Test Talents, Live Diversity And Increase Market Success – How Integrative Management Delivers In The Digital Age

By **Brigitte D. Lippmann** - Talent Advisor - Change Expert
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Until not too long ago, past experience and achieved results of a candidate were not only acceptable, but the most applied proxies to predict potential, future performance and success. This is changing partly caused by the digital transformation, but also triggered by the shifting industry lines, shortages in innovation, globalization, less predictable [political] settings and scarcity of suitably educated and skilled workforce. With that backdrop, we should search for talents with unconventional résumés, using different selection processes and adapted expectations.

The fast and complex world, in which our talents are supposed to work and lead successfully, requires different profiles.

In European and Mid-tier American companies, the "WHAT" of experiences still often determines recruiting and development of employees [what did they study/learn; what did they deliver; what was the range of responsibility; what the size of their teams]. This often leads to linear career ladders, which may work as long as organizations are lead in a top-down manner – be that by functional, geographic- or product- driven structures.
The digital world operates in project-like environments that are crossing departmental, geographic or functional boundaries. In that context, situational sense-making, inspiring communication, effective collaboration and the consideration of multiple perspectives are crucial for progress and success.

That challenging work environment paired with [often stereo-typical] preferences of the younger generation lead to career-lattices: flexible combinations of positions, roles and responsibilities that are much broader than careers of the past and that seldom move in a pure vertical fashion. [A concept that is not new in the US, but is quite novel in the mid-sized market in Germany, where this article was originally published.]

The HOW is as important as the WHAT

So,... if the WHAT is not sufficient to evaluate the next career step, what should we do to select our future leaders?

Companies can achieve more, if they also pay attention to the "HOW" of the talent's way to work and interact. Here are two elements to differentiate:

- The inner thinking-HOW: How does the talent make decisions? How does it solve problems? How does it weigh risk? How is it motivated? How quickly can talents apply what they have learned in a new, complex environment? ...
- The external action-HOW: How collaborative are employees? How integrative can they lead to results? How do they enable everyone to actively participate in the project? ....

For emerging talents, both "HOW's" and the "WHAT" can best be tested in projects or special operations, which are mostly individual ecosystems with clear objectives, time limits and departmental, cross-country or cross-functional reach. This environment helps to observe and interpret cause-effect results of taken actions/behaviors more isolated.

The thinking-HOW: Best practices are not the answer.

Specified goals and precisely communicated expectations are [in the best cases] rough guides to be interpreted by the agile leader. Digital transformation and acceleration of innovation make independent thinking, decisive action and timely analysis of results is fundamental. Future mistakes are avoided by learning loops with deliberate reflection leading potentially to course corrections. One rule is crucial to ensure this: mistakes are allowed once and as long as leaders learn from them [a challenging principle in some cultures – one example being German culture].

In our fast-moving world, the needed reflection of taken action is unfortunately not happening automatically, but must be established in an organization. Here, HR, managers and coaches can do a lot to develop talent. It's not about "best practices" [e.g., what was the situation, what was done, what was the result?], but a deeper questioning that simplifies transfer of learning in today's complex work environments: How was the situation analyzed? How were key issues identified? How have important insights been separated from less relevant lessons? ... Insights can be discussed as interdisciplinary learning in the project group or can even be a thought process in the mind of one individual - in each case they support new thinking and increase the flexible applicability of tools and experiences in the portfolio of employees.

The Action-HOW: Successful talents of the digital age lead integratively.

Problem-solving or innovation projects are usually staffed with a diverse group of individuals. Studies have shown that teams with people of different ages and gender from different functions, nations, experiences, hierarchy levels etc. are more successful economically than homogeneous teams. But to do this, the project leader must manage to lead such diverse groups and successfully support different ways of thinking. In these situations, the "Action-HOW" is most visible and is decisive,

whether challenges are mastered, new markets unlocked or innovative products / processes developed.

The Center for Talent Innovation defined 6 Behaviors which create integrative cultures [see sidebar]. It is defined as a working culture of open exchange: "listen-up-speak-up-culture. Integrative leaders create an atmosphere in which employees feel free to express views and ideas, contribute unorthodox methods, and suggest unconventional solutions. This productive openness, e.g., cultivates more "out-of-the-box" thought and includes more perspectives into the decision-making, which in turn supports e.g., a better understanding of markets and a quicker perception of potential problems.

6 integrative leadership behaviors

1. Ensure that everyone speaks up and gets heard
2. Makes it safe to risk proposing novel ideas
3. Empower team members to make decisions
4. Take advice and implement feedback
5. Give actionable feedback
6. Share credit for team success

Source: Center for Talent Innovation

Integrative leadership thus strengthens companies not only on the commercial level but also on the organizational level: employees feel valued, develop quicker and are happier. This does not only have positive effects on employee engagement and absence indicators, but also on the – these days critical – "employer branding".

Meaning, the talents that lead their teams and projects integrative are the more successful ones: the proven leaders for tomorrow.

Conclusion:

- Digital transformation and acceleration of innovation impact the skills we require from tomorrow's talents for their selection.
- Talent management should consider not only the "WHAT" of the CV but also the Thinking-HOW and the Action-HOW.
- Diversity is omnipresent - if allowed. Integrative behaviors help companies to successfully leverage this diversity.
- In projects, processes and behavior can be tested and observed relatively independently. Successfully used methods and insights can develop talent and also rub off on the organization and influence the leadership culture in a future-oriented way.

Developing talents to agile and integrative executives is necessary for market success – it is an absolute must for digital transformation.