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DR. DAVID COHEN, President, Strategic Action Group Ltd "Contrarian Consultant; Powerful Results"

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In the talent management world, most organizations strive to improve their people processes by bench-marking the best. To Dr. David S. Cohen, principal consultant and founder of Strategic Action Group, this is nothing more than a recipe that leads to mediocrity and dysfunction. He has successfully challenged the traditional ways of helping to build companies through people. His passion is aligning an organization's people practices with its unique company culture and strategic business plan.

"No two organizations are alike," Cohen says "Most leaders know this, which is why they often talk about their organization's unique culture and values. So why would you want to copy how your competitor identifies and develops people? If you're truly different - and I believe you are - you're going to end up with people who don't fit your culture, won't thrive in your environment, and won't help you achieve your strategic goals."

That's not always welcome news. The market for talent is fierce. Talent managers focus on speed and efficiency when it comes to recruiting new people or building processes that develop high potential leaders. They are quick to turn to "cookie cutter" solutions to support their talent management function. In the process, they create misalignment between what the organization wants to achieve and the people that they are bringing on board to execute on that vision.

Cohen's not afraid to tell clients what they need to hear, instead of only what they want to hear. "I tell organizations to stop looking externally for the answers to their talent management needs," he says. "The answers are inside your four walls. You build your process and approach to talent based on what you believe in- your cherished values - and the differentiating behaviors that drive success in your environment. That's the foundation for developing a meaningful and

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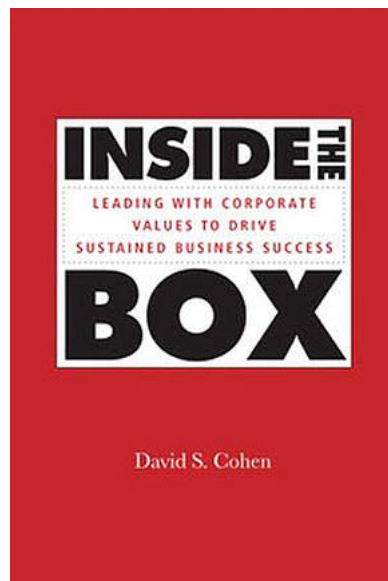
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sustainable competitive advantage through people who are passionate about your purpose and committed to your success."

His secret sauce is an unwavering focus on developing integrated and customized, talent management systems that reflect each organization's authentic culture, working environment and strategic business plan. From David's perspective, when employees are aligned with the company values and are passionate about the company purpose they will be highly engaged, retained and productive. He is a critic of glossy posters or company websites that proudly proclaim values. "Again, it's the cookie cutter problem," he says. "Most organizations state their values using the same words used by their competitors. That's a pretty good sign they haven't figured out what matters to them, what they stand for, and how to articulate it in a way that will communicate that difference."

Cohen digs deep with his clients to identify and articulate those authentic values in meaningful terms. That understanding then provides the basis for real clarity around the behaviors and attitudes that drive performance results in the right way. He's written two best-selling books that explain his ideas and practical approach. His first, *The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing and Keeping Top Performers* explains how to identify and hire for the behaviors that really improve organizational performance. His second, *Inside the Box: Leading with Corporate Values to Drive Sustained Business Success* dives deep on the importance of organizational culture and why values-based companies significantly outperform their competitors.



"Too many managers still focus on skills and knowledge when they are looking for people to help them achieve their strategic business plan. Relevant skills and knowledge are great, especially from a short-term perspective, but the real differentiator is culture fit. Do these people have the right values and the right behaviors to achieve your plan in the right way? People are generally hired for their knowledge and experience, but it's their results and innovations that help them stand out. They are usually fired for their interpersonal behaviors."

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With clarity around values and behaviors, companies can build integrated processes that align with and support organizational culture and performance goals. These include interviewing, performance reviews, leadership development, succession planning, and how you evaluate when to reward someone and when to let them go. This has big ramifications inside and outside of the company. "Your people know when you're not living the values that you say you believe in. They see who gets rewarded and promoted, how performance is assessed and what matters to you. That's your employee brand. If it's out of line with your explicit values, then a kind of cynicism and confusion sets in and performance suffers. Even your customers and investors know this. Alignment needs to be baked into your processes and that starts at the top. The organization's leaders are the biggest differentiators when it comes to demonstrating whether your values truly matter," Cohen says.

Kimm Kober, HR Director USA, for M&G Chemicals has seen the impact of Cohen's approach first hand. "David's insights about organizational effectiveness, leadership and talent, his powerful questions about our values, and his sincere curiosity about our culture were essential in helping M&G managers make informed decisions about people, not just the easy or obvious choice. We now have a values-defined culture that serves all our stakeholders, and talented people who are essential to our globally diverse team," Kober says.

Cohen adds, "Today's dynamic organizations are global and diverse, and that makes culture and values even more important. You really need to understand what matters to you and how that can be identified and supported through people in diverse environments around the world if you are going to succeed." He preaches this message at every opportunity because he knows organizations succeed when their people are thriving and contributing their all. In addition to his consulting practice, keynote speeches and books, he also publishes frequent articles and teaches at the Executive Leadership Division of the Schulich School of Business at York University.

"I'm proud of my reputation as a contrarian consultant," he says. I've never seen the value in following a theory or practice just because it was trendy or popular. I have a mission and that's to help the organizations and the leaders I work with to figure out why they are unique, what really matters to them, and how they can make that more powerful through their people."

An example of David's contrarian perspective regarding stock or off-the-shelf talent tools is his perspective on testing. While he believes tools like Psychometric testing have a place, he would not recommend using the test as a means of creating a candidate shortlist. "For example," Cohen says, "If a Psychometric test is used too early in the process, it can potentially weed out your most viable candidates."

When it comes to stock cultural assessment he is even stronger in

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his position. He adds, "It is important to be mindful that these instruments were developed mostly in the United States, in American English, and have been designed to measure a candidate's or a company's traits, not behaviors, in an American environment. Many of today's organizations are global. The characteristics that are required for success in the United States are not necessarily the same ones needed for success in a different locale."

"For example, it is not culturally acceptable for those of the Muslim faith to consume alcohol in the Gulf Region and in some states alcohol is forbidden. Yet, on one very popular Psychometric test for identification of talent capabilities, there are questions on behavior around alcohol. If Muslim candidates from the Gulf Region honestly answer alcohol-related questions, they will be placed at a disadvantage," Dr. Cohen says. This is only one example of why customization to the authentic values and work environment behaviors is essential to building a foundation for talent management.

This approach has served Cohen and his clients well. Many of his engagements, such as with Michelin Tire, have lasted for decades, and have generated powerful results that have helped clients navigate massive change confidently and happily. "Organizations are in constant churn," he says. "Although there may be market changes, technology changes, leadership changes, and staff changes, the company's values stay the same. If the values are strong, you can look back and recognize the same company from twenty, fifty or even a hundred years ago, even though its products and services may be very different." And, if those values are strong, the organization is likely to be very successful, no matter what change brings.

Suzen Fromstein is the author of Suits and Ladders, Ten Proven Ways to Keep Your Job Safe - with a few jokes thrown in. Suits and Ladders was an Amazon Best Selling Book in the Career Guides Category



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

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