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For Workplace News

Way back in the Dark Ages, when I was in elementary school, the raging debate among educators concerned homogeneous versus heterogeneous classes. Do we put all the smart kids in one classroom and the not-so-smart kids in another?

The logic was that, since learning capabilities were varied, different approaches were needed. Where schools opted for heterogeneous groupings, they supported the more “challenged” learners by providing remedial assistance, usually through tutoring.

I have had a lifelong respect for teachers who have success working with heterogeneous classes. In my opinion, they are true educators, able to teach to the student while encouraging the diversity of the group. In management today, we are seeing an echo of the homogenous versus heterogeneous debate – and the latter voices are winning without adequate understanding of the consequences.

## Talent Management that Stimulates ‘Class’ Wars

The history is interesting. In 1911, Frederick W. Taylor determined that everyone should be managed the same. Over the years, this approach was reinforced by fears of favoritism. If a manager provided one direct report with something while not doing the same for another member of the team, it was considered unfair. This stifled managers from treating each team member as an individual with individual needs. Eventually, the pendulum swung in the other direction when Ken Blanchard introduced the concept of Situational Leadership — meaning providing differential treatment for developing direct reports.

Today, the pendulum has swung even further. Employees who are outstanding at what they do are sometimes separated from others as high potentials and managed differently. Those in charge of succession planning and talent management efforts are understandably concerned about developing leaders who can bring organizations into the coming decades. But do they fully understand what they are doing to the organization as a whole?

Gifted and talented schools face the same problems as gifted and talented organizations. Not every student or employee ranks as gifted and talented, so

what do you do with the great majority?

Employees of all abilities are motivated to be part of an organization by a feeling of belonging. Organizations recognize this at some level through their efforts to be employers of choice with employees who are engaged. But how can employees feel chosen if they are literally labeled “B” or “C” players, consequently being made to feel as they are second class? Eventually, they will be alienated from the goals and victories of the organization and frustrated and lose their commitment.

Clearly, the focus on highflying employees supported by a parallel set of managers will lead to corporate trouble. An even more basic problem is that the idea operates out of a wrong-minded theory of human learning, and is intrinsically exploitative. It also doesn’t recognize diversity efforts because it proposes to create a community of like-minded employees. In a global organization this won’t begin to recognize the complexity of the real world.

What we need, instead, is a more balanced participation from all employees. We need to maximize the potential development of each individual and recognize the value of

diversity among humans, even in such sensitive areas as intellectual capability, motivations, and responsibilities. One of the most effective means of developing people is to put them in the position of teaching others. By having employees help one another and learn from one another, every individual becomes more committed and capable. On the flip side, it's helpful to keep in mind that a good teacher learns more from his students than the students from the teacher.

True succession planning and personal development programs have been long-needed in organizations. But let's not pursue them in a way that ignores the need for meaning and community in the workplace. I think the pendulum needs to swing back again, and that we need managers, like true educators, who can support and nurture all employees, not just the chosen few.

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• *The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers (John Wiley and Sons, August, 2001)*

• *Inside the Box: Leading With Corporate Values to Drive Sustained Business Success (Jossey-Bass August 2006)*

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