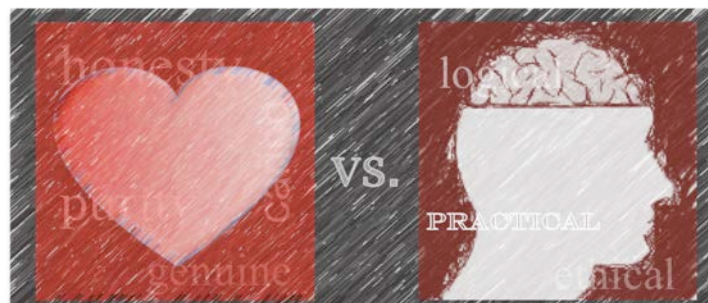
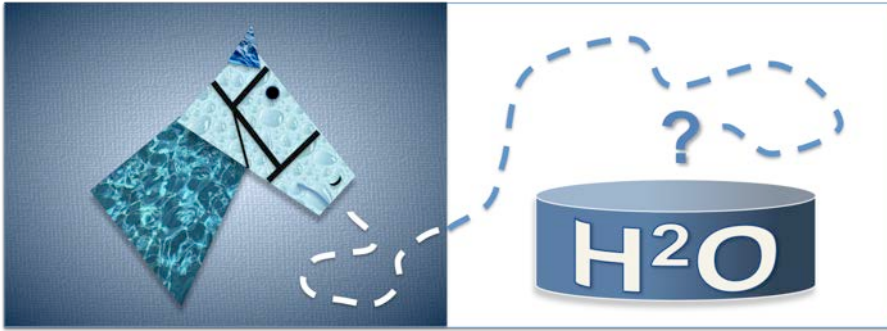


INSIGHTS

Mindset of a Talent Manager

Talent practices often bear the philosophical imprint of their designer. These two essays stress the need to take personal accountability and realize that results are what truly matter.





About that Horse . . .

By Marc Effron, President, The Talent Strategy Group

The HR leader slowly shook her head, frustrated she was unable to convince her CEO to support her talent management proposal. “Well,” she concluded with a chagrined look, “you can lead a horse to water . . .” And, with one phrase, the blame had shifted.

This was not her problem anymore. She believed her design was sound and her arguments persuasive. Any reasonable person, she thought, would endorse her vision. If the CEO hadn’t bought in, it was due to a fundamental flaw in his thinking or character.

On the plane home, that tired idiom ran through my mind. If you actually lead a horse to water and it doesn’t drink, is that necessarily the horse’s fault? I realized that there were three distinct possibilities in that situation.

You’re Leading Poorly: The journey with this horse has been so tortuous that the horse is now angry, exhausted or both. You’ve guided it on a meandering, indirect route. The trip was long, and many times the horse suspected you were lost and simply pretending to know the way. The part about the water wasn’t even mentioned until about halfway through. Even then, it was something vague about a “beverage.”

In this case, the horse may well be thirsty but it has no confidence in your ability to lead him to water.

The Water’s Bad: Let’s assume this is a logical horse, an experienced horse. It’s not this horse’s first rodeo. The horse is well aware what high quality water looks and tastes like. You’ve led this horse to water

and told him to drink it. The horse hesitates. He looks into the water and something appears off. He asks you a few questions: “How do you know this water will actually quench my thirst? Isn’t this same water you asked me to try a few years ago that was actually stagnant? Are there other beverage options available that might taste even better?”

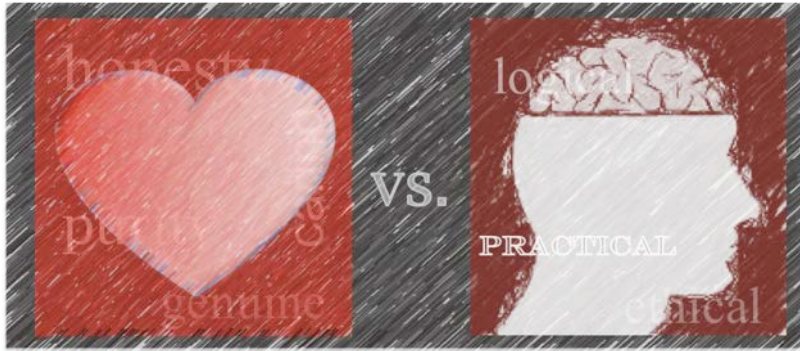
You smile condescendingly at the horse, grab his neck and shove his head into the water. “Everyone else drinks this water! You should too.” The horse holds its breath. It’s now wet, angry and extremely unlikely to drink what it considers to be foul water.

In this case, the horse would be happy to drink, but you’ve led him to bad water.

You haven’t made him thirsty: You know this horse has previously been led to water and was happy to drink. In fact, when he has liked the water he’s even told his stable mates about it and convinced them to drink it too. Right now, however, this is a contented horse and you’ve done nothing to make him thirsty. You haven’t described how water will make him run faster or have a richer coat. You haven’t exercised the horse until he realizes he needs water.

In this case, you haven’t convinced the horse that water will in any way benefit him.

There is one other possibility if you lead your horse to water and it doesn’t drink. You may have a stupid horse. In that case, you can spend years trying to educate the horse or, better yet, you can find a new horse. But until you rule out the three factors above, let’s not be so quick to shift blame to the horse.



The Unimportance of Being Earnest

By Marc Effron, President, The Talent Strategy Group

At a celebration to honor your career, you run into two of your previous managers. Both managers were invaluable to your success — each provided you with big assignments, challenging goals and tough feedback. You respected each of them and valued what they had done for your career.

Later that evening, one of the managers tells you he never actually believed in how he managed people. He only did it because HR told him to. You're surprised by the comment. But should you care? Was he a worse manager because he did not genuinely believe in what he was doing?

The question of manager belief vs. manager compliance was raised in two recent conference presentations. After speaking at each event, I heard a variant of the question: "You focus on process design and accountability to get managers to comply. But shouldn't good managers genuinely believe in these talent management practices, not just execute them because they have to?"

The question's subtext was that a manager who was earnestly interested in doing the right thing was somehow superior to one who simply executed what he or she was asked to do.

That perspective troubles me for three reasons:

First, talent management practices work if, and only if, they're implemented. Managers with the most earnest belief in great talent management add no value at all until they actually turn those beliefs into action. Most managers believe in setting goals, coaching, etc. — they just rarely find the time to actually do it. In contrast, the manager who only gives feedback or grows a successor under the threat of HR's wrath has genuinely helped the employee and the company.

Second, we forget that managers' judgments of talent processes are based on their experiences. Through our design of complex and laborious processes, we've convinced some managers that processes don't add value. To get a manager to believe, we need to show them that giving feedback, following up on engagement activities or setting great goals can be simple, fast and powerful activities. Once they experience a positive process, it's much easier for managers to truly believe that it's the right thing to do.

Third, the sentiment that managers should genuinely believe in their talent practices is both wistful and wrong. All of the eye-rolling, cynical remarks and sighing about the managers in their care is not getting the work done. "They should believe!" "Passion is crucial," they cry as they flay themselves. This mindset represents a humanistic, results-optional, HR approach that needs to be rapidly eliminated for the benefit of the profession.

The reality is that it doesn't matter if managers truly believe in the talent processes, they are engaging in. We know these processes work if they're implemented. Our goal as HR and talent management leaders should be singular — ensure successful implementation. If a manager genuinely believes in what they're doing — fantastic! If they think it's ridiculous but do it anyway — fantastic! Employees and the company are going to benefit either way.

Let's drop our conviction that an earnest belief in growing talent is superior to cold-hearted execution. Idealism is wonderful but getting results is actually a lot more fun.

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