

Talent Management Starts With Talent Assessment

By

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When leaders master the art of talent assessment and commit to coaching those who need their help, those in their organizations develop fierce loyalty, exhibit infectious enthusiasm for the work they do, and want to spend their careers growing along with their organizations. When your best talent *doesn't* receive attention, retention, productivity, and morale suffer. Talent assessment, however, is a misunderstood and much-underdeveloped skill among senior leaders.

Talent assessment involves more than sizing people up. It's a powerful way executives can help their best talent realize their personal aspirations, and it provides a system to ensure continuity of leadership and build the future of the company. Armed with accurate information, leaders can structure jobs and opportunities so people can excel and meet their potential; the organization can provide resources and training; bosses can continually monitor progress; and they can provide more meaningful feedback. None of this happens automatically, however. You need to know how to recognize strengths and limitation and understand how to create a workplace that helps people play their best games.

A New Model of Talent Assessment

One of the most critical responsibilities of senior leaders involves assessing talent—something you've probably never been trained to do. Of all the leadership and managerial duties you'll face, this is probably the least intuitive, the most complicated, and the least familiar. Whenever you're assessing strengths, you'll need to carefully weigh the three constructs of talent: the aptitude to do the job, the behaviors that will ensure success in the job, and the requisite experience for success. A person's behaviors and experience usually present

themselves in the most obvious way—the aptitude appearing much later in the game, but the aggregation of the three explains strengths in a nutshell.

Aptitude involves a natural disposition or tendency toward a particular action, the readiness to learn, and the raw talent to function in the role. It involves three major capacities: verbal ability, quantitative skills, and strategic thinking. When people evidence strong control of language through use of advanced vocabulary, well-developed writing and speaking skills, and a quickness at learning new skills from verbally presented data, you can infer robust verbal ability.

At the most basic level, quantitative skills involve the capacity to handle a budget successfully. More advanced evidence will be tied to stellar performance with profit and loss responsibilities. Engineers and accountants usually come in the door with well-developed quantitative skill—otherwise they could have never made it through school. But often those in operational roles will have these abilities too; they’ll just need some help in honing them and applying them successfully to your organization’s strategy.

Strategists understand how to separate the critical few considerations from the vast number of nonessential ones. They maintain a global perspective as they quickly get to the core of complex problems, even when they haven’t encountered the problem before. They typically multi-task effectively and keep the priorities clearly in focus. Most see the future as open and malleable, so they paint credible pictures of the future for others to understand. They usually handle change well, even when they didn’t welcome it.

You can often infer aptitude from individuals’ track records. How quickly have they learned new, unfamiliar tasks in the past? Handled unexpected, unpleasant change? Aptitude implies that, with training and experience, this person can master the skills required to do the next job. If a person doesn’t have the requisite aptitude *for the job*, nothing else matters. Without

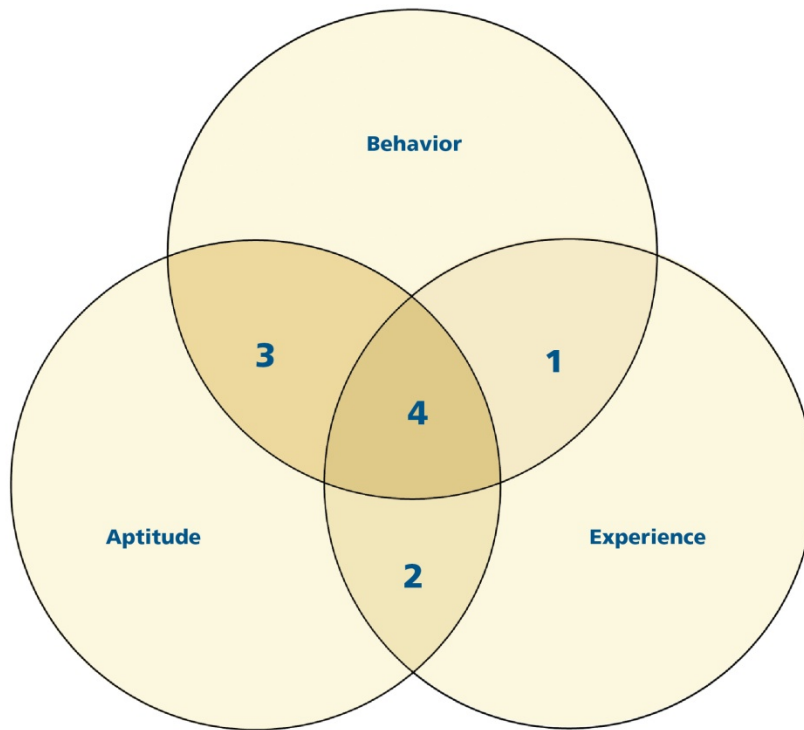
it, no amount of coaching, training, wishing, or hoping will make this person able to advance. The trick is to determine what specific aptitude a job requires.

Behavior involves people's conduct—the way they present themselves. It tends to be consistent. Behavior encompasses morals, deportment, carriage and demeanor. Gregarious people who enjoy meeting others, interacting, and engaging in conversation exhibit some of the strengths required of a sales person. On the other hand, a person who likes solitude, does his best work without distraction, and welcomes opportunities to double check work for accuracy displays some of the strengths of a good cost accountant.

Experience, the most easily observed and objective aspect of talent assessment addresses the skills the person has displayed so far. In other words they already know how to perform specific tasks and have demonstrated this in the past. While important, experience offers limited prophetic value. I find companies give it unfair advantage in the assessing game, however. Experience should be one, but only one, factor in assessing talent

Try to bring a balanced approach to the process. For example, a person may have aptitude for learning quickly in the verbal arena but lack cognitive agility in the technical field. Similarly, different jobs may require uncommon behavior tendencies or experiences. The trick is to first assess people and then to recognize whether or not they are in a job that lets them leverage their strengths. Here's a model that may help you see the differences:

Talent Assessment Model



1 Behavior + Experience

Don't hire or promote these individuals if you need them to progress in the organization. They lack aptitude so can never be a high potential candidate.

2 Experience + Aptitude

Hire and promote these people cautiously. They lack the behaviors that will help them move up. With coaching, however, they can often learn to change behaviors and become Fours.

3 Aptitude + Behavior

A viable candidate for hire or promotion. With enough time and the right kinds of experience, these people can become Fours.

4 Behavior + Experience + Aptitude

The ideal candidate for hire or promotion. These people have all the essentials to be the top talent in your organization.

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As you assess people, ask yourself into which section would you typically put this person. Obviously, you'll want all "4s," but you usually can't achieve that. Instead, you'll need to determine which of the "2s" and "3s" you can help. With each person, go through the process

with different jobs and positions. Did your assessment of their strengths change? If so, they may be valuable employees who simply aren't in the right job. If they are "2's" or "3's" ask yourself if training or coaching could move these people to a "4" status.

Conclusion

You can't coach people to have more aptitude, raw talent, or intelligence. On the other hand, if they have trouble with people skills, presentation and writing skills, management abilities, or technical skills, coaching and training can make all the difference. Many leaders concentrate their efforts on mitigating the weaknesses of their direct reports. Instead of becoming an expert on weaknesses, doesn't it make better sense to evaluate your talent accurately so you can concentrate your coaching time and efforts on the stars who will take your organization to the next level of success?

Dr. Linda Henman, the author of *The Magnetic Boss* and the soon to be released *Landing in the Executive Chair*, is a leading expert on setting strategy, planning succession, and developing talent. For more than 30 years she has worked with executives and boards of directors in Fortune 500 Companies, small businesses, and the military. Some of her clients include Tyson Foods, Emerson Electric, and Boeing. For more information, visit www.henmanperformancegroup.com.