



Management and Performance Associates – March 2011

The Waters of March

“And the river bank sings
Of the waters of March,
It's the promise of spring,
It's the joy in your heart.”

This is the chorus to *Waters of March*, a song created by the great Brazilian composer Tom Jobim. The song, chosen by a panel of Brazilian journalists and musicians as the best Brazilian song of all time, has been recorded by a number of international stars. If you don't know the song, here is a link to a bilingual rendition by jazz artist Susannah McCorkle: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m478jgmhdTw>

The original lyrics in Portuguese refer to the “closing” of summer in Brazil. When translating the lyrics to English, Jobim adapted it to the northern hemisphere, and the “promise of spring” was included.

It doesn't matter where you're reading this article, north or south, summer or winter. March is when the year really begins. In the South, it's after carnival & summer vacations. In the North, it's after the holidays & winter storms (including the occasional trip to the Caribbean to defrost). Everywhere, January and February are consumed with planning for the year. March is when your planning and hopes turn into execution & results. And the “promise of spring” brings the hope that this year, all managers will have fully competent and motivated staff in order to achieve their aggressive performance goals.

Although it is a critical leadership competence, identifying, developing and retaining talent has become cliché. We apologize, however, this is the right time of the year to revisit this theme. One season is over, another one begins, and we need to prepare for it. Having the right resources will help us achieve our goals. We don't only mean headcount. In today's competitive, changing and complex business environment being *just* competent is not enough. We need staff that is

talented, with above average (and different) abilities and high motivation.

Leading organizations cannot accomplish their vision if they do not change the way their leaders hire and manage people. Simply put, we cannot hire an “average Joe or Jane” and then expect them to be creative, innovative, and flexible as conditions change. Please don't be offended by the expression “Average Joe or Jane.” What we mean is somebody probably very good at what they do--technically--but scenarios change. Performance expectations change. Employees that were “competent” 'til a minute ago may become underperformers without the proper set of competencies, i.e. adaptability to change, flexibility, ability to learn, dealing with ambiguity, influencing without power, innovation and creativity, to name a few.

This month we would like to share some tips on identifying talent. Our next newsletter will expand on talent development, and later we'll cover Retention. One common theme for all three of these articles will be managing a meritocracy. The only criteria for hiring, developing, deciding on promotions and compensation should be talent based.

1 - Be on constant lookout for talent, regardless of the job opening

Staff, especially the talented ones, may leave. Top performers, even in a high unemployment scenario, are the ones being headhunted. When they leave (or get transferred, go on a leave of absence, get sick, retire or even die) it's already too late to 'start' looking. By constantly networking we will be on a permanent lookout for talent and not just externally. Sometimes the replacement is right under our nose and we may be unaware of it. We need to talk to our own people, understand their dreams, motivations, potential, and their willingness to relocate. We may not know that Mary is studying for her MBA on weekends and that Paul is attending evening classes to get his degree.



One big lesson we at MAPA Consulting learned some time ago is that talent is everywhere. Our natural tendency is to look for people already performing a similar job, instead of those who have transferable competencies. Perhaps the next sales manager does not have to come from Sales...

On the external front, we need to keep our eyes open in order to take advantage of every external event (professional associations, cocktails, fairs, training sessions, and business trips). Once you find talent, keep them in your radar.

2. Hire 'best in class,' don't settle for 'best available'

Another lesson that we've all learned the hard way. Don't waste headcount. Treat internal and external candidates with the same criteria. A common practice, unfortunately, when we are pressed for time, is to interview three candidates and hire the best of the three. Careful, the best of the three might be far from desirable. Keep interviewing, don't hire until the best in class for *that* position is found. Best in class is not someone who is overqualified. Run away from the MBA if the job offered is entry level and repetitive.

3. Understand the job at hand

Before asking Human Resources to start recruiting, or before we ourselves start talking about the position available to our acquaintances and potential candidates, we need to be clear about the job at hand. Once hired, what is this person supposed to do? To do it well (not just survive it) what competencies need to be present? What is the job now and how it is expected to change in the future? Remember the mix of technical and *soft* competencies. Also, be clear on the job requirements (travel schedules, languages, certifications, etc...) If the position is for a sales manager start listing the leadership competencies. Emphasize the managerial expertise, not the sales experience.

4. Explore situations where the candidate has used the competency in the past

The idea of behavioral interviewing is asking a set of open ended questions for each competency identified as critical for performance. Listen to what the candidate is saying. Probe and get to the core of the issue until satisfied that the competency is present – or not. Focus on the competencies, not on job titles. The candidate may have acquired the competency we are looking for in a completely different way, industry or field. Questions should be structured so as to ascertain the candidate's use of the competency, focusing on applied behaviors and lessons learned.

Two examples: instead of asking a candidate if s/he speaks Spanish, conduct the whole interview in Spanish (assuming it is required for the job). Instead of asking "Do you have a good relationship with your peers?" say:

"Unfortunately, we all have had a conflict with our peers." Pause. Then say: "Tell me of one disagreement you have had with your peers." Listen to what they say, how they say it, listen to what they are *not* saying. Probe: "What specifically did you do in managing the situation?" Continue: "What was the impact on the relationship? What did you learn from this situation?"

One final hint: use the same set of questions for every candidate. Internal and External. It will help in comparing different candidates and in making the right decision.

5. Involve others in the decision

After interviewing several candidates have a discussion with other interviewers. What is the feedback from HR? What does our boss think of the candidates? What was the impact on peers?

Pay special attention to gaps (demonstrated competencies versus desired competencies). Can they be developed on the job? Remember that it is easier (and feasible) to teach candidates with good potential about the technical aspects of the job.



Much harder (if not impossible) to change them when the gap is in personal characteristics (lack of interpersonal skills, cannot see the big picture, has no flexibility, does not learn on the go, not wired for change, sees all as black or white, etc...)

“When working with talent management strategies, many times we place an exclusive focus on people whom we consider to be high potentials. In one way, this approach is correct, as it allows us to differentiate in the application of resources and available opportunities to those who will disproportionately impact the organizational future. On the other hand, my professional experience has demonstrated that it is fundamental to implement a dual approach: differentiated strategies for these few exceptional professionals and general strategies for the remaining 95% who actually carry the organization forward. These two approaches clearly complement each other and are valid both for institutional and individual initiatives, for each manager to implement with his/her team.”

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See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

To know more of our training programs, please send us an e-mail to:

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