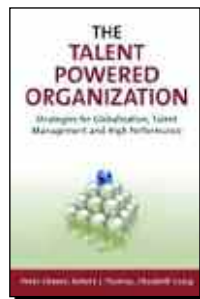


The Talent Powered Organization: Strategies for Globalization, Talent Management and High Performance

By Peter Cheese, Robert J. Thomas and Elizabeth Craig
Kogan Page Limited, 276 pages, 2008
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I might have had a more favorable initial response to this book if I had read it a few months ago – in March or April instead of October. The first pages make reference to the “rocketing demand” for talent and organizations “struggling to recruit” and similar phrases related to competition in recruiting for new employees. In light of recent developments in the world economy, it didn’t strike me as likely to be very useful in circumstances very different from what the authors saw around them when they sat down to write the book, probably in 2006.

But I read further and I changed my mind. Regardless of economic factors now and in the foreseeable future, this book about talent management could be very useful to nearly anyone with an interest in helping their organization succeed. It is written with both intelligence and clarity, providing ideas and understanding to those of us without Ph.D.s in organizational design or psychology.

For those not yet well versed in the vocabulary, the authors offer this definition of human talent: “the combined capacity and will of people to achieve an organization’s goals.” They state that a key factor in the success of an organization is its ability to use human talent – hence the need for “talent management” to discover, develop, deploy, motivate and energize the people who manifest that talent.

Many books, seminars, webinars, journal articles and blogs in recent years have focused on that first part of talent management: “discovery” of talent, and that mostly translated to “recruiting.” It seems likely that getting people to apply for the jobs in your organization won’t be much of a challenge any time soon. The challenge will be to pick the best out of the many who will apply; an even bigger challenge will be making the most of the employees you already have on board, because many organizations simply will not be doing much hiring in the near future.

Meeting those challenges is really what this book is about.

Everyone who reads this will find different “ah-ha!” ideas or realizations. I found them all through the book, but will share three of the biggest.

One: The economic chaos and rising unemployment of today will surely postpone the shortages of skilled workers that we were all fretting about just a few months ago. Hiring will slow, there are a lot of good people already out there looking for work, and baby-boomer employees will not, after all, be retiring in great numbers just yet because they simply can’t afford it. But this is just a postponement, and if there is any silver lining to this situation, it’s that organizations now have a little more time to do the planning, research and

redesign that they should have been doing but probably weren’t. Effective talent management doesn’t happen overnight: a lot of questions need to be asked and answered. Those questions include:

- What competencies does your organization need to succeed?
- Where will those competencies be found five years from now, or three?
- In fact, CAN those competencies be found outside your organization, or do you need to emphasize development of internal resources?
- What do those internal resources look like? Do you know where they are? How will you move them from their current state to the skill levels you will need to survive and succeed?

This book has a lot of good ideas about how to get from here to there.

Two: “Engagement” could be the closest thing to a magic wand yet discovered, at least as a factor in organizational success. Motivation is part of employee engagement, but motivation is a great deal more than “interesting work for good pay.” Cheese, Thomas and Craig list eight common factors, such as the ability to align individual effort with company performance, pride in the company and relationships with co-workers. All of these are complex and to achieve them will require, in some cases, significant changes to organizational culture, as well as investments in infrastructure such as information technology, internal communications and even physical infrastructure to promote knowledge sharing and more frequent personal interactions.

Three: Every organization has certain functions that are considered key to its success. These are typically functions such as Sales, Customer Service and Finance. Yet research indicates that most CEOs rate the performance of those vital functions very poorly! (Do American businesses stay in business in spite of themselves?) Part of this has to do with poor hiring decisions, but a large part of the problem is attributed to “equally low assessments of their training and learning functions.” This may be the best part of the book, in that Cheese, Thomas and Craig thoroughly and clearly describe the bottom-line value of serious investments in learning within the organization, explain seven key principles behind high-performance learning, and illustrate with numerous real-life examples of organizations that take this seriously: Avaya, General Mills, Nielsen Media Research, Toyota and even the Tennessee Valley Authority.

There are many, many books in publication about talent management, learning and employee engagement. I think this is one of the good ones. There are many points at which the reader is likely to think “can we do something like this?” or “I know we aren’t ready for that step yet, but I’ll bet we could do X instead.” The authors don’t say a great deal about the role of technology, but IHRIM members and the HRIT field in general will see many areas where recent developments in technology – instant messaging and Web conferencing are just two examples – can promote alignment of effort with organizational goals or relationships with co-workers. If you come away with just one such idea or the answer to one core question about how to improve talent management in your organization, then it’s worth the price of the book.

Marcia Mather Barkley
Senior Consultant in Management Consulting
CedarCrestone, Inc.