

# UPSHOT FOR MANAGING EXECUTIVE TALENT

## **1. Managing executive talent begins with a point of view on leadership, a model.**

- a. Leadership models ought to be brief enough to be memorable, complex enough to be interesting to managers.
- b. Reflect the central tension in leadership—rather than uni-dimensional lists, how about representing the trade-offs?
- c. Two big tensions cover the lion's share of senior leadership:
  - Forceful vs. Enabling (how)
  - Strategic vs. Operational (what)At a minimum, make sure your home-grown models cover these.
- d. A higher-order principle can integrate the model and provide focus. We prefer "versatility" or balance—which may be the queen of all competencies.
- e. The model is a vehicle for shaping the leadership culture—and ought to be used by top management for this purpose.

## **2. Instrumentation needs to be consistent with the model—and designed with usability firmly in mind.**

- a. The first goal of assessment is to distinguish high from low performance. Typical rating scales don't do this well: 85% of scores are between 3.5 and 4.5.
- b. Typical rating scales obscure "what to do?," the key question in development. You have to measure overdo and underdo separately to find out how to improve.
- c. Can't assess balance without measuring overdo and measuring pairs of opposing dimensions to balance.

## **3. Implications for leadership development.**

- a. Too often, we inadvertently send the message that "more is better." Yet, many a performance problem is a strength taken too far. If we're going to identify strengths in leaders, must we not also capture strengths overused?
- b. Half of development is the mental game. While working directly on behavior is a great lever for change, don't forget the inner work of development, another terrific source of leverage for development.

*Source:* Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser, "Rethinking Executive Assessment," in HRPS workshop: *Building and Managing Executive Talent*, San Francisco, CA, September 13-14.

- c. Remember the leverage that comes with getting the strengths to sink in. The step prior to capitalizing on strengths.
- d. The central development need for leaders is arguably lack of balance. Because it is widespread among leaders and because it taps into the basic tendency in human beings to go one-dimensional, to think in black-and-white terms, to polarize. And lopsided leadership is a telltale sign of ineffectiveness.
- e. Versatility is an ultimate goal. While many may never fully get there, it is still a good target to shoot for.

#### **4. Implications for staffing.**

- a. Be wary of "playing to strengths." You risk overdeveloping strengths and making blind spots out of untested areas. Besides, the key to growing as a leader is a broad range of challenging stretch assignments.
- b. Promotion based on track record is risky. What gets you up the ladder isn't always what makes you effective at the next level. (Witness the prevalence of overdo Forceful and Operational, and scarcity of Strategic and Enabling among execs.)
- c. Be careful what you recruit for. Keep in mind what comes with a leadership specialty. For instance, a turnaround artist isn't likely to have a gentle bedside manner. An innovative visionary isn't likely to be detailed and disciplined. Try to keep opposites in mind—and recognize the trade-offs (and what you're willing to trade off).
- d. Staff around an executive's limitations. Building teams with managers who have complementary skill-sets can bring balance. The prerequisite: The individuals must value what he or she lacks.
- e. Staff for counterbalancing. Leaders who go overboard—for example, on strategic reach or using power—need someone or something to balance them. The prerequisite: the leader is open to that influence.