

TOPIC 4: BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAPS - ENSURING YOUR SLT HAS THE SKILLS YOU NEED



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IN THIS ARTICLE, I PROVIDE SOME TIPS ON MANAGING UNDERPERFORMANCE, CONDUCTING SKILLS GAP ANALYSIS AND ON HIRING NEW TALENT. I ALSO DESCRIBE THE COMMON TRAPS OF MICRO-MANAGEMENT AND ABDICATION INSTEAD OF DELEGATION IN MANAGEMENT.



INTRODUCTION

A team can only perform to the level of its weakest players and if you look at any elite sports team you will find a group of highly skilled and motivated individuals, performing at the top of their game, to a clearly defined game plan.

Team members train daily throughout their careers to perfect their skill, stamina and mentality and then apply these qualities as required by their team; because when a player fails to deliver the manager quickly looks to the substitutes bench to minimise any impact. And should the shortfall in contribution continue, he may turn to the transfer market, to strengthen the squad with fresh skills, or a better mentality. Unfortunately, you are unlikely to have a substitutes bench of top-class players warmed up and ready to go, or the kind of financial resources these teams have available to invest in talent. Even if you had, it is important to avoid the instability, or fear of failure, that can develop from excessive chopping and changing of personnel, which can devastate an otherwise positive and progressive culture.

Nevertheless, these same fundamental principles apply to businesses, and it is the CEO's primary role to extract the required performance from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), which may involve refreshing or upgrading by adding (or replacing) team members when and where required. This is something of a balancing act that needs to be managed judiciously, especially in a growth environment, where stretch is continuously applied. It may help you to better apply this (sometimes uncomfortable) principle if you understand that most people know when they are falling short. This is fine (healthy even) for a short period; however, if an individual underperforms repeatedly or for an extended period not only does the business suffer, but so does the individual concerned. No one benefits from these situations.

So, how do successful CEOs objectively manage their SLTs through such transitions? Well, the starting point is identifying the skills required to execute your business plan and matching them to the skills and capabilities within the current team. This helps to determine if they have 'round pegs in round holes or square pegs in round holes', and where it is the latter, what best to do about it. This process is commonly referred to as **skills gap analysis**. Once this analysis has been conducted, a decision can be made regarding how best to lead and develop the team, manage underperformers and/or recruit new talent.



STARTING AT THE TOP

It is all too easy to focus on the qualities and performance of those around you and ignore the fact that the business starts and ends with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). It is vital that the CEO provides an example for others to aspire to, through:

- Communicating a clear vision and strategy
- Demonstrating a positive can-do attitude
- Adopting an inclusive, performance based, team culture
- Using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as an objective means of monitoring business trajectory and decision making
- Promoting personal and professional development

It is often lonely at the top. Therefore, the support of a good Chairman and board can greatly assist a CEO's performance. They can add value in both technical/functional subjects and in a CEO's personal development. Consider your own support network and build this up actively to provide you with the help you need, such as finding a mentor or recruiting an advisory board.



I HAVE ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH MY TEAM EVERY MONDAY. MONDAY IS BEST AS YOU ARE COMING FRESH TO THE WEEK. YOU CAN REFLECT ON WHAT YOU ACCOMPLISHED LAST WEEK AND SET UP YOUR TARGETS FOR WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE THIS WEEK. IT IS HELPFUL TO HAVE EVERYONE'S GOALS FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS DOCUMENTED SO EVERYONE KNOWS THEIR PRIORITIES AND HOW WE CAN HELP EACH OTHER. WE USE ASANA TO TRACK ALL THOSE TASKS.

- NICHOLAS KURIA, GENERAL MANAGER, PIT VIDURA, RWANDA

MICROMANAGEMENT, DELEGATION, AND ABDICATION.

Delegation is one of the most important skills for a CEO to perfect and yet it is a core skill I rarely see well demonstrated in the enterprises I engage with. Delegation is the organised transfer of responsibility for a task to a competent subordinate, via a clear brief that includes the results expected and the timelines for progress to be reviewed along the way. This should result in the assigned person knowing what is expected of them and then assuming responsibility for the outcome. Importantly, the person delegating must remain engaged and ready to provide support if needed.

The management style often displayed by first-time CEOs in the early-stage businesses I have worked with often seem to fall into 2 broad categories: micro-management and abdication, with behaviour often oscillating between the two.

Micromanagement involves excessive supervision of employees. This behaviour can arise from a deep intellectual or emotional connection with the subject matter or core purpose (as with founders). It may also be driven by lack of confidence in the person assigned, or the fear of failure. Whilst there may be occasions where this approach is appropriate for specific tasks, if overused it restricts employees from flourishing and creates lack of ownership to tasks and outcomes.



The opposite of this is management 'abdication', which occurs when responsibility is transferred in an unstructured way to an employee by their boss, with little or no support provided to help deliver the outcome. This can work if the person is super competent but is never optimal. It carries a high risk of failure, or that the person takes the task in an undesired direction. Abdication often occurs because the person handing over control either does not know the subject well or does not consider it important.

Oscillation between micro-management and abdication often occurs because the leader's role has grown from a position where they could previously be involved in everything at a high level of detail to one where they cannot. They run out of time to provide all staff members with a deep level of support they previously provided, and so leave some areas unattended while focussing too deeply on others. This is exhausting for the CEO, unempowering for their reports, and generally confusing to all involved. In such situations it is up to the CEO to adjust and accept that they will now deliver results through efforts of others, rather than personally.

Another root cause can be that the business does not have a clear set of priorities or strategy, resulting in the CEO's time being consumed by reacting to day-to-day problems, or 'firefighting', as it is commonly called. A solution to this malaise may be found in Article 2 of this series on Master Planning.

IDENTIFYING SKILLS GAPS

The term 'skills gap' describes a mismatch between the skills that employers rely upon in their employees and the skills that those employees possess. Any mismatch makes it difficult for individuals to fulfil their job functions and for companies to execute their business plans.

When it comes to career skills, most people tend to think of technical or 'hard skills' such as accounting, engineering, marketing, language and numeracy. However, in today's business leadership world, 'soft skills' have become increasingly important for success - so what are soft skills? Soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify than hard skills and are generally less measurable.

Examples of important SLT soft skills include:



Communication



Emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships and team building



Critical thinking and problem solving



Decision making



Conflict resolution

Here are a few steps you can take when assessing the skills needed in your SLT:

1. Start with your business strategy and think through the skills you will need across the organisation to execute it in the short and long term (since these may well be different). Include the culture you are striving to create, as this will help define important soft skills required.
2. Identify the SLT roles you will need in your enterprise, as well as the important hard and soft skills for each role (it may help you to refer to your Master Plan when fleshing these out)
3. Create an inventory of skills for each role in your the SLT, categorised by the type of skill and the degree of competency and experience required.
4. Now list the skills in your current SLT and compare it to the skills identified in step 3. The missing skills and capabilities represent the gap that you need to bridge through development or recruitment.

Depending on your background and experience (and that of your board) you may well benefit from external assistance by an HR professional. Attending business forums and talking to other CEOs, as well as reading widely on the subject, can also be helpful.

DEVELOPMENT

Having identified the specific skills or experience shortcomings in members of your SLT, which you feel should be bridgeable by the incumbents, how you then go about bridging the gap may vary.

This depends on the skills to be developed and whether it is an individual or group development issue. In either event, the starting point is to explain your findings to those it affects and to gain their acceptance of your assessment as well as the buy in to the need for a development programme. Topic 2 covers key aspects of building and managing high performance teams and includes establishing both individual and group performance review and coaching forums, into which development programmes can easily be added.

Remedies may involve:

- One-to-one (or group) coaching in specific areas
- Targeted training programmes delivered by professional trainers (this may range from acquiring a commercial license to IT skills)
- Achieving additional professional qualifications relevant to a current or intended future extension of role or responsibility
- Participation in relevant industry forums
- Taking on new responsibilities

In situations where costs are involved (for example with a professional qualification or license) it is perfectly reasonable to protect your investment by linking reimbursement to results achieved, or a period of continuous employment beyond then end of the training.

Once an appropriate plan has been agreed, initiate it as quickly as possible. This includes building the outcomes sought into the scope of individual performance reviews and ensuring that regular updates become a feature of your interactions with that persons.



AS A SMALL ENTERPRISE WE DON'T HAVE A LARGE BUDGET TO HIRE PEOPLE FOR EVERY GAP IDENTIFIED. WHEN WE IDENTIFIED WHICH SKILLS WERE 'NEEDS' AND WHICH SKILLS WERE 'WANTS', WE COULD SPEND OUR BUDGET WISELY.

- ANSELME ANDRIAMAHAVITA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, LOOWATT SARL, MADAGADSCAR



MANAGING UNDER-PERFORMANCE

The key to handling under-performance is to maintain objectivity and fairness, which means focussing on performance rather than personality, and using a fair and transparent process. This can be easier said than done, as one may encounter challenging behaviour. However, treating employees subjectively when reviewing their performance will undermine their effectiveness, along with the trust your organisation has in you. Before commencing the process, it is important to check the local labour laws to ensure you act in line with what is required by them.

Here are some things to bear in mind when dealing with these kinds of situations:

01 DO NOT IGNORE THE PROBLEM

Act as soon as you identify a problem. Avoid the temptation to let the situation run and see if it fixes itself: in my experience they seldom do.

02 CONSIDER WHAT IS CAUSING THE PROBLEM

Does the person concerned lack necessary skills, or is there perhaps a misunderstanding about priorities or expectations? As there may be several layers to the situation, it is important that you evaluate if there are other contributing factors - including on your part - and if so, what changes you can make to improve the outcome. It can also be helpful to subtly observe performance of the individual in their day-to-day work. One way to achieve this is via a practice often referred to as 'management by walking around' when you can informally engage with employees in their workspace.

03 TALK TO THE INDIVIDUAL CONCERNED

Start with an informal discussion around the concerning issue to see if they are aware of it and if so, what their views are on it. This meeting is best kept low key and aimed at finding the cause, as well as supporting a resolution, but it is also a time to test how coachable that person is.

04 ESTABLISH A PLAN

If the situation is not readily resolved through informal discussion and further action is required (disciplinary or performance), ensure that you quickly establish a clear, fair and objective process. The person should clearly understand the outcomes you expect, their timing, the reporting requirements during the process and the potential consequences of partial or non-partial delivery. These components should be written down in a document to ensure that both of you are on the same page. This may warrant independent oversight, which for a senior executive could either be either the HR manager, or a director.

05 REGULAR INTERACTION

Except in extreme or repeat cases, the goal is a resolution that results in an acceptable improvement. It is important not to sit back and await the deadlines but rather to monitor and support the individual in the challenge you've set through regular progress updates and fostering two-way open communications.

06 ACT DECISIVELY

If the performance improvement you are looking for occurs, close the matter off with a positive meeting confirming the outcome achieved and future expectations on performance. However, if it does not reasonably deliver the outcomes within the agreed timeframe you take the remedial measures included in the plan. Again, this is a situation that may well benefit from the involvement of an HR professional and once again checking your local labour laws.



RECRUITMENT

If you reach the decision that you need to recruit new talent into your SLT, how do you then set about finding the best person for that role and reel them in? Here's a process for you to consider:

01 START WITH A CLEAR JOB PROFILE

Develop a profile that describes a candidate who will truly extend the capability and professional standards of your SLT. Succinctly summarise this into three bullet points that explain:

- What this new executive position will enable the company to do and accomplish
- When you find the right person
- What capability they will bring with them
- Why this is so important to the company's capability to execute its strategy

This is now your summary pitch to your board, your SLT, recruitment partners and matching candidates.

In a longer job profile, you should include – roles and responsibilities, outcomes expected, skills, experience, the personal characteristics required, and a description of the executive culture being joined.

02 WRITE A JOB BRIEF AND CAST YOUR NET

From this profile produce a job brief which you can also be used for the job advert and interview and selection process to follow. There are several cost-effective channels that cast a wide net in the job market including:

- Executive job boards such as LinkedIn and online executive search platforms
- Industry bodies and forums
- Your professional network and those of your SLT (a hot referral is generally less risky than a cold selection)
- Other stakeholders such as the board, or investors (people already vested in your success)

Use the pitch you have developed from the profile to focus their understanding of what you are looking for and draw in their support.

03 LONGLIST

Select 6-10 (max) candidates that best match your profile for an initial interview.

At the initial interview you should allow 45 minutes to:

- Ask why they have applied and what they bring to the role described.
- Describe the role in detail, including your expectations (using your bullet points).
- Get their response to this and ask how they would tackle the job if appointed.
- Pick out some typical/difficult work scenarios and ask how they would approach dealing with these (assess how the approach fits from a process and culture perspective).
- See if they have further questions.

04 SHORTLIST

From these interviews extract a shortlist of 3-4 shortlist candidates that you consider most competent for the job. **Do not** put forward candidates you don't have confidence in, simply to make up the numbers. If necessary, revisit your applicants list and/or advertise again to line up a second round of potential first interview candidates, as back up.

05 INTERVIEW SHORTLISTED CANDIDATES

The interview with shortlisted candidates should take the form of a panel interview, consisting of you, your SLT and preferably one independent panellist, ideally with experience in the discipline being recruited (for example if it is a finance role, you might ask a partner from your auditing firm to participate or a director of your board). Allocate 90 mins, or longer depending on the task.

This interview is critical, and much thought and effort should be put into the format and content. My suggestion is that it includes:

- Specific tasks, or lines of questioning be assigned to each panellist.
- A list of issues identified from the CV, or first interview, to be addressed in more detail.
- A challenging task, sent out with the invite and worked on by the candidate before the interview, to be presented by the candidate for 15-20 mins during the interview. This should be assessed in real time by the panel. Allow 15-20 mins for the selection panel to ask the interviewee questions on their presentation afterwards.
- After each interview (and before the next) allow some time for the panel to review each interview. Discuss the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and allocate a combined score for the candidate against the key criteria in your job profile. The conclusions and scorecard should be recorded for later reference.
- Once this round of interviews have been concluded, the panel should meet a final time and agree on a preferred candidate and a second preference candidate.

06 NEGOTIATING THE TERMS OF THE EMPLOYEE AGREEMENT

The final interview with the preferred candidate focuses on the detail and timing of the appointment, including the detailed terms of the employment agreement (including salary, probation period and other benefits) and start date. If both sides align on these then the offer is confirmed, along with start date. However, if agreement cannot be reached then the second preference is contacted and this interview repeated with them.

07 CONTRACT COMPLETION

The contract should be sent to the candidate for signing as soon as possible (close of business same day). You have put in all this effort to find the perfect candidate - don't let them go because you were too slow to secure them. Give the candidate a clear timeline for signing the contract.

ONBOARDING

This is an often overlooked yet critical part of bringing new recruits to your SLT and getting the best performance from them as quickly as possible. Having invested the time and expense to attract your ideal candidate to your team, do not take your foot off the peddle now if you want to get the most from this new-found talent.

Here is a checklist of some important induction elements to have well prepared:

- A briefing from the CEO on day one, focusing on business strategy and the 3-point contribution summary (from Step 1 above) and how success will be defined in the role. Also, include the culture that the organisation has built or is trying to build, so the recruit knows which behaviours are valued.
- Meet the team: SLT, any direct reports and organisation in general.
- Comprehensive pre-planned sessions with each member of the SLT to induct the new team member into all aspects of the business.
- Regular reviews and updates during the initial and probation period designed to test both knowledge accretion and approach. These should be backed up by feedback from the SLT and direct reports.
- Participation in management meetings from day 1.

Conclusion

I trust this article helps you in the challenging task of improving the performance of your teams more, as well as the impact of your enterprise. If you have feedback or questions on this report, or this series, please contact peter.transform@gmail.com





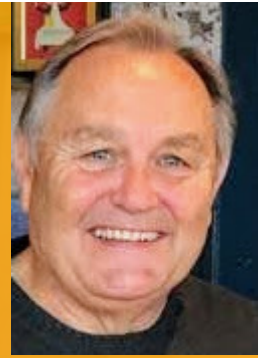
Note about the author:

With over 35 years of C level experience, Peter has been responsible for leading performance transformation across a wide range of small to medium sized commercial enterprises, primarily in the IT&T and services sectors.

Since 2016 he has focused his attention on sustainability in the WASH sector: first developing a suitable business model and local management team at Clean Team Ghana - then an NGO owned home container base sanitation (CBS) service in Ghana's second city Kumasi - and subsequently helping successfully adapt the model to other home sanitation businesses in Peru, Haiti, Rwanda, Madagascar and most recently, the Philippines.

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This initiative has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



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