

The Talent Advantages: Winning the War for Talent in a Dismal Economy

By Nancy MacKay, Ph.D

Attracting, retaining and developing talented employees are challenges facing every organization. According to CEO guru Jack Welch in his book, *Winning*, hiring and keeping the right people even one-third of the time is well above the average. That's a scary statistic when you consider the cost of losing and replacing your best people.

What's a leader to do? Many make HR responsible for developing and executing the company retention strategy. Trouble is, this rarely works because HR's influence throughout the organization is limited.

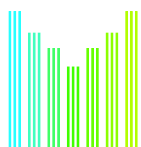
Other companies lack explicit accountability for top talent. If it's not in anyone's job description or performance review, don't expect to see anyone caring much about searching out, developing and looking after your best employees.

Another common omission is not knowing which jobs are the most strategic in terms of leadership development and retention. Your talent-management strategy will lack appropriate focus and effectiveness if you don't know which positions are the most critical to your organization.

Top talent is your greatest source of competitive advantage. Every CEO, often guided by a savvy HR professional, needs to have strategies to attract, retain and develop the best and brightest in order to win the war for talent and accelerate business results –especially in a dismal economy.

Here are six tips for creating people practices that provide the edge in the talent pool.

Create a leadership style that builds trust and candor. Great people are inspired by great leaders and great leaders are honest and trustworthy. Know the potential successors to all direct reports and make positive connections as frequently as possible. Too often leaders kill trust and candor by being judgmental and more concerned with looking good than acknowledging others. Being a control freak or, on the flip side, avoiding control or blaming others is a sure way to turn off your talented employees.



Create accountability for talent creation and retention down the line. Identifying and retaining your best employees should be within the mandate of your entire management team (in fact, all your HR strategies should be well integrated throughout the organization). Remember, you get what you measure. Hold people accountable for hiring well and for succession plan execution. Integrate your plan with your corporate strategy and evaluate quarterly.

Marry career development and succession planning. For many reasons, a lot of executives keep “the list” of key employees a secret, but this is a mistake. Make sure that your top talent know who they are and then work with them to develop their careers. Invest more heavily in the growth of top talent and extraordinary leadership, not in remedial work, for the greatest return. Strive for 50% ready now to speed up strategy execution.

Become the leading advocate for top talent acquisition. Many CEOs attract top talent from other organizations by developing their personal brand. People want to work for them. As a leader, be personally accountable for attracting a few key people regularly and serve as a mentor to some of them. Expect the same of other top executives.

View your talent holistically, embracing the needs of all generations. Your organization includes talent from at least three different generations: Boomers, Xs and Ys. Develop retention strategies that individually address the life balance, career strategies and technology needs of each group. One size does not fit all.

Accept nothing less than extraordinary leadership and talent. Establish tough standards for new talent, and cut your losses when some don't measure up. When people are performing in an outstanding manner, continue to increase expectations of performance. The worst position is to allow good people to “coast.”

