

Better talent, better results

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Publication: USB Agenda

Date: April 2013

Human resources is no longer just a staff department that makes sure people get appointed and paid. It has become a strategic business partner that emphasises talent management. Experts share the importance of talent in any company.

“**T**alent is the biggest investment that a company can make.”

This is according to Prof Eugene Cloete, vice-rector: Research and Innovation at Stellenbosch University. For him, talent is about far more than simply a qualification. He has 25 years of experience in this field.

To prove his statement, he gives an example of a young boy with the talent to kick a soccer ball really well but he is not interested in the sport and therefore it gets him nowhere.

“On the other side, you have the chap who is average in kicking a ball, but he has passion for the game and attends every practice. One day you will see him in a world-class soccer team and people will say: Just look at that talent! The first chap will stand on the sideline with nothing.”

Cloete uses another example to explain talent: “In golf there are clear goals for each player, and that is to get the ball into the hole with the least number of shots. The goal and expectations are therefore clear.”

He says players like Ernie Els and Tiger Woods don't have to ask anyone what golf clubs to use for what shots. “They make those decisions themselves. But in this whole process there must also be a game – it is not about aimlessly hitting around balls. What are they going to play if there's no tournament?”

He says talented people have certain characteristics that stand out.

“You don't have to motivate them. They also have a positive attitude towards life. You can rather appoint someone with a positive attitude than someone with a high qualification and a negative attitude. That person is simply useless in the job.”

With the positive attitude also comes passion. “Think about someone like Freddie Mercury from Queen. He always sang with total commitment.”

Another characteristic of talented people is that it seems like they are always having fun. And they are nice to work with.

Talented people like pressure. Again, Cloete uses his golf analogy. “It never looks like golf players are working because they are passionate about their work and they like high expectations. The higher the expectations, the more

motivated the person.”

He says talented people are action-oriented. “Their work does not stay an expectation, they also get it done. They finish what they started. If times are tough they don’t walk away from a challenge.”

Talented people are inquisitive and they don’t just accept the *status quo*. Cloete says golf players do not go to a rugby field to hit a ball through the posts. “Oh no, on their way to that small hole with the flag there are water holes, sand pits and trees in their way. These obstacles do not scare them; on the contrary, they want that.”

Talented people also ask many questions. They want to know whether things cannot be done in a different or better way. “It actually forms the basis of creativity,” says Cloete.

According to Cloete, they think on a higher level. “People with talent don’t get caught up in detail and they can see the bigger picture. Moreover, they already know how their contribution will help to turn that bigger picture into a reality.”

Cloete says the last characteristic that he looks for in talent is cognitive discordance. “Talented people make your head spin. You think you know how to do something and then someone comes with a totally different way of doing this. But in a way that makes you think: Wow!”

He firmly believes that it is actually easy to manage talent.

“There needs to be agreement on clear goals. People with talent want to know what it’s about. And those expectations need to be communicated. Then you have to leave people to live their talent to the full, otherwise you kill their passion. You also need to give recognition for people’s work and ideas. People have a deep, deep need to receive recognition.”

According to Cloete, his winning recipe is: Appoint talented people, set clear goals, communicate high expectations and give recognition.

He says students from precarious circumstances have come to him with the dream of doing a master’s degree.

“They don’t think it is possible to achieve this. I then tell them: You are not just going to do a master’s degree, you are going to do the best master’s degree that has ever been done. I establish faith in them. I encourage them. They don’t want to disappoint themselves or the person who believes in them.”

Cloete says most people in the world are brilliant. “But they don’t live it to the full because the world’s systems oppress talent.”

Does better talent necessarily mean better results? Cloete answers: “A definite yes!”

Someone who works with talent every day is Alayne Reesberg, chief executive of Cape Town Design and the person who has to make sure things run smoothly for Cape Town as the 2014 World Design Capital.

She was formerly Microsoft big boss Bill Gates’ director for high-level communication. Returning to South Africa after 23 years abroad, she started her own company, Reesberg Partners, which focuses on management consulting.

Reesberg says talent is inherent and is developed by education, experience and exposure. “We all know someone who was super smart at school but who at the same time was bored and could not perform well. The big difference thus comes with the character, that which is inherent.”

She says it is a big challenge to manage the talent of young professionals who are way more informed than the older generation was at that same age.

“The big challenge comes from the management side. The best way to develop talent is precisely by giving the young ones the opportunities to show what they can do. And if they don’t succeed the first time, you must support them, create frameworks and let them try again.”

For Almene Potgieter, manager: Talent at Stellenbosch University, the two most important components of talent are performance and potential.

“I would define any person who is a high performer in a specific key position, or anyone with great potential, or both, as talent.”

According to her, you can appoint people with lots of talent and great potential, but you have to make sure that those people deliver the goods.

The questions are: “Does that talent manifest in performance?” And: “What context and culture do I create within my organisation for talent to flourish?” Because this is where talent is transformed into performance, according to Potgieter.

Other individual factors – like the person’s self-image, passion, drive, focus, the ability to work in a team and the willingness to learn – will all determine whether talent is converted into achievement.

For her, the management of talent is about having the right people with the right qualifications, skills, knowledge and mind-sets in the right position at the right time. Potgieter says a critical aim of the exercise is successor planning. “When it comes to knowledge in a company, you want to make sure that there is continuity and with that a leadership pipeline. Should someone resign or retire, there will be a strong pipeline of people with talent ready to fill key positions.”

“Talent is your biggest asset and a source of competitive advantage. Talent is required to reach your strategic goals. Therefore, it is so important to make sure you attract and appoint the right people. You also have to develop them optimally and retain them.”

How do you seek talent outside of your organisation?

Potgieter says the brand and organisational culture (which also strongly relates to leadership style) of modern organisations must attract talent. Moreover, it is important that different generations get accommodated in one organisation. “Prospective employees look for places where they can live to the full. Various factors play a role when someone decides to join an organisation, like the balance between work and lifestyle management, personal values that correspond with the organisation’s values, leadership style within the organisation, adaptable work practices, and opportunities for career growth.”

According to Potgieter, it is important that talent management is not seen in isolation but rather as a process that is integrated with other human resources processes like recruiting, selection, staff development, performance management and compensation.

How do you develop and keep people?

Accelerated and focused career development in the form of individualised development plans form an important part of talent management. This often also means that the individual must work with a mentor or management

coach.

Companies need to invest a significant amount of money and time to attract and retain scarce talent. Potgieter says competitive compensation, recognition, organisational culture and opportunities for growth and development, among others, are necessary to reach this goal.

Prof Cloete concludes by saying: “You can grow talent. If the passion is there, the rest will follow by itself.”

Characteristics of talented people

- They are motivated, passionate and curious
- They always have fun
- They like pressure
- They are action-driven
- They ask a lot of questions
- They think on a higher level and in ways that will turn heads