2. Conceptualizing and operationalizing 'inclusive' talent management: four different approaches

Françoise Cadigan, Nicky Dries and Anand van Zelderen

INTRODUCTION: THE TREND TOWARD INCLUSIVE TALENT MANAGEMENT

The origins of the term talent, its etymology and usage in the gifted education and sports literatures, and its first mentions in the field of talent *management* (cf. the 'war for talent' book by McKinsey consultants Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) all clearly demonstrate that talent has historically been defined as a scarce resource. In this type of approach, only a small percentage (e.g., between 1 and 20%) of any population is considered as having the potential to exhibit true talent (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gagné, 2000; Gelens et al., 2013; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). In companies, talent is typically equated to being an 'A-player'—i.e., a high-performing, high-potential employee who contributes disproportionally to the bottom line of their organization (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003; Silzer & Church, 2010; Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf, 2007).

Collings and Mellahi (2009) and Iles and colleagues (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010) added that talent management should focus on getting these talented people into critical roles, defined as those that disproportionately contribute to an organization's strategic objectives. For instance, sales roles are critical at high-end retail organizations such as Nordstrom, whereas logistics roles are critical at large supply chain organizations such as Costco (Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005). Getting high-performing, high-potential employees into these roles will thus provide the best return on investment (ROI) towards meeting strategic objectives—justifying higher investments in this specific subset of employees. In contrast, an accountant at either of these organizations may play an important role, but is not critical to achieving their strategic goals, and thus should not be included in their

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so-called 'talent pool.' Exclusive approaches to talent management, such as these, are argued to optimize costs by investing specifically in confirmed talent working in the most strategic roles (Lepak & Snell, 1999, 2002; Smart & Smart, 1997). It is estimated that between 40 and 60% of global companies have such 'high potential' programs in place for the management of their most talented employees (Pepermans et al., 2003; Silzer & Church, 2009a, 2009b; Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf, 2007).

Critics of so-called 'exclusive' talent management say it is elitist and exclusionary, as it creates and reproduces unequal treatment of employees (Bonneton, Festing, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2020; Swailes, 2013), which may harm their morale, engagement, collaboration, trust in leadership, and productivity (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). These scholars argue that the negative effects on those left out of high potential or talent programs, including withdrawal and disengagement (O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019), outweigh these programs' possible benefits (e.g., Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013). Furthermore, according to the literature on knowledge management all employees, regardless of position, have the potential to hold valuable explicit and tacit knowledge that is critical to an organization's functioning and success (Vaiman & Vance, 2008), especially as this knowledge develops over time (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990).

As a result, less exclusive forms of talent management—focusing on the strengths and capabilities of all employees—are gaining traction both in the academic literature and in organizational practice (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014) with empirical studies reporting that at least 50% of HR managers adhere to an inclusive talent philosophy (Leigh, 2009; Meyers et al., 2020; Peters, 2006). Although the arguments in favor of inclusive TM are certainly valid from a phenomenological point of view—i.e., many practitioners do not like the exclusive approach, and many organizations do not want to 'do' talent management in this way—the problem remains that it is a contradiction in terms when we consider the conceptual and theoretical origins of the term 'talent' both in the TM literature and beyond (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013).

In this chapter we examine whether the existing tensions between exclusive and inclusive TM can be resolved, or at least clarified. Specifically, we set out to more explicitly conceptualize and operationalize what inclusive TM could look like in practice such that it becomes more concrete and actionable for organizations that wish to adopt this philosophy. In addition, we also aim to provide more construct clarity for researchers interested in the topic of inclusive TM, building extensively on the foundational work of Swailes (2013; Swailes et al., 2014). To date, inclusive TM has mostly been branded as 'anti-exclusive,' while it is much less clear what inclusive TM *itself* would look like. We perceive this as a risk, especially for the vulnerable employee

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groups inclusive TM scholars are specifically focused on protecting (Malik & Singh, 2014; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019); the risk being that organizations are quick to state that 'everyone has talent,' without having specific inclusive practices in place to back up this claim. We argue that a targeted approach is needed to ensure that the lofty goals of inclusive TM are met, and to make sure that this term is not appropriated or abused purely as a form of window-dressing or employer branding (Dries, 2013). So, if inclusive talent management is here to stay, we need better operationalizations of what is meant by 'inclusive,' and clearer pathways from concepts to practices. Throughout this chapter we argue that representing inclusive as *all employees*, and exclusive as a *small group of employees* may be somewhat of a false dichotomy. We propose four different approaches, summarized in Table 2.1, to inclusive talent management that can each rightfully claim to fit this construct.

The four approaches are: (1) focusing on potential and strengths rather than talent and gifts, (2) increasing the size of the talent pool, (3) defining a broader range of talent domains (i.e., the *talent for what?* question), and (4) topgrading the entire organization. In the following section, we explore each approach in detail. We end the chapter with a discussion on how these different theoretical/conceptual approaches might translate into a logical set of TM practices.

FOUR APPROACHES TO INCLUSIVE TALENT MANAGEMENT

First Approach: Focusing on Potential and Strengths rather than Talent and Gifts

The first approach involves how talent is defined and operationalized and focuses on constructs other than talent. For instance, Nijs et al. (2014) operationalized 'talent' as a multidimensional concept comprising both an ability and an affective component such that to achieve excellence—the ultimate criterion for talent—an employee can either perform better than others (i.e., interpersonal excellence) or perform consistently at their personal best (i.e., intrapersonal excellence), in activities they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy. Focusing on intrapersonal excellence and on the affective component of talent (i.e., liking what one does), these authors argued, will translate into a more inclusive TM approach than focusing on interpersonal excellence and on the ability component (i.e., being the best). Other authors, however, have stated that it is undesirable from a scientific point of view to define the same construct in different ways (Dries, 2013). An alternative approach is to use different terminology for interpersonal and intrapersonal constructs—i.e., talent and gifts for the former, and potential and strengths for the latter (Dries, 2022; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). This is

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Table 2.1 Four different approaches to inclusive talent management: overview and characteristics

Approach characteristics	First approach: Focusing on potential and strengths rather than talent and gifts	Second approach: Increasing the size of the talent pool	Third approach: Defining a broader range of talent domains	Fourth approach: Topgrading the entire organization
Key concepts	*Potential:* Latent capabilities—representing the gap between a person's current level of functioning within a given performance domain and what he or she is maximally capable of—that can develop into strengths or talents but are not yet utilized or seen. *Strengths:* Patterns in attitudes, behaviors, and feelings developed through experience, that are manifested in episodes of personal excellence, capturing someone at their best.	*Threshold approach:* Comparing an employee's performance to a standard that is considered 'good enough,' rather than requiring him or her to outperform coworkers (i.e., forced ranking). The threshold for inclusion in a talent pool thus becomes absolute rather than relative.	*Conjunctive approach:* Talent is defined and measured as being excellent at X and Y and Z. A talented employee is expected to be better than most others in all different aspects of their job. *Disjunctive approach:* Talent is defined and measured as being excellent at X or Y or Z. A talented employee is expected to be better than most others in at least one specific aspect of their job.	*Topgrading:* An elite, 'ivy league' approach to TM where only the best people in the labor market are hired into the organization.
Who (or what) is a talent?	Etymologically (and statistically) speaking, not everyone can have 'talent,' but everyone *does* have the potential to develop strengths in domains they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy.	Everyone who meets a preset standard of performance, regardless of the performance of comparable others. If everyone meets the threshold, everyone is a talent.	A talent is someone who is excellent (i.e., better than most others) in a given talent domain—for instance analytical, communicative, or leadership.	A talent is an A-player who is top in his or her field, as compared to similar profiles in the labor market—not just in his or her current organization.

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Approach characteristics	First approach: Focusing on potential and strengths rather than talent and gifts	Second approach: Increasing the size of the talent pool	Third approach: Defining a broader range of talent domains	Fourth approach: Topgrading the entire organization
Definition of inclusion	While the definition of 'talent' requires performing better than others (cf. interpersonal excellence), the constructs potential and strength allow for all employees to be included, as they represent performance at a personal-best level (cf. intrapersonal excellence).	Inclusion does not necessarily mean that *everyone* is in a talent pool, but rather that everyone has the opportunity to qualify. Being excluded due to not making a preset 'cutoff percentage' does not happen in this approach. There should be clear criteria for how to improve one's performance in order to meet the threshold.	The more different talent domains are acknowledged as important by the organization, the higher the odds that any given employee will be excellent in at least one of them, thus allowing more employees to be included in a talent pool.	If everyone in the organization is top in their field, by definition everyone in the organization is a talent—this approach is thus highly elitist and inclusive at the same time since all employees are considered talents. The exclusivity occurs prior to entry, but much less so after.

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Advantages/Strengths	This is the only approach that allows for all employees to be included, as it does not require forced ranking or interpersonal comparison; each employee is regarded in their own right. Employees tend to like this approach as it values their unique contributions and customizes career paths around them—when done right.	This approach is least likely to trigger feelings of unfairness or psychological contract breach. It does not compare employees to each other and provides clear standards that need to be achieved in order to be included. It encourages employees to improve themselves and reinforces self-efficacy and self-esteem. The risk of misidentifying people as talents is lower than in a more exclusive, forced-ranking approach which tends to be more subjective and political.	This approach has the potential to form the ideal 'hybrid' approach, mixing exclusive and inclusive TM elements together. It allows people to be recognized and differentiated for excellent performance, while still including a much larger proportion of employees since more *types* of talent are recognized.	Some of the most successful and ambitious organizations in the world are known to use topgrading, which attracts the most hard-working and high-performing people in their industry. It has a strong reputation effect. Everyone working in this type of organization knows that their colleagues are also highly competent, and the relatively higher salary cost is expected to be offset by the return on investment (ROI) thereof.

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Disadvantages/Pitfalls	This approach does not allow for strategic workforce differentiation, where the most high-performing, high-potential people are put in the most pivotal positions and are disproportionally invested in following a return on investment (ROI) logic. This may mean that it is less cost-efficient and less optimal in terms of organizational performance and competitiveness. The lack of emphasis on interpersonal excellence may frustrate high performers.	Research shows that high performers tend to prefer forced-ranking approaches. High and average performers are not differentiated between in this approach, meaning that the best performers in the organization may feel under-rewarded.	When an overly narrow set of talent domains is seen as important by the organization, or when they are not sufficiently different from each other, the same type of people will be chosen again and again as talents. It is important to identify and reward talent in uncorrelated talent domains, and then apply a disjunctive approach to talent identification. Another pitfall is that there often still are (unspoken) hierarchies between talent domains, that show up in promotions and pay.	May create an elitist and arrogant organization, characterized by selection biases and 'management cloning.' It puts a lot of pressure on the selection process, knowing that it is quite difficult to assess the potential performance of (especially junior) new hires without ever having seen them in action in the context of the organization. It is not cost-efficient; in that it is not necessary to have the best people in the labor market for every single position (cf. differentiated HR architecture).

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Implications for TM practice	Measure performance often and look for indicators of untapped potential in performance fluctuations: when was it 'better'? in what team, on what project, under what supervisor? And can we replicate those 'personal best' contextual conditions? Train people on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. Put them in roles that capitalize on their strengths and assemble teams of people with complementary strengths and weaknesses. Emphasize and reward team performance over individual performance.	Lowering the threshold employees need to meet to enter a talent program, thus giving the opportunity to more people. This can be done by increasing the (arbitrary) percentage of people who can be included in a talent pool, accepting everyone who meets an absolute threshold, or even affirmative action. Consider different qualitative criteria for inclusion altogether, such as motivation over performance, and knowledge over education. Rather than classifying employees as poor performers (cf. 'rank and yank'), actually help them improve and meet the threshold set by the organization.	Identify the different talent domains that are important to the organization and assess each employee on each talent domain using performance appraisals and forced ranking. Assess to what extent employees' scores are correlated between talent domains; if they are highly correlated, add talent domains that are more distinct. Use the data to evaluate in which talent domains the organization has many talented incumbents, and which are potentially lacking. In the long term, monitor whether certain talent domains are more appreciated by the organization in terms of promotion, pay, and quit rates.	Talents are identified (using the interpersonal excellence criterion) *prior* to organizational entry, which is less sensitive than differentiating between employees already working together. To attract these people, typically pay should be higher than the market rate, and/or the organization needs to have a good reputation. New staff are typically put on fixed contracts first, such that hires who fail to live up to expectations can be identified quickly and either improved through training or oriented to a position outside of the organization.

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an interesting approach as it orients researchers and practitioners to different literatures and practices than the 'traditional' TM approach.

Potential

Potential is defined as latent capabilities that can develop into strengths or talents but are not yet utilized or seen. In other words, potential is the gap between a person's current level of functioning in a given performance domain, and what he or she is maximally capable of (De Boeck, Dries, & Tierens, 2019). Potential denotes possibilities, promise, and latent action (Altman, 1997). Scheffler (1985) describes potential as a *capacity* via critical periods and plasticity, *propensity* via development, and *capability* via choice to reach a specified goal. By definition, potential cannot be detected from current performance in an area that a person already knows well (Roussillon, 2002). Attributes that signal potential include curiosity, accepting responsibility for learning and change, adventuresomeness, effective learning from experience, getting results under tough conditions, and seeking and using feedback (Altman, 1997; McCall, 1994; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). The emphasis is on how individuals learn and act when they are at their best and discovering which conditions help them naturally to access this mastery (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Potential connects to the knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant, 1996) in that as employees gain tenure with their organization, they also gain valuable explicit and tacit knowledge (i.e., absorptive capacity; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) that help an organization compete in its market environment (Haesli & Boxall, 2005).

Potential assessments tend to be important both in exclusive and inclusive TM practice (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). However, in exclusive TM, typically a set percentage of employees is identified as having high potential (mostly 1–20%) annually, based on interpersonal comparison and forced ranking of employees—mirroring the principle of interpersonal excellence (Church et al., 2015). In inclusive TM, there is no forced ranking, and each employee is developed to achieve their 'best self' in the position(s) most suited to their potential and interests while also building valuable knowledge for the firm and their job. In addition, it is useful to reflect on how organizations might go about uncovering employees' *untapped* potential. One suggestion is to move away from a focus on assessing people's average performance, and instead look for fluctuations in performance over time (Dries, 2022). If a person has a mediocre (or even bad) performance, and if managers believe these employees may in fact have potential (cf. the 'nine-box' method of crossing performance and potential ratings; Philpot & Monahan, 2017), the following indicators may be of interest to managers: When was the performance 'better'? On which project, on which team, with what type of job tasks, at which point in time or career stage, and under which supervisor did this

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person perform better than they currently do? What is the degree of variability in performance between the formal appraisal periods (especially if these take place only once a year)? What is the best performance this employee has demonstrated across that entire period, and what were the circumstances of this 'personal-best' performance episode? Do other sources of variance play a role in the performance ratings—is everyone on that team poorly rated? Is the supervisor lenient or strict in his or her ratings? How are the team relationships? Is the person chronically under-stretched or bored? Does he or she have passions outside of the workplace that could be utilized, in one way or another, to enhance their engagement?

Thus, inclusive TM provides work opportunities that allow employees to demonstrate potential, growth, and learning new skills (Silzer & Church, 2009a). Helping employees reach their potential may further help them find meaning in work (Mitroff & Denton, 1999) such that people move beyond the present and anticipate possible scenarios in the future, reflecting their hopes and aspirations for the future in relation to work (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). Connecting present work activities to one's future work self creates a sense of purpose and motivates employees to approach the desired end-states that their future work selves entail (Strauss et al., 2012). A recent longitudinal study found that as employees perceive themselves to be fulfilling more of their potential, their perceived work meaningfulness increases (De Boeck et al., 2019).

Strengths

Strengths represent an inclusive TM construct—like potential—the difference being that potential is latent, while strengths are presently visible in an employee's behavior. More specifically, strengths are defined as patterns in attitudes, behaviors, and feelings (Linley & Harrington, 2006) developed through experience, that are manifested in episodes of personal excellence, capturing someone at their best (e.g., Roberts et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2011). The strengths-based approach to TM aligns with the inclusive/developable talent philosophy described by Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014), which holds that anyone can develop potential into strengths through training and development, knowledge gain and learning (Briscoe, 2008).

Renzulli (2005) argues that everyone can contribute to societal improvement and that it is the duty of organizations to offer opportunities, resources, and the encouragement required to achieve each employee's full potential through maximization of their involvement and motivation. This approach relates to the positive psychology and vocational psychology literatures. For instance, positive psychologists Buckingham and Clifton (2001) assert that everyone possesses a certain set of strengths (e.g., adaptability, discipline) and that it is the specific cocktail of strengths that contributes to everyone's

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uniqueness. This approach is believed to generate psychological and physical health, which increase productivity.

Some scholars argue that the strengths-based approach restores social and ethical considerations in that exclusion from talent programs may signal that non-talented employees are inferior (Downs & Swailes, 2013). In this way, the strengths approach supports Swailes et al.'s (2014) ideas for fully inclusive talent management (FITM) described as a focus on capabilities and the creation of the conditions in which abilities may flourish (Nussbaum, 2012), which contribute to feelings of competence, self-worth, respect, appreciation, well-being (Ghielen, van Woerkom, & Meyers, 2018), and job related performance (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). In FITM, those employees who need help receive it rather than those who are already advantaged or considered talented. In this way, no employee is excluded, rather each employee is helped in ways that benefit them and, in turn, their organizations via positive feelings explained by positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), and knowledge enhancement (Vaiman & Vance, 2008).

Overall, the strengths-based approach prioritizes employee welfare over profits, and provides opportunity via participation (Downs & Swailes, 2013). Van Woerkom, Meyers, and Bakker (2022) further propose that individual strength use, and collective strength use by teams are reciprocally related such that a strengths-based climate is positively related to collective strengths use, and a strengths-based climate strengthens the positive relationship between individual and collective strengths use. One idea is to shift the focus of TM away from individual performance and instead focus on composing complementary teams, in which members have strengths and weaknesses that cancel each other out, allowing for an optimal division of tasks (Dries, 2022). Vance et al. (1991) find that the learning benefits of knowledge-sharing groups include increased confidence in problem-solving, reduced isolation, and better ability to identify future problems.

Overall, this first approach rests on the assumption that people can thrive and succeed in the right context. This approach involves organizations making genuine efforts to elicit the potential and strengths of each employee, shifting the emphasis toward learning. The organizational challenge then becomes one of fitting all employees into jobs that they enjoy and which enable each individual's potential and strengths (Swailes et al., 2014) that also benefit the organization. This approach also constructively helps underperforming employees, or those whose strengths and potential do not benefit the organization, to exit the organization.

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Second Approach: Increasing the Size of the Talent Pool

The second approach involves including a higher percentage of employees into the talent pool, which is a commonly suggested practice for inclusive TM (e.g., Sparrow et al., 2014). Similar to the first approach, this approach moves away from a competitive, winner versus loser mentality inherent in the global 'war for talent' paradigm and moves toward a more cooperative approach. In general, a key difference of this approach is between relative versus absolute performance evaluations. Relative performance evaluations are typically used for talent identification in exclusive TM, as a form of forced ranking using social comparison. In contrast, a 'threshold' approach looks at each individual's absolute performance compared to a standard of 'good enough,' but not compared to coworkers. A study by Blume, Rubin, and Baldwin (2013) compares employee preferences for performance management systems that either use a forced distribution system (FDS) where employees are compared against each other versus a non-comparative standards system where employees must meet a certain threshold. These scholars find that respondents with the highest cognitive ability or the ones who are the most 'talented,' by proxy, report the forced distribution system as fairer whereas everyone else prefers the standards-based or threshold approach.

A forced distribution system may employ a sorting effect, giving applicants the impression that the organization is serious about rewarding high performers and is intolerant to poor performance. The respondents in the study with the highest cognitive ability may expect to perform well and may view FDS as an indicator that the company values high achievement and will be more likely to offer opportunities for promotion. Further, such individuals may be more willing to work in a competitive environment where they believe they will rank highly when compared with others and be rewarded accordingly (Trank, Rynes, & Bretz, 2002). These findings support a key reason why organizations implement FDS, namely, to attract and retain high performers.

In the standards-based or threshold approach, anyone who passes a certain threshold of performance—even if it is 50% or more of all employees and regardless of comparison to colleagues—can enter the talent program. Providing clear criteria for inclusion signals to employees how they need to improve themselves to be included in the future. We identify three sub-approaches that will increase the size of the talent pool: (1) attributing another threshold to talent, (2) focusing on attributes other than output so that more employees make the cut, and (3) helping more employees make the cut.

Lowering the talent threshold

First of all, any threshold in a forced ranking approach is arbitrary—there is no ultimate criterion to decide whether it is better to identify 1% of employees

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as talents, versus 10% or 50% (Church et al., 2015). Ho (2005) provides the example of accounting and law firms limiting the number of associates who can make partner to create a feeling of scarcity (Hirsch, 1977) as a form of artificial resource restriction. Similarly, the literature on intellectual giftedness (in schoolchildren and students) describes the arbitrary and subjective nature of thresholds for considering someone 'talented' (Gagné, Bélanger, & Motard, 1993). This implies that organizations are free to set the threshold for inclusion into their talent management programs at any level they choose (Dries, 2013). Several companies have reported drastic changes to their talent management programs in this regard, for instance by increasing the percentage of employees in their talent pool from 1 to 30% (cf. case study by Hjordrup, Minbaeva, & Jensen, 2015).

The threshold approach may strengthen the psychological contract so that more employees feel impelled to work harder and remain employed with their organizations, and improve their organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), which is defined as the value individuals perceive themselves to have in their role as organizational members and is the extent to which a person perceives him- or herself as a competent individual, or a 'person of worth' (Pierce et al., 1989). Employees with high OBSE perceive themselves as important, meaningful, capable, and worthwhile within the specific context of their employing organization. Three typical sources of OBSE include implicit signals sent by the organization (e.g., through its practices); messages from significant others (e.g., supervisors) that are received and internalized; and feelings of efficacy and competence derived from work and organizational experiences (e.g., experiences of success; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). All three of these are at play in talent programs, as they send both direct and indirect messages about the relative value of employees and how those included or considered talent are valued more than those excluded or considered non-talent (Malik & Singh, 2014; Michaels et al., 2001). The threshold approach may also enhance knowledge gain as employees can focus on being the best at their jobs rather than comparing themselves to others who may be perceived as better or superior.

Focusing on attributes other than output

A second sub-approach involves focusing on attributes other than output, which also lowers the threshold. When it comes to TM, most organizations focus solely on output—typically operationalized as past performance—in assessments of talent (Silzer & Church, 2009a). However, some argue that natural talent may be overrated, especially for sustaining organizational performance (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). It has been hypothesized that only 30% of a talent's performance stems from individual capabilities and 70% from resources and qualities specific to the organization including reputation, technology, leadership, training, and teamwork (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria,

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2004). Performance also depends on teams that have experience working together (Taylor & Greve, 2006), and context matters such that people do well in certain environments but not in others (e.g., Thomas & Lazarova, 2006). Furthermore, individuals and teams gain knowledge the longer they work at the organization where their knowledge can be managed in a way that helps the organization (Vance et al., 1991).

If employees make the cut into talent programs by being valued for criteria other than output, this may again boost employees' sense of OBSE and reduce unfavorable outcomes associated with upward social comparison, including envy, a reduction in self-esteem, and hostility toward others who are better off (Fiske, 2011; Sterling, van de Ven, & Smith, 2006; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). This sub-approach may further reduce the risk of selecting the wrong people in an exclusive strategy which can backfire (Walker & LaRocco, 2002).

As opposed to the first sub-approach of increasing the percentage—which redefines the criterion for talent pool entry in quantitative terms (e.g., top 30% is 'good enough')—focusing on attributes other than output implies considering different qualitative criteria altogether for determining who is 'talented' (for instance, motivation rather than only performance, knowledge rather than only education). As such, everyone who meets a basic threshold of performance, and is also motivated, passionate, and willing, can be considered a talent.

Within this sub-approach, we also find the (often controversial) practice of affirmative action. Noon's (2010) article on this topic asks the question whether having equal standards or thresholds for all groups is fair. Noon questions whether the groups that have been historically marginalized or institutionally discriminated against require more help to reach the same threshold, or, alternatively, the standard might be lowered specifically for them. These ideas are mirrored in heated debates for instance around quotas in companies and minority-group admission criteria at elite universities. Similar to the first sub-approach, this mechanism provides employees opportunity via participation, but rejects setting a predetermined threshold that is likely subjective and perhaps enshrines a biased vision of talent (Swailes et al., 2014). This approach may reflect fairness in that everyone gets a more equitable opportunity, not only those who display desired traits and fit the mold of 'talent,' or who have benefited from advantages and opportunities throughout their lives (Gagné, 1993).

Helping employees reach the threshold

In the third and final sub-approach, employees who do not meet the threshold can be provided with coaching for improvement so that they can make the cut. This sub-approach reflects the basic notion of remediation of poor performance through training—which may appear obvious, but we know from

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research that once a person is branded as a poor performer it is hard to turn that perception around (Dries, 2013). This differs from exclusive TM strategies, which exclude and separate people into in-groups and out-groups, and into categories of high and low value. Rather, this sub-approach promotes effort where feelings of efficacy and competence can be instilled through work and organizational experiences (Pierce & Gardner, 2004) and eventual knowledge attainment (Vance et al., 1991). Similar to the first approach, when an employee's talents are deemed to fall below reasonable thresholds that the organization has democratically established, the organization should help the employee to either improve, or encourage them to deploy their talents elsewhere. Fully inclusive TM only exists if this step is at least attempted when a person is branded as a poor or mediocre performer. 'Inclusive' means that employees are not given up on or left out (Swailes, 2013).

Third Approach: Defining a Broader Range of Talent Domains

A third approach to inclusive TM involves asking the '*talent for what?*' question (Nijs et al., 2022). In this approach, criteria are considered such that the idea of forced ranking is maintained—i.e., the practice of comparison employees against each other to see who is more 'talented'—but the number of relevant talent domains (exactly what one is talented *at*) is expanded. For instance, in the context of academia, a talented faculty member could be defined as someone who is in the top 10% of scientific research, *and* teaching, *and* service, *and* science outreach, which represents a conjunctive view of talent. Alternatively, a talented faculty member could be defined as someone who is in the top 10% of scientific research, *or* teaching, *or* service, *or* science outreach. This view proposes that excellence in one talent domain compensates for being moderate in other domains (and that expecting people to be excellent at everything is unrealistic), which represents a disjunctive view of talent. According to Bélanger and Gagné (2006):

Conjunctive: Talent = X and Y and Z

Disjunctive: Talent = X or Y or Z

Taking the disjunctive approach means that more employees are included in the talent pool and implies a more collective/team-based approach to talent management where not every individual employee needs to excel at everything. This list can be expanded depending on the needs and strategies of an organization—the more different types of talent domains are recognized, the more inclusive TM becomes. Different categorizations of talent domains are found in the literature, especially that on giftedness and

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gifted education. Sternberg (1985), for instance, distinguished between three forms of giftedness associated with the three major components of his triarchic theory of intelligence (meta components, performance components, and knowledge-acquisition components). Tannenbaum (2000) defined four categories of talent (scarcity, surplus, quota, anomalous). Gardner (1990) distinguished seven types of intelligence, and Gagné (1983, 1985) described four different domains of giftedness (intellectual, creative, socioaffective, sensorimotor), each further subdivided into multiple subdomains.

In general, if there is a disjunctive view that talent that can take many forms (e.g., intellectual, social, artistic, athletic), the number of people who are seen as talented 'at something' will increase proportionally to the increase in the number of talent domains recognized. In addition, the higher (less selective) the cut-off value chosen (e.g., top 20 vs. top 1%), the larger the number of individuals labeled talented. Furthermore, if two talent domains are not highly correlated, those who excel in one talent domain will not necessarily simultaneously excel in another talent domain, which will further increase the total number of individuals excelling in either domain. For instance, when good researchers are also good teachers, this means that the talent domains of research and teaching are highly correlated, narrowing the potential pool of talents again. In other words, highly correlated measures tend to create a high overlap between selected subgroups, whereas uncorrelated measures create different subgroups of talented individuals. It is thus important to define and acknowledge different talent domains that are sufficiently different from each other, if one wishes to become more inclusive (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006).

In general, disjunctive versus conjunctive have opposite impacts on prevalence estimates. For instance, Bélanger and Gagné (2006) provide the example of assuming an identical threshold of top 10% for each talent domain. Conjunctive definitions lead to low inclusion percentages as the number of talent domains increases in that most of those who survive the first cutoff score (A) will not survive the second (B), and most of the A and B survivors will fail to exceed the third threshold (C). As the number of criteria included in the definition and identification process increases, the resulting number of individuals labeled talented will soon become overwhelmingly small. In the case of disjunctive definitions, the impact is reversed; if talent can manifest itself as A or B or C, then the resulting population of persons labeled gifted or talented will increase with each new criterion added. One begins with the top 10% on criterion A, then adds all those not already chosen who excel on B, and so forth with each additional criterion. Taylor (1973) applied this reasoning in the context of his theory of multiple talents; assuming his eight talents to be uncorrelated, he estimated that 99% of the members of a population would be identified as above average (top 50%) on at least one of these eight abilities. With a much stricter 10% selection ratio, the corresponding prevalence would

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still be 57%. In other words, more than half of the population would be among the top 10% in at least one of his talent domains. To understand the impact of correlated criteria on prevalence values, Bélanger and Gagné calculate that when the disjunctive approach is used and includes 10 talent traits, each correlated at 0.1, with a selection ratio of 15%, then the inclusivity rate is as high as 74%.

A study by Nijs and colleagues (2022) applied the idea of talent domains—which comes from the literature on gifted education—more specifically to TM research. The authors distinguished between 14 talent domains, based on the work of Gagné (2004): linguist, scientist, analyst, technician, creative brain, critical thinker, mediator, speaker, spokesperson, planner, entertainer, leader, business(wo)man, and networker. They reported that across 44 multidisciplinary teams, the social status of 'most talented team member' was most often granted to peers perceived as having both leadership and analytic talent with a degree in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) serving a dominant signaling function. Thus, they found that being seen as a talent was determined both by the type and level of talent team members were perceived to possess, pointing at a risk with this approach—that there can still be hierarchies between the different talent domains, where having a certain type of talent is still disproportionally appreciated and rewarded by one's organization (and perhaps society, as is the case for STEM; Nijs et al., 2022).

Fourth Approach: Topgrading the Entire Organization

The fourth and final approach is topgrading, which is an inclusive approach that is paradoxically *more* elitist than an exclusive approach. In essence, topgrading is an elite, ivy league approach that uses fixed contracts to eliminate the bottom performers. In this approach, an organization strictly hires only the top 10% in the labor market such that everyone in the organization is identified as a talent. Those who do not live up to the excellence threshold are replaced by those who do (Smart, 2012; Smart & Smart, 1997). What allows us to label this approach as inclusive despite its elitism is that the decision to label someone as a talent (and the interpersonal comparison that goes with it to determine who are the 'best' in the labor market) is made in the selection stage before the employee is officially hired. According to Smart (2012), topgrading is an ongoing process where development and training are provided to improve existing human capital and where lower performers are deployed into roles in which they can excel (and if that does not work, oriented out of the organization). Examples of companies priding themselves in topgrading—and claiming that everyone in their organization is a 'talent'—are McKinsey, Harvard, and Tesla.

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Topgrading focuses on building a talent advantage by only hiring and promoting the most talented people available, implementing more thorough recruitment and screening techniques, and quickly removing under performers. Smart and Smart (1997) argue that the salary of an A-player is the same as that for a C-player, but the returns on investment of the former are better, so they ultimately cost less. Furthermore, it is difficult to turnover C-players, so it may be worthwhile to allow them the opportunity to become A-players, but if they fail, then they should be redeployed or counseled out of the organization. The philosophy is that everyone can be an A-player in the right role and pay, which is similar to the strengths-based approach and the sub-approach of helping more employees reach the threshold, but topgrading is more cut-throat by using fixed contracts and swiftly removing under-performers. In general, Smart and Smart (1997) argue that talent is an asset that can be controlled unlike the economy, industry, customer preferences, etc., and thus should be manipulated and controlled to the highest degree.

According to Smart and colleagues (Smart, 2012; Smart & Smart, 1997), A-players are believed to do everything better and should comprise at least 75% of employees, with almost no C-players. An example is the 1992 and 1996 Olympic men's American teams as an elite sports team where topgrading may work best, and includes other professional sports leagues such as the National Basketball Association or the National Hockey League where only athletes who display the highest levels of performance are recruited such that the whole team is truly talented (Downs & Swailes, 2013; Swaab et al., 2014). This is echoed by Swailes et al. (2014) who explain that topgrading only works in small, niche organizations or where required skills are in short supply, such as in start-up businesses. In large organizations, there will inevitably be employees with long tenure who slip to average or below average. Thus, inclusive talent management that uses topgrading would be difficult to achieve in anything but small organizations.

It is important that all managers embrace the approach and think of themselves as in the recruitment business for life (Smart, 2012; Smart & Smart, 1997). A thorough job analysis and chronological interview techniques, while considering the organizational strategy, culture, and fit help to avoid bad assessments. Multitudes of competencies are included and tailored to each job starting with the CEO. The screening process must include an extensive interview that omits easy-to-fake questions. Rather, the focus is about actual experience and includes reference checks from past supervisors. The selection process involves the hiring manager rather than only HR managers. A performance management system rewards top performers and deploys poor performers. Even after a hire, all levels of employees are interviewed for performance management including co-worker and 360° assessments with development

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plans implemented for each employee. With these practices, the hiring success rate should be close to 90% (Smart, 2012).

There are critics of topgrading, however, including Lewis and Heckman (2006) and Gladwell (2002), who say that that topgrading is a rebranding of strategic human resource management (SHRM) or even general HR and argue that competent performance, rather than A-level performance, may be acceptable for less strategic positions (cf. the differentiated HR architecture model; Lepak & Snell, 1999). They also contend that there are errors in raters' goals and performance appraisals and criticize past reports about topgrading that are cross-sectional, occurring during economic booms, and include no data analysis. Eichenwald (2005) points to Enron that failed miserably after taking a topgrading approach. Gladwell (2002) further criticizes topgrading for focusing on individuals rather than organizational attributes, such as team structure and physical capital.

A CONTEXTUAL NOTE: THE GREAT RESIGNATION

Referred to as the great resignation, during the COVID-19 pandemic people began to leave the workforce due to poor treatment, and/or poor pay relative to the growing distribution of world wealth, making it harder for organizations to find and retain employees especially in entry-level positions in the service industries (Hirsch, 2021).

Due to this phenomenon, employees worked longer hours on smaller staffs, in positions that require interaction with the public with little to no safety measures and no guarantee of paid sick leave where these trends quickly burned-out the lowest-paid workers (Morgan, 2021). Organizations have tackled this 'war for talent 2.0' by offering hiring bonuses and raising pay and benefits. However, 94% of retailers still cannot fill empty roles (Morgan, 2021). The inclusive forms of TM proposed in this chapter may help tackle the great resignation. For instance, the first approach of focusing on employees' strengths and potential may make employees feel valued. The second approach of increasing the size of the talent pool will be especially helpful for people who feel unfairly treated due to comparisons made between their performance and that of colleagues, and the lack of regard for performance factors other than output (such as motivation). The third approach of defining a broader range of talent domains will help clarify to organizations in which talent domains they have sufficient staff, and in which talent domains they may have a retention or attraction issue. And the fourth approach of topgrading may work in attracting and retaining the most competitive, ambitious staff as these will always flock to the organizations with the most high-status reputation.

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DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we explore four different approaches to inclusive TM—a concept that is increasingly advocated for by both academics and practitioners, that has however lacked clarity and actionability. Based on the features of the four different approaches to inclusive talent management (Table 2.1), we developed a decision tree for organizations and researchers to determine which custom approach might best fit their talent philosophy. The decision tree, depicted in Figure 2.1, takes the decision-maker through four questions.

Taken together, the four approaches outlined in this chapter resonate with Swailes et al.'s (2014) ideas around 'hybrid' forms of talent management, that feature both exclusive and inclusive elements. We also believe that the nuance between the different approaches drives home the point that inclusive and exclusive TM exist on a continuum rather than as dichotomies (Adebola, Swailes, & Handley, 2015; Stahl et al., 2012).

For instance, talent management may include inclusive practices for everyone, focused on strengths and potential, with additional practices for a selected few talented employees. The most extreme pole of 'all-exclusive' TM would include a very small proportion (such as less than 5%) of the highest performing and most talented employees who are believed to contribute the most to achieving an organization's strategic goals. Alternatively, the opposite pole of 'all-inclusive' TM would include all employees and would involve the most extreme forms of any of the four approaches described in this chapter, for example, an extreme disjunctive approach that includes an infinite amount of talent domains, a high selection ratio, and uncorrelated criteria. The midpoint on the continuum may involve inclusive approaches that are not as extreme and thus do not include all employees, but perhaps 25%, 50%, or even 75% of them.

Approaching exclusive and inclusive TM as a continuum may subdue easy criticisms of the most extreme approaches to each, which may be an artificial discussion anyway (Swailes et al., 2014). For instance, those holding an exclusive philosophy have accused inclusive TM advocates of being naïve (Gill, 2002), while inclusive TM scholars say that exclusive TM promotes a neoliberal winner-take-all ideology at the expense of more vulnerable employee groups (O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Swailes, 2013). Indeed, fully exclusive TM can be considered elitist and exclusionary, creating unequal treatment that may harm employee morale, engagement, collaboration, trust in leadership, and productivity, where the negative effects on those left out may outweigh the possible benefits of these programs. For instance, the threshold for considering someone 'talented' is often arbitrary and subjective (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006; Ho, 2005). The opposite side of the spectrum—fully inclusive

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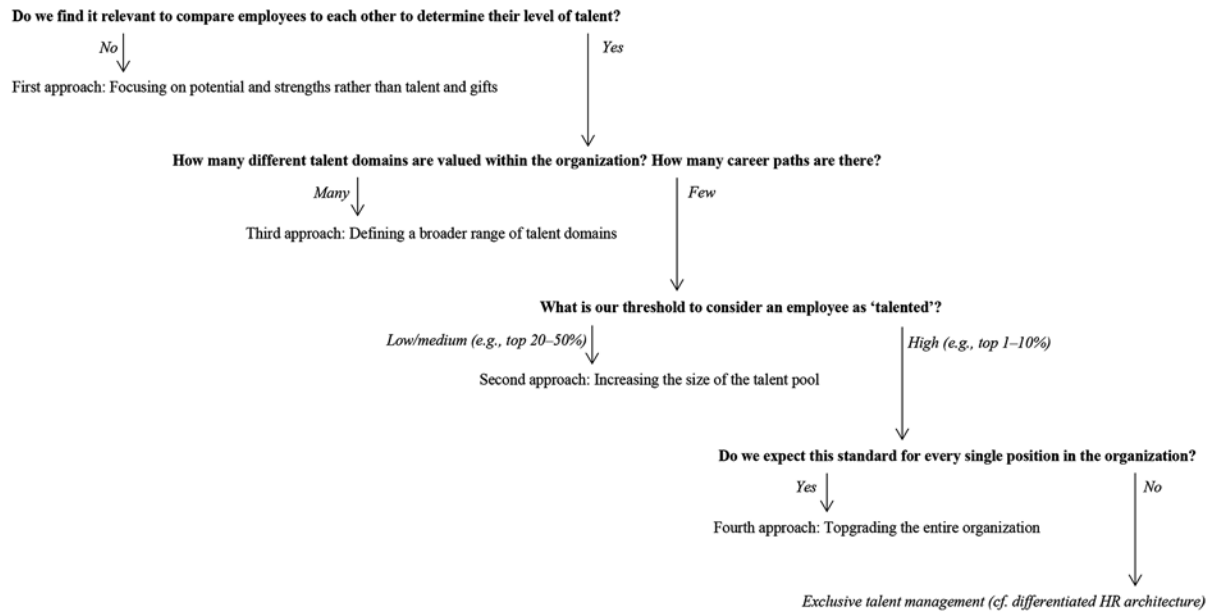

Figure 2.1 Four different approaches to inclusive talent management: a decision tree

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TM—in contrast, may be a contradiction in terms, as we know that 'talent' historically and etymologically refers to human capital that is rare and difficult or impossible to imitate (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Moreover, fully inclusive TM may be costly and not strategic by investing in all employees equally, rather than focusing investments on employees working in the most strategic roles, which will provide a higher return on investment (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Most importantly, organizations may prefer to publicly make socially desirable statements such as 'everyone has talent' but lack practices to support this statement. We have even encountered cases where such organizations in fact did have secret high-potential programs behind closed doors—for only a handful of employees from a very large organizational population (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). In those cases, claiming that one's talent management is inclusive reeks of window-dressing rather than truly appreciating and developing all employees' talents in an inclusive way (Dries, 2013). For instance, in many organizations there are (explicit or implicit) hierarchies between talent domains even when they claim 'all employees are valued' (Nijs et al., 2022)—consider the relative importance (and promotability) of being excellent at research/publishing (and mediocre at teaching) versus being excellent at teaching (but mediocre at research) at most universities. Or similarly, being in a core versus support staff position at any other type of organization (Lepak & Snell, 1999). It is our impression that there are very few organizations that do not differentiate between their employees at all when it comes to the implementation of TM in practical terms. Our identification of four very different approaches may thus allow TM to be less of an all-or-nothing choice between inclusive and exclusive practices, reframing TM as a hybrid set or *bundle* of practices that best suit the needs of any individual organization (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014).

We believe that in the above lies the solution to integrating the 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' talent management literatures—which are currently at odds with each other (Swailes et al., 2014)—into an accumulative body of knowledge. Rather than each approach arguing against the other, we believe it will be more constructive to acknowledge the different forms that talent management can take both conceptually and in organizational practice. In establishing such 'unity in diversity,' we believe talent management could finally make the transition into a more mature field of academic inquiry (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015)—although clearly phenomenon-driven—characterized in equal parts by construct clarity, rigor, and relevance.

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