Talent Development: Acquiring a Telescopic and Microscopic View

ABSTRACT  It is no secret that navigating today’s dynamic workplace is significantly more challenging than it was 20 years ago. Professionals at all levels have pressing questions: What are the biggest issues facing the next generation of leaders? How can managers successfully engage and motivate their employees? What leadership qualities should young professionals cultivate in order to help them achieve their goals of reaching the C-suite? James Brooks, PhD, Partner at Executive Development Consulting, shares the answers.

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What are the biggest challenges that companies face in today’s marketplace, and how can effective executive leadership help overcome these hurdles?

Companies are faced with a number of challenges in today’s marketplace; the biggest of which is discovering new areas for business growth and creating value in those areas.

The second challenge is finding and developing talent. Talent acquisition and development have transitioned from being the responsibility of the HR department, into a major challenge owned by leaders at all levels. When you look at organizational surveys you find that companies are struggling to find the talent they need to drive growth initiatives, so this challenge is directly related to the first challenge.

The third challenge today is how to create an energized workforce committed to a common purpose. This is particularly difficult because everyone is overloaded with work and a long list of priorities.

The best leaders solve these challenges by focusing intently on a small list of critical priorities, embracing a talent mindset, and offering an experience to employees that is purpose-driven, challenging and supports growth and learning.

Do you see these challenges evolving during the next decade as a new generation of leaders moves into the C-suite?

These challenges won’t change significantly during the next decade because the economic conditions aren’t likely to change dramatically and demographic changes are going to make the talent challenges more acute.

From a perspective of what is required of leaders, there will absolutely be different requirements. Leaders will need to create customized experiences for employees, be flexible in their approach to managing and supporting employees and learn to assemble and optimize the impact of diverse teams. They will need to organize in a way that enables business agility, and yet at the same time give their employees what they want and need from the workplace, which is a “have it my way” experience. This is no easy task.

What is the one essential characteristic you’ve noticed during your years in the executive coaching business that all successful executive leaders tend to possess?

The ability to craft sound strategy never goes out of style. It is an essential characteristic for all business leaders. It may sound a bit clichéd, but not all leaders are good at this or naturally demonstrate it; it’s a skill that can be developed, but companies are continually searching for leaders who can scan the environment, see opportunities before competitors, and get their business positioned to get there first.

Along with that is balancing a short- and long-term view. This is especially true today because companies are very focused on what needs to be achieved this week, month or quarter and it’s very easy to miss product or industry transitions. Those things sneak up on you when you are in “heads down” execution mode.

When you spoke to Professor Gruber’s IMC class in 2013, you said that a good manager must have the ability to view situations through both the telescope and microscope. Can you please explain this idea further?

Yes, it’s consistent with the thoughts on strategy. I love the telescope and the microscope because it really captures what leaders need to do; the first is developing that strategic vision based on opportunities, and the second is figuring out how to manage and inspect at a deep enough level to foster successful implementation.

In the past, people who were strong strategists didn’t necessarily have the microscope skill, which is all about how you create operational excellence and drive the day-to-day tasks. You still have to motivate people in the same way, but motivation at the microscope level is about helping the team achieve a micro-goal in the short term, as opposed to thinking about how we can position ourselves for the long term. Successful leaders have to be able to use both the telescopic and microscopic lens, and very few people naturally have both of these skills.

It’s easier to train and teach the microscope piece as opposed to the telescope, and those who have the microscope are more likely to be very successful in the early and middle stages of their career. To be successful at a senior leader or executive level, really requires the telescope.
The marketing communications industry is in a constant state of flux due to the ever-evolving landscape of the 21st century. As a result, the marketing industry often precludes a sense of stability—jobs that are relevant today are often gone tomorrow. What can industry leaders do to help maintain corporate culture and boost employee morale during this time of transition?

The best thing that leaders can do during transitions is to figure out what is meaningful to people and offer it to them—for me that may mean one thing, and for you that may mean something totally different. Paying attention to individual employee’s needs and working to give them what they want in a world with finite resources can be a very powerful tool to boost morale. It doesn’t have to be expensive or complex; in fact, most of the time it’s not. For example, a simple thank you, spending a bit of time with a person, or giving them visibility within the company goes a long way.

I find in my work that managers often think that people want promotions and more money, but the reality is that there are a lot of high performing people who are not particularly well compensated. Those who work in non-profits or NGOs are one example. Attitude, collective commitment and talent of a team are what dictate performance. Getting the right people on board exponentially raises the probability of success.

What advice do you have for young professionals as they embark on their careers? What are some key skills that they can develop, both in their work and personal lives, to help them achieve fulfilling careers and perhaps one day reach the C-Suite?

First, IMC graduates need to realize that they have a skill set that is highly valuable, but not everyone will understand the value they bring or how to fully utilize it. So it’s important to figure out how to help current or future employers see the breadth of capability and creativity they can bring to their work.

Early in their career, they should engage in as many different projects as possible to deepen and broaden their skills. It’s much harder to gain breadth later in your career, so build a broad foundation early.

Second, there is a big need to educate or senior leaders. There are leaders who don’t understand how to use Twitter and Facebook and other social media platforms; this is a big advantage for those who know how to leverage these platforms.

People who are at an earlier stage in their career and understand these tools have a significant advantage, especially in the marketing context.

Third, graduates must realize that technical skills will only take them so far. To progress in their career, they must learn how to lead and to manage. This is a skill set that does not come naturally to many people and must be built over time and experience. Taking steps to test their skills via project leadership, trying new things and getting feedback will be tremendously helpful to fast track their success.
Dr. Brooks is a seasoned consultant and coach who helps executives, teams, and companies maximize their performance. During his career, he has worked as an external consultant and a Human Resources executive leading a broad array of executive development initiatives. His work has been noted in numerous publications, including Fortune magazine and The Wall Street Journal, and he has delivered lectures at many universities and corporate conferences.

Prior to joining EDC, James was an HR executive at Cisco Systems, where he held a succession of Leadership Development, Talent Management and HR Generalist roles. He co-founded Cisco’s Leadership Development and Employee Engagement groups, created Cisco’s first global succession planning process, lead an innovative Executive Coaching program and developed high-impact leadership development programs. He also led the company’s global career development, employee engagement and flexible work initiatives. Based in part on leading edge practices he developed, Cisco has been perennially rated as a “Best Place to Work” by Fortune Magazine and a “Best Company for Leaders” by CEO Magazine.

James was previously a Consultant at Personnel Decisions International, where he provided executive assessment and coaching, competency modeling, 360 feedback, and leadership development programs to Fortune 500 companies. He also has deep experience in building selection systems and strategic planning efforts, and has worked or consulted with companies and non-profits of all sizes.

James graduated from the University of Missouri with a Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Psychology and studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, France. He has a Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. He also holds a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certification from the Society of Human Resource Management.