

Developing a Talent Mindset

Mamie Doyle 01 April 2011

Introduction

In her new book, *A Chance to Make History*, Teach For America founder and CEO Wendy Kopp asks what it will take to improve our nation's school systems and ensure that all students receive the excellent education they deserve. Kopp notes that there is nothing elusive about the answer. Building up successful schools will require the same strategies employed by any successful entity: recruiting and empowering extraordinary and diverse leaders at every level.

As with any organization, recruiting the right people for the right team positions can be a complicated, challenging and competitive endeavor. A 1997 article from McKinsey & Co. coining the notion of "the war for talent" ventured that talent would be the most important corporate resource over the next two decades, and that it would be the resource in shortest supply. This reality requires schools and organizations to shift from an approach of developing a strong but independent human resources department to developing an organization obsessed with its talent at every level, and adopting a "talent mindset."

In partnership with schools, school districts and universities, Teach For America recruits, trains, develops

and provides ongoing support for our teachers throughout their commitment, and asks our teachers to go above and beyond traditional expectations to help their students achieve significant academic progress. At the same time, we foster the talent and leadership of our alumni to address the systemic causes of the achievement gap, both inside the classroom and beyond.

Teach For America is dedicated to providing talent and leadership for our nation's high-need classrooms and strengthening system-wide efforts to close our nation's achievement gap. To that end, we also work tirelessly to recruit, develop and retain exceptional individuals to advance this mission by joining our staff. Teach For America's 30-member Mid-Atlantic team—supporting nearly 400 teachers and 800 alumni across Philadelphia, Camden and Wilmington—also values talent and leadership at every level of our organization, and we are constantly seeking innovations to strengthen our effectiveness and impact.

At Teach For America, we strive to operate with the “talent mindset” McKinsey describes, beginning with recruiting talent, then developing that talent at every level, and finally retaining our talent and providing opportunities to learn and grow with our organization.

Recruiting Talent

In order to recruit talent, schools, districts and support

organizations need to 1) clearly define the capacities of particular roles, 2) recruit broadly and 3) select talent that will meet the unique organizational needs and strengths of each individual organization.

When hiring new individuals for our team at Teach For America, we start by identifying the competencies that are particularly important for a specific role and building out a profile for the position. We then recruit a broad and diverse group of applicants, strategically sourcing from pools of talent where those competencies might be particularly strong.

For example, when seeking talent for our programmatic leadership team—those members of our team who spend the most time with our teachers and who develop their instructional expertise—we obviously seek those individuals within and outside our alumni network who have been successful teachers. When trying to fill roles on our development or finance teams, we advertise at business schools or through external networks, or seek individuals from our alumni base with a financial background.

Said bluntly, we don't assume that posting a role on idealist.org or our internal network will get the job done—we define who we are looking for and aggressively and strategically cultivate them. Once we have recruited a broad and diverse pool of individuals with the background and skills we are looking for, we spend time interviewing

and selecting our talent. We seek to find people who first and foremost align with and deeply believe in our unique core values, culture and mission, and then focus on those who exhibit in either past experience or through simulated situations that they have the skills and competencies necessary to be successful in a role.

Developing Talent

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Once talent is cultivated and selected, it's important to develop that talent from day 1 so as to build and grow an internal pipeline or "bench" of talent within an organization or school. Developing talent requires 1) initial role training, 2) clear and consistent feedback and 3) ongoing professional development.

At Teach For America, we approach developing our talent first through a process called onboarding, a three- to six-month training process during which a new staff member becomes acclimated to the organization, to his or her individual team and finally to his or her specific role. This can be done in formal sessions or conferences, online trainings, on-the-job practice, or less formal one-on-one meetings or check-ins with managers and colleagues.

We create a culture of learning and continuously improving, regardless of tenure within a role or within the organization, and set the expectation that clear and

consistent feedback will be given and should be given up, down and across colleagues, in an effort to make us all better in our roles and ultimately reach our vision faster and with greater urgency. This can take place through formal feedback cycles two or three times a year, but also happens on a daily basis for all staff members more informally.

We approach ongoing development of our staff by coaching them to improve in their roles and in the core competencies required to be successful in the position and beyond. Alongside these efforts, we ask our people to work in conjunction with their manager to drive their own professional development plans, so they are positioned to be ready for more responsibility or different roles within the organization that align with their skills, interests and personal ambitions. Examples of professional development opportunities and coaching that our staff can engage in and drive are externships within or outside the organization, "stretch opportunities" on projects to build knowledge or skill outside the normal functions of their roles, formal trainings, mentor programs with senior staff members, and resource groups for staff members who share some aspect of identity.

Retaining Talent

Cultivating talent, selecting talent and developing the leadership of that talent within an organization can be incredibly time-intensive and resource-exhaustive.

Therefore, organizations must spend time and effort keeping the talent they have cultivated and grown for the sustainability and long-term success of the organization. Retaining our highest-performing people, either in their roles, on teams or within Teach For America, is also a responsibility we take seriously.

When our highest-performing staff members express interest in exploring other professional opportunities, we ask “What will it take to keep you?” and take action to do whatever we can to keep exceptional staff members within the organization. We think creatively and outside the box to keep our staff members happy, satisfied and effective in their roles and believe it is almost wholly within our control to keep our very best people, as opposed to “luck” or solely their personal choice (though that is obviously part of the equation). When our highest-performing people choose to leave the organization, we ask them why and look internally to consider if there was anything we can learn from the decisions, experiences or potential mistakes we made along the way.

We didn't always approach staff development this way, and we are consistently striving to be better, learn from others and learn from our missteps. But we found that it is critical to operate with this talent mindset to maintain, support and develop a pipeline of leadership within our organization.

Conclusion

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Teach For America was honored to be recognized as one of America's best companies to work for by *Fortune* magazine in January 2011—the only nonprofit outside the health care industry among this year's honorees. This recognition is a tribute to our incredible staff members, and it will be a wonderful way to fuel our ongoing efforts to build an even stronger pipeline of talent into our organization, ensuring that we continue to move closer to achieving our vision. Teach For America is only as strong as the leaders at all levels who work relentlessly to realize our vision for educational equity--and with a deep sense of humility, we recognize we consistently have a lot to learn and must constantly work to improve. However, this honor for our organization recognizes that we have made at least some strides in our "talent mindset," inasmuch as the people who work with us, who were part of the selection for this honor, find personal and professional satisfaction in their experience on staff.

Schools, school systems and supporting organizations can refine and innovate their own talent mindsets. Each school and each organization is unique and requires different approaches to finding, developing and keeping the talent that aligns with their unique values and competencies. The concept of a "talent mindset" is neither unique nor innovative in its own right, but we don't see it playing out as much in the education world as much

as in the private sector. What would happen if all of us—schools, districts, support organizations—developed a talent mindset and worked relentlessly to recruit, develop, train, support, value and retain our very best people in the education reform movement in our city? We're likely to see more innovations in education led by true leaders who are learning, growing and staying in Philadelphia—a good thing for our city and for our students.

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