

When is talent not enough?

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A taboo exists when a cultural norm is violated. The field of human resources (HR) has many cultural norms, one of the most prominent being an increasing focus on talent. Some want to rename the HR field to something along the lines of people or talent management, human capital, or workforce planning. These labels imply an assumption that people are at the heart of organizations and HR policies and practices improve how people perform. HR's primary task is the management of talent.

Decades ago, my mentor (Bonner Ritchie) who convinced me to come into the profession had an adage, "organizations don't think, people do." He encouraged me to observe how people behaved in organizations as a way to understand how organizations worked. Ironically, the field was called "organization" behavior.

In the ensuing decades, I have become increasingly convinced that while people are the heart of organizations; they are not the key to organization success. In making a cake, there are many ingredients (flour, butter, sugar, eggs, etc.), but the cake is more than the ingredients. In systems theory, the system is more important than the individual parts. A steering wheel, engine, brakes, or other car parts do not make a car; the car exists as a system that integrates these individual parts.

Likewise, talent or people, are individual parts, but they uniquely exist when they come together as teams, departments, or organizations. So, my mentor's adage "organization's don't think, people do" may be more appropriate "organizations shape how people think and act."

The evidence of organizations mattering more than individuals comes from many sources. In the Academy Awards, about 20% of the time, the Best Picture of the year also has the Best Actor or Actress. In the NBA, about 15% of the time, the team with the top scorer won the NBA championship (5% without Michael Jordan). And, when Michael Jordan led the league in scoring and his team did not win the NBA championship (4 times), he averaged 34.55 points per game. In the six years that he led the league in scoring and won the championship, he averaged 30.5 points per game. About 20% of the time the winner of the Golden Boot (best talent) is also the winner of the World Cup. In hockey, the leading scorer wins the Stanley Cup about 25% of the time.

Like movies and sports, business today requires teamwork. To have sustainable organizations in a world of change and complexity, individual abilities must be combined into organization capabilities. Talent requires teamwork.

The HR passion for talent needs to be informed with an equal, or even greater, commitment to studying organizations. The HR field should be as interested in defining organization culture,

systems, processes, teamwork, workplace, and capabilities as talent related issues. HR practices create organizations as much as they drive individuals.