

INSIGHTS

Start with the Science, Please!

HR practices often reflect folklore disguised as science. You owe your company a more fact-based approach to building talent.





Start with the Science, Please!

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In *One Page Talent Management*¹ we encourage HR leaders to always “start with the science” when designing HR practices, since science provides a strong fact-base to guide our decisions.

This discipline is especially important because each of us carries in our minds some HR folklore that we believe is proven science. With all the right intentions, we integrate that folklore into our HR practices and are then surprised when they don’t deliver the intended results.

It might help to start by defining what we mean by “science.” Every year we receive an overwhelming amount of information about our field from research reports, consultants, books, and articles. We can separate that information into three categories:

- **Proven science:** A conclusion based on repeated experiments over many years that all find that X causes Y. These experiments have been published in well-respected, peer-reviewed academic journals. There is no substantive disagreement in the academic community that the findings are true.
- **Science:** A conclusion based on one or a few experiments that show that X causes Y. They’ve been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. There may be science that conflicts with these findings. The research may have been recently completed.
- **Research:** A consulting firm or other research group has conducted a survey or research project and has reached a particular conclusion. It hasn’t been reviewed or published by an objective source.

All of this information provides us with helpful data, so as a smart HR consumer you'll need to determine the weight that you'll give to each. My experience is that far too often we allow ourselves to be influenced by research that, while intuitively compelling, has not met the standards of proven science.

Given that the decisions we make in HR can influence people's lives and livelihoods, we should focus on the proven science to make decisions about human resource practices.

Starting with the Science

Highlighted below are five pieces of HR folklore that often influence the design of talent management practices. You'll see that applying these beliefs actually limits performance, needlessly increases complexity and potentially damages leaders' careers.

HR Folklore #1

Employees will work harder to achieve goals they set themselves.

So we: Ask employees to lead the goal-setting process and their managers to review and approve the goals.

But the science says: Employees will work equally hard towards a goal that's set by their manager or set by themselves. This means that there's no advantage in having employees set their own goals.ⁱⁱ

So we should have managers lead the goal-setting process. This doesn't mean that managers should tell employees their goals but they should initiate the conversation and set the expectations for what the employee will deliver.

Why, if employees will work equally hard towards goals set either way, should managers lead the process?

First, employees are unlikely to set goals that are as challenging as those their manager would set for them. Employees are intelligent enough to understand that their bonus depends on achieving their goals. They are not going to set goals at a level of challenge that jeopardizes their ability to achieve that bonus. It's their manager's responsibility to extract the highest possible level of performance from them.

Second, their manager is hopefully better equipped to translate goals from the level above them to the employee's level. This should improve the vertical alignment of goals in the organization.

HR Folklore #2

"Stretch" goals are different than "regular" goals

So we: Possibly include a stretch goal in the goal setting process but rarely focus on increasing the challenge level of all goals.

But the science says: The more challenging the goal, the more effort the employee will exert to achieve it. If we set a goal at a moderate level of challenge, the employee will respond with a moderate level of effort. As we increase the size of the challenge, they will commensurately increase their effort.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we should add the maximum reasonable amount of stretch into every goal. Every goal that doesn't ask the employee to deliver as much value as possible leaves performance on the table. This means that the entire concept of a "stretch" goal is a fallacy.

Every goal should be sent to the maximum level of stretch to ensure we get the employee's highest possible performance against that goal.

This implies that we need to put in place mechanisms that ensure big, challenging goals are set. This might include goal calibration sessions, goal auditing by HR, 2-level up reviews of goals and certainly training and clear accountability for managers to set bigger goals.

HR Folklore #3

Self-assessments are a valuable part of a performance review process.

So we: Ask employees to write a description of their accomplishments and possibly rate themselves against each or provide an overall rating of their performance.

Employees often spend many hours on this task despite the fact that, in the large majority of companies, their self-assessment has absolutely no impact on the final rating. In fact, in many cases that rating had been submitted weeks, if not months, earlier.

But the science says: Self-assessments are the least accurate form of assessment – less accurate than the assessment of one’s manager, peers or direct reports. This means that an employee’s self-assessment is likely to overstate their accomplishments, setting up a more challenging year-end conversation.^{iv}

So we should make self-assessment a voluntary part of the review process, being completely transparent with employees that their self-assessment has absolutely no impact on the final rating decision.

Employees should understand that this is a performance review by their manager. It’s not a negotiation, debate or chance to make their best pitch for a high rating. They should know that they have a “voice” but not a “vote.”

If your employees choose to, they should be allowed to enter notes about their year into

your HR system. It’s likely, however, that after learning that their self-assessment has no weight, the number of employees choosing to do this will dramatically fall.

HR Folklore #4

When a manager sees a gap between their self-perception and how others perceive them, they will work hard to close that gap.

So we: Include self-assessments in 360s because we assume that seeing these gaps will spur managers to change.

But the science says: Our brains are hardwired to carefully maintain our well-honed, positive self-image and to resist any information that might challenge our deliriously inaccurate self-perception. We won’t work to close those gaps – we will work hard to explain them away.^v

In addition, we’re *less* likely to change our behaviors when they’re compared to others’ behaviors than when we’re simply told to do something differently. So the normative data sold by many consulting firms with their 360s actually *decreases* the average manager’s willingness to change.

So we should stop including self-ratings in 360 assessments and stop trying to use gaps as a motivational tool. Explain to managers that the feedback and direction they receive should be evaluated on its own merits – not in comparison to their personal assessment of a situation.

HR Folklore #5

Learning agility is a proven predictor of high potential and/or high performance.

So we: Buy assessments to measure learning agility and use the results to classify select leaders as having high potential to advance.

But the science says: There are a large number of problems with the claims some consulting firms make about learning, or other types of, agility. First, the research they present doesn't meet the level of "science" defined earlier but many make scientific claims about their agility products.^{vi}

Second, while the term "learning agility" has intuitive appeal, there's no consistent definition of what it means. Every consulting firm defines it differently. We can't claim that something is beneficial when everyone defines it differently.

Third, the academic community has strongly questioned whether "learning agility" is even a concept. Many of them see it simply as a combination of already studied phenomenon that's now being bundled and sold under a new heading. There's also the question of how thousands of academic researchers working on the question of "what allows people to succeed at work" never uncovered this concept over 70 years of research.

So we should wait for proven science before using these tools to assess or develop leaders.

Imagine if you screened someone for "learning agility," they scored poorly and this held them back from a key career opportunity. Then, three years from now, the concept is proven not to be valid.

If we're making decisions about people's careers, we should be very confident the concepts and tools we're using to do that are proven through science.

Starting with the science demands that you critically compare your own assumptions against what's been scientifically proven to be true. It's never easy to admit that you've been operating on a few mistaken assumptions. But it's far better to acknowledge and change than to continue to build solutions from flawed raw material.

ⁱ Efron, Marc, and Miriam Ort. *One Page Talent Management: Eliminating complexity, adding value.* Harvard Business Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Miriam Erez and R. Arad, "Participative Goal Setting, Motivational and Cognitive Factors," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 71 (1986): 591–597. 12.; Gary Latham, Miriam Erez, and Edwin Locke, "Resolving Scientific Disputes by the Joint Design of Crucial Experiments by the Antagonists: Application to the Erez-Latham Dispute Regarding Participation in Goal Setting," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 73 (1988): 753–772.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990); Victor Vroom, *Work and Motivation* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964).

^{iv} Anne Tsui and Patricia Ohlott, "Multiple Assessment of Managerial Effectiveness: Interrater Agreement and Consensus in Effectiveness Models," *Personnel Psychology* 41, no. 4 (1988): 779–803.

^v Locke, Edwin A. "Goal theory vs. control theory: Contrasting approaches to understanding work motivation." *Motivation and Emotion* 15.1 (1991): 9–28.

^{vi} See the entire issue of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* devoted to learning agility. September 2012, Volume 5, Issue 3