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Interpersonal Skills and People Management: Actually, There's More

by Eli Amdur

Career coach and adjunct professor of executive communication and leadership, Eli Amdur reaches for great ideas from non-business leaders, Abraham Maslow, Albert Einstein, Yogi Berra, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and more—and applies them to prepotent business issues of people management, interpersonal skills and talent development. Leaders who understand these lessons—understand them in a large context—will lead their organizations to success. What is that larger context? And why must we all consider ourselves leaders?

“**P**roper management of the work lives of human beings, of the way in which they earn their living, can improve the world and in this sense be a utopian or revolutionary technique.”

Who but Abraham Maslow, the father of modern humanism, could provide that overarching idea, that larger context in which we must rethink our roles as managers—better, as leaders—of people? When we take on all these prepotent (to use Maslow's own word) issues—soft skills, interpersonal skills, team building, motivation, synergy and more—we would be wise to view them in Maslow's framework.

Enlightened leadership

Over 60 years ago, Maslow was already teaching us about “enlightened management,” way ahead of his time. As a historic footnote, I am certain that, were he alive today, he would be talking about “enlightened leadership,” because the term “leadership” is so relatively new.

Actually, the word “leader” first appeared in the English lexicon about the year 1300 A.D., and it had a very flat definition: the first person on a journey. At a time when English was (a) just starting to develop into what would become the world's dominant language, and (b) strongly influenced by the impact of the Crusades, it is easy to understand this definition.

It wasn't until around 1800, half a millennium later, that the word “leadership” appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary, and the reason is not a coincidence. Think about that time. On one side of the Atlantic Ocean was arguably the greatest collection of leaders in one place at one time in the history of humankind: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, Adams and Paine. Across the sea, there was Lafayette and there was Napoleon.

Two great revolutions were inextricably linked, and then there was the Industrial Revolution. And so, from government, politics, diplomacy, industry and invention was born the concept of—indeed, the very word —“leadership.”

It was not until well into the 20th century, though, that we started to explore leadership by asking questions like, “If there is such a thing as leadership, what then, are leaders' issues, styles, approaches and skills?” So while Maslow talked about enlightened management, now we must think in terms of enlightened leadership. He certainly would have.

OK, enough history.

Maslow advised that we could and should assume that all our people have the impulse to achieve; that everyone prefers to be a prime mover rather than a passive helper; that everyone wants to feel important, needed, useful, successful, proud and respected; and that people have a tendency to improve—and are improvable. That, then, is the context. We are all leaders and need to develop our teams and ourselves as such.

The illiterate of the 21st century

In his classic book, *Future Shock*, futurist Alvin Toffler warned, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.” What we have only begun to unlearn is that reliance solely on technical skills is a formula for failure. Have we begun to deal with the all-important soft skills? Yes. Have we begun to emphasize them, nurture

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them, develop them? Yes. But have we really redefined and rethought these issues? Have we really relearned? No, not yet.

Getting back to Maslow's context, as enlightened leaders, I submit there is a higher level at which we must address these issues: talent. Skills are the trees; talent is the forest.

Talent management—a key corporate strategy

A funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century; corporate leaders discovered the idea of talent management. In its summer 2004 newsletter, The Conference Board, referencing its recent study of 75 HR executives, says, "Talent management, a relatively new and increasingly popular human resources area, is becoming a major part of corporate strategy."

Relatively new, indeed! That, in essence, is the point. As Albert Einstein told us, "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." We are only beginning to reach the levels of thinking that will redefine how we develop our businesses, our very occupations. But here's the rub. There is no agreement on what talent really is, no unilateral definition, no axis points, no profile. But as more than one executive has told me, "I know it when I see it."

"You can observe a lot just by watching"

There are a lot of good reasons we all love Yogi Berra. But Berra was not the first to assign value to the process of observation. Swiss child psychologist, Jean Piaget, who developed a huge body of knowledge simply by observing his three children, influenced the fields of psychology, sociology, education, epistemology, economics and law. It is only logical, then, that we use the same technique to develop an understanding of or a description of talent, rather than to try to construct a strict definition of it. And that's exactly what's going on.

Most executives I have surveyed begin the discussion on talent with one of these words: potential, capacity, capability, aptitude and ability. See the point? Not a measurable entity in the lot. But they know it when they see it.

So where, I ask, do all those skills come in to play? And what, you might now ask, is my point about all this?

Talent or experience?

"I'd rather have a lot of talent and a little experience rather than a lot of experience and a little talent," explained John Wooden. With that, the "Wizard of Westwood," indisputably the greatest coach in any sport, let alone basketball, led UCLA in the 1960s and 1970s to unprecedented—and still unmatched—team success. He recruited talent; he developed the experience. Make no mistake; Wooden considered skills important. They were at the very center of the 14 building blocks in his "Pyramid of Success," the road to competitive greatness. Wooden got it 40 years ago; we're just getting around to getting it now.

Assessing others—be careful!

The overarching lesson is that, to reach competitive greatness, a leader's obligation is to develop talent by doing two things. The very first responsibility is to make a clear distinction between what someone has done and what that person possibly can do. "We judge ourselves by what we're capable of doing, but others judge us only by what we've done," said Henry Wadsworth Longfellow over a century and a half ago. From America's most beloved poet, from days long past, comes a great business lesson for the 21st century: look for potential, capacity, capability, aptitude and ability.

The leader's second responsibility, it follows, is to facilitate the development of that talent. Make it happen, in other words.

Neither is easy. Recognizing talent and then doing something with it are both formidable challenges. The first requires some innate talent of your own; recognizing talent is a talent itself. You can draw up guidelines, such as looking at performance and inductively deciding what talent(s) that person has that led to that performance, but at the end of the day, you either will spot talent or you won't. The second responsibility, however, can be mapped with more certainty.

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Victorious warriors

How do we become competitive? How do we win? Sun Tzu, a Chinese military strategist in the fourth century B.C. said, “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war and then seek to win.”

Permit me to inject a thought of my own, and then we’ll get back to Sun Tzu. I believe there are eight drivers of talent development: vision, organization, leadership, selection, inclusion, parallels, alignment and communication. An enlightened leader should be comfortable answering questions about each of these drivers:

- **Vision**—How clear is yours? Can your employees articulate it?
- **Organization**—Is your organization structured to accomplish its goals?
- **Leadership**—Are you developing today’s leaders? Tomorrow’s?
- **Selection**—Do you have not only the right people for the jobs, but the best?
- **Inclusion**—Are your people empowered to carry out the mission?
- **Parallels**—Are the organization’s goals parallel with those of its people?
- **Alignment**—Are you, and all parts of the organization, moving at the same speed?
- **Communication**—Is it encouraged? Is it active? Is it 360°? Do you do it well?

Embedded deep within these drivers is a commitment to the development of those soft skills, those interpersonal skills we keep talking about: communication, persuasion, influence, negotiation, relationship building, team building, creating synergy, delivering training, fostering diversity, mentoring, managing change, recruiting, motivation, creativity.

As a business leader today, Sun Tzu would put in place all those strategies, resources and programs his talented people need. He would, for example, ensure that all his people share his reason for being part of the organization. He would create a robust learning organization with a strong knowledge management function because it’s not just what you know, it’s what you do with what you know. He would develop leaders to succeed him. And so on.

But the fundamental reason Sun Tzu would do all this would be his enlightened understanding that the greatest asset an organization has, after all is said and done, is talent. Develop talent, and you develop the continuous ability to grow, to compete and to succeed. Talent is the only asset that change does not overtake. Sooner or later, change will overtake products, services, technology, structure, systems and processes. It will not, because it cannot, overtake talent.

Past, present and future

“Let the path be open to talent,” demanded Napoleon 200 years ago.

And the good Professor Einstein taught us, “The distinction between past, present and future is only a stubborn, persistent illusion.” The enlightened view, the view of the future, emphasizes interpersonal skills, soft skills, business savvy skills—in short, talent. Finally, leaders are shaking off that stubborn, persistent illusion.

At the end of the last century, *Life* magazine, in a special issue, named Bob Dylan as one of the 100 most influential Americans of the 20th century, and said of him, “Dylan knew what we all know; he just knew it sooner.” So what did Dylan know? What did he say?

*The line it is drawn the curse it is cast
The slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin’.
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin’.*

Get it? □

**Develop talent,
and you develop
the continuous
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