



The Secret of Agile Organizations

In order to be able to operate successfully, organizations have to be agile. Only then will they be capable of anticipating a frequently unpredictable future, and of using that agility to gain competitive advantage. Many CEOs emphasize how that agility – and thus their success – is mostly determined by their employees. But how does one create an agile workforce and thus put human capabilities into action as best as possible for successful strategy-execution?

In the book *The Secret of Agile Organizations* (Nyenrode University Press 2015) authors Gijs van Bussel, Ralph Jacobs and Marijn Tielemans describe how organizations can employ Agile Talent Management as the most important secret ingredient for making optimal use of their Human Capital. The authors have tested their ideas against daily business practice and have conducted personal interviews with Joe Jimenez (CEO of Novartis), Frans van Houten (CEO of Philips) and Robin van Poelje (chief executive of the ICT firm Total Specific Solutions). All three of these are companies with their own contemporary vision of talent management.

In the book, Agile Talent Management is presented as a framework for the development of an integrated talent strategy, within which organizations can commit their employees optimally for their strategy-execution, and through which they can identify just those talented individuals, through which an organization can develop its desired capabilities – often even as they remain unclear as to precisely which capabilities will soon be needed. This dilemma – so important for organizations – stands central in the book.

The line of the story

The book begins with a sketch of a business environment that is becoming increasingly more disruptive. Organizations find themselves forced to continually renew their processes, their business models, and above all their knowledge and abilities, sometimes even having to invent them anew. In these circumstances, managers have dual obligations to fulfill: ensuring organizational continuity through strategy-execution and taking care of succession.

There then follows chapter-by-chapter – each beginning from an academic perspective – a coherent exposition of the various elements of Agile Talent Management. Starting from a basis consisting of the strategic plan established by the organization, as well as the societal ambitions and core values it has set forward, the connection is made with talent management through the formulation of talent mores. Is it the organization alone which is responsible for the sustainable deployment of an employee, or is it that employee his/herself? Do we ascribe talent to each employee, or do we only devote our attention to a specific group of “high potentials”? By giving an answer to questions such as these the organization makes explicit its leading principles for the design and deployment of various talent management instruments.

Research shows that managers succeed in fulfilling the obligations listed above only to a very limited extent. In order to become more successful here, the authors present their “Talent Management Lemniscate,” a structure within which all instruments for talent management can be deployed in a coherent and continuous manner.

Special attention is given in the book to an alternative perspective on the identification of talent. Many talent scouts make a methodological mistake by identifying talented people on the base of past performance together with an estimate of their potential for further development. It is better to look at learning agility as well as performance. Using the model developed by the authors for this purpose, one can evaluate in a valid manner whether an employee is suited to quickly making new capabilities his or her own.

But deploying agile talent with the correct capabilities alone will not ensure desired performance for an organization. For this it is necessary to deploy talented people in strategically diverse teams, which are then (trans-)formed into high-performance teams. That is why the authors take you along to show the manner in which teams can develop into high-performance teams, and then present an approach which has up to now been mostly ignored: the strategic diversity of teams. Depending on the organization's developmental phase (i.e. is it a start-up, for example, or does it have committed investments it needs to earn back?) teams can be put together optimally on the basis of this approach.

Finally, remuneration is positioned as the keystone of Agile Talent Management. How can an organization best reward its employees? Is it only about money, or are other incentives possible? Do only the results achieved count, or also the way the organization's norms and values are upheld? And must the organization devote the lion's share of its resources to its crucial talented people? From our own experience in the crisis years just passed we are well aware of the shadow-effects of such decisions . . . They are all relevant questions, to which any organization can give proper answers with the assistance of the sustainable reward

framework that is presented here. Furthermore, a good reward based on this model will never be too high.

Now that an organization's results are to a large part determined by its agile workforce, Agile Talent Management is a vital strategic instrument. It thus also offers HR managers plentiful chances to strengthen their positions. Using the concept described in the book of "HR for Business" (HR4B), HR can measure and improve the maturity of its human capital management and thereby justify it for top management.

Is an organization assured of success by the application of Agile Talent Management? In the last chapter, where the authors look into the future and the "nomadic network" type of organization likely to prevail then, they argue that this is simply not foreseeable. According to Complexity Theory, organizations are simply unpredictable and complex systems, whose components are closely bound to one another so that spontaneous qualities can arise through their interaction. But with Agile Talent Management managers can create the proper context for the fostering of the most-important value of any organization: agility. An organization capable of this is justified in relying upon gaining sustainable results . . .