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How the Best Managers Identify and Develop Talent

by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Jonathan Kirschner

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Summary. Too many of us look for talent in the same old (wrong) places, or follow the popular trend of thinking the “best hire” is the “best culture fit.” These approaches undermine efforts to boost diversity (demographically and cognitively) and ultimately hinder creativity and innovation. While there is no one “best” way to hire talent, there certainly are better approaches than those we have relied on in the past. Researchers have outlined seven science-based recommendations to help managers update their hiring tactics, and develop their talent management skills along the way: think ahead, focus on the right traits, be data-driven, hire internally, be inclusive, consider who will add the most to your team as a unit, and never stop trying to make people better. [close](#)

Great managers are typically experts in their fields with a strong performance history and an interest in being in charge. But to lead effectively they need to develop another skill, one that is often overlooked: talent management.

The ability to see talent before others see it (internally and externally), unlock human potential, and find not just the best employee for each role, but also the best role for each employee, is crucial to running a topnotch team. In short, great managers are also great talent agents.

But becoming a great talent agent is not always easy. It requires us as leaders to be more open minded and to throw away outdated, albeit popular, hiring tactics. Too many of us look for talent in the same old (wrong) places, or follow the popular trend of thinking

the “best hire” is the “best culture fit.” These approaches undermine efforts to boost diversity (demographically and cognitively) and ultimately hinder creativity and innovation.

While there is no one “best” way to hire talent, there certainly are better approaches than those we have relied on in the past. After carefully scrutinizing the performance of what makes a competent and incompetent boss, my colleagues and I have outlined seven science-based recommendations to help you update your hiring tactics, and develop your talent management skills along the way.

1) Think ahead.

Oddly, prospective employees are often asked during job interviews what their five-year career aspirations are or where they see themselves in five years; yet few managers ask themselves what their five-year talent strategy is. Most leaders know what kind of talent they are looking for in the moment, but far fewer think ahead to figure out whether or not their new hire has skills that align with their long-term strategy. If you know where you want to go, focus your efforts on hiring someone with the skills, abilities, and expertise you will need to move forward. Don't assume everyone you have today will stay. You must simultaneously play the long game while executing your shorter term goals.

2) Focus on the right traits.

The two biggest mistakes managers make when they evaluate other people's talents are: focusing too much on their past performance (even when they lack reliable metrics) and overrating the importance of their resume, hard skills, and technical expertise. The World Economic Forum predicts that 65% of today's jobs will no longer be around in 15 years. This means that leaders cannot place too much emphasis on the current educational curriculum, which is primarily designed to prepare people for present, rather than future, jobs. While we may not be able to guess what those jobs will be, it is clear that people will be more equipped to do them if they have certain soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, drive, and learnability. They are the foundational traits that determine new skill and knowledge acquisition. Moreover, these foundational aspects of talent are likely to become even more important with the rise of AI.

3) Don't go outside when you can stay inside.

Firms often hire externally when they could source better talent from within. Scientific reviews show that external hires will take longer to adapt and have higher rates of voluntary and involuntary exits — yet, they are generally paid more than internal candidates. That's why it's valuable to look for talent internally before you search outside your organization. Internal hires tend to have higher levels of adaptation and success rates than external hires, not least because they are better able to understand the culture and navigate the politics of the

organization. They are also more likely to be loyal and committed to their company. Further, promoting internal candidates boosts other employees' engagement.

4) Think inclusively.

Most managers have a tendency to hire people who remind them of themselves. This tendency harms diversity and inhibits team performance. When we hire people just like us, we reduce the probability of creating teams with complementary skillsets, those with different and even opposite profiles. The only way to think about talent inclusively is to embrace people who are different from you and others already on your team. But we suggest you take it a step further and celebrate people who challenge traditional norms. The engine of progress is change, and change is unlikely to happen if you only hire people who perpetuate the status quo. We all know that companies with a diverse talent pipeline tend to have better financial results.

5) Be data-driven.

Every human — managers are no exception — makes bad decisions from time to time. But very few are interested in acknowledging this, which is why hiring biases are often so pervasive. In fact, research shows that hiring managers would rather inflate performance ratings than admit they hired the wrong person. Those of us in positions of power, therefore, need to be extra self-critical and test the outcomes of our decisions. For

instance, when you hire someone, outline clear performance goals that can be easily evaluated by others, and see whether your view of their performance aligns with what others think and see. Likewise, before you nominate someone as a high-potential employee, arm yourself with solid data and evidence to ensure that your decision is fair and sensible, even if the future proves you wrong. Talent identification is an ongoing process of trial and error, and the point is not to get it right, but to find better ways of being wrong.

6) Think plural rather than singular.

We live in a world that often glorifies individualism and bemoans collectivity. However, almost everything of value that has ever been produced is the result of a collective human effort — people with different backgrounds coming together to turn their unique talents into a high performing synergy. Thus when you think about your talent pipeline, focus less on individuals and more on the configuration of your team: will people work together well, are they likely to complement each other, and do their functional and psychological roles align with what the team needs? On great teams, each individual is like an indispensable organ in charge of executing a specific function, making each part different from others, and the system greater than the sum of its units. Talent agents know that for teams to be successful, the individuals on them must embrace a “we before I” attitude.

7) Make people better.

Great managers recognize potential where others don't — and so do great talent agents. No matter how skilled your employees may be, you still need to help them grow in new ways. No matter how much an employee is struggling, you are responsible for attempting to help them find their footing. As professors Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular recently noted, “The role of the manager, in short, is becoming that of a coach.” This means mastering the art of giving critical feedback, including the ability to have difficult conversations and address poor performance. It also means predicting your future talent needs so that you can stay ahead of the demand and have people on your team remain relevant, valuable assets for years to come. As our ManpowerGroup research surveying nearly 40,000 organizations across 43 countries shows, almost one in two employers report that they just cannot find the skills they need, which suggests that their talent planning strategies are not effective enough.

In sum, being a great manager is, in large part, about being an expert in talent matters. Fortunately, there is a well-established science of talent management, grounded on decades of industrial-organizational and management research. But unless you know how to apply it, this science is useless. And the most important part of this process is to never stop thinking about your employees' potential and talent. No other factor is likely to make such a big difference when it comes to building a high performing team.

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic is the Chief Innovation Officer at ManpowerGroup, a professor of business psychology at University College London and at Columbia University, co-founder of deepersignals.com, and an associate at Harvard's Entrepreneurial Finance Lab. He is the author of *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? (and How to Fix It)*, upon which his TEDx talk was based. His latest book is *I, Human: AI, Automation, and the Quest to Reclaim What Makes Us Unique*. Find him at www.drctomas.com.

✕ @drctcp

Jonathan Kirschner is a business psychologist and the founder and CEO of AIIR Consulting, a global leadership development and coaching technology firm dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and performance of leaders and their organizations by deploying science-based talent development solutions.

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