



Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future

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Developing talent: the magic bullets

New experiences and the agility to learn from them are the keys to succeeding in the war for talent, says Mike Lombardo.

According to a 2004 Conference Board survey of over 500 CEOs, availability of talented managers and executives is sixth on a list of 62 major challenges their organizations face. Succession planning is eighth. Most readers are undoubtedly familiar with why these are top 10 issues for CEOs. In McKinsey's *War for Talent* studies, only 7 percent of multinationals said they had enough talented managers and 3 percent said they developed people effectively. Only 15 percent of executives get selected from the succession plan.

The problem may be that we tend to look for a magic bullet; a key to solving our woes. And most of the magic bullets used aren't really magic. Grades in school predict technical, not managerial performance. The college or university we graduate from predicts nothing, although many continue to believe that this predicts success somehow.

The three magic bullets

If success were essentially a matter of IQ, academic results and number of years' experience, we would have the talent and bench problem solved. Long-term success actually involves three magic bullets:

1. Basic intelligence, which most organizations assure through their hiring practices.
2. Variety of experience.
3. Continuously learning to do something new or different.

It's the last two bullets that cause our troubles. Only some people have the requisite experiences needed for managing and leading in the world of change and fewer still have been taught how to learn from them.

To remedy this: first, people can't learn from experiences they aren't having. It's now fairly well proven what kinds of experiences season leaders: startup and turnaround assignments; business critical projects; moving to a different function or line of business; jumps in scope and scale. These experiences demand people learn new competencies and ways of behaving. If they learn, they become more rounded, capable people than they were before. Yet in the *War for Talent* studies, 66 percent of executives had never had a startup, and 40 percent had never been in an unfamiliar line of business.

Learning from experience

Second, just like people can't learn from experiences they aren't having, neither can they learn anything new without making sense of the experience. In our research, we call this learning agility. This is unrelated to how intelligent a person may be – here we are talking about adaptability. What promotes adaptability? Many tactics, but here are a few examples:

- Searching the past for parallels, looking at history, asking others, reading a biography. Whenever Harry Truman

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faced a "first-time" crisis in the White House, he consulted what he called his "council of presidents." He would go to the presidential archives, find as many roughly parallel situations as he could, and see how previous presidents thought them through.

- Making sense through rules of thumb. Many learners keep lists, mental or otherwise, of things that might be true most of the time. These are guiding principles and trends they use to view situations. Colin Powell is a famous current example of someone who has such a list.
- Learners have more ways to handle situations because they have more conscious learning tactics. They'll keep a journal, write down a plan, engage in a visioning exercise. In one study, effective supervisors had five times more methods to handle difficult employees than did the average supervisor. That's learning in action.

So, the three magic bullets together are what create a successful executive. Bright enough, varied enough in experience, and adaptable enough to learn from their actions. Combining these three is what effective succession planning should be and the last two have often been ignored. Variety in job experiences and targeted, active learning from them is what will shrink the talent gap.