

Strategic talent development – making the best people in crucial positions better

Rino Schreuder and Simon Noorman

Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to explain the why and what of strategic talent development. It shows how top talents in value-creating top positions can make a strategic difference for organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – Having established the differences between generic and strategic talent management, this article argues that talent management needs to be aligned with the organizational strategy. The next step is to ensure that the talents and skills of people who fulfill strategic, “difference-making” roles are best developed. You cannot standardize your talent development to achieve greatness.

Findings – Strategic talent development is a valuable and priceless investment in the future of the entire organization.

Originality/value – Strategic talent development is an innovative addition to existing talent management practices – not a replacement. An addition that makes the link between talent management and strategy (even) more explicit and can help organizations to make a next step in the realization of their ambitions through a targeted deployment and development of their top talents in key positions.

Keywords Talent strategy, Strategic talent management, Making a difference, Strategic talent development
Paper type Viewpoint

Rino Schreuder is based at the EMD Centre, Huizen, The Netherlands.

Simon Noorman is a Consultant, Change Manager and Trainer, based in Meppel, The Netherlands.

A generic talent strategy can never be the basis for a talent approach that is specifically tailored to the unique strategy of a specific organization. To contribute significantly to the achievement of specific strategic goals, talent management needs to be aligned with the organizational strategy.

Such a strategic approach of talent management requires HR to perform two crucial tasks:

1. translate the required strategic capabilities of an organization into crucial positions or roles that have a disproportionate effect on the achievement of the strategic objectives; and
2. ensure that such A positions or roles are occupied by the best people, to enable top talents to really make the strategic difference.

Having established the differences between generic and strategic talent managements, we turn to the next step: How do we ensure that the talents and skills of people who fulfill these strategic, “difference-making” roles are best developed? Because *generic* training and development is not sufficient for the occupants of A positions to really make a strategic difference. You cannot standardize your talent development to achieve greatness.

Making Messi even better

We are aware of the fact that a differentiated approach to talent management raises questions and concerns. Doesn't everybody have (a) talent? And do we really want to create so-called crown princes and their irritating behavior?

“With strategic talent development, we mean the specific attention an organization should give to the development of talents or skills in which someone is already extremely good, and that may have an above-average impact on the strategic success of the company when applied in an A position.”

No, but we should not reject the good with the bad either. If you have a top player like Lionel Messi in your football team, you would better position him as a forward. And you will also pay *extra* attention to his physical and mental fitness, nutrition and focus.

And possible prima donna behavior? That happens, but it is rarely functional, it can damage the team’s performance and must therefore be unequivocally rejected and prevented.

And the other team members? They are also important, and their physical and mental fitness, nutrition and focus also need professional attention.

In other words, strategic talent management and strategic talent development are an optional *addition* to existing talent management practices – not a replacement. An addition that makes the link between talent management and strategy (even) more explicit and can help organizations to take a next step in the realization of their ambitions through a targeted deployment and development of their top talents in key positions.

Difference makers

To give an impression of the kind of roles and people we are talking about, please consider – apart from Messi – a few other examples of possible difference-making roles:

- Reception employee in a medium-sized hotel;
- Formula developer in the food industry;
- Medical specialist in a hospital;
- TV News anchorman/woman; and
- Search engine specialist at a website development firm.

In their roles, these professionals can make a disproportional contribution to the success of their organization. Conversely, if they perform poorly in these crucial roles, the effect is also disproportionately large.

As you can see, these are not *management* positions. Managers are often expendable and not of *above-average* importance for implementing a specific strategy. Crucial roles in the managerial area are often temporary roles, such as a turn-around manager or the manager of a post-merger integration. Managers are more often *value enablers* than *value creators*.

We often see this temporary importance of A positions. In relatively stable organizations – where *exploitation* is the name of the game – A positions can last longer. But in innovative, transformative organizations that are focused on *exploration*, A positions will be more dynamic.

Strategic development: generic when feasible, specific when necessary

As “everyone has (a) talent,” there is always room for generic, inclusive talent development. After all, every employee benefits from the development of his or her talents. Top talents

should also work on the development of their *generic* qualities. This includes product knowledge, presentation techniques and knowledge of the organization or project skills.

With *strategic* talent development, we mean the specific attention an organization should give to the development of talents or skills in which someone is already extremely good, and that may have an above-average impact on the strategic success of the company when applied in an A position. Top talents in value-creating top positions can make the difference, and it is therefore very important for the organization to make those top talents continuously better in their role. *Value-driven* talent development. This requires specific attention in terms of content, time and money. It also requires deviating from a principle of equality when it comes to investing in learning and development. Finally, a value-driven approach also requires deviating from investments in development based on hierarchy. *Generic management development* remains important, but *key position development* will make the strategic difference.

Focus, focus, focus

Strategic talent development is therefore about special people with special qualities who can make the difference in crucial positions. One of the first interventions is to ensure that those special people have as much opportunities as possible to use their special qualities.

In other words, make sure they are not burdened with all kinds of administrative, financial and organizational tasks. They are not particularly good at that, and the time that they have to spend on such activities is not available for deploying their top talents.

So, make sure that their support staff, or their team members are good at those other tasks. That enables top talent to become better and better.

This seems very obvious, but we all know the stories about teachers, specialists and other professionals who are buried under administrative tasks, as a result of which they cannot focus on what they are really good at.

Garton & Mankins put it like this: “In most organizations, time goes largely unmanaged. Business professionals fill their days with unproductive phone calls, emails, meetings, and conferences and find little time for value-adding activities.” They call this *organizational drag*. And they call upon managers and leaders to reduce this drag and to help employees to maximize their value added (Garton and Mankins, 2017).

Performance management new style

Secondly, top talent should receive more, better and different feedback on their performance. This starts with making the desired behavior and the intended results in their key position as explicit as possible. Even more than with other positions, it is important to have a frame of reference in which top talents who fulfill such a strategically crucial position can be supported, developed and assessed. Measurement gives insights into the extent in

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which the potential of the position is actually being realized. Frequent feedback based on various sources, forms the basis for continuation or adjustment of initiated development activities. *Performance management* as the basis for *performance development*, to maximize the strategic contribution of the best people in the crucial positions.

An increasing range of advanced technological support tools facilitates this performance management new style. The continuous collection of (feedback) data and the linking of talent development to organizational performance is becoming easier and better thanks to enhanced feedback systems and the rapid growth of HR analytics.

Charan *et al.* (2018) recommend organizations to reconsider every piece of talent-facing bureaucracy that has accreted over the years; and to deliver more-effective feedback, often drawn from multiple sources, far more often than once a year.

Role in the narrative

For the motivation, guidance and improvement of top talent in top positions, it is very important that it is crystal clear for them what role they play in the *corporate narrative*. Their contribution must be directly expressed in terms of the contribution to the (strategic) results of the company, not just of their department or function. This requires feedback at a strategic level, from people who oversee that strategic level. At the same time, it requires very personal and regular feedback, for example about the distribution of their time between strategic and nonstrategic tasks.

Space for sharing and experimenting

Top talents are often deployed by organizations as a “standard bearer,” which also has a strong development component. They are encouraged to share (and to keep up-to-date and improve) their expertise by giving them the freedom to initiate activities outside their own organization, to gain external knowledge or to set up experiments. And also to propagate the strategy of the organization – after all – they also act as a proponent of the corporate culture. Top talents are sometimes deployed in business-to-business contacts, or in marketing and advertising. Others are part-time professors, or receive additional opportunities to participate in external forums, meetings or industry sector activities.

The time spent on such activities can be seen as an effective investment in their development, because it often provides the top talents with high-quality and specialized input and feedback that they cannot always get internally.

Strategy development

Finally, it is important to involve top talents in new strategic developments in the organization. Exactly the people who have to make the difference in crucial positions, can provide valuable input in the development of new strategic plans, and also continue to develop in their various roles. In addition, these new strategies can also lead to other (future) A positions and *other A* players. It is necessary to prepare the *current A* players for that scenario as well.

In short: strategic talent development is a valuable and priceless investment in the future of the entire organization.

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Corresponding author

Rino Schreuder can be contacted at: rino.schreuder@emdcentre.com

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