

Talent is Your Business

By Jeffrey Schmedeke

It's amazing to venture through the management section of a bookstore, whether at a brick and mortar operation or online. New editions on the topic seem to constantly appear. And people buy them; I once had a graduate professor who lamented that she should have published a management textbook instead of the public affairs books she and her husband wrote and marketed. Her contention was that they would have been much richer had they done so.

So it goes with picking and developing a workforce. In the never-ending quest for operational talent, businesses and firms search for Cassandras or crystal balls that can help them divine the right mix of skill, personality and energy. Hiring managers as well as human resource professionals spend much of their career lives trying to read who will fit in where and do well. Of course, there are many management books on that subject, too.

One such book on organizational behavior that I've found useful is *Reframing Organizations* by Lee Bolman and Terence Deal. In it the authors suggest there are four frames of reference for any organization: the Structural Frame; the Political Frame; the Symbolic Frame; and the Human Resource Frame.

Each Frame conveys a different way to view human interactions in organizations. The Structural Frame sees the firm as a factory or a machine. Rules, task management, and defined roles are hallmarks of this Frame. The Political Frame draws from the "jungle." Everything is competition—winning and commanding internal resources; agendas and powerbases; power and conflict. Using a Symbolic Frame of reference gives one the aspect of theater. Work is about symbols, esprit de corps, and creating a culture of meaning. The last Frame is Human Resources. This vantage point portrays a firm's employees as an extended family. Assessing needs, assigning skills and aligning organizational goals with human capacity are the focal points.

Most leaders and decision makers recognize that at any time in any work day, it helps to understand firm dynamics using every one of these Frames. However, the last Frame may be in need of a re-think. We are living in an era of linked information, networked colleagues and volumes of data that force firms to reinvent their internal machinery quickly and nimbly. This requires that we shape our view of talent a little differently.

One new idea comes from Reid Hoffman, co-founder of the professional networking site, LinkedIn. In his new book on talent management (!), *The Alliance*, he argues that leaders and co-workers should see each other as networks of allies. His reasoning seems to re-frame how we work with each other by blending some elements of Bolman and Deal, while re-writing the extended family model of Human Resources. The idea here is to get past what he rightly sees as the all too often low level of trust between firm talent and organizations. He argues instead for a workforce culture built on mutual investment by the firm and the employee. The rationale seems sound and clear: That companies without loyalty to customers, both internal and external, are companies with no long term thinking. Without long term thinking companies won't invest in new ideas or technologies. If companies are not investing in new concepts and skill sets, then they are on the path to the economic graveyard.

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To advance in this economic reality, leaders may have to assess how they think about their organizations, what frames of reference are at work in their internal psychologies and what the best approaches forward will be. Hoffman's suggestion can be summed up this way: Help the talent develop and thrive and they'll help the firm develop and thrive. It is a kind of mutualistic symbiosis that everyone in an organization should learn and understand. To get there, internal training should be aligned toward that end. Every skill in leadership, project management or in communication (to name a few) that a firm cultivates with its employees should be seen as an investment in the future of the firm. Where ever employees land in the future, whether internally or externally, they will be allies.

We may have more than enough management books. Can we really ever have enough allies?