



# **Nuggets on Talent Management and Engagement from TLNT's High Performance Workplace Summit**

Insights

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After 31 years as a labor lawyer, I don't often feel like an amateur, but that's how I felt listening to day one's HR and academic presenters. We overuse the term "Thought Leaders," but the expression fit the speakers. All of them dug deeply into HR and Talent topics without coming unmoored from practical application. I'll write more as time permits, but today I want to share a few "nuggets."

## **The Importance of Risk: How NASA Celebrates Failure as an Important Step on the Road Innovation and Success ... or Learning Fast and Failing Forward.**

### **Jere Bucholz, Chief Human Capital Officer and Assistant Administrator, Human Capital Management, NASA**

Take Risks! I bet you didn't expect NASA to boldly praise risk taking. Because of the hazards associated with space exploration, you probably expected, "obsessively compulsively work out every detail, don't get creative, and go with a belt and suspenders approach." Let's be honest, given public and political scrutiny, you might have expected something like, "the tallest grass blade gets cut first."

However, NASA's mission depends on bold innovation. Hence NASA's Star Trek-like motto: To reach for New heights for the benefit of humankind." But innovation demands creativity, exploration, and calculated risk taking. We all know the Thomas Edison saga of how he tried hundreds of variations before hitting on the right combination for the light bulb. NASA patron saint Neil Armstrong explained that we know that "the advancement of knowledge and the rate of progress is proportional to the risk encountered."

Administrator and former astronaut Charles Bolden has set the tone with his guiding statement: "Risk intolerance is a guarantee of failure to accomplish anything of significance." Bolden lives this motto and early on stunned engineers by responding to an explosive misfire by telling them, "this was a good day." Instead of having to make excuses and cover their flanks, the engineers kept trying and figured it out. They failed forward, to quote Ms. Bucholz. How many corporate managers would respond so positively to a calculated and necessary failure? NASA's philosophy does not mean that they throw caution to the winds. They manage risk and try to learn as much from their failures as from their success. NASA is a unique employer, but to some extent, their philosophy transfers well to all of our workplaces.

## **Competence + Commitment + Contribution = High Performance Workforce**

**Dave Ulrich, the Rensis Likert Professor at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan and a partner at the RBL Group**

I can't do justice to Professor Ulrich's presentation, so I'll only discuss a few crucial observations. Ulrich followed Ms. Bucholz and set his tone by quipping that building culture is harder than "rocket science." Ms. Bucholz chortled enthusiastic agreement.

In discussing how to build the right culture, Ulrich discussed the strengths and weaknesses of managers.

Out of 67 activities, managers ranked these areas as the top things managers do best:

1. Ethics/Values
2. Intellectual horsepower
3. Integrity/trust
4. Function/Technical skills
5. Managing diversity
6. Customer Focus
7. Action-oriented
8. Perseverance
9. Drive for results
10. Comfort around higher management
12. Standing alone
13. Business acumen

No surprise as to the areas managers ranked as their weaker areas:

They ranked "Developing people" dead last at 67!

Personal disclosure and confronting direct reports were close behind at 66 and 65. Personal learning was at 63, and "understanding others" came in at 62. Seeing a trend here? The remaining weakest areas were:

63. Dealing with Paradox

62. Understanding Others

61. Conflict Management

60. Total Work Systems

59. Motivating Others

58. Managing and Measuring Work

57. Patience

56. Directing Others

55. Managing Through Systems

You'll have to read Ulrich's books or wait for another post to learn his approach to talent development, but my immediate take aways are:

1. Managers are inherently weak in many of the areas necessary to develop talent.
2. Many managers seem unconcerned about these weak spots, if they even acknowledge them.
3. Purposeful actions are necessary to address these weaknesses, and those who do so will probably be the survivors in their industry.

Howard

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