

Talent pipelines – implications for selection and development*

IT'S A REALLY SIMPLE IDEA. A talent or leadership pipeline defines the distinctive leadership role of each level within the organisation. It is a clear explanation of team leaders', managers' and executives' separate responsibilities.

But, it's a simple idea with great practical value. A pipeline's definitions convey to individuals what's expected of them and of the jobs they aspire to. It gives managers relatively objective guidelines for judging both the performance and potential of their team members. And, a pipeline model streamlines and integrates everything in talent management: coaching, assessment, development centres, training, appointment decisions...

With such a range of advantages it's not surprising that pipeline models are increasingly popular. Some of our clients have superseded competencies with pipeline models, and we expect more to do so.

Pipelines seem to have big implications for HR and for selection and development in particular. It may take a few years to really discover the significance of pipelines, but some of their impact is becoming clear. This article anticipates likely changes in HR's thinking and methods.

New thinking

The key pipeline concept that puts a completely new perspective on talent management is that different levels of the organisation ought to make distinctly different contributions to the business. Senior jobs should not be merely bigger, better paid, more responsible versions of junior jobs. Senior managers should do different things; their roles ought to be qualitatively different.

For example a pipeline model might view jobs and their responsibilities as:

- **Managing Strategy** as the executive's job. In a competitive world, it's the businesses with successful strategies that survive.

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- **Managing Performance** is the role of department heads, of middle managers. Organisations must orchestrate teams, processes and resources in the most cost-effective ways.
- **Managing People** is what team leaders and supervisors should do. Organisations have to manage their people: allocate tasks to them, reward them, coach them, develop them, etc.
- **Managing Service** is the role of production and customer facing staff. Finally, organisations must address customers' needs with front-line services or products.

Table 1 (alongside) shows a few illustrative responsibilities for two levels: Managing Performance and Managing People.

Notice how different those two sets of responsibilities are; each is very specific to a management level. That is the defining characteristic of a pipeline model, and the thing that distinguishes pipeline and competency approaches. Some competency frameworks have 'levels', but they tend to be gradations of ability or performance, not distinctly different tasks.

Quite a few pipeline models exist, and organisations sometimes develop their own to be compatible with their contexts, values and strategies. For example, an organisation with many technical professionals has a pipeline model which describes three levels of management with equivalent levels for specialist/professional roles. The indispensable "Leadership Pipeline" book defines seven management levels, including managing a global enterprise .

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Table 1

Managing Performance	Managing People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finding and appointing able team leaders ● Overhauling wasteful/unnecessary processes or teams ● Agreeing and monitoring what teams will deliver ● Ensuring that a team or unit attains its objectives ● Replacing team leaders who don't achieve ● Monitoring and influencing costs ● Rewarding team leaders who develop their people ● Developing a departmental plan that supports the business strategy ● Explaining the business strategy and its applications for teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inducting and training new staff ● Winning people over with clear, persuasive arguments ● Providing team members with helpful ideas and advice ● Sharing their knowledge and expertise with team members ● Celebrating the team's successes ● Giving people the power to make decisions ● Reviewing and strengthening individual team members' performance ● Keeping his/her boss informed about the team's plans and performance ● Demonstrating how to tackle a task

Implications for managers

Notice the widespread use of 'should' and 'ought' in pipeline models. Most competency frameworks describe how things are; usually how good performers behave in your organisation. Competencies are essentially descriptive. But, a pipeline model is prescriptive; it sets out what leaders and managers should do, not what good performers do at present. A pipeline model might view leadership very differently to the organisation's current understanding of what's good. A pipeline approach might even question aspects of the best managers' leadership.

Because the development of a pipeline model asks an organisation to delineate what leaders really ought to be doing, it almost inevitably redefines roles for all levels of management. And, it is likely that some managers at every level will not meet all their new, pipeline defined responsibilities¹. Hence, a clear pipeline model spotlights 'poor' managers, those failing to address their responsibilities, throughout the organisation. That is something competency approaches rarely seem to have done.

In fairness to 'poor' managers, they may never have been asked to lead and manage in the ways defined by a new pipeline model. Perhaps we should expect a degree of 'pipeline shock' when the new model is presented? With some justification, people will argue 'That's not my job'. So, the announcement of a pipeline model

shouldn't just convey what leadership is at different levels, it has to present a convincing case for its definitions of leadership. The pipeline model has to be sold, and sometimes sold to people with very different notions of what good leadership is.

A convincing launch is something competencies rarely had to do. Because competencies were often based on the views of credible/influential managers, they were rarely if ever challenged. Sure, people tinkered with the wording of behaviours and indicators, but we can't recall any serious objections to any set of competencies in 30 years of consulting. As HR professionals, we've probably got to learn how to sell pipeline models very convincingly.

Implications for competencies

Because pipeline models are prescriptive most, if not all, of our existing approaches to developing competencies begin to seem inappropriate. Focus groups, critical event interviews, repertory-grid, etc., they all capture today's or yesterday's perceptions of good leadership. They don't define what good leadership ought to be, but perpetuate today's assumptions and perspectives, especially HR's views.

So, the development of an organisation's pipeline model should ask searching questions about what has to be done and who should do it. It's a vital opportunity for the organisation to

¹ For example, managers who are effectively doing their direct reports' jobs, and neglecting the key tasks associated with their level of the organisation. That is known as 'managing down', and it can be a widespread problem.

think rigorously about how it works, and to make some clear (perhaps tough) decisions about roles.

Because managers (should) do different things at different levels they need different skills and knowledge. One set of competencies for all levels will not work; it would probably destroy the value of a pipeline approach. So a pipeline implies different competencies at different levels (assuming competencies are used).

It might not be good enough to define the same competency differently at each level of management, e.g. influencing at executive level, influencing at middle management, etc. That's a common practice with competencies, but just muddles things for pipelines. It is using the same competency name for different things.

We suspect many organisations will consider abandoning their competencies in favour of simpler pipeline models. A pipeline approach might be an opportunity to move on from the complexity and criticism that have often dogged competencies.

Implications for assessment

Closely related to what managers ought to be doing is what managers give time to and what they consider important. For example, department heads responsible for Managing Performance ought to give priority to organising the function's processes and resources cost-effectively. If a department head doesn't do that, he/she is underperforming, whatever skills and abilities he/she may have. So, the assessment of an individual's priorities and use of time (what gets done) is just as important as assessing competence (how well it is done). Within a pipeline approach assessment is broader than ability and personality.

For example, one of the most telling forms of pipeline assessment is to review how a manager spends his/her time. As part of a retail organisation's assessment centre, participants used their diaries to explain to observers what they had given time to and why. It was an incredibly insightful exercise. Talented regional managers were managing the performance and resources of their regions as a whole. Less able individuals were managing stores directly.

A key by-product of assessment within a pipeline approach is to communicate to managers where they need to be giving time and attention. And, assessment can trigger significant changes in priorities and performance.

One of our clients achieved real improvements in team leaders' coaching, delegation and workload management with 360 feedback that highlighted what wasn't being done.

A 'talented' individual has the ability to perform at the next level; something that is only reliably tested by giving the person next level tasks to tackle. And, the assessment of talent is not just important for long-term succession planning. Talented individuals see things afresh; they raise standards and create change. What's more, talented individuals can be moved to new businesses, roles and projects. They enable an organisation to be flexible and responsive. Hence, the assessment of talent is central to today's organisational health and competitiveness too.

A smart HR function therefore assesses talent as routinely as it does skills and performance. Appraisals, 360 feedback, appointment interviews, etc should all gauge suitability for the next level as well as current skills and performance. It's vital information that enables HR to understand and utilise its talent pool.

Some of our assessment practices seem questionable, because they measure talent at the wrong level. For example, an assessment centre for aspiring department heads should provide realistic exercises relating to understanding and strengthening departmental performance. The centre should not assess teamwork and coaching, because those are team leaders' responsibilities. And, arguably individuals should not be attending that centre unless they've already got great track records in Managing Others. Many centres might be using exercises that are conventional and convenient, rather than ones representative of the next level.

One of the central pipeline ideas is that an individual should perform well at a level before being promoted to the next. Problems are thought to occur if an individual skips or moves quickly through a level. The validity of that idea is debatable, but if it's true it suggests the assessment of talent should be for the next level only, not for two levels up. For example, the assessment centre for aspiring department heads should not include strategic exercises, because that implies skipping a level.

Implications for development

For personal development, a pipeline approach might mean the end of some 'one-size-fits-all' training. Leadership is different at different levels, so a generic leadership programme for all

levels won't address the key responsibilities and challenges of each level. Department heads who really need to be learning to improve functional performance, shouldn't be taught to communicate or to coach. They should already be competent at those things. People might be complimentary about a generic leadership course, especially if it's entertaining, but big, tangible improvements in individual performance might be rare.

A pipeline approach also puts a very different perspective on 'poor performance'. Conventionally, poor performers are perceived to lack skills, and that may be part of the problem. However, it may be that poor performers have strengths, but the wrong priorities. Their view of what is important is mistaken; perhaps they have set clear, logical priorities to do the wrong things.

That seems to be true of many of the poor managers we encounter. They are often in technical functions and focusing on the details of projects and processes, whilst giving little time to their people and to achieving results through others. Curiously, they often believe they are doing absolutely the right things, and don't understand why their efforts aren't appreciated. 360 feedback to poor performers often highlights both their technical strengths and their mistaken priorities.

Pipelines underline an important but sometimes neglected point: for an individual to perform well: his/her manager has to be performing well too. Very few people succeed if their manager is inept, yet the focus of many personal development plans is purely on the

individual. A pipeline approach might require us to engage the manager in the individual's development. For example, some of our development centres required managers to attend and contribute to the last day of the centre when feedback was given and action plans designed. That proved to be so crucial the organisation decided an individual couldn't attend the centre if his/her manager couldn't.

Not that engaging the individual's manager is always easy. Our 360 feedback/coaching one-to-one process⁴ explores how the manager will become involved, convinced and given opportunities to shape the action plan. It's a step that can take an hour if the individual has a poor relationship with their manager; most of the action plan may be about managing the manager.

In conclusion

Clearly there is a lot here for HR to think about. Pipelines question many aspects of our thinking and practices which have been largely shaped by competencies for the past three decades. No doubt there will be problems with pipelines, and some will regrettably rebrand competencies as pipeline models. However, there are some really important and practical ideas for organisations to think through and utilise.

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³ *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company* by Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter & James Noel. Jossey Bass, 2001, ISBN-10: 0-78795-172-2.

⁴ Peter Goodge & Jane Coomber, 2007, How to ... get 360 coaching right. *People Management*, 3 May, 2007, pp.44-45.