

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

## Career-Building Part Two: Developing Talent for Competitive Advantage

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

Succeeding in today's complex global marketplace is extremely challenging. Fundamentally, it requires that organizations accelerate the development and deployment of unique talents to create new solutions and resolve multifaceted problems — and do so more quickly and effectively than ever before. But how?

Career-building is the answer. Just as career-building offers individuals new opportunities for personal growth and relevance (as discussed in the last issue of *The StraightTalk Coach*), it also offers organizations a new paradigm for establishing and sustaining competitive advantage.

### Building Careers to Drive Organizational Success

For organizations, career-building means intentionally developing and deploying talent to create a superior market position. Adopting career-building as a success strategy requires a significant shift, because most organizations' human resources management efforts are entrenched in producing longevity — that is, acquiring and retaining talent.

Career-building requires another emphasis entirely. Organizations must instead redirect their human resources

management efforts to produce essential and exceptional abilities — and deploy them strategically.

Embracing career-building as a competitive strategy profoundly changes an organization's relationships with employees. It entails a concerted focus on developing the endlessly evolving *T*Mght skills that sharpen an organization's marketplace difference-makers, and then more flexibly and rapidly deploying those differentiating talents as new threats or opportunities emerge. For example, an organization may fully leverage an individual's talents by assigning her to several teams simultaneously.

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**T**Talented people  
need organizations less  
than organizations need  
talented people.

~ Daniel Pink

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Most organizations delegate talent management to their human resources departments. No such delegation is possible in a career-building world. Although career-building transforms what a human resources department does and how it does it, truly developing

and deploying talent for competitive advantage demands that every leader become the *T*Chief Career Builder for her group, team, division or entire organization.

### Career-Building for Competitive Advantage

Start structuring a career-building value chain in your organization by addressing the following questions:

1. What are our difference-making competencies today? What will they be tomorrow? Fully understanding your organization's future differentiators is essential to identifying the talents you must develop to achieve them. Be careful to anchor this process in an external orientation: Career-building cannot create competitive advantage if it does not anticipate current and future customer needs.

2. What leadership, culture and systems will optimize developing and deploying those talents? Career-building requires an unprecedented level of flexibility — backed by solid systems — to monitor each individual's unique talents and limitations and offer appropriate deployment and development opportunities. The organization also needs fluid structures to support effective team-building and individuals'

participation on multiple teams. New compensation structures that reward horizontal as well as vertical progress are also required.

As Chief Career Builder, each leader will need a better understanding of his employees' strengths, limitations and impact on advancing the organization's strategic objectives, as well as awareness of what situations will encourage the greatest contributions from and development of each individual.

3. How can we accelerate the pace of learning to drive greater innovation and better results? Creating and sustaining competitive advantage through career-building means accelerating the pace of learning to improve innovation and results simultaneously. Constantly drawing on broad and deep sources of knowledge inside and outside the organization will become the norm. Instead of silos responsible for a single product, service or function, career-building requires a highly matrixed organization that fosters an optimal balance of business innovation and results.

Exploring these questions and acting on the answers ± even within a leader's group or division ± can improve an organization's relevance to employees and its competitive position. Yet many organizations can go even further to become **Leading-edge career-builders**.

### **Leading-Edge Builders**

Leading-edge builder organizations will be flexible, energized and highly relevant. Leading-edge builders will be actively pursued by leading practitioners and other talented individuals because leading-edge builders will offer new challenges and growth opportunities that enhance their marketability. Customers will rely on leading-edge builders and competitors will fear them because of the exceptional skills they apply to resolve difficult problems and create new products.

Leading-edge builders also feature a distinctive culture, one characterized by a consistent external orientation, StraightTalk, continuous learning and strong team orientation, all of which make profound contributions to rapid

development and deployment of unique talents.

### **Becoming a Leading-Edge Career-Builder**

Transforming your organization into a leading-edge builder entails continuously working through the following five-step process:

1. Assess, assess, assess. Assessing talent is essential because it provides information with which to career-build strategically. The better you understand your organization's future competitive advantage and the difference-making capabilities needed to achieve it, the better you can design systems to develop those abilities. Keep asking, **What emerging talents are needed?** and **Where are our talent gaps?**

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**the empires of the future will be empires of the mind.**  
~ Winston Churchill

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An effective assessment process should be externally and internally focused. It includes constantly gauging anticipated market needs against the strengths and limitations of individual players so you can create new teams to innovate and deliver better results. Assessment also includes measuring how development efforts are affecting each individual and the broader organization.

2. Deploy for talent synergy. Offer assignments to individuals in roles and on teams that create unique skill sets for overcoming challenges and generating new solutions. Leading practitioners who add value to many teams simultaneously and/or those who contribute laterally across various functions will be highly prized.

3. Deploy for chemistry. Strengthen relationships with customers by consciously matching your unique talents to their specific needs. Constantly evaluate and refine your understanding of targeted market segments and the difference you make for them. Then construct teams

whose **Chemistry of talents** fits your customers' **Chemistry of needs**.

4. Establish alliances. Alliances are crucial because organizations must maintain a sharp focus on the constantly shifting intersection of unique talents and customer needs. Strong alliances ± with suppliers, vendors or even customers ± can assume non-core functions or periodically add particular talents to overcome a challenge or capitalize on a specific opportunity.

Creating and managing alliances is a distinct leadership skill your organization may need to develop. The success of your alliances will also depend on the quality of your assessment process. It is difficult if not impossible to accurately identify which functions are appropriate to delegate to alliances if you do not first accurately define the competitive advantage you are seeking and the core competencies needed to achieve it.

5. Design learning into everything. Customer needs and markets are evolving so quickly that organizations must increase the speed, quality and outcome of learning by planning it into every activity. This may call for greater investment in knowledge management technology, as well as establishing teams responsible for creating and disseminating new knowledge.

Fostering such learning places new demands on leaders, who must balance the need to improve results with the need to develop new knowledge and create centers of excellence around the organization's competitive advantage.

Becoming a leading-edge builder will challenge almost every aspect of how your organization operates. Yet the rewards can be tremendous.

Organizations that successfully career-build for competitive advantage will enjoy relevance that attracts the most desirable talent. They will offer increasingly valuable difference-makers that captivate lucrative customers. Above all, leading-edge career-builders will have the capacity to create and sustain a significant competitive advantage ± today and in the future. **HK**

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