

#DAY34LOCKDOWNSA

WORKING FROM HOME:

Dispelling the Top 10 Talent Management Myths

by

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Since the growth of the science and practice of talent management over the past ten years, it has become evident that there is some misunderstanding about the meaning and features of talent management. Now with masses of talented managers and employees working from home during the lockdown, it is a good time to revisit the importance of talent management. As the great American business leader, President of Ford and later Chrysler, Lee Iacocca said: "I hire the best people brighter than me and get out of their way."

The essence of talent management is about two things: Get the right talent and let them thrive. Many companies get the first one right, but they fail dismally in the second one. They attract and acquire the right talent, and then they frustrate their talent with poor leadership and people management practices. Examples of poor leadership and people management practices are as follows:

- An underperforming or dysfunctional team;
- A toxic organisation culture;
- Poor people skills;
- Destructive conflict;
- Inadequate onboarding;
- Unfair labour practices;
- Exploitation of people;
- A lack of skills development;
- Ignoring or discarding ideas;
- Maintaining the status quo;
- In- and out groups;
- A lack of creativity and innovation;
- Poor communication and listening;
- Inconsistent decision-making;
- Breach of confidentiality;
- A lack of transparency;
- Workplace bullying;
- Ineffective meetings;
- No or invisible values;

- Dishonesty;
- A lack of transparency;
- Micro management;
- Nepotism and favouritism;
- Office politics;
- Poor execution of strategy;
- A lack of trust and empowerment;
- Discrimination such as racism and sexism;
- Sexual harassment;
- Under-utilisation;
- Work overload.

While many essential workers continued to experience many of the above poor people management practices during the lockdown when they continued to work at sites, some of them were significantly reduced or completely eliminated during the lockdown for non-essential employees working from home. For example, office politics and sexual harassment were reduced or completely eliminated at many companies when employees worked from home, unless if elements of it continued online or over the phone.

Today I want to share and dispel some myths about talent and talent management in order to create a better understanding and focus around talent management strategy, in particular when employees are working from home. The top ten most common myths about talent management are as follows:

1. *Talent management is an elitist or exclusive approach to people management:* While it is indeed true that talent management focuses on the talent segments of the workforce, the intention is to leverage talent for business performance, and not to position talented employees as “superior” to the rest of the organisation’s employees. In fact, some employees not considered talent, but solid, reliable and loyal employees doing a good administrative or support job for years or even decades are extremely valuable, but they may not necessarily drive business performance directly. All employees are special and need to be treated with the utmost respect and dignity, and should therefore have growth and development opportunities. Employers should not neglect employees who did not continue working on a laptop during the lockdown. You need to care for all your employees. Your employees in townships were at a higher risk to be infected with the Covid-19 virus than those in the comfort of their homes. The same principle applies to essential workers such as nurses and reception staff at hospitals, or police officers who were at the frontline of being infected.
2. *Talent management is a new name for HR management:* This is not true, rather, the true owners of talent management are senior line management, with HR providing professional expertise in facilitating talent management processes and interventions. Line managers are talent managers and they need to reflect on how well they are managing their talent while both parties are working from home.
3. *Talent management is the same as workforce planning:* Although there is a clear interface between workforce planning and talent management, these are two

different but supporting processes. Workforce planning covers the whole workforce and all work done in the organisation, while talent management focuses specifically on the attraction, development, deployment, retention and optimisation of talent in critical and leadership positions. An extensive and adapted workforce plan is needed in ensuring that a reduced workforce returns to work in May during lockdown level four. The necessary safety precautions must be in place at all companies, while employers with more than 500 staff members must test their employees for the Covid-19 virus. If some employees test positive, those employees will be send home, hence the need for an adapted workforce plan.

4. *Talented employees are above the rules of the organisation:* Like all other employees, talented employees must conform to organisational rules and policies, and if not, disciplinary action may be taken against them. While employers should show greater sensitivity and flexibility during a lockdown caused by a world-wide pandemic, misconduct and unethical behaviour by staff should not be tolerated. Likewise, disciplinary action must be taken against employees violating the stringent new safety regulations at work. Non-compliance to new safety measures not only constitutes non-conformance to the employer's rules, but also the Disaster Management Act regulations, and the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
5. *Talent management provides you with a license to poach the best talent from your competitors:* While a free labour market makes it possible to attract talent from your competitors or any other organisation, developing internal talent remains a top priority for progressive employers. The larger your talent pool, the less it will be necessary to attract external talent to your organisation, although it may be required from time to time to adopt a more external approach to attracting new talent from outside the organisation. However, the labour market is less stable and mobility is restricted during the lockdown, and companies should therefore consider using the large pool of freelancers who are ready to do short-term assignment for them. But utilising and looking after talent working from home should be your first priority.
6. *Talent management is only for knowledge companies:* While it is indeed true that talent management is absolutely imperative for knowledge companies such as law firms, banks, universities and science centres, it is a key issue for all organisations. Even companies with business models operating against talent management in the past such as mines, construction firms, security companies, factories, municipalities and other labour intensive industries have now realised that they need to adapt their "low talent" business models to a more progressive talent management approach, given the importance of knowledge, high level expertise and technology driving talent-driven change. Ironically, companies that adopted knowledge management and talent management in the past, have been better placed to let employees work from home, but all other companies are now forced to step up during these times.
7. *Talent management is only for the private sector:* The private sector was indeed first to adopt talent management, but all organisations need talent management. In fact, poor public sector service delivery can often be attributed to a lack of talent management at public service departments and other state entities. The unprofessional behaviour by some public servants were exposed during the lockdown,

but fortunately many government departments stepped up significantly in starting to provide online communication and services even after hours. Ironically, the real spirit of batho pele was practised for the first time during the lockdown.

8. *It is impossible to “manage” talent, because talent is a natural gift and talented employees do not want to be managed:* While high talented employees typically do not prefer close supervision given their high level thinking, professionalism, self-management and implementation skills, talent still needs to be directed and optimised for these employees to perform optimally. They need good leaders to create a positive environment and for them to be able to perform at their best when working from home, while being treated with sensitivity as a result of home responsibilities and increased levels of stress and anxiety. Also, talent management encompasses the processes, systems and methodologies that need to be managed to make talent management work.
9. *Once you have attracted and appointed the right talent, you can sit back and your organisation will perform automatically:* Bringing in talent into your organisation on its own is not enough. You need to create an environment conducive for optimal performance of your talented employees. Moreover, a talent culture is needed so that talented employees can thrive. In addition, talent reviews and evaluation approaches are needed to continuously assess the effectiveness of talent management, and given the “talent war” continuous talent management is needed to integrate, align and leverage talent management practices. Therefore, talent development and retention plays a key role in building effective talent management. Talent management requires regular talent discussions followed by very clear actions to be implemented if you really believe in putting talent first. My questions to leaders today are: How many talent discussions did you conduct during the lockdown? Have you considered your talent management plan during the lockdown?
10. *Talent management cannot be measured:* Although talent management is a relatively new field in South Africa, approaches to measuring its impact is in its infancy. However, leading companies have started to move beyond basic evaluation to more sophisticated approaches to talent measurement. Online performance management systems managing and reporting on talent performance every day is needed in today’s world. My questions to leaders today are: Have you measured your talent management plan during the lockdown? How did you manage performance during the lockdown? How can you improve on your talent management?

Dispelling the above myths will enable talent managers and business leaders to create a common understanding about the meaning, benefits and impact of talent management in the workplace. Companies must learn to understand that talent is a special component of your workforce and your overall people strategy. The power of talent is such that while employers think they have to attract talent, in today’s talent-driven economy, the truth is the opposite: Talent attracts employers. Talent can work anywhere for any employer, hence the growth in the number of freelancers in the gig economy.

An explicit working from home strategy should be aligned to your overall talent management strategy. While talent working from home has been pronounced during the lockdown, talent

management happens every day. It is recommended that companies develop an explicit approach and philosophy on talent management. The talent management philosophy should culminate in a clear talent management policy and strategy in which key terms are defined and clarified in an attempt to dispel the myths outlined in this article. Clarity of purpose and focus will play an important role in ensuring the effective implementation of talent management in the workplace. Like all other management interventions, the most important aspect of talent management is implementation, we need to create a talent-driven culture and let our talent thrive, whether they are inside our buildings, or working from home. Leadership excellence should be prioritised as part of your overall talent management strategy, given the fact that top talent will no longer tolerate leadership incompetence.

I started today's article with a quote from Lea Iacocca, and I am concluding this piece with another message from him that is so relevant for management and all people working from home during the coronavirus lockdown: "In times of great stress or adversity, it's always best to keep busy, to plow your anger and your energy into something positive." Despite the pain and suffering caused by the Covid-19 crisis, perhaps it is a good time for us to reflect on the importance of talent and to channel our energy and lockdown frustration into our talents, not only to help our organisations and its stakeholders to get through this crisis, but to create a better caring workplace and society for people to realise their full potential.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). An earlier version of this article appeared in Talent Talks. For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za