

Counterfeit Talent Management

It's all a big fake, charade, mirage, smoke and mirror exercise. Our company proclaims in its recruiting literature that it is a “people” focused company. In the annual report there is a message from the CEO about how “people are the reason for our success.” The workers in the trenches know that all these statements are for show and do not represent how things actually get done. This is not something that will land a company in jail like making counterfeit money, but it will be short changing the investors.

A counterfeit talent management process is easy to spot once you have the right “glasses.” Most likely the company does have an annual period when they collect data about its employees. The company spends money training and development. There is even a solid connection between performance and reward built into the compensation plan. And every year the company is out looking to recruit the best and brightest for its training programs. So what is wrong with this picture and how could it be labeled “counterfeit?”

Talent Management in our way of thinking has to do with outcomes, not activities. A legitimate TM process causes good employee churn and inspires employees to develop themselves. A TM that is working effectively happens both in good and bad economic cycles.

There are five signs to look for to determine if TM is a fake.

The first thing is placement of the current senior management. How many got there because they were products of the TM process? Did they follow a prescribed path, did they attend specified development programs inside and outside the company. Did they receive coaching and mentoring to fine tune their skills? If few or none of them got their jobs by thoughtful development plans, then it seems as if the current TM did not and does not apply to the most senior positions.

The second sign is the number and type of development, stretch assignments. In companies that have a well functioning TM, there are always positions at all levels of the company that have been created on a full time or temporary basis that are specifically designed to test and stretch top performers. Employees in these positions are monitored more frequently and more is expected of them.

The third sign is the existence of a very predictable, visible hierarchy of mandatory courses. When someone first becomes a manager, he or she is sent either before his or her appointment or very soon thereafter to the “first time manager” course. When someone is named to run a business for the first time, he or she gets sent to a general manager program either inside or outside the company and sometimes outside the country. There is a clear message sent to the individual that running a business is much different than running a function and it requires new and different skills.

The fourth sign to look for is senior managements involvement is the TM process. This pertains not merely to the annual paper exercise of reviewing the talent pool, but the actual coaching, guiding and mentoring of that talent base. For example do the senior managers believe in and subscribe to them being teachers. Do they make the time to participate in specific development programs for business managers? Do they make time to inspire and direct the new recruits? Do they walk the walk? Do they set an example by their own actions?

The fifth sign is the employees themselves. If a company wide employee attitude survey were taken, what kind of score would the company receive for the questions that have to do with career development, job opportunity, fun in the workplace and strength of management? In companies with a “showcase’ TM the surveys always report the same kind of story. The punch line is that management does not really care much about the employees.

TM has we all know is not a “book.” It is a way of thinking and acting. It should be a key activity for all managers and all employees. In some companies TM is ingrained in the culture. In that world a business manager would never think of having a conversation or review of a business without looking at strategy,

processes and people. In that business the same kind of conversation would take place if the business was growing, stagnant or declining.

When there is a “counterfeit” TM, there is generally no connection to the business bottom line and what happens to the people. If anything there exists a very shortsighted point. Management’s philosophy could be summarized as: if we need talent we hire it. We burn through them. And when they are not longer needed we let them go.

All the posturing, promo and hype in the company’s annual report does not a TM make. Unfortunately there are more fakes then originals. If only there was logo like the ones on clothing and purses that would clearly differentiate a fake from the real thing. In this case knowing and creating the real thing takes a little more digging and asking of questions. A lot of work has to be done by management teams that want TM outcomes instead of just PR.

The Curtiss Group can assess a company’s current TM process and provide a roadmap for how to link it to the strategic plan and make it work effectively.