DO YOU THINK OUTSIDE THE [TALENT] BOX?

These are not easy times. With unrelenting pressure to look for new sources of advantage, deal with complexities or break down barriers created by silos or remote structures, CEOs are looking for new ways to tap into the collective creative spirit. It cannot be business as usual.

Globalization will continue to reward those companies that excel at collaborating internally and externally. Innovative products and services, and their speed to market, are increasingly dependent on a firm's ability to work in an interactive and integrated fashion, linking all its centers of excellence for a common purpose. (World Economic Forum, Davos, 2008)

Our talent consulting and coaching work reveals innovation is high on the corporate strategic agenda. Companies that develop skilled people with the mindset, competencies and commitment to execute and devolve global strategy are more likely to generate higher growth rates and be more attractive to customers, talent, suppliers and investors.

The challenges deriving from this are two fold - a need to foster talent with a new set of abilities; and having a capacity for bringing innovation to the fore. It is not an either-or option – talent development and innovation competence are linked. It is thinking outside the succession or talent identification nine-box.

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL TALENT PREMIUM

Insight: Success in the entrepreneurial space requires both creativity and the ability to execute and take risk. The ante is that innovation must be delivered and this means translating good ideas into results that truly improve business performance. Technology is a partial enabler. Many leaders still look for ways to invoke entrepreneurship in their companies.
Solution: Most innovations come through networks - people connecting in sync with a purpose. Talent management can play its part by tracking and linking what everyone inside the company knows. Chief Talent Officers from well-performing companies act with intent to establish innovative cultures that are collaborative, collegial and team-oriented. They exploit these networks encouraging high-performance teams, no-fault brainstorming, outside-in thinking and participative decision-making for new levels of engagement and learning.

Insight: Leadership development requires fresh curriculums and new experiences that connect talent to these innovation competencies. Critical is how to 'compete while co-operating' in complex situations.
Solution: Rotational programs where experience in two business units, across two functions and in at least two countries, before reaching the C-suite is one approach. Another is a purposeful sequence of action-learning projects that have significant business impact and potential to create distinctiveness. It may mean taking commercial risks. The stakes to succeed must be high. Whether you call these efforts hot teams, focus groups, *un*focus groups, action labs, boot camps, shadow cabinets, task forces or T-teams; the best ideas come from new sources of cooperation that draw on diverse talent, the most experienced, high-potentials, critics or lateral thinkers across all areas.

Insight: CEOs and Boards can be frustrated that commitment to explore new ideas readily exists, but opportunities talked about may never be fully achieved. Ideas that can deliver actual value remain coveted.
Solution: Some situations are just too complex, difficult or ambiguous. Often no one individual or division can develop the answer, or if they could, they cannot execute it alone. Cross-functional input is needed. To deal with and think through each layer of this complexity, collaboration from targeted action-learning projects forges interdependent and links. The more interconnected an organization, the greater its intelligence.

The Talent Advisors
growing / capability

C-CHANGE FOR CREATIVE TEAMS

Insight: Leadership on innovation is not just about the hard-metrics of results. It is also about how people get those results.
Solution: Collaborative groups have a collective identity and acoustic quality that makes the participants more aware of their thinking, conversations and interconnections. It is an important aspect of the leadership development experience. When there is a high tolerance for ambiguity or unusual connections, people more easily try new things and come up with new solutions, even if not perfect at first. They know mistakes teach something new that leads to the next idea and then the next. It is not failure – it is feedback. As the team accepts no one person alone has a meaningful answer; they know if the team fails, each member fails. This prevents factions or competitive bias.

Insight: Even successful, high-performance firms with strong reputations for innovation and learning face real conflicts from regional and divisional silos. They work hard on cross-boundary connections.
Solution: Constructive conflict should not be overlooked when designing the leadership development curriculum. Divisional conflict can jump-start the creative process. Of course, it helps when people know and recognize how intellectual and interpersonal conflict differ. Emotion plays a substantial role in networks. Conflict is constructive when it enhances intellectual depth, breadth and ingenuity. In high-trust cultures, people debate rigorously, but they also cooperate with each other easily, viewing others as equal partners who readily commit to the best overall outcome. If divisional power-interests dominate, the behaviors stifle shared creativity. Executives who display the traits of collaborative innovation themes are more effective cross-divisional contributors and sought-after mentors.

Insight: Attitudes to change influence the innovation culture. Understanding this is a key leadership role of change management. A preference to keep things the way they are does not necessarily mean opposition, as those who do hold a genuine commitment to change, can continue to apply energy to a subconscious 'competing commitment.' What appears to be resistance or inertia is really a personal assumption that keeps people acting in a certain way. Uncovering these assumptions can release the ability to change.
Solution: Experiential group processes lead to change as they are based on an insightful adult learning concept: people are more likely to act their way into new thinking, than to think their way into new actions.

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION

Leadership development is not smooth, continuous or incremental, but one punctuated by inflection points. The same applies to innovation. Entrepreneurism is fostered when: **1.** Learning builds real capacity for both internal and external collaborative innovation **2.** Skills and mind-sets for new ways of thinking and new ways of working are taught with experiential or action-learning **3.** Executives are sourced, selected, evaluated, rewarded on collaborative-innovation traits **4.** Cross-functional interdependence that unlocks complexity and enables execution is actively exploited **5.** New connections and intersections, often from difference, crossing borders, diversity and constructive conflict, are highly valued **6.** High-trust cultures use rigorous debate and discussion for deeper exploration, analysis and learning.

© 2008 All rights reserved