



What's all this about Talent?

The flyer for the first Talent Officer Conference, held recently in the USA, said 'The most important corporate resource in the coming years will be talent.' The conference was addressed by 'Talent Officers' from organisations such as IBM, Fidelity and KPMG. (Some US companies are replacing their HR Director with a Chief Talent Officer).

The big push in the USA seems to have come from a McKinsey study published in 1998 under the title 'The War for Talent'. As so often happens the UK has taken up the idea. The recently formed Talent Foundation talks of organisations 'fighting a costly war for talent' and articles and books are appearing quoting this 'talent war' metaphor.

On the positive side the invocation of 'talent' may be a necessary counterblast to mechanistic ideas about competence. Given a choice of an employer's reference describing you, would you prefer 'This person is competent' or 'This person is talented'? Talent allows us to get out of the mediocrity of competence into recognising the varying talents of people in organisations.

This use of 'talent' can imply a holistic quality and this can be of value in moving beyond reductionist competence lists. However a holistic approach is being used by some writers to justify a sheep and goats model; there are the chosen few talented people and there are the rest. This elitism is not justified by the evidence. A talented rugby player may not be talented at tennis – and vice versa. And neither may be talented at music or management. A talented finance director can turn out to be a disaster as a CEO.

A feature of the elitist use of talent leads to talk of a 'talent pool'. This metaphor has come to mean that there are limited numbers of talented people and you need to fish them out of the pool. The proponents of this view then switch metaphors to argue for a 'war'. The original McKinsey article says that the war was once 'a sequence of set piece recruiting battles' but is now 'an endless series of skirmishes'. I'm not sure that these bloodthirsty metaphors are helpful.

What is more heartening is that there are many who take a developmental view and see the nurturing of the talents of all employees as a priority. However we also have to be careful about excessive individualism. The evidence from learning organisation research is that developing individuals is not enough. The often-quoted critique is that you can have a team where each individual has an IQ of 150 but the collective IQ is 50. It may be of limited value to develop people as individuals if other features of the work place are not conducive to high performance.

Ultimately we need to consider if we need to use the term 'talent'. Research evidence has shown that investing in the people side of the business pays off. We need more key decision-makers to recognise this. If invoking the concept of 'talent' is needed to do this, then so be it.

By Professor Ian Cunningham