

## Chapter 3

# Mastering Talent Management: The Uncertainties, Lack of Clarity and Misunderstandings

**Nana Yaw Oppong**  
*University of Cape Coast, Ghana*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Although companies around the world have made talent management a top priority, most human resource professionals and senior executives believe their organizations have not fully resolved the talent management puzzle. The chapter investigates if there are any indicators that suggest that talent management is a puzzle. Applying mainly review of academic and popular literature, the assessment is done under five headings including talent and talent management definitions; the need for talent management; the root of talent management; talent management strategies and processes, and talent management-diversity integration. It is revealed that albeit being differentiator between organizations that succeed and those that do not, talent management is saddled with uncertainties, lack of clarity, and misunderstanding, which are hurdles that need to be cleared to pave way for more effective talent programs. To overcome these, organizations should avoid one common blueprint to all talent situations, but develop approaches that suit individual talent requirements.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of talent management cannot be underestimated. It is obvious that structured TM program is expensive, especially when those developed are the ones likely to leave to bargain for high conditions of service with their newly acquired skills. This is informed by the looming talent shortage which will impact every organization without regard to industry, and that this stems from the fact that the skills set possessed by available workers may not match the advanced, more complex skills required by businesses in this information and knowledge economy. It is therefore advised that organizations should take specific initiatives to better position themselves to mitigate the operational challenges posed by the talent shortage. At the very least companies can start creating a culture as an employer of choice by accommodating individual differences and continually identifying and offering development opportunities

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to employees. It is believed that talented individuals will be more likely attracted to organizations that invest in their employees (Busine & Watt, 2005).

Deloitte (2005) recounts the impending baby boomer retirements; widening skills gap between what organizations require and what is possessed by individuals; and ineffective approaches to talent management are combining forces enough to threaten the world business economy. Citing the result of a survey involving 123 HR executives to support this, the study revealed that incoming workers with inadequate skills (70%); baby boomer retirements (61%); and inability to retain key talent (51%) combine to pose the greatest threats to business performance. This result brings to the fore the need to provide relevant skills to younger employees and retain them for organizational success. This is the essence of TM which is believed to be the differentiator between organizations that succeed and those that do not. Talent management is however plagued with misunderstandings, uncertainties and lack of clarity, suggesting that the area is not grounded in practice, therefore highlighting why it is seen by many experts as a puzzle (Stahl et al., 2012) to realize the full benefits of the concept. It is the aim of this chapter to explore some of the issues that render TM a puzzle. This explanation is done under the following five sub-headings including talent and talent management definitions; the need for talent management; the root of talent management; talent management strategies and processes, and talent management-diversity integration.

## **TALENT AND TALENT MANAGEMENT DEFINITIONS**

Many authors/researchers, a few being Cappelli (2008); Harris, Craig & Light (2011); Caravan, Barbery & Rock (2012); Swailes, Downs & Orr (2014) have written about talent management, with a few who have tried to define 'talent'. Notwithstanding, the definition of talent has been unclear. Literature suggests fundamental lack of clarity about what is meant by talent. This needs to be clarified because if organizations cannot compete successfully without talented people, then it becomes an unavoidable task to clarify who these talented people are. It is cited by Barlow (2006) that some organizations do forced ranking of people (not talent) into 'A', 'B' and 'C' as categories of talent but only the few rated 'A' grade are prioritized. Earlier, Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod (2001) had categorized talent as valuable, rare and hard-to-imitate. They however find it difficult to prescribe who talented employees are. More recently, Swailes et al. (2014) view talent from positive psychology perspective.

Generally, managers find it easier to indicate who their talented employees are than to explain what they mean by talent. When managers are asked to explain why employees appear on their talent list the commonest answer could be that they are good performers or promising. Due to the difficulty in pinpointing what talent is, many managers and authors attempt to describe who talented individuals are rather than what is talent. There are those who depart from the people categorization to identification of attributes of employees. For instance, Zingheim and Schuster (1999) compare talent to skills and competencies; Paprock (2006) compares it to skills, knowledge and capabilities; Fleming and Asplund (2008) compare talent to skills; while Ambrose (2003) compares it to capabilities. These descriptions offer some levels of understanding when considered individually but could be confusing when they are compared, trying to develop a common definition or understanding of talent. For instance, Fleming and Asplund (2008) distinguish between what is innate (talent) in individuals from what can be changed or acquired (knowledge, skills); while Gagné (2007) distinguishes between natural abilities (gifts, potentials) from systematically developed skills (talent). These distinctions suggest that while Fleming and Asplund see innate/natural abilities as talent as distinguished from what could be acquired or developed

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