



“Make sure everything you put into your talent is enhanced by line managers, not destroyed. Don’t send them back to idiots”

There are some organisations that very effectively identify talent. They take their high potentials through excellent development activities, and then return them to line managers to build on the investment. But even these best-in-class talent management programmes could have a fatal flaw. That flaw is the forgotten elephant in the room.

That elephant appeared to me in Zurich in 2005 when I was global head of talent and leadership at UBS. In November 2004 we ran the first ever group-wide talent programme for an elite audience: the top 10% of the top 10%, the true stars. No expense was spared, and it lacked no senior leader presence to inspire this critical group and align them to the new entrepreneurial strategy of the bank. They were to be champions of the new world. It won awards and was part of a Harvard case study. But three months later three of our ‘uber high potentials’ told us they were thinking of leaving.

Why? We had inspired them, aligned them to the new strategy, shown them how valued they were, and the massive potential they had to succeed! Then the elephant became visible. We had, after all that effort and cost, sent them back to ‘idiots’. We had sent them back to line managers with neither the skills nor desire to use their potential either for the good of the team or the

organisation. Some even treated them as a threat. The old world had collided with the new.

The problem was not the fault of the line managers. They were only ‘idiots’ because we had not developed them to be able to develop talent effectively. We had assumed they were up to the job, but many weren’t.

Immediately a line manager engagement strategy was designed and rolled out, with the objective of ensuring every high potential had a line manager who could develop them effectively.

It clearly set out what line managers were expected to do to develop their high potential team members and how to do it quickly and simply given the other work they had. It showed them what the organisation could do to help them and what excellent development looks like.

Their HR business partner was given the same information using the same structure but with more detail. The HR business partners were developed to support their line managers in lunch and learn sessions and made aware of development resources and opportunities – not just in their own business area but across the whole organisation – from job shadowing in another division to mentoring.

In a further step to ensure success the delivery of the talent

development objectives became part of the line managers’ own objectives (on which part of their bonus was reliant).

Line managers also had the opportunity to attend workshops to develop their coaching, general management skills, and understanding of the organisation’s big picture. This was all planned and initiated within eight weeks of that fateful morning when the elephant became visible.

This strategy’s effects were dramatic; the most powerful being that not only did it enhance the development of high potentials but also line managers. We were also able to ‘flip the switch’ so that their new development capability could be used on their whole team, not just high potentials. In the longer term this in itself created even more high potentials – we had unwittingly instigated a virtuous circle of development that was more powerful than we could have imagined.

The moral of the story is: make sure all the time, effort and resources you put into your talent is enhanced by their line managers, not destroyed. People join organisations and leave bosses, so don’t send your high potentials – or indeed anyone – back to ‘idiots’. Make sure every line manager has the motivation, skills, and holistic perspective to inspire and enable everyone to reach their full potential. **HR**

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