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Imagine if you were told that you had to eat an elephant, it would be pretty hard to know where to start, but it's the image that faced Gina Wilson the National Human Capital Manager Of Cliffe Decker when she had to reorganise their Development Centre.

Wilson's brief was a huge one: to create a Manager Development Centre that was realistic, integrated, relevant, and that reflected the technologically advanced nature of the business world today.

It required integrating the functions of a development centre, while at the same time creating a talent management process.

Wilson concedes that the process was helped by the fact that the company had bought into the idea of a Development Centre and had committed resources to setting one up. But she was still faced with the enormous task of reworking the entire system at the company.

She travelled to the UK to sit in on sessions there, but in the end "I realised that as a South African I could create a hybrid of the ideas I liked and thought worked and discard those that didn't."

What Wilson found in the existing system was that the Development Centre had become isolated and was behind the times in terms of processes and technology. "People had come to expect that after they had been with the company they would receive an email inviting them to attend a workshop, but there was little understanding of why or what the outcome should be," she said.

She also found that the psychometric tests used were outdated and that people were hefting around massive numbers of files and "enough paper to wipe out a rain forest".

So part of the task was to set up a paperless centre, with updated tests and to make it fully integrated technologically.

Once the basics were in place it was necessary to consider what the company wanted to achieve with the Development Centre, was it about talent management, leadership, or succession planning.

What Wilson found was that often the wrong people were being identified at the wrong time to go on the workshops, and that talent management is about valuing differentiation in a community.

Succession planning is a process, said Wilson, that needs to be managed and begun in good time, there is no point in doing it when there is a crisis, ideally it's about planning for the future of a position and/or an individual. Different categories were identified for Wilson's company as being: High Potentials, High Flyers, Key Value Creators, Unengaged, and mismatched.

Having identified the categories and slotting people into them it was then necessary to look at four factors that impact on development: performance, potential, aspiration, and engagement.

Interestingly enough during this process many hoary chestnuts were unearthed, "for some people under aspiration it's not about money, it might be about prestige, recognition, a good work life balance, because Cliffe Dekker is a law firm there was an assumption that everyone wanted to be a partner, but when we engaged with people in the Development Centre we found that that wasn't true, some people didn't want to be on the partner track, others did but clearly were never going to make it and so people had to look at where they fitted in and whether their aspirations were realistic."

Another key point was that they only worked with the top three categories of people in the Development Centre. This is largely because at the lower level there is little to work with in terms of aspiration, and so remuneration is the key to securing their performance and happy engagement with the company.

For some of the Key Value Creators going on a Development Centre Course was not what they really wanted to keep them productive and happy, “for someone in the financial law side of things being sent to shadow a top expert in one of our branches overseas was of far more value.” Again it’s about getting to know your people and where they fit in.

Of course every company wants to attract the best possible talent and this is particularly true in South Africa where the skills pool is fairly shallow. Wilson found that money and rewards were what attracted talent to accepting a job, but that once they were in the company another dynamic kicked in which was about offering recognition and helping them to reach their goals, in other words giving them opportunities.

Wilson says that Development Centres are not for “problem children” or for those who show no potential or have a low engagement with the company, it’s for those who have been identified as valued members of staff who are key to retain for the future growth and development of the company.

When the new-style Development Centre was up and running it was greeted with overwhelming approval by staff, a fact Wilson is proud of.

And how to eat an elephant? “Start at the toenails and nibble your way through it until you have finished the task,” said Wilson.

Ends

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