs have been either handed over to robots or outsourced to other countries. Flat organizational structures are replacing the outdated hierarchical model. Weekly "calibration" meetings are supplanting the traditional annual performance reviews.

By asking the question "Where does our strategy require talent that will make us better than our competition?" organizations can hire talent that fits more suitably into their strategy, rather than into their culture. They no longer need brawn; they need brains. However, managing brains is significantly more complex.

Each industry is unique; each organization within an industry is unique; each employee within the organization is unique; and each role is unique. Therefore, each individual has to be trained and nurtured in a unique way. How can management do this and yet remain equitable to all? It cannot.

Each employee's role must provide value. But not all employees contribute the same amount of value. For instance, an employee responsible for mergers and acquisitions may be considered more valuable than one responsible for purchasing office supplies. How much more valuable? Well, this is up to the senior executive team to determine. It must quantify the strategic value each person provides and what his potential value may be in the foreseeable future.

This assessment, once completed, determines who gets the royal jelly — who is given more grooming, more support and more opportunities to grow and advance.

Some companies such as Google and Facebook use the "hire slow, fire fast" approach. This is where the "new" management comes in. In order to manage this new knowledge-based talent pool effectively, it takes a new kind of manager at all levels. She must be one who can articulate the organization's purpose and strategy. She must paint the picture (the vision), inspire the team, motivate and guide each member in the development of his skills and talents. In essence, the traditional manager's role has to change. Now she has to become both a leader and a coach. Being just a manager is not enough.

One way to get managers to focus more on the leading and coaching aspects of their jobs would be to remove the word "manager" from their titles. Insert leader or coach instead. And, just like the coach of a hockey team, this new business coach must map out the season's strategy, pick the right players; evaluate each player's potential; assign them to the right positions; and develop their skills to maximize their respective potentials — with the sole purpose of winning the cup.

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