It's a challenging and dynamic time to be in charge of talent. Challenging because labor is a seller's market, with the U.S. nearing full employment and a generation willing to leave jobs at the drop of a hat. Dynamic because that generation is one of four in the workforce right now, and 100% penetration of the mobile phone is opening up new technological possibilities in every sphere, including the talent space.

To try to make sense of this whirlwind, I'd like to tackle specific challenges and opportunities facing today's talent leaders one at a time. In future pieces, I'll address the changing roles of coaching, learning, data, organization design, and more, but for right now I'd like to focus on talent tools, which are so numerous and complex that even the analysts can't sort them all out, much less a busy HR pro.

I offer ten observations about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going — or at least should be going.

1. Talent management tools have focused on serving the needs of HR.

This may seem like a good thing. And it is. HR needs tools that help to move talent in and then move it around. And we should continue to expect innovation in this space, with better, faster, higher quality tools. But let's be clear. Talent management tools are created by HR and for HR. This leads to my second point.

2. Talent management tools are not built for nor willingly used by team leaders or team members. Nor should they be.

Here's a sentence you've never heard: "I've got a brand new team. I can't wait to get them on my HRIS!" These tools are not supposed to be used...
by the team leader, so don’t try to make them do it. It’s making a category error, like expecting a train to take you right to your doorstep. The train does an important job. But it’s not a car. Trying to make it one will serve everyone badly.

3. For your team leaders and members, you need Talent Activation tools.

These represent the next phase in talent tools. The focus of Talent Activation tools is on increasing engagement, retention, and performance in real time, in the real world. If talent management tools are your train, these are your car. They are where the rubber meets the road.

4. Talent Activation tools are built for the team leader, not for HR.

Why? Because performance and engagement don’t come from an HR mandate or even an executive one. They only come from the interaction of team leader and team member, on a real team doing real work. The primary metric to assess these tools is voluntary usage. If your team leaders don’t want to use your tool, then the team leaders aren’t wrong; your tool is wrong.

5. Any good Talent Activation tool must allow the team leader to create his or her teams.

Most tools are deployed against the static boxes on an org chart. Every team leader knows that those are not the place where the real work happens. It happens on cross-functional teams, project teams, teams the organization probably doesn’t even know exist. Everything we do with our talent — development, recognition, goals, engagement, performance ratings, diversity and inclusion — is deployed against org structures that don’t reflect real teams. The only plausible sources of truth about what teams are getting work done are the leaders of the teams. So empower them to create their own in your system, and deploy your tools against those.

6. To be useful, your Talent Activation tool must help the team leader answer three questions.

These are not HR questions. They’re the real-world questions every team leader needs to know the answers to:

• What are the strengths/capabilities of my people?
• What are my people doing right now, and how can I help?
• How are my people feeling right now, and how can I help them feel better?

In fact, when you break it down, every movie you’ve ever seen about a team, from Apollo 13 to Ocean’s 11 to The Avengers, basically follows this pattern of inquiry. Our storytellers instinctively know what teams are about. It’s time our talent tools did, too.

7. Talent Activation tools can’t just be empty tech.

They have to be infused with content that is personalized and relevant to the user. From Netflix to Alexa to the smart lock on my door, I’ve come to expect that every piece of tech I use today knows me. If my HR tech — whose sole purpose is to know and help me — treats me as a faceless cog in the machine, it’ll never get anywhere.

8. Talent Activation tools have to be integrated to be used.

The current crop of tools that we see in the world of Talent Activation are single point solutions. They’re siloed. Which means that the team leader will get buried under their unintegrated complexity. You can’t give people a personality tool that’s disconnected to an engagement tool, which doesn’t relate to the performance management tool, the recognition tool, or the leader development tool. Well, you can do that. But nobody will use them voluntarily. HR professionals need to tell providers that they need a unified tool set.

9. Talent Activation tools should be missing something. By design.

I mean they should intentionally leave out something very specific: feedback. We have tools today that will get you feedback on anything from anyone, anytime. But your people don’t want feedback. They don’t want you to tell them where they stand. They want you to help them get better. They want coaching. Please don’t fall for the feedback trap. There is no evidence that it drives performance.

10. When you serve the team leader, you serve HR.

Counterintuitively, you will serve HR most effectively by serving the team leader first. Because if your Talent Activation tools serve the team leader, they will be used. If they’re used, you will get data on:

• Which teams really exist in your organization
• The strengths and capabilities of people right now
• What people are actually working on right now
• Where engagement is at right now

The best way to get accurate, meaningful, real-time, real-world insights into what your teams are doing is to give your team leaders the right tools and let them go.

I have accused HR professionals of mistakenly using talent management tools in the Talent Activation space, but in truth it’s very understandable that they have. For one thing, Talent Activation tools are new on the scene, and we’re all learning what they’re capable of and what they should be. And what’s more, it’s in the interest of those who make the talent management tools to imply that their wares will address those broader talent issues. But it’s not in the interest of HR, and it’s certainly not in the interest of team leaders and team members. Talent management tools have their place, but that place is not in team leaders’ hands. Instead, leave talent management to the HR professionals, but give Talent Activation — the driving of engagement, retention, and performance — its due by putting the right tools in the hands of the people who can use them most effectively: your team leaders.

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