



## Has the tide gone out far enough yet?

*Updated 25 June 2020*

As the global economy starts to take faltering steps towards trying to establish a semblance of a new normal – whatever that is going to look like-- most of us will be reflecting on the experience of the last few months in varying guises of lockdown. For business leaders the experience of this worldwide crisis has presented an unprecedented time to step in, step up and really lead. If I can misquote the Sage of Omaha – Warren Buffett - who offered the wisdom that “You only find out who is swimming naked when the tide goes out.... “. The same applies to leadership talent in every organization. After this period of huge uncertainty and ambiguity - how has your talent bench performed in these most testing of circumstances?

Over 20 years ago, team McKinsey produced yet another of their brilliantly crafted ideas that took ready root in the business world. The phrase - “The War for Talent” entered the lexicon of personnel management. The McKinsey article being partly responsible for shifting the terminology that morphed Personnel Management into HRM (Human Resource Management), and then People Management and now Talent Management: the idea that the management and leadership of people is, in reality, the management and leadership of talent.

Maybe we should be clear on what we mean and what is meant by talent? I recall a conversation, many years ago with a very successful, senior business leader who, with a very straight face, suggested that he could not have a high potential programme because all of his people were talented. However, as we all know, come the challenge some people will step up or be provided with opportunities to lead, and others may choose not to or lack access to the right opportunities. Inevitably there are some who do stand out more than others.

Today it is clear to us that differential investment in talent is a worthwhile investment – but the testing, reaping the ROI on leadership/talent development, needs circumstances or a crucible in which it can be tested and proven. 2020 is proving to be such a crucible. Are

you selecting from the widest possible pools in your organization? This is not another polemic or lecture on bias - unconscious or otherwise but a nomenclature that might be of help. But how are you selecting your future leaders – what filters and systems and processes are you using?

Most organizations have what we term Hi-Vis talent. The usual suspects - we call it “Hi-Vis” talent because it so obvious that he or she could be wearing high visibility vest- they just stand out so very clearly. But let us just stop a moment. There is also a search for what one Managing Partner calls the search for “Hidden Talent”. The individuals who seemingly appear from nowhere or from unexpected sources – often hidden or invisible and not necessarily in the mainstream parts of the business. It raises the question of where are you looking for talent in your business? I am referring to the talent that doesn’t look or sound like you or me. I am not speaking only about the “usual suspects” – the traditional dimensions of diversity such as gender, race-ethnicity disability, and nationality that even today remain underrepresented. But what are the non-traditional sources and locations of talent in your organization? What does leadership look like to your Millennials?

So, as we moved into the first year of the 2020s where are you looking for talent and what are you doing to enable encourage and develop those who are not the usual suspects in your talent landscape. It will have become very clear from this crisis that some people are simply not able to deliver on the leadership expected of them – although they may still be valuable contributors. So, what do you do with them? But that is for another discussion.

We know that all too often the human response to threats – or change - is the oft-cited Fight, Flight or Freeze reflex and in women it has been suggested that the response is a tendency to cope by Tending and Befriending\*. As we start to take steps to get our economies moving and start trying to craft a “new normal” - how has your “talent” – both the “Hi-Vis” and the hitherto “Hidden Talent” performed? Has your definition of “Talent” been proven – or does it need to be revised?

So, has the tide gone out far enough yet for you to have clear visibility on how your talent have performed? Where have you found “Hidden Talent” – those that have stepped up and into the ambiguity to lead their colleagues? Those who have exercised leadership in this desperately uncertain time. The economic prognosis for the future makes grim reading and suggests that your Hidden Talent are likely to be even more valuable as we lurch into the next phase of establishing our “new normal”.

\*See Dr. [Shelley E. Taylor](#) UCLA. Psychological Review 2000

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