

Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management challenges and opportunities for HRD

Reflections on Leading Young Talents: A Manager's Perspective

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This piece presents an expert view on the topic of leading entrepreneurial talent in a global business environment. Based on a structured interview with a manager who heads a department of 250 employees in an enterprise with 2,000 employees, we explore best practices for managing young talents. By investigating different ways of engaging young employees, the research makes recommendations aimed at improving employers' retention policies and reducing the risk of losing talented employees. Specifically, the interview offers a leader's insights on talent management in the form of seven "ingredients": (1) employee empowerment; (2) employee motivation as a long-term vision; (3) early investments; (4) cross-generational collaboration; (5) ensuring employee well-being; (6) transparent promotion criteria; and (7) leadership motivation.

Key Words: talent management, leadership, young employees, practice, experience, industry

Introduction

Human talent contributes significantly to organizations' attainment of a sustained competitive advantage (e.g., Lawler, 2010). However, attracting and retaining young talent is a major challenge for organizations around the globe (Keller & Meaney, 2017). Thus, practitioners and academics alike are driven to identify the best ways to strategically manage talented employees in order to enhance their job satisfaction, well-being, individual and team performance, and, ultimately, their retention (e.g., Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019; Narayanan, 2016).

The current piece provides a practitioner perspective on the topic of managing¹ young entrepreneurial talent in a global business environment. According to Collings and Mellahi (2009), strategic talent management is a set of:

activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization (p. 304).

But how can organizations ensure the continued commitment of their young high potentials? Past research suggests that "management style may be the key to successfully leveraging Millennial employees' talents" (Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 237). Through a qualitative approach, we

investigate the best practices of a manager at ETI Elektroelement d.o.o. — an international company in the electro industry with 2,000 employees headquartered in Slovenia — and discuss their implications. Since its year of foundation in 1950, ETI has grown into a world's leading provider of products and services in the field of electrical installations.

As Head of the Fuse Business Unit, our subject matter expert, Mr. Peter Benko, shares insights into his employment, engagement, and initiatives in relation to leading talent at ETI. To date, Peter has been working in the company for thirteen years. Four years ago, he assumed a leadership position and is now heading a team of 250 employees organized in production units. He is the direct supervisor to 15 young engineers, each of whom is specialized in the field of product and technology development. Thus, Peter looks back at his time at ETI and what he has learned from managing his team. He shares his best leadership practices for addressing key challenges in managing young talents and achieving success with his team of engineers, which he describes as being dynamic, agile, proactive, diverse, and self-initiated. Specifically, Peter defines talent as:

Talents have some special motivation and engagement, very high loyalty, and commitment to the organization. They are quick learners who easily develop competencies to handle problems, and in just a few months after hiring are able to work independently. Knowledge is crucial, but if other things are not present, knowledge is not enough. The real gems are those with strong initiative, positive thinking, who are looking for things to do by themselves and are very good at cooperating with others.

The company ETI has an inclusive, strengths-based rather than an exclusive approach to talent management (Dries, 2013). This means that, from a strategic perspective, every employee in the company is seen as a talent and developed to reach their full potential (e.g., Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001; Warren, 2006)². In order to achieve excellence and bring out the best in his team, Peter adopts inclusive yet guiding leadership practices. In what follows, we elaborate on seven “ingredients” that we derived from the interview for successfully managing young entrepreneurial talent, namely: (1) employee empowerment; (2) employee motivation as a long-term vision; (3) early investments; (4) cross-generational collaboration; (5) care for employee well-being; (6) transparent promotion criteria; and (7) leadership motivation. This piece contributes to the field by offering a practitioner perspective on the success factors for inclusively leading young engineering talent in a Slovenian medium-sized organization in the electro industry, with key departments located in rural regions³.

Leading Millennial Talent: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

Definitional complexities acknowledged, Millennials are seen to comprise a generational cohort born between 1982 and 1999 that is set to make up 50% of the workforce by 2020 (Barbuto & Gottfredson, 2016; Fry, 2015). This generation of employees is often associated with negative workplace stereotypes such as unwillingness to work, lack of motivation as well as unrealistic salary expectations, perceived neediness, a sense of entitlement, and disloyalty (e.g., Thompson & Gregory, 2012). However, reflecting *essentialism*⁴, stereotypes are overgeneralizations of groups of people and must, therefore, be interpreted carefully (Fox, 2010). In fact, increasing evidence highlights more positive attitudes and characteristics of Millennial employees (e.g., Gani, 2016). Thus, research by Baker Rosa and Hastings (2018), for example, found that managers perceive their young subordinates as being pro-active, eager to learn and develop, and open to receiving constructive feedback. Millennials also tend to value work-life balance and while, according to

Peter, they are extrinsically motivated, they first and foremost appreciate work that is interesting (Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015). When asked about what is important to young people at work, Peter notes:

I think they mostly want to come to an inclusive, innovative environment where they will be given an opportunity. Salary may be important, but not as the top priority. It's more important for them that they can learn, express their creativity, and contribute.

As suggested by prior research, “relationships with immediate managers may be the key to fully leveraging, motivating, and retaining Millennials” (Hershatler & Epstein, 2010; Lancaster & Stillman, 2003; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). “[More specifically], if organizations are going to succeed, managers need to adopt leadership and management styles that complement their young employees’ work styles” (Thompson & Gregory, 2012, pp. 239; 243). In the following sections, we introduce the seven ingredients Peter uses to manage the young entrepreneurial talent in his department successfully.

Employee Empowerment

Peter argues that the creativity, motivation, and innovative spirit of talent flourish when given freedom. He believes that a problem emerges if Millennial talent is held back from realizing their ideas. Peter adds that employees can be limited from reaching their full potential when the vision of leaders and young employees are not aligned. According to Peter, this misalignment is often due to different ways of thinking:

Young people have a different way of thinking, that is, out-of-the-box thinking. I have seen cases when leaders held young employees back from developing their full potential, even though the ideas they had were good. For example, young employees were not allowed to realize their idea just because it was something out of the ordinary (neither regular nor common). Also, the problem is often that older employees ‘know’ that an idea will not work. But then the young employees, who do not know that the idea is ‘bad’ and will not work, just make it happen. They make it work but in a different, out-of-the-box way. I have heard this quote once; it goes: ‘For many years, we have been trying to solve it, unsuccessfully. Then the young came along, not knowing that it cannot be solved, and they solved it’. I often repeat this statement because it is very true.

Thus, empowerment is a vital characteristic of the leadership style that Peter embraces. Here, we define employees’ empowerment as “a multifaceted construct corresponding to the different dimensions of being psychologically enabled. [In particular, psychological empowerment is] a cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalization” (Menon, 2001, p. 161). More specifically, Peter argues that independence and inclusive decision-making are pivotal for motivating employees, developing feelings of self-efficacy, and building trust. Consequently, giving employees autonomy over their jobs permeates Peter’s leadership style.

Not only are they included in the decision-making process, but they have to make their own decisions. On their own. For example, I give a lot of power to them. Maybe this is one difference worth mentioning. In many cases, we talk about power or responsibility. If you make someone responsible for something, this can be quite problematic because it can result in fear: ‘What if something bad happens’. But if you give someone power, you also give them a chance to execute the idea in the most optimal way possible. And thus, the thinking about the problem changes. As

a result, the person works with a more positive outlook and a positive attitude, not worrying about 'what if this does not work out'. So, this is my way of motivating them — empowering them, trusting them, and also giving positive feedback.

Further, Peter argues that a critical component of successfully managing Millennial talent is to allow them to contribute to the success of the company, that is, to be part of the company's vision and strategy. This inclusive approach may foster young employees' intrinsic motivation and lead to higher work engagement. Such an approach also gives young employees the opportunity to work on something meaningful and fulfilling, which aligns with scholarly findings on the career expectations of Millennials (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).

When we were making the plan for this year, I told the guys to prepare their ideas they want to realize this year. They presented their own suggestions at a meeting. Later on, I gave them the task to evaluate their ideas — how much would we have to invest in it and what would we get from it. After two weeks, we had another meeting where we discussed all of the ideas together. In the end, we chose the six most valued ideas, and we included them in our annual plan. If you look from that perspective, they are actually working on their own ideas and are practically building up their contribution they want to give. Of course, these ideas are matched with the vision and strategy of the company, so pursuing these ideas does not lead us in the wrong direction. In fact, I have realized that people work better when they are working on their own ideas. They know better how much time they need, so in the end, the deviations from the deadlines are much smaller when people are setting their own timelines. Also, the tasks are done much better this way than if I were to develop the tasks alone and just give them to them.

Through the shared creation of ideas and projects, Peter seeks to foster employees' creative, entrepreneurial spirit. However, Peter states that freedom must be balanced with guidance and prioritization on the leader's part.

At certain moments, as needed, I am a leader in the full sense of the word, and I am not a co-worker. I decide 'Okay, we'll do it like this' or 'This task is a priority; we'll work on it first'.

While Peter strongly believes in empowerment and non-authoritative leadership styles, he also provides clear directions as to which activities to concentrate on.

Long-term Vision for Young Employee Motivation

With regards to the provision of negative feedback, Peter says:

Even if they fail, I will not say: 'This was totally wrong, what were you thinking?' I always try to see the positive, even in failure. I see it as a lesson. Because we are unable to learn if we do not make mistakes.

He finds that young employees are typically very self-critical and well aware if they have completed a task below standard. However, by having a long-term vision of motivation, Peter thinks that pointing out every mistake does not result in long-term benefits. Instead, he predicts discouragement among the employees that might harm organizational goal attainment in the long run. While a no-feedback culture is no solution for Peter, he believes that a positive attitude and outlook towards the future result in more learning and thus a better future performance than a mistake-oriented culture of finger-pointing.

First of all, I would like to emphasize a positive attitude and a positive outlook. It is important not to concentrate too much on what was one month ago, two years ago, etc., but what is going on right now and what will happen in the future, how we can solve the problems that arise.

In order to maintain business excellence and reach organizational objectives, Peter emphasizes that providing employees with specific, timely, and continuous performance feedback is essential. Aside from one-on-one conversations with engineers about the progress in reaching objectives and the weekly meetings, he also holds a monthly meeting where he demonstrates the financial side of the work performed, as shown below:

Once a month, we have a meeting where we discuss a monthly report, which includes how many products we made last month, how many sales we made, what we did well, what we did poorly, how productive we were. I inform them of this measurable data. And I always try to give at least one good example from the previous month.

The Early Bird Catches the Worm

Peter explains how the challenge of attracting and retaining talented employees affects Slovenian employers in urban versus rural areas differently. In the Slovenian region of Izlake where the company's Research & Development function is centralized, the shortage of highly qualified electrical and mechanical engineers led the organization to introduce a competitive scholarship programme which acquaints future employees with the organization's engineering practices at an early stage of their university studies. Through early investments such as summer work and industrial placements, the firm begins establishing connections with potential employees during their time at university. Thus, students get to know the company, the production process, and the culture early on in their career. This initiative contributed to the company's above-average graduate hiring and development of a young workforce. In particular, the majority of employees in charge of technology or applicable development are younger than 30 years.

We are kind of lucky as far as recruitment goes because we run a very good scholarship programme and we mostly employ all young employees through that. This gives us the opportunity to test them throughout their study and also develop certain competencies that they don't get through their study so that they are then ready to start working once we employ them. If we had to find engineers in the market, it would be a different story as there are simply not enough of them.

Cross-generational Collaboration at Work

Managers often encounter generational gaps in the workplace that hinder successful performance. Peter intentionally fosters intergenerational collaboration so that employees can learn and appreciate different opinions. More specifically, cross-generational connections have been nurtured by introducing regularly-rotating, diverse teams comprised of younger graduates and older, more experienced employees. Formalized cross-generational collaborations enable knowledge transfer from older to younger employees and vice versa through, for example, mentoring and reverse-mentoring (Kaše, Saksida, & Mihelič, 2019). Over time, these collaborations can form solid relationships and thereby contribute to a better understanding of worldviews, values, and attitudes of different generations.

Teams are the key connector between the two generations. Our employees are used to working in diverse teams, and they are a regular part of our working life. With the help of teamwork, obstacles between the two generations are dissolved.

Transparent Promotion Criteria

When considering talented candidates for promotion, Peter specifically considers the employees' competence, innovative capabilities, and team spirit. Most importantly, however, he focuses on the attainment of measurable goals.

So, for promotion, it is crucial that the person is capable of *achieving results* that can be measured in numbers. We actually measure the numbers by the entire department, not by individuals, but you always know who contributes what. While it is critical that he or she is *competent*, or that the person can achieve some good results, it is also important that the person has many innovative ideas. Someone can be a great worker but does not have any *innovative*, breakthrough ideas, which we need. Another important factor is the team-spirit. Someone can be a great individual, but if they are incapable of *teamwork*, problems can occur — for example, that other team members become dissatisfied. So, it is really important that workers are able to work with others and are team-oriented. For this to happen, they must be educated in that way, and this does not happen by itself.

While performance is measured on a team level, individual contributions are known and communicated transparently.

Ensuring Employee Well-being

As a leader, Peter seeks to be approachable on matters related to both his employees' professional and personal lives. On a daily basis, Peter takes time to sit down and engage in one-on-one discussions with his employees, asking how they are doing at work, whether they have encountered obstacles to achieving their goals, but also enquires about their feelings and well-being more generally. It is important to note that these discussions are informal and serve as motivational drivers. He prioritizes mental and physical well-being above all else and signals employees to take enough time off work to recover from illness.

I always tell them that it is important that they first feel okay. 'Take as much time as you need — if you need three or four days instead of two, it's okay, don't worry, just make sure that when you come back, you can start working normally'.

Leadership Motivation

A big challenge for leaders is that they not only need to motivate their employees, but also need to nurture their own implicit and explicit motivations in order to inspire and successfully manage talents (e.g., McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). Peter, for example, is motivated by the vision and desire to create a more modern company and strives for constant improvement and excellence. However, most importantly, he seeks inspiration from the energy and desire of his team and the responsibility of the organization for the community in which they live and work. The willingness to "do good" and the responsibility he feels as a servant leader to help create a successful company which can, in turn, give back to the local community functions

as his motivation to lead. Some of these elements are a reflection of “conscious capitalism” and “conscious leadership”, which entails doing good for a higher purpose (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014). Peter notes:

Many times, my team is my motivation. Another important aspect is that the company is very important for many people — we have around 1,000 employees working in Slovenia, which means 1,000 families who rely on income from here.

Lessons Learned

Prior research suggests that fostering a leadership base that suits the needs of young talent is the key to ensuring the continued commitment of Millennials (Barbuto & Gottfredson, 2016). In light of the needs and expectations of young employees and current challenges of modern workplaces, value-laden leadership approaches such as transformational or servant leadership are considered especially appropriate (Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora, 2008; Thompson & Gregory, 2012). While both transformational and servant leadership focus on elevating leaders’ and followers’ morale and motivation, they differ in the role leaders assume in the process (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Primarily, the role of a servant leader is to serve his/her employees, whereas the role of a transformational leader is to inspire his/her employees in order to achieve organizational goals (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Sendjaya et al., 2008). In particular, servant leaders typically prioritize follower needs over organizational needs or self-needs. At first glance, this suggests that organizational goal attainment may suffer from having servant leaders. Yet, Sendjaya and colleagues (2008) claim this is not the case. In fact, Gregory Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004) argue that “organizational goals will be achieved on a long-term basis only by first facilitating the growth, development, and general well-being of the individuals who comprise the organization” (p. 355). Further, Barbuto and Gottfredson (2016) reason that “servant leadership is likely the optimal leadership style for creating an organization rich in human capital development and for making an organization a preferred workplace for the Millennial generation” (p. 59). We find that the seven best practices on which Peter relies closely resemble servant leadership. While Peter is very aware of the importance of managerial decision-making that benefits the company’s innovative power and revenue-creating capacity, he sees organizational success as a pathway to serve customers, employees and owners, but also the local community and the families of his employees. This multi-stakeholder focus is reflected in the following statement:

We need to work only on the ideas that will bring us the greatest value. What is important to me is that this company grows continuously, develops new solutions that go beyond existing ones, and has a positive impact on all stakeholders, including employees, customers, owners, and the local community. We have 1,000 families that depend on the company’s success, so the company needs to be healthy for the future of these families.

When concluding the interview, we asked Peter six questions with the instruction to answer them intuitively and quickly (Table 1). Upon reflecting on his own leadership practices with regards to managing Millennial talent, Peter feels that by giving his team autonomy and empowering them, he is providing young employees with opportunities to grow and innovate. Enabling employees to become decision-makers and help create new projects or ideas allows Peter to achieve better results with his team than he would alone. Peter also argues that having an open mind and trust in junior employees is a requirement for successfully managing young talent and nurturing their enthusiasm. Moreover, he wishes to create more open working environments

that further facilitate dynamic collaborations. Yet, while being appreciative of the characteristics young people bring to the workplace, Peter emphasizes the responsibility of higher education institutions for developing curricula that better prepare students for the work they will encounter in their profession as engineers.

| Question | Answer |
|--|---|
| Being a leader is ... | ... pretty amazing. It seems to me that I can do more together with my team than if I were to work alone. |
| Managing young entrepreneurial talent requires ... | ... an open mind. |
| I wish young employees were ... | ... more educated about real-life cases which are useful at work during their studies. But this is more a matter of the higher education system and not of the young employees. I wish that graduates continue to come with so much momentum and enthusiasm. |
| I am glad that young employees are ... | ... coming to work with such enthusiasm. |
| Given that you had unlimited financial resources, which approaches for working with the young would you like to use in the future? | I would reorganize the working space/environment to offer much more creative work than it does currently. I would make everything more dynamic — everyone would have their own laptop, and they could work for one period with one team in one place, then another period with another team in another place and so on. I would also add some round standing tables which would be used for brainstorming. There is still a belief that if someone is not working at the table, they are not working. But I completely disagree. I think that people moving around, having discussions with several groups has a positive effect and can produce great results. The workspace should be more open in order to enable this kind of work. |
| What would your advice be to other practitioners to establish a productive relationship with young people? | Above all, to trust in young employees and believe in their abilities and talents because I think they are incredible. |

Table 1: Subject matter expert’s reflections on leading Millennial talent

While we urge not to generalize from case study research, we invite scholars and employers alike to reflect on the seven different ingredients our expert practitioner identified and consider how they might apply to the specifics of other organizational contexts and industrial sectors.

Based on the aforementioned research and conclusions drawn from the practitioner interview, we predict that successful leadership practices likely depend on the values and needs of the employees as well as the organizational culture. We, therefore, developed two key recommendations for those leading Millennial talent:

- a) **Form trusting relationships with talents.** Past research emphasizes the importance of trust and meaningful connections for developing talents’ loyalty and commitment (Hershatler & Epstein, 2010). Moreover, by establishing strong relationships with employees, managers build a foundation for effective leadership and facilitate employees’ seeking and acceptance of feedback (Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

- b) **Tailor the leadership style to talents' needs.** According to Thompson and Gregory (2012), the negative stereotypes associated with Millennial employees are likely to transform into strengths if managers are able to fit their leadership style to their needs. Thus, a needy employee would metamorphose into an eager learner, and a disloyal employee would become entrepreneurial (Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

Concluding Remarks

This piece investigated best practices in leading young talents in order to improve employers' retention policies and reduce their risk of losing talented employees. Based on a structured interview with a senior manager, we identified seven best practices that have enabled Peter to achieve success with his team. Building on these practices, we recommend leaders with an inclusive talent strategy to (a) form trusting relationships with their employees; and (b) tailor their leadership style to their employees' needs.

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Notes

- 1 Conceptual distinctions between leadership and management acknowledged (e.g., Antonakis & Day, 2017), the present piece uses the terms leading and managing interchangeably.
- 2 For more information on the tensions between inclusive and exclusive talent management and related advantages and disadvantages, please see, for example, Dries (2013).
- 3 The case study was conducted in the form of a semi-structured practitioner interview that included a set of questions on Peter's previous leadership experience, talent management practices, leadership style, and motivations for working with young engineers. The researchers obtained informed consent and received permission to provide organizational and person-specific information. The interview was conducted and recorded in the Slovenian language, subsequently transcribed, and then back-translated into English by an expert academic fluent in both languages. In an inductive approach, the data were thematically organized by two independent researchers without prior hypotheses derived from theory, extracting seven distinct topics from Peter's reflections.
- 4 Essentialism relates to the tendency to infer essences which are often ascribed to people's underlying traits (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny; 2019; Prentice & Miller, 2006)

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