



The role of the line in talent management

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Talent management is one item on that ever-growing list of things that HR is asking line managers to do. For managers this particular area is often confusing and frustrating.

- 'Talent management' seems to come at managers out of HR and the phrase itself makes it seem unfamiliar. In fact it's only the rather unhelpful word 'talent' that's new(ish). The underlying reasons for talent management and the fundamental practices it involves are as old as the hills, but the jargon and some of the tools too often block managers from understanding what it means in practical terms.
- HR defines talent management in directly contradictory ways. There is often a message about 'everyone having talent' when at the same time the tools managers are asked to use may define 'talent' to mean people who can become top executives. HR really needs to use language clearly and consistently.
- Talent management can feel like a series of data requests from HR followed by little or no action. As explored below, talent identification with no follow-up in terms of development and deployment is a massive waste of time.

HR professionals could help line managers from the outset by being much clearer in their own thinking – and communication – about talent management.

Managers also need to understand their role, and indeed their limitations, in supporting talent management. Here we focus on just four aspects of the line manager's role: talent spotter, career discussor, talent developer and collaborator with other managers.

The line manager as talent spotter

The first step in talent management is often taken to be 'identifying talent', but here the term 'talent' is pretty useless unless we help managers to answer the question: 'talent for what?' Organisations may be asking line managers to do several things here:

- Identify those individuals – usually a very small proportion of the whole workforce – who may have the potential and aspiration to reach very senior management levels and/or general management (in the sense of managing across functions). This

is what businesses often mean by 'high potential'. Sometimes 'high potential' is not so specific. For example managers looking at employees in early career may be able to spot people who seem much more able than average – but neither the individual nor the manager yet knows what career direction they may go in.

- Sometimes the role of 'talent spotter' is wider than potential for top jobs and 'talent' is defined in terms of promotability, that is the potential and aspiration to move up a level in the organisation – but maybe not reach the dizzying heights of senior management. Managers do need to be clear whether the organisation is interested in knowing who is promotable or is only interested in the 'high potential' few.
- If organisations really act on what they say about everyone having talent then line managers may often be helping employees to develop their potential in the same role or in a role at a similar level to their current job. This is really normal employee development, but of a future-oriented kind, looking beyond the current year and perhaps the current job. This is not difficult for managers to grasp as long as the core performance and development processes make it clear that development is for the future not just for the current year.
- When we ask managers to do succession planning for particular posts or kinds of posts, we are still asking managers to spot 'talent', but this time in terms of more specific potential often related to a function or role type not just a level, eg potential to do one of our senior professional roles in finance.

Although HR has got rather fixated on 'high potential', looking at 'promotability' and succession to a type of job are much easier for managers to work with. They can imagine the level or kind of job which is relevant to that person and think about whether they could really see them doing it.

HR can certainly help in talent spotting by providing managers with simple guidelines (eg for succession planning) and criteria, but also by helping line managers see how talent spotting relates to other everyday behaviours they need anyway including:

- Simply getting to know your people, how they work and what motivates them.
- Watching what they are good at doing and what they seem to enjoy.
- Noticing when they have started to outgrow their job or if a different kind of job would suit their abilities better.

It is interesting that this simple set of behaviours about getting to know staff and observing them carefully at work is a core part of effective leadership (Tamkin et al., 2010) and also emerged strongly in our work this year on how engaging managers develop their people (Marvell et al., 2014).

The line manager and career conversations

There is little point in identifying 'talent' or potential if the organisation does not know what someone wants to do in career terms. It is very dangerous for organisations to assume they know what individuals want career-wise without asking them.

The line manager has a role in helping individuals to surface their career aspirations and start to explore whether what they want to do might align with what the organisation may be able to offer them in terms of opportunities.

Career aspirations can be seen in terms of grade or level (how ambitious someone is for promotion) but also in terms of direction: what kind(s) of work are we thinking about here? Timing is a third key dimension of aspiration – when might a job move be desirable?

Personal factors greatly influence career aspirations, especially how an individual's career fits with their other commitments and how flexible they can be geographically.

It is realistic to ask line managers to open up a career dialogue with their people. The table below shows that career conversations cover a wide range of topics – much wider than seeking to assess 'talent' or 'potential'. Managers do need help from HR in understanding what an effective career conversation might look like. In particular, career conversations are really about helping individuals explore what they might want to do. This makes them much less organisation-focused than performance conversations, and also obviously much more future-looking.

Figure 1: Career conversations

Performance conversations	Career conversations
What do you need to prioritise?	What kinds of work do you want to be doing in future?
How well are you doing? (what and how)	Does this fit with how others see you?
What learning will help you do your current job better?	Work-life issues and choices
How will you access this?	Possible kinds of paths/moves & timing
What help do you need from me/ others?	Pros and cons of career options
	What skills/experience do you need to be a credible candidate for the kind of role you are considering?
	How will you develop this and what do you need from me/the business?

Individuals will often need to talk to a range of people about career issues. So it is the job of a manager to start those conversations, but not to finish them or feel it all rests on their shoulders.

HR should also not advise managers to cram this kind of conversation into the last ten minutes of a long and taxing appraisal discussion. Managers should agree with individuals what kind of a career conversation they want and whether more time needs to be fixed another day to explore this agenda in depth. Career issues come up when they come up, not just when the organisational calendar asks managers to have career conversations.

We also shoot ourselves in the foot if we call career conversations ‘difficult conversations’. Why would we want to do that when this is a potentially interesting and fulfilling part of the manager’s role?

HR’s role here is to help managers know what an effective career conversation may look like; help them practice; and to give individuals another place to go if they can’t talk to their boss easily or if they need to address deeper career issues.

The line manager as talent developer

The real bottom line of talent management is proactive skill and career development. This link is not always well made, even with very senior populations (IED, 2014). Talent development means starting to prepare people for work they are not doing yet but may be doing in future. That future can be just months away (if someone is nearly ready to apply for a promotion or job move) or several years away (if they need to widen or

deepen their experience considerably before a career transition). For employees likely to stay in the same job or a very similar one, development may still mean mastering new skills and knowledge as the business changes around them.

Some practical things line managers need to do here include:

- Facilitating development, but not assuming that they have to deliver it all themselves. For example, a technical expert may be much better at coaching someone in their professional skills than their own boss.
- Helping the individual access required work experiences. This may be about a job move, but can also be about finding opportunities within the current job role or through a secondment or assignment. Line managers may often need another manager or HR to help identify and access the right opportunities.
- Appropriate nomination of individuals for more formal opportunities, eg corporate talent programmes or talent pools, sponsored external qualifications etc. Line managers need to understand where these offers fit in and to put forward individuals for whom those interventions are timely and appropriate.

The line manager as collaborator in collective management activity

As already hinted above, we are mistaken if we make individual line managers feel that they are alone in seeking to identify and nurture the talent of their staff. The development of talent often needs input from other people: in spotting potential; widening career understanding; and facilitating development.

We all know people who are very good at making their managers think they are wonderful, but who appear very differently to others in the organisation. The converse is also true – people who are not very good at telling their boss how wonderful they are, but are obvious stars to others they work with inside the organisation.

We have known for many years that talent management benefits from collective management thought and action, usually by natural groups of peers looking at their teams together with their own manager. These collective discussions go under a wide variety of names: succession forums, talent reviews, people reviews etc. They provide an opportunity for managers to reach a shared view of individuals' potential and of succession plans, informed by the kind of career conversation highlighted above. Managers often need to act collectively to spot career opportunities across the organisation and to prioritise individuals they wish to send on corporate programmes.

This collective view informs wider workforce planning and resourcing strategy. Line managers also need to loop back to the individuals concerned to help them understand how the organisation sees them in a wider context.

It takes considerable discipline and maturity for managers to act collectively in this way, especially as each of them may at some point have to let their best people move on to work for someone else!

HR plays a vital role in this collective activity by orchestrating discussions and the flow of information and helping managers follow up agreed actions.

Positioning line managers to succeed

The role that line managers play in talent management is a subtle and thought-provoking one; but it does not need to be confusing or frustrating. As Peter Cheese has highlighted, HR needs to move away from communicating talent management as a set of procedures for managers to comply with (CIPD, 2014). We need to move towards working with managers themselves to develop relevant approaches to address real business and workforce issues. The shift from 'best practice' to 'best fit' is overdue in talent management, a highly context-specific aspect of people management (Campbell and Hirsh, 2013; Munro, 2014).

We also need to be more careful in thinking through what managers are well positioned to do for their own teams; what they need to do with other managers; and who supports the employee with information, advice and support in developing their own skills and career. Perhaps if we think more carefully about what the line manager can realistically deliver, then they will enjoy it more and do it better.

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To find out more about the ideas in this article or how IES can help, please contact:

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Participative Mini-Conference: Line Management 21 May 2015, London

The line manager is a crucial player: developer, coach, talent spotter, engager, motivator, performance manager, communicator, workforce planner, change agent. Much is expected of line managers, who represent the vital link between organisational priorities, and the translation of these intentions to actions on the ground. Yet managers themselves often feel overloaded by the combination of roles they are asked to perform and the operational targets they are required to meet. How can HR best support the line?

The mini-conference is an opportunity for you to network with your peers from other organisations, and benefit from IES's depth and breadth of expertise.

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