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diversity in talent management
conceptual models: A
commentary on “The psychology
of talent management: A review
and research agenda”**

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**Appreciating and ‘retooling’ diversity in talent management conceptual models: A
commentary on “The psychology of talent management: A review and research agenda”**

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Abstract:

This commentary on “The Psychology of Talent Management” suggests that readers should avoid concluding that the diversity of talent management concepts across psychological disciplines is something to be “corrected,” and instead embrace it as a resource to be tapped for future understanding. It suggests two frameworks to enhance these efforts: “Retooling” talent management using well-known frameworks applied to more traditional organizational resources, and tapping research on “shared mental models” through which teams articulate and appreciate their diverse concepts of tasks and goals.

“The psychology of talent management: A review and research agenda” (Dries, 2013—this issue) provides an intriguing summary of the different perspectives on talent, by reviewing several psychological disciplines, providing a useful reminder of the implicit assumptions about talent, in the minds of researchers, leaders or practitioners. It has a particular value as a reminder that much writing and practice in talent management provide little definition of the “talent” concept, and to call for greater attention to definitional and implicit assumptions. I found very useful the articulation of distinctions such as talent as embodied in the individual versus talent embodied in capacities, between talent as egalitarian versus talent as the elite, and talent employment versus deployment.

The article's narrative and tables nicely articulate how these and other distinctions carry important implications for research and practice. Indeed, I found one compelling message to be that there is much promise in integrating and explicating conflicting definitions and assumptions about talent. I foresee the article motivating useful and well-intended research to better

illuminate these conflicts, resolve them and strive for more commonality in the talent definition.

In this commentary, I wish to sound a cautionary note against the conclusion that talent management research and practice require a common definition to advance. The article does not directly suggest this, but it would be regrettable if it motivates debates about syntax and technical differences in meaning. There is a risk that we miss the valuable opportunities it suggests for an appreciation of diversity and the integration and synergy that comes with such an appreciation. A comprehensive and common talent definition is not necessary for improving talent systems that enhance individual, organization and social contributions of talent management. Nor is a common definition necessary to future integrative research. Even today, the implicit meaning of talent varies, but is often sufficient for organizations to accomplish very valuable talent management contributions.

I respectfully propose that a potentially overlooked value of this article, and the debates it will motivate, goes beyond reconciling diverse talent definitions, to exploiting the value in such diversity.

Here, I will provide examples of frameworks to guide research and practice exploring the means through which such diversity develops and is expressed. Codifying and illuminating this diversity can make talent management systems more effective, and illuminate unstated assumptions that cause sub-optimization or implementation difficulties. This is true even if we do not need to resolve them. A very intriguing objective is to examine how and why different constituents, disciplines and organizational systems may simultaneously embody different talent definitions or “mental models,” and what those differences reveal about unaddressed issues of theoretical understandings and practical application.

For example, I found Table 2 and the associated narrative to be very useful, and to suggest both synthesis and very healthy differences between the different domains, such as I/O

psychology and educational psychology. The concise depiction of the criteria, contributions and gaps was helpful in illuminating the surprising diversity of views. It is striking that such diversity exists even within a relatively common discipline of psychology, let alone if one included related disciplines such as labor economics, anthropology, political science and sociology. However, it is also true that in the space of a single article, such a wide-ranging summary cannot fully capture the cross-domain relationships. Thus, the articulation of the main gaps in Table 2 is helpful, but might incorrectly lead readers to conclude that the main goal should be to either reconcile these gaps, or perhaps to reject the domain because its findings or research methods are not compatible with other domains. While the article does not suggest this, I believe it is useful to emphasize the point that the value may be in the diversity, and a worthy challenge is to search for frameworks that can both acknowledge and incorporate that diversity.

I will develop these ideas using two related concepts. The first is “Retooling Human Resources (HR)” (Boudreau, 2010), which means tapping the power of accepted frameworks from other disciplines to reframe HR, and thus talent management, in ways that better illuminate hidden assumptions and opportunities to integrate diverse definitions. For example, one can reframe employee turnover using frameworks from operations and logistics that optimize inventory turnover. The second is the concept of “mental models” and in particular the research showing that shared mental models (SMMs) have powerful effects on the performance of teams (Boudreau, 2012).

I will also propose that an emerging discipline—cognitive psychology—should be considered as an addition to the disciplines noted in this article, and as a further source of potential understanding about talent management decisions.

1. “Retooling HR”: seeing talent management through the lens of business disciplines

The article effectively demonstrates the diversity of views of “talent” across different psychological disciplines, and provides an interesting platform to consider the diversity with which talent is viewed across business disciplines. “Retooling HR” reframes HR questions with the logic of disciplines such as finance, marketing, operations management and engineering. These are often logical frameworks that leaders outside of HR understand and trust. More important for this commentary, such frameworks often provide ways that leader appreciate and integrate diverse views of concepts such as inventory, risk, and optimization. Like “talent,” such concepts have a variety of definitions, but frameworks such as return-on-investment or inventory-optimization help leaders understand the distinctions well enough to improve their decisions.

For example, items in inventory can be seen as creating value for what one can sell them for in their present form, but they can also be seen as creating value for what they can be transformed into through further refinement within the organization. Inventory optimization frameworks have long helped leaders articulate, discuss and resolve the dilemmas associated with inventory value and use. Applying the analogy to “talent,” the article shows that talent is considered both as embodied in the person as they exist today (“play to the strengths”), or embodied in how the person might be further developed (“enhance the areas of weakness”).

Could business frameworks such as inventory management help leaders better appreciate, explicate and integrate such talent definitions? Table 1 shows how several talent-management questions and research frameworks can be retooled to draw on the logic of traditional business frameworks.

The table can inform some of the dilemmas noted in the article. For example, the contrast between the HRM operationalization of “talent as capital” and the I/O psychology criterion of “predictive validity” (noted in Table 2 of the article) is analogous to the financial dilemma of

seeing investments as assets with value today, and simultaneously as resources whose future value must be predicted. Financial portfolio analysis has long helped leaders both acknowledge this distinction, but also reconcile it to make financial decisions. Similarly, the article notes the positive psychology operationalization “talent as strength” and the potential limits of the implicit assumption that all organizations have the capacity to assign everyone to positions that match their strengths. Table 1 shows that this is similar to the dilemma that engineers face when setting specifications for product or service components, knowing that with limited resources not all specifications can be “excellent,” and some risk of failure must be accepted. The key is to optimize how one distributes “excellence” across components so that it creates the greatest value and lower quality creates the least risk.

Thus, by “retooling” talent dilemmas using business logic, one may find untapped frameworks to help leaders navigate the diversity so nicely articulated in the article. Moreover, because business logic frameworks such as finance, operations and engineering are familiar to business leaders outside of HR, their learning may be faster and their acceptance enhanced (Boudreau, 2010; 2012).

2. Mental models as a mechanism for understanding and enhancing diverse talent perceptions

An objective of “retooling” is to find common frameworks that integrate mental models about HR with mental models about more traditional resources. A mental model is an explanation of someone's thought process about how something works in the real world (Answers.com, 2011). It represents the relationships between its various parts and the often-intuitive perceptions about cause and effect or actions and consequences. Mental model theory suggests that reasoning depends not only on objective or logical forms, but on the mental models

that represent them (Johnson-Laird, 1983).

The article vividly shows that various research domains in psychology approach talent with different mental models. The retooling examples above and in Table 1 suggest that HR leaders and non-HR leaders may also approach talent with different mental models, but that they can be integrated. If retooling HR can contribute to shared mental models (SMMs) among academics in different disciplines, and between HR leaders and non-HR leaders, perhaps the research on SMMs suggests untapped opportunities to find common ground and improve performance. If we think of HR leaders and their non-HR counterparts as a team, or of researchers from different domains of psychology as a team, then research on how teams benefit from shared mental models (SMMs) is illuminating as a theoretical basis for predicting the effects of retooling and reframing HR decisions.

An SMM is a team's shared representation, comprising shared knowledge, skill, attitudes, the team's objectives, team processes, teamwork components, communication, coordination, adaptation, roles, behavior patterns, and interactions (Cooke et al., 2003). Research suggests that SMMs among team members have many positive effects (Johnson & O'Connor, 2008):

- Teammates who have similar beliefs and knowledge structure are better able to anticipate their teammates' actions and information needs and to respond effectively (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993; Rouse, Cannon-Bowers, & Salas, 1992; Smith-Jentsch, Campbell, Milanovkh, & Reynolds, 2001).
- High levels of SMMs lead to greater team expectations that influence effective team behaviors (Rouse et al., 1992).
- Teams with SMMs require less overt planning because teammates are able to predict what others will expect, thus reducing the need to explicitly communicate (Rouse et al., 1992).

- Teams with SMMs use their shared knowledge to adapt quickly to changing task demands (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993).

The “psychology of talent management” article (Dries, 2013—this issue) articulates the differences in mental models across psychology disciplines, and I would suggest this can be an invitation for researchers from different domains of psychology to compare and understand their respective mental models, and perhaps develop shared mental models across their disciplines. This would certainly not mean attempting to adopt any one disciplinary framework, because the article makes clear that all of the disciplines bring useful features. The SMM research suggests that it may be possible to accept the differences, find common ground where cross-disciplinary assumptions coalesce, and also find the unique value in incorporating the differences.

In the same way, the cross-disciplinary differences identified in the article may help us understand how different mental models are applied to talent decisions by leaders in organizations (Boudreau, 2012). Experience suggests that organizational leaders often find it difficult to distinguish “talent” as the person from the “talent” as the attributes of the person. For example, leaders in one unit are often reluctant to give up their high performer, to allow that high-performer to move on to development opportunities in other units, because they cannot imagine a replacement that will precisely match that individual high performer.

In contrast, HR leaders, seeing talent as fungible across individuals, create talent systems that assume development is possible and that one person's contributions can be replaced.

Similarly, organization leaders often approach talent management as if it applied only to their elite high-potentials (similar to the “gifted” idea in the article), making them reluctant to take time to manage talent that is not part of the elite group. HR may develop programs based on assumptions that many employees will benefit from talent development and its effects are not limited to the top group. I propose that a combination of well-articulated differences (as in the

“psychology of talent management” article by Dries, 2013—this issue), plus analytical and logical frameworks to bridge the gap between constituents (as in “Retooling HR”), and a focus on the shared and unshared elements of mental models, may provide a path toward both honoring the diversity of views, and harnessing that diversity for more creative approaches to talent management.

3. Conclusion

The article, “The psychology of talent management” (Dries, 2013—this issue) provides a thought-provoking articulation of just how differently talent can be conceived, even by closely related disciplines. It correctly makes that point that with the ever-increasing importance of talent as a social and organizational resource, and of relationships such as employment and organizational membership as vital crucibles of social interaction, efforts to better understand and appreciate these differences are well-founded. While “it’s the talent stupid” is not yet the motto of most HR organizations, it is a sentiment that might well become a useful guide for many organization leaders. Rather than seeing diversity across talent conceptualizations as something to be “fixed,” future researchers and practitioners might be well advised to see the diversity as something to be appreciated and nurtured.

I would suggest that “retooling” talent decisions using frameworks that have proven valuable to such efforts with other more traditional resources may advance this effort. Understanding how mental models can be more fully shared may also offer fruitful directions for research and practice.

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