Chapter 20

Developing Top Talent: Guiding Principles, Methodology, and Practice Considerations

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Two catalytic experiences significantly influenced my beliefs and practices regarding the development of top talent.[1] One occurred in the mid-1980s with a global manufacturer of chemical and electronic materials and will be discussed later in this chapter with a view toward conveying potential best practices as related to top talent development. These potential best practices will be considered through the guiding principles, methodology, and practices considerations that drove this work. The other catalytic event occurred in the early 1990s with a global pharmaceutical company. The chapter begins with this experience—one that provides clues about the possible traps to avoid in top talent development initiatives.

Catalytic Experience 1

In this experience, I was one of a cadre of external consultants involved in a leadership development program focused on a company's top 400 high-potential managers. In the full-day orientation to the program, we were briefed on the design that placed multi-rater feedback as its core element. These were early days of the data-gathering tool now known as "360 feedback," so considerable time was spent on the leadership competencies as well as on the electronic data-gathering process—also innovative at the time (Bass 1995). Participants represented every global sector; and given some lingering concern about confidentiality, a significant number of them had requested external feedback consultants. Another concern, raised by company HR professionals based in Asia about the difficulties associated with getting meaningful multi-rater feedback from Asians, went unanswered.

Regarding action planning, the expectation was that participants were all smart enough to complete their own development planning. Within a year or so, this initiative was abandoned. A former HR professional of the company confirmed the reason: Talent development initiatives cannot maintain traction or credibility absent action planning and follow-up. Such initiatives must also be connected to a company's broader talent development strategy.

Catalytic Experience 2

The second catalytic experience was significantly more influential in that it involved one of the longest continuous top talent development initiatives in a global organization, Rohm and Haas Company (now Dow). For nearly 25 years, I worked in close collaboration with the CEO and other C-suite executives, particularly the leader of the HR function, to ensure the development of its top 70 senior executives and high-potential managers (top 5 percent of the company).

In 1985 the then-Chairman of Rohm and Haas Company Larry Wilson concluded that the growth of his company necessitated the focused development of top business and functional leaders. He needed leaders who were more globally minded, entrepreneurial, and market-facing, and who would drive business growth faster. Wilson charged his Corporate Head of Human Resources, Mark Feck, to design and implement an initiative that would deliver on this objective.

After a series of discussions about competencies, Wilson determined the initial set[2] and Leadership 2000[3] was launched in 1986. In brief, this was conceived as a top talent development *process*—not a program. The four phases of this process will be described under "Methodology" later in the chapter.

Guiding Principles

See Table 20-1.

CEO makes business case for top talent development/internal-internal partnership
Conveyance of executive wisdom
Internal-external partnership—holistic approach
Fostering trust—maintaining boundaries of confidentiality

Table 20-1 Developing Top Talent—4 Guiding Principles

CEO Makes Business Case for Top Talent Development/ Internal-Internal Partnership

High-impact top talent development work evolves best when initiated by a CEO who makes the business case for its necessity. Such efforts can also be initiated by a senior HR professional who provides the business rationale and enjoys a collaborative relationship with the CEO. Ideally, the CEO is maintained as an overt champion of the initiative and along with other C-suite executives actively participates in the work. Further, such initiatives take hold and thrive in the presence of a strong strategic (internal-internal) partnership between the CEO and senior HR officer who is a member of the CEO's leadership team.

Conveyance of Executive Wisdom

The ongoing engagement of the CEO and other C-suite executives in rigorous and thorough follow-up phases ensures the necessary motivation and commitment of all involved. *Leadership 3000* participants wanted to "show well," and senior executives wanted to convey their lessons learned in ways that would accelerate business success. Often these lessons involved the less obvious tactics, interpersonal dynamics, and grittier "political" aspects of effective leadership in a global business world in which factors like customer intimacy were assuming greater importance (Wiersema 1998). Further, the candor that typified action planning and follow-up meetings gave C-suite executives a closer look at top talent individuals, and often ignited unexpected possibilities such as ex-pat assignments or function-to-business management role rotations.

Internal-External Partnership—Insight-Oriented/Holistic Approach

Feck believed there was a talent pool "waiting to be released." He also believed Wilson's objective was steep given potential barriers, most specifically what was commonly referred to as "Rohm and Haas polite." This culture factor, coupled with his desire to give participants an insight-oriented and holistic experience, influenced his choice of me, a clinically trained consultant, as his design and implementation partner. In Feck's words, "We need to go inside-out. We need to assess the whole person, not just one's profile of leadership competencies. We need to have real relationships with these people, and they need to know themselves and understand what influences their behavior in good times and bad. Their accurate self-awareness is essential for continued learning and personal growth. Continued learning and personal growth are essential for the development of world-class leaders" (Wasylyshyn 2003, p. 322). This interdisciplinary (business, HR, and psychology) partnership ensured the project's holistic and insight-oriented intent. Equally important, it helped to maintain a focus on business priorities and to link me with other key HR stakeholders in the organization.

Fostering Trust

Fostering trust that was grounded in clear boundaries of confidentiality was another—and perhaps overarching—guiding principle of *Leadership 3000*. This was accomplished in numerous ways, commencing with the invitation to participants that stressed its *developmental* (versus evaluative) intent. This meant that each *Leadership 3000* participant was considered the "client," the company was the "sponsor," and each client owned her or his data (Tobias 1990). Through the action-planning and follow-up phases, the sponsor received detailed information about participants' strengths and development areas, but this was quite different from their having access to actual psychometric and/or multi-rater data. Surely it was appropriate for Feck to weigh in on key personnel decisions involving these participants, but he did so in a manner consistent with his HR role versus *Leadership 3000* process owner.[4] Finally, I was never asked—or expected—to "vote" on candidates as related to C-suite succession planning activities.

Methodology

See Table 20-2.

Identification of participants
Four-phase model
Multifaceted data gathering
Synthesized feedback
Comprehensive action planning and follow-up
Optional spousal module
Fostering "total brain leadership"

Table 20-2 Developing Top Talent: Methodology Factors

Identification of *Leadership 3000* Participants

Participants in *Leadership 3000* were identified through an annual talent review process that included the specification of activities that would yield rapid developmental mileage. For top talent, this meant nomination into *Leadership 3000*. This linkage between the company's overall talent management strategy and the specialized *Leadership 3000* development process was key in socializing its purpose and place in the array of human resource development activities.

While there was a concern at the outset about fostering a "crown prince/princess" dynamic ultimately, the retention benefit of sending the "top talent" message far outweighed any adverse effects. Further, this process was also used in the onboarding of newly hired C-suite executives. In this instance, multi-rater feedback was gathered after the individual had been in role for several months. Initial feedback to these executives focused on the company culture norms, the individual's behavioral preferences, and opportunities for leveraging quick "wins," as well as avoiding early faux pas.

Four-Phase Model

The *Leadership 3000* four-phase model consisted of data gathering, feedback, action planning, and follow-up. On the surface this appears similar to other insight-oriented leadership development methodology (Kilburg 2004), but there were two notable differences. The first was the ongoing engagement of the CEO and other C-suite executives in the action-planning and follow-up phases, as described above under "Guiding Principles." The second was the optional Spousal Module. More will be said below about this uncommon development tool.

Multifaceted Data Gathering

Given the holistic principle of *Leadership 3000*, its data-gathering phase was multifaceted and began with gathering a full life-history. Core life themes were then integrated with the psychometric data in an attempt to provide participants with deeper insights about their motivations, aspirations, behavioral preferences, and quality of both personal and work-related relationships—particularly as related to leadership style.

A broad array of psychometric tools[5]—appropriate for use in the workplace—were used to engage participants rapidly and to cause relevant leadership information to surface. On an optional basis a projective technique, the Rorschach, was also included in an effort to provide participants with even deeper insights about their personalities (de Villemor-Amaral 2007). Of note, given the confidential nature of all testing data and the innate curiosity of these high-potential individuals, every participant elected to include the Rorschach. Feedback discussion of deeper issues such as the individual's potential for transference reactions,[6] behavioral hot buttons, and points of particular vulnerability often provided breakthrough insights.

In addition to the company competencies, a set of Essential Leadership Behaviors[7] provided the basis for the multi-rater data gathering. This information was gathered face-to-face initially and then electronically with follow-up conversations to ensure full understanding of each rater's input, as well as of pertinent contextual factors.

Synthesized Feedback

The goal of two lengthy feedback sessions (one for the psychometric data and one for the organization-based multi-rater data) was to synthesize all the information and identify both strengths to leverage and development needs. In the last wave of *Leadership 3000* (2000–2008), participants' most frequently occurring strengths were bias for action, strategic focus, creative thinking, business acumen, and courageous leadership. In this same population the most frequently occurring development needs were emotional fortitude, persuasion and influence, developing people, courageous leadership, and strategic focus.[8]

Comprehensive Action Planning and Follow-up

Participants prepared a *preliminary action plan (PAP)* based on their strengths and development needs. This document provided the basis for the action planning meeting that would be attended by members of her/his development "brain trust."[9] Participants then integrated meeting content into what became the *Master Action Plan (MAP)*. Participants' MAPs, consisted of specific actions and included timelines for progress. While they could include familiar development vehicles such as business school executive education programs, job rotations, task force assignments, short-term mentoring, and executive coaching, they were also distinguished by the pursuit of "lessons learned" (conveyance of executive wisdom) as provided by C-suite members.

Regarding the essential leadership behaviors, *emotional fortitude,*[10]. emerged as a particular development need. As top talent, they represented what I saw in other companies: unilateral cognitive strength (IQ) but less strong in terms of emotional intelligence (EQ).[11] Through *Leadership 3000* participants focused on the development of "total brain leadership"—that is, the integration of left and right brain functioning. In a global business climate, right-brain capabilities particularly as related to cultural understanding and other relationship challenges need to be on a par with left-brain analytical and problem-solving strengths (Wasylyshyn 2008).

In the words of former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, "No doubt emotional intelligence is more rare than book smarts, but my experience says it is actually more important in the making of a leader. You just can't ignore it" (2004, p. A14).

Numerous researchers emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence as a fundamental leadership competency (Goldman 1998; Goldman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002; Brienza and Cavallo 2005). Further, ongoing research in this realm of leadership has produced the construct of social intelligence. Goleman and Boyatzis wrote, "The salient discovery is that certain things leaders do—specifically, exhibit empathy and become attuned to others' moods—literally affect both their own brain chemistry and that of their followers" (2008, p. 2).

And from the C-suite, we hear the all-encompassing importance of this leadership dimension captured in a comment from Haemonetics CEO Brian Concannon, "Leadership is about connecting the longest distance in the world—the one between the head and the heart"[12] (personal communication, 2005).

Regarding the *Leadership 3000* follow-up phase, all members of a participant's development brain trust attended a mandatory MAP review meeting approximately eight to nine months after the action planning meeting. This gave participants sufficient "real world practice" time to work their MAPs (Hicks and Peterson 1999). For this meeting, participants provided annotated versions of their MAPs to indicate progress made and/or the need for additional guidance.

Optional Spousal Module

The optional Spousal Module was designed in response to the holistic intent of *Leadership 3000*. It was grounded in the following rationale: top talent individuals do not usually seek assistance with personal issues, however difficult they may be. Giving them a confidential opportunity to explore and, in some instances, to assist in resolving marital or other family issues in a constructive and problem-solving manner could help reduce personal distractions, thus fostering greater focus on work.

For those who included this optional component in their *Leadership 3000*, I gathered data from each partner using a customized interview protocol. A subsequent three-way planning meeting focused on a broad array of personal issues, as well as work-related concerns including the stress of ex-pat assignments, repatriation, dual careers, and chronic work-family integration[13] issues.

Practice Considerations

See Table 20-3.

Commitment to one program/one external partner over time
Positioning the initiative as a "pilot"
Fierce truth-telling
Relationship-based commitment—meeting participants where they need to be met

Table 20-3 Top Talent Development: Practice Considerations

Commitment to One Development Model and One External Partner

The importance of Rohm and Haas's commitment to *one* leadership development model for its top talent, as well as its 24-year partnership with the same external consultant, enabled the company to leverage numerous longitudinal effects. These effects included (1) participants' accelerated preparedness for bigger roles, the building of a new business platform, and expansion into Asia; (2) the establishment of a clear and sustained set of leadership competencies for top talent; (3) a clear semantic regarding the behavioral norms as related to leadership effectiveness; (4) the culture and C-suite relationship "archeology" I could bring to each new *Leadership 3000* participant; and (5) and an unexpected top talent *retention* benefit. (More will be said about this under "Relationship-Based Commitment" later in the chapter.).

Positioning the Program as a "Pilot"

The decision to position *Leadership 3000* as a "pilot" had effects beyond the obvious grace period for identifying constructive changes.[14] Given the absence of a major program rollout, outcome expectations were managed, and concerns about costs were minimized. By choosing the potential best "ambassadors" for the initial "pilot" group, participants themselves established the credibility of the process.

Further, since the first wave of participants included top talent from regions other than North America, there was time to fine-tune the methodology and create a viable long-distance approach for future non-U.S. participants. For example, American and Asian HR professionals based in Asia were enlisted as feedback resources for competency-based data gathering versus holding the expectation that direct reports or even the peers of Asian top talent participants would be comfortable enough to provide candid feedback

Fierce Truth-Telling

It is only in recent years that the leadership clarion call for transparency has helped break through business culture totems, turf struggles, unproductive competitive dynamics, and the silo mentality that can block honest performance feedback and candor generally (Olegario 2006). *Leadership 3000* tackled this potential barrier by (1) using the multifaceted data-gathering phase to illuminate inescapable development themes, (2) holding firm on the guiding principle of data confidentiality, and (3) leveraging the trusting relationships that formed between participants and both the internal (HR) and external (myself) members of their *Leadership 3000* brain trust. It would appear that the fierce truth-telling that characterized this work chipped away at the "Rohm and Haas polite" dynamic.[15] Specifically, in the early days of the Dow acquisition (2009), Dow executives described Rohm and Haas top talent as "considerably more aggressive and direct" as compared to their Dow peers.

Relationship-Based Commitment: Meeting Participants Where They Need to be Met

In the first catalytic experience cited above there were two fundamental problems with the program developers' contention that participants should be smart enough to craft their own development plans. First, sound development action planning is not about being smart. In fact, we know that for smart people developmental learning can be difficult due to their tendency for defensive reasoning (Argyris 1991). Second, objective and targeted action planning is not easy—hence, the just-in-time, step-wise collaboration between participants and consultant in framing good PAPs and MAPs.

More importantly, from an authentic, relationship-based perspective, was the immediate assistance participants received in the wake of difficult, sudden life events such as accidents, deaths, and illnesses. For example, a French participant was provided a bilingual bereavement counselor when his father died.

The consideration of love—that is, the place of affiliative love in top talent development—is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, meeting *Leadership 3000* participants where *they needed to be met* involved many acts of attunement and committed caring that could be considered a way of loving. It is possible then that on a deeper, psychodynamic level such caring and/or loving was part of the "glue" in these close, development-oriented relationships.

Of particular note was the unexpected top talent retention benefit of *Leadership 3000*. Participants were often contacted by executive recruiters luring them with opportunities that were both appealing and anxiety-provoking. In the safety and candor of *Leadership 3000* brain trust relationships, they were helped to weigh the pros and cons of outside roles objectively. In nearly 25 years, the company only lost three of its Superkeepers™.

Implications for the Future

Was *Leadership 3000* successful in developing top talent at Rohm and Haas Company? This will be impossible to assess fully in light of its purchase by Dow. However, in the wake of the purchase, Rohm and Haas CEO Raj Gupta wrote, ". . . *Leadership 3000* resulted in the development of a highly diverse group of global leaders and ensured a smooth leadership transition at the CEO level. Further it helped deepen the self-confidence and preparedness of key business leaders who drove two of the company's boldest initiatives—the building of its Electronic Materials business and its presence in Asia" (Gupta and Wasylyshyn 2009, p. 37).

An assessment of over half of the *Leadership 3000* participants conducted by an outside evaluator hired by Dow found them to be "significantly above the industry benchmark" especially in terms of customer and marketplace focus. While these assessments of success cannot substitute for empirically based research, they are nevertheless positive indications of the potential value of a CEO-sponsored, insight-oriented, holistic development process delivered over an extended time (Gupta and Wasylyshyn 2009, p. 37).

Further, beyond the impact such a process can have for the development of top talent, there are potential systemic effects with implications for building vibrant learning and success-oriented cultures. Bennis (1999) in summarizing his research on a number of global companies that had invested in leadership development initiatives concluded, ". . . leadership development programs have made significant influence on the culture of organizations. The shift in culture may have eased an important organization transition, helped anticipate pressures of globalization, or toughened an organization to compete" (p. xviii).

Conclusion

Turning to the future there are global economic, technological, environmental, political, ethical, and societal forces that will test the stamina and talents of even the best business leaders. The psychological effects of the unknown, relentless change, and continued threats of terrorism will further intensify their leadership challenges. They will also have to create new models of working in order to corral an increasingly nomadic workforce and to compensate for a general lack of local talent. Therefore, in the face of these and other issues yet to come, whatever companies are doing now to develop top talent will need to be bolder and faster to fully equip business leaders for the rest of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. In this chapter, the term "top talent" refers to those already successful business managers and/or functional leaders who are capable of handling assignments of greater scope and responsibility and who may also become candidates for C-suite roles.
2. The initial competencies were (1) ability to earn trust and support among superiors, colleagues and subordinates, (2) ability to form a realistic vision for the organization, (3) ability to communicate vision and inspire commitment/quality performance, (4) toughness and drive to overcome obstacles, (5) ability to size up opportunities/ problems and take effective action, and (6) managerial and administrative competence. Several years later these were revised to (1) market-aware & customer-driven, (2) strategic focus, (3) global perspective, (4) bias for action, (5) adaptive to change,

(6) creative problem solving, (7) professional credibility, (8) business acumen, (9) persuasion and influence, (10) safety and performance, (11) people and performance management, and (12) interpersonal effectiveness.

3. This top talent development program was initially named Leadership 2000. Given its sustained value and credibility, in the year 2000, Wilson's successor, CEO, Raj Gupta, renamed it *Leadership 3000*. In the remainder of this article, it will be referred to as *Leadership 3000*.
4. Since Feck's death in 2000, I have worked with three other corporate HR heads building on the original intention of *Leadership 3000* and preserving its guiding principles, methodological rigor, and practice commitments.
5. The psychometric battery used for *Leadership 3000* included the following; Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, Life Styles Inventory 1, Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R), BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQi), Rorschach, Hermann Brain Dominance, Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey, and PRF-Form E as well as the participant's life history.
6. A "transference reaction" is a psychological phenomenon whereby emotions related to past experiences (often repressed childhood events) are triggered—a deep emotional nerve is struck, and an individual transfers those past feelings onto someone in the present. Often the personal insight that a particular person may be eliciting a transference reaction can be helpful in understanding and adjusting a difficult work-related relationship—particularly with peers and authority figures.
7. The Rohm and Haas Essential Leadership Behaviors consisted of courageous leadership, emotional fortitude, enterprise thinking, pragmatic optimism, steel trap accountability, truth-telling, and tough on talent.
8. Courageous leadership and strategic focus were either a strength or a weakness for participants. Therefore, short-term peer mentoring was a common action step, i.e., linking individuals with others who were strong where they were not.
9. The *Leadership 3000* "brain trust" of every participant consisted of his or her boss, the CEO or another C-suite executive, the corporate head of HR, and the external consultant who facilitated the action-planning and follow-up meetings. Since there was no ceiling placed on access to members of one's development brain trust, participants could call on them for years thereafter, as well as through the four phases of the *Leadership 3000* process. Often these relationships continued for years, and I became a "trusted advisor" to many.
10. This Essential Leadership Behavior was defined as: the ability to use self-awareness (of strengths and weaknesses), self-management (focus, discipline, tact, and diplomacy), attunement (empathic understanding of others), and relationship-building skills (relating to people in ways that are deeper than transactional need) to drive business results. Emotional resilience (can deal well with ambiguity, crises, and adversity in all forms). Stays cool under pressure.
11. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is defined as the awareness of one's own and others' emotions and the ability to discriminate among them, and the ability to use that emotional awareness to achieve work and personal objectives. Emotional intelligence consists of four dimensions—self observation, self management, attunement to others, and relationship-building.

12. A graduate of the United States Military Academy, Concannon became president and CEO of Haemonetics Corporation, the global leader in blood management solutions, in 2006. This comment was made in a conversation we had that spanned a number of leadership considerations.
13. I use the more apt term "work-family integration" instead of the popular "work-family balance" terminology. For top talent individuals, work-family balance—if considered literally as a balance between the two domains of work and family—is an impossible objective to achieve. On the other hand, everyone should strive to find his or her version of work-family integration.
14. *Leadership 3000* maintained its "pilot" status for approximately five years when CEO Wilson acknowledged its success, and it then became integrated into annual talent review discussions and targeted development actions for top talent.
15. It was in the course of this top talent development work that I acquired the professional nickname, "The Velvet Harpoon."