



Building Great Talent Managers: The 4+2 Model

It's a rare individual who can architect, build and execute talent strategies that actually drive business results. We describe the six factors that differentiate great talent managers and why they're essential for success.



The 4+2 Model

If corporate priorities were set by unanimous agreement about their importance, executives would be focused on little other than talent management (TM). With amazing regularity a survey emerges reporting that corporate executives view growing talent as their first priority. In that same survey, the executives lament the actual state of talent in their organization and the survey authors lament the fractional amount of time the executives invest in building talent.

This increasingly predictable dialogue obscures the fact that the real work of talent building isn't getting done in most organizations. As human resource professionals, if we are committed to changing that conversation, we must understand the few capabilities that differentiate those companies that consistently produce great talent and great business results. As experienced

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practitioners and consultants in this field, we believe a critical and often-overlooked element is the capabilities of the TM staff.

As TM has evolved into a well-defined discipline, it has become increasingly important to identify the skills and behaviors that differentiate a great TM leader. In this article we describe those factors. What we present is likely very different from how a typical HR leader or line executive would describe a good talent manager – and that's exactly why it works.

Defining Talent Management

To provide both context and urgency for our model, we start by outlining the functional boundaries of TM and offer a brief overview of the state of the field. The functional boundaries are important since, as a field that emerged only in the last decade, there's understandable uncertainty about what work constitutes TM. We look to the research of the New Talent Management Network (NTMN), the world's largest organization of TM professionals, to help inform us in both areas.

The NTMN conducts an annual State of Talent Management survey that assesses what TM does, the struc-

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ture of TM departments, compensation levels, etc. Their most recent survey shows that TM is emerging as an increasingly well-defined field. The types of activities done by TM groups are becoming more consistent and universal across companies, and are different than the work done by other HR specialties.

The data shows that groups that are officially called “TM” are typically focused on talent reviews and succession planning, high potential identification, career development and assessment and feedback. Groups identifying themselves as organization development or organization effectiveness engage in these activities much less frequently. This suggests a shift of these activities from those groups (or generalists) to this new specialty area.

The NTMN survey also asks respondents to assess how their executives would rate the effectiveness of their company’s talent practices. You might expect that efforts at “impression management” would inflate the response to this question. Given the findings, we really hope they did not. Fewer than half of respondents rated core TM practices like high potential identification, development planning and assessing leaders as Always or Often Effective. Succession planning scraped by with 51% rating this practice as Effective.

Survey questions about the simplicity, transparency and accountability of those practices fared even worse. Barely 30% of respondents considered their development planning process Extremely or Mostly Easy to Use.

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While there may be many reasons that these practices aren’t working and that executives are unhappy with their company’s talent, only one is under our control. As an HR community, we own our capabilities and we need to collectively own improving them. The increased demand for great talent in our organizations makes this not only the ideal time to focus on this issue, but perhaps the last time we’ll have an opportunity to. It’s doubtful that corporate executives will tolerate much longer a department that is so clearly underperforming its potential.

The 4 + 2 Talent Management Capability Model

TM’s recent emergence as a field means that no clear success model has been developed yet. Based on our experience as TM consultants and practitioners, interviews with other well-regarded practitioners and input over the years from executive search leaders, we believe we have identified the factors that differentiate successful TM leaders.

We propose that there are six characteristics that differentiate a high performing TM leader. We consider four of these to be core – the proverbial “price of admission” required to operate at an acceptable level of effectiveness. Being great at these will bring a modicum of success, but they are only part of the equation. The other two are factors that separate the great from the merely very good. It is these two that elevate TM leaders to their highest level of effectiveness.

The Core Four

- **Business Junkie:** Knows business and loves business

- **HR Disciple:** Has comprehensive, first-hand knowledge of human resource disciplines
- **Production Manager:** Can build and consistently execute talent production processes
- **Talent Authority:** Understands the backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses and development needs of top talent

Business Junkie: Great talent leaders are permanently addicted to business – they need their daily fix to function. They show this by both knowing business and loving business. At a practical level, they are deep experts in their organization’s business. They understand the company’s strategy, how the products or services are produced, how the R & D process operates and how the company goes to market. They can pull apart their company’s (or any other company’s) income statement and balance sheet, and are able to trace human capital decisions back to the relevant line items. Their understanding comes from first-hand involvement in the business – sitting through marketing meetings, wandering the floor at the factory, going on sales calls.

In addition to knowing their business, they genuinely love business. They enjoy waking up each morning to participate in the capitalistic pursuit of making and selling things that produce a profit for their company, jobs for their employees and returns for their shareholders. Far from being “people focused” and reluctant participants in their companies, they advance a business-first agenda, in which they are responsible to get the best return from that corporation’s talent investment.

HR Disciple: The HR Disciple has a broad understanding of the core TM areas along with compensation, recruiting, organization development and engagement.

They are an avid student of the human resource discipline. They are able to effectively translate from academic abstraction to practical reality. According to the HR leaders we interviewed, there’s no substitute for broad based experience to grow one’s capabilities as an HR Disciple. Many cited executive recruiting experience as a great way to calibrate the gold standard for good talent.

Exposure to the other HR specialty areas (compensation, generalist, organization development, etc.) is equally important to ensure the TM leader has a holistic understanding of how those levers interact to drive performance. Another critical differentiator? Multi-company experience. There’s just no better way to gain perspective and depth than by seeing how HR challenges are handled in operating environments and under different business cultures.

Those desiring success in this field should actively seek out assignments, projects and other opportunities that broaden their experience in both different HR disciplines and different operating environments. No matter how superior one’s TM technical skills are, without this additional knowledge and experience it will be difficult to develop the credibility and perspective needed to excel.

Production Manager: Some in the TM field think of themselves as experienced craftspeople, building individual leaders by hand in a labor of love. The best in the field know that they are actually the production line managers on the talent factory floor. Their job is build and operate a process that turns out leaders who meet the specifications agreed to, in the time frame that was agreed upon. To them, the “talent factory” is not just an analogy – it’s reality.



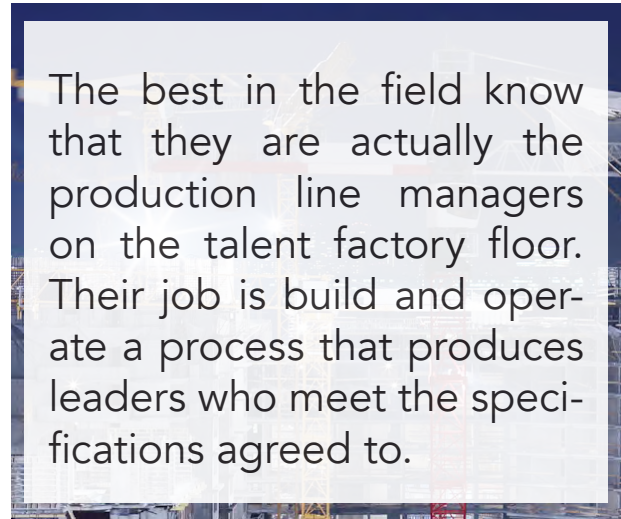
They approach their task with the same disciplined approach to process management as any other production leader. They understand the raw materials available to them, the tools that can most effectively cut, shape and polish that material, and how to ensure that the finished product meets quality standards and is distributed appropriately. They know how to keep the production line moving to produce leaders when needed. Excelling in this role means keeping those production processes simple. As Roger Cude, VP Talent Management for Humana, says, “Your processes must be elegant but simple. As a craft, we tend to overcomplicate things.”

Production manager skills can be gained through practice with classic project management tools like Pert and Gant charts, through exposure to six sigma methodology and most powerfully, through first hand experience in operations or supply chain roles. More important, and more challenging to develop, is the belief that talent should be produced with this mindset.

Talent Authority: Great talent leaders know their talent, cold. When the CEO calls unexpectedly asking for a slate of candidates, the talent leader can immediately list five names along with the strengths and weaknesses of each. The most expensive TM technology is no substitute for a talent leader’s nuanced knowledge of his charges.

A successful talent authority also has a great “eye for talent.” As subjective as that might sound, certain individuals have a talent for selecting talent. They understand what it takes to succeed in a given role and have the ability to quickly summarize how well a given candidate fits with those needs. This likely stems from matching a deep understanding of the business, its culture, and the patterns of past success, with an ability to ascertain how well someone would fit with the intellectual, cultural, political and relationship-based factors of the job. It’s tough to be a talent authority without this capability.

Becoming a talent authority only happens when the talent leader has a deep, personal knowledge of the organization’s talent. This means having one-on-one meetings with key talent where the talent leader builds trust as he gathers information about leaders’ careers, their ambitions and their management style. She must then integrate that information with all the other data



she has about that leader – derail factors, business performance, engagement performance – into a comprehensive 3-dimensional leadership profile. That effort requires a large investment of time, but yields great returns through more accurate and timely talent decisions.

The Differentiating Two

While TM leaders must be Business Junkies, HR Disciples, Production Managers and Talent Authorities, achieving their full potential requires even more. When at their best, TM leaders are a trusted advisor to senior leaders, often including the CEO. Their guidance has meaningful impact on the most critical talent choices made in the organization and, therefore, on the company itself. They provide insight and coaching to top leaders that is compelling enough to actually affect change. They achieve this level of impact by being a:

- **Trusted Executive Advisor:** Uses credibility and relationships with executives to influence key decisions
- **Courageous Advocate:** Is appropriately aggressive in advancing a point of view on talent, independent of its popularity

Trusted Executive Advisor: As a trusted advisor, the TM leader uses his knowledge, experience and insights to guide key people decisions in the business. But even with a strong level of technical expertise, a talent leader can only become a trusted advisor by flexing a different set of muscles. Being a trusted advisor means that

the relationship moves from the professional into the personal.

The TM leader demonstrating this behavior provides wise counsel on talent issues in a way that considers their client's ego, their personal hopes and fears, and reflects a deeper understanding of the organization's financial, operational and political realities. This requires that the TM leader:

- **Is professionally credible:** Professional credibility starts with demonstrating the Core Four we discussed earlier. The credible TM leader can integrate those ingredients in a way that allows the leader to continually make the "right" talent decisions for the organization. This includes being able to persuasively present and argue for a position using the right balance of facts and emotion. Without that capability they are destined to remain a technical specialist.
- **Forms strong executive relationships:** The quality of a TM leader's personal relationships with senior executives will determine whether they become a trusted advisor on talent issues. That strong relationship can only happen after the senior leader trusts that the talent leader has their best interest at heart. To get there, the TM leader will need to demonstrate that they understand the executive's personal and professional agendas and that they respond to the executive's ego needs. The TM leader will increase the relationship's strength after each interaction where the executive sees that they genuinely represent his or her best interests.

Courageous Advocate: The Courageous Advocate has a theory of the case about why specific talent choices should be made and they are appropriately aggressive in voicing that opinion. A difficult capability to master, many TM leaders fail on their path to greatness because they over or under use it. A Courageous Advocate:

- **Has a Theory of the Case:** A theory of the case is a fact-based, brief, logical and credible argument about why a talent decision should or shouldn't be taken. It is the concise expression of a deeply held viewpoint on why talent succeeds, the best way to develop talent, why talent fails and the learnings from hundreds of other talent interactions. A theory of the case might be that Mary can succeed as a new

general manager even though she's never led teams before because:

- **Point #1:** She is highly motivated to succeed in that role and she's breached similarly large gaps in her career development driven by that motivation.
- **Point #2:** Her personality characteristics are consistent with those who have successfully led teams through challenging times.
- **Point #3:** We have strong development and support mechanisms for general managers in our company.
- **Point #4:** She has a strong functional team around her who will provide support as she learns.

A well-developed point of view is at the core of being persuasive.

- **Is Appropriately Aggressive:** This phrase, provided by Kevin Wilde, former VP Talent Management at General Mills, captures a variety of nuanced behaviors that differentiate great TM leaders. To us, "appropriate" means knowing how to select which battles are worth fighting, knowing in which situations pushing back will be most productive and knowing the politically productive way to bring a potentially incendiary issue to the table. "Aggressiveness" means not being afraid to voice your opinions, to fight for what you believe is right and not to be afraid of pushing back just one more time.

The combination of a theory of the case and the appropriate amount of aggressiveness creates a TM leader who drives the right talent decisions in the right way.

We believe that 4 + 2 Talent Management model highlights the most differentiating capabilities for talent management leaders. Given that this field is still forming, it's possible that our view on these critical capabilities will change over time. What we know today, however, is that this young field is an inflection point where its credibility and impact are in question. We are confident that the closer that TM leaders fit with the 4 + 2 profile, the better the odds that this profession will realize its true potential.