High Potential Talent Development Practice in Organisations – Theoretical Inspirations

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Abstract: *This paper, an extract from research on TM practices in Indian business organisations, aims to present the High Potential Talent Development Practice and the inferred theoretical inspirations that seem to guide its conception. It attempts to delineate the practice into two parts – Intent and Design. While Intent is the purpose of instituting the practice, design indicates the kind of interventions. The findings in each part are correlated with existent theories and approaches. It also looks at the alignment of the practice with learning principles and the assumptions under which it is implemented. Examining the practice thus led to a model that indicates the critical theoretical influences on the same and as well highlighted its prevalence and context based suitability. This paper offers researchers and practitioners an insight into the existing ways of TD in the Indian context and also the need for a fresh look into its design and content to make it more enriching for both organizations and talent.*
Keywords: *High Potential Talent Development Practice, Intent, Design*

I. Introduction

Research on HR and firm performance linkage has proved that effective HR systems have a bearing on the financial performance of an organisation. Talent Management(TM) opined to be a practitioner generated term (Capelli and Keller, 2014), has evolved from being seen as an extended HR system to a strategic approach presently. The concept of key positions and workforce differentiation serves as the key to differentiating Talent Management from HRM according to Collings and Mellahi (2009). The strategic view was further boosted due to application of Barney's(1991) RBV perspective and Boudreau and Ramstad's (2005) 'talentship' concept both of which connected HR/TM programs to organisational outcomes. Thus, in current times, definition of TM as provided by Collings and Mellahi (2009) seems most appropriate. It is explained as a strategic practice that involves activities and processes leading to the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization. It rests on the theoretical perspective of talent as human capital and links individual talent to organisational context.

Talent development (TD) is an integral part of Talent Management (Garavan et al., 2012) and an essential pillar in the overall Talent Management strategy of any organisation. According to Garavan et al. (2012), a talent strategy focussed on external market for talent supply would be less successful than a strategy that focuses on development of talent within. It is essential for any organisation to develop its talent to create the power to be competitive, profitable and sustainable. In fact, talent is wasted whenever it is not recognised, developed, expressed, refined and leveraged (Chowdhury, 2002).

Defining talent followed by the identification and selection of talent in the organisation readies a sub-set of population that is considered to be laden with potential for excellence in the present and future and hence ready to be honed by way of talent development. Talent development interventions are equated to talent learning phases by organisations since learning needs to be integral to talent development. Developing talent for organisational growth is as good as what any cutting edge technology is for the said purpose. It seeks finesse, perfection and a detailed eye.

One of the earliest definitions of TD indicates that it is the process of changing an organization, its stakeholders and its employees by displaying selective attention to groups using planned and unplanned learning, in order to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage for the organization (Rothwell and Kazanas 1994). The focus was on building competencies to enable strategic business plans. Contemporary definitions view it from a systemic perspective. Garavan et al.'s (2012) definition of TD focuses on the planning, selection and implementation of development strategies for the entire talent pool to ensure that the organisation has both

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the current and future supply of talent to meet strategic objectives. Pruis (2011) talks of TD being the result of a coherent organisational talent management effort: from strategic resource planning, to assessment and identification, pipelining, career planning, career development, engagement, mentoring and coaching and (last but not least) learning and development. According to Blass and April (2008), TD includes the development practice by itself and so also career development processes and practice. They also discuss the development path and focus and career support to be essential dimensions in TD.

Thus, an effective TD program, in order to meet its goals, needs to be more than just a portfolio of off-the-shelf components. It needs to be carefully thought out and implemented and each organisation has to develop the amalgam of interventions and implementation strategy for itself based on its business needs and expectations from the program.

This article is an excerpt from the qualitative multiple case study based research done by the researcher to examine TM Practices in Indian organizations which also includes the TD practices.

II. Research Methodology

The research included organizations that meet pre-determined criteria of being profit oriented primarily. The key research parameters are as below:

Ontology	Objectivist
Epistemology	Relativist
Research Approach	Qualitative Inquiry
Research Methodology	Case Study – Multiple Cases
Sampling strategy	Purposive Heterogeneous Sampling
Data Collection methods	Semi - structured interviews with open ended questions
Data Sources	HR Head / TM head / L&D head / Business Manager interview transcripts as Primary data, Secondary sources include web resources and Company Literature in the public domain
Data Analysis Method	Cross Case Analysis with thematic perspective
Data Validation	Review of data, findings and analysis with a few participant organisations
Data Collection Period	Oct 2016 – Dec/Jan 2017

Case Selection Criteria

The research includes those organisations that meet pre-determined criteria of importance as below:
a) Business organisations located in predominantly Mumbai and a few in Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore since these are business hubs with many corporate offices.
b) Diverse in terms of sector, firm type, size and age

This served the purpose of attaining a broad picture of TM in business organisations in the Indian context.

Case Selection Approach and Size

Since research on Talent Management would be a sensitive one for any organisation, the researcher adopted the 'backyard research approach' suggested by Glesne (1999, see Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008 p. 52) and began with few familiar organisations where entry was easy to begin the Pilot Study. Contacts from these same organisations' representatives and research guide's contacts were further explored to seek permissions from various other organisations to interview. This approach has been prescribed by Eriksson and Kovalainen(2008). According to the authors, doing research in an organisation and with people that one is familiar with or have connections to often allows an easier access to both individuals and written research materials and also helps build contextual knowledge.

According to Patton (1990), there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. It depends on what you want to know, the purpose of inquiry, the usefulness, the credibility, available time and resources and what is at stake. He specifies that one can focus on few cases and more open range of experiences (an in-depth study) or large number of cases for a specific set of experiences(an in-breadth study). The researcher has adopted an in-breadth approach in this study. Within the in-breadth study, the principle of redundancy (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was applied, the focus being on getting maximum information as well as ensuring the representativeness and therefore, the analytical generalization of the findings and conclusions that will be drawn from this research.

The researcher approached 51 organisations formally by writing a descriptive mail explaining the research topic, purpose and also enclosing the interview questions in detail to which 32 organisations responded positively.

Although the research included findings on the entire Talent Management Process and Practices, the scope of this article is restricted to highlighting the findings and discussion on TD practices and its theoretical affiliations as visible in its intent and design.

III. Findings

Features of Talent Development Program in Organisations

Of the 32 organisations in the study, 22 of them had formal TM practices which included a formal TD practice too. The TD program is observed to be mainly aimed at the development of only high potential talent (see fig 1) although talent has various connotations in the organisational context. While all organisations profess a democratic approach to learning and development, talent development is mainly aimed at the high potential talent identified for general management and leadership positions and thus is hierarchical in its character. In this case, talent means a strategic few selected exclusively by rigorous procedures which also involves assessment against desired competencies. The pathway to TD begins with the creation of an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for talent. Co-creation of IDP as a practice is observed minimally. IDP draws the learning plan emphasizing the strengths, development areas, aspirations of the talent in order to maximise their potential. Post IDP; they are then exposed to a fast track development module consisting of interventions focussed on leadership and individual IDP based depending on their level and responsibility. However, customisation and self managed learning are concepts that do not seem to be very prevalent and need further probing and study. This program aimed at accelerated development is a time-bound specifically designed program for leadership talent and is mainly organization-centric and generic in nature and invariably communicates the privileged status accorded to high potentials as well.

Fig 1: Talent Development Pyramid
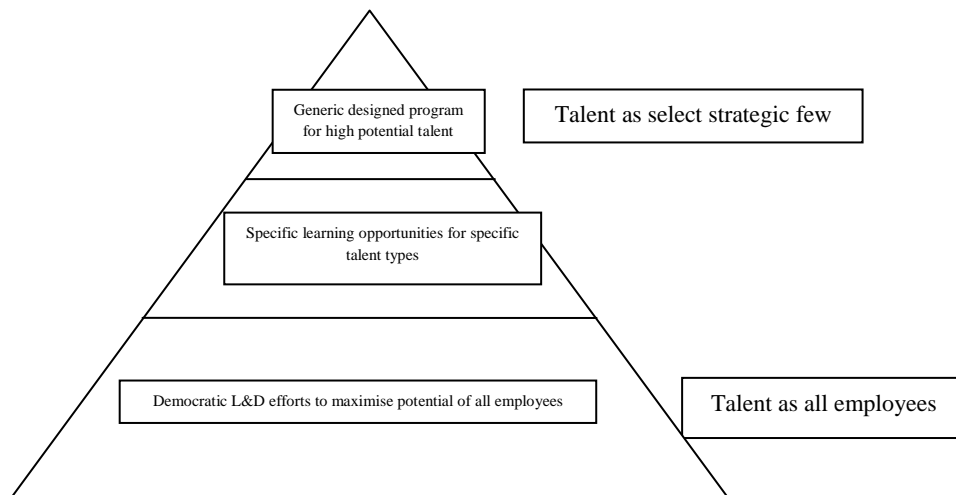
Nevertheless, these accelerated programs help develop a strong base of talent focussed on leadership positions. As the future leaders of their organizations, high-potentials move smoothly into new positions, receive special coaching and mentoring, and are expected to deliver superior performances. Thus the talent development architecture consists of pathways, programs and supporting processes to refine raw potential to a polished performer (Gandz, 2006) and accelerate the career of a talented individual making talent fit for prized deployment opportunities.

Types of Programs in Fast Track High Potential Talent Development Module

High Potential TD Module being focussed on enabling succession coverage for the organisation is a response that has been given by nearly 50% of the formal organisations in the study sample. As Blass and April (2008) state, TD is not a pro-bono activity and organisations do look to accomplish their purpose which motivates them to sustain investing in it. An internal TD approach helps to retain industry and firm specific knowledge and skills which can help them to be competitive. Hence organisations avoid ad-hoc'ism and exhibit utmost diligence in designing the same.

Irrespective of organisation sector, the fast track talent development module is loaded with a wide variety of intervention types (see fig 2) as below:

a) Specialised track for general management skills and leadership development – At least 50% organisations identified such programs as being distinctive and highly effective in elevating the leader potential of their organizations. They engage in tie-ups with premier institutes within the country or even outside to deliver such program for their high potential talent. In some organisations, the young talent is provided such opportunities locally while the senior talent are sent to universities abroad. All in all, there are programs in the menu for young leaders, emerging leaders, early leaders, young CEO, new horizon program and so on

to cater to the young talent while for senior talent here are tie ups with foreign universities and with premier Indian institutes. In some organisations, Organisation Impact Projects (OIP's) or Business Impact Projects (BIP's) or Special Projects is part of this specialised track.

b) Multi-faceted rotation – This is an experience-based leadership development tool and involves the rotation of managers across disciplines, divisions and geographies. In the study sample, cross country postings, functional rotation and being part of cross functional teams or audit teams is made available to the high potential talent in the fast track program. At least 32% organisations adopted this approach.

c) Arranging Impactful coaching sessions and interactions – These are aimed at enhancing specific competencies or overall enhancing the motivation levels of the participant. At least 45% organisations adopted this approach. Renowned Experts and Consultants were engaged for this purpose or in some cases internal coaches from other subsidiaries were called in.

d) Shadowing and Mentoring – Both these enable learning from others' experience and can provide useful development insights for those with high potential. In particular, having access to senior management as role models can prove invaluable. At least 27% organisations adopted mentoring while 14% organisations adopted shadowing as an approach towards talent development.

e) Use of technology – E learning modules, Online libraries, Virtual Development centres, Scrum approach as a way of Agile learning have also been observed as a part of the fast track in some of the study sample organisations. Technology enhanced learning saves time and cost of classroom training.

f) Use of novel techniques like Reverse Mentoring, Lunch with chairman

Fig 2: Intervention types in Fast Track High Potential Development Module

Formal	Relationship based	Education	Job based	Informal
Training Workshops by experts like Anand Kasturi , Rob Kendall	Executive Coaching	Executive MBA's/Mini MBA	Action learning projects/Experiential projects	Exposure to creamy clients
Guest lectures by renowned motivational and other speakers	Mentoring	Certifications in relevant areas	Functional Rotation/Audit Team member	Managing senior positions in proxy
Overseas institutes training programs	On the field buddy	B Tech M Tech and MBA for junior talent	Cross Country Postings	Lunch with the chairman
Certified Management Programs at various reputed universities here and abroad for junior as well as senior talent	Reverse mentoring		Business Impact Projects/OIP's/Shadow Boards	
Classroom Training / e learning/SQ EQ modules	Engaging with stakeholders		Expanded Roles / Stretched assignments	

Additionally, educational opportunities are made available to the young talent especially in the manufacturing sector which is a strong area of focus in the Indian context. Formal learning approaches seem to be the most popular approach.

Thus, every organisation strives to design a comprehensive process which can bring in some measure of success though not guarantee it. Cost is a major over-riding factor in designing the talent development architecture. However, organisations do realise that only by combining potential talent with access to and time for learning new skills will it consistently and cost-efficiently develop its high-potential leaders. A mix of formal, relationship based and job based experiences is observed to be in mind while designing the fast track programs. Informal ones have been sparsely observed.

IV. Discussion

Irrespective of sector, firm type, size and age, every organisation had a pre-designed module to develop high potential talent. The kind of interventions varied from being highly professional and cost-heavy to being internally designed and supported and cost-light.

The findings are discussed in terms of theories that highlight the intent of the organization and the design considerations of the program.

Intent

This indicates the purpose for which a TD module is in place. Intent guides the actions. The intent of the organisations to develop high potential talent was to create talent pools within and also enhance capability readiness of the organization to support succession coverage. To achieve this, some of the actions taken include:
- Instituting elaborate fast track talent development modules in place.
- Creation of own universities/ state of the art learning centres
- Investing huge amounts in high potential talent development
- Active involvement of senior management
- Training their high potential talent in general skills
- Willing to invest in the competencies of their talent
- Offering monetary rewards or promotions at the end of development module

These actions emphasize the application of two theories at least.
What makes organisations accord this privileged treatment to high potential talent is the view, which they hold regarding them and the benefits for the organisation. In most cases, especially the ones with exclusive talent philosophy, high Potential talent is viewed as human capital at par with the other forms of capital used as means of production and profits.

Human capital is a critical part of the intellectual capital of any organisation. The CIPD (2017) report on Human capital theory quotes the definition of Human Capital as given by Schulz:
"*Human Capital is: '…all human abilities to be either innate or acquired. Attributes … which are valuable and can be augmented by appropriate investment will be human capital*".

The report quotes that an investment to enhance these capabilities leads to an increase in human productivity, which in turn bodes well for the organisation. With a long term perspective in mind, the short term aspects of costs and time spent are set aside. Human Capital signifies the capability reservoir of any organisation. Thomas et al in *Human Capital and Global Business Strategy* (as cited in the CIPD 2017 report) define human capital as the performance and potential of people in an organisation thus attributing human capital term to the talent of the organisation. They consider human capital management as a strategic imperative requiring more than routine attention. Thus the human capital approach privileges specific interventions to develop individual leaders. It looks to develop individuals keeping in mind the needs of the job level and eventually the organisation level and aims to fulfil the key purpose of succession coverage (Stewart and Riggs, 2011).

However, some human capital theorists (cited in King,Takeyah L, 2016) have cautioned against providing developmental interventions in general skills that are useful to other firms too and which may result in talent attrition. This position is not well supported by other theorists and so also in this research.

The facts above highlight the belief of the organisations in another theory too i.e. the Social Exchange theory. A social exchange relationship rests on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). An exchange begins by the act of giving by one party which when reciprocated leads to a probability of continued association and exchanges and feelings of mutual obligation (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007). Eisenberger et al. (2001) define this feeling as an employee's obligation to repay the good that has been received by helping the organisation achieve its goals. According to Aselage and Eisenberger (2003), the strength of this exchange, or reciprocation, in social relationships gains ground when both parties willingly share the resources valuable to the other. Whereas beneficial treatment is significant for the employees, employers seek long term association and commitment (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007; Eisenberger et al., 2001) and it is the organisations that initiate this exchange. Koster et al.'s (2011) research proposes that employees may perceive investment in general skills as an investment in their development and employability and thus may reciprocate by continuing with the incumbent firm. Employers Such kind of focused training efforts decreases the probability to search for new jobs and enhances commitment (Larsen et al., 1998; Sieben, 2007).

Design
This indicates the means of achieving the purpose and this is generally guided by some theoretical perspectives.

Real-time opportunities such as business-impact projects, organisation-impact projects, action learning projects, job rotations and enrichments, shadow boards, impactful sessions, coaching, classroom case discussions, and reverse mentoring focus on training the core mental faculties and enhance thinking skills, memory, knowledge retention, and problem-solving skills, thus emphasising a *cognitivist* approach. Such cognitive skills are the driving forces in contemporary work environments (Hunt and Madhyastha, 2012). Neuroscience research shows that cognitive intelligence can be enhanced on interaction with a structured environment to guide development (Quartz and Sejnowski, 1997). The implication of this knowledge is in the belief of the organisations that it is possible to develop the overall cognitive capacity of both individuals and organisations. Unless cognitive skills are well-developed, information processing would be hampered and

higher-level thinking and deeper understanding would not be developed. Thus, the focus of organisations is on enhancing these skills. Also, these are aimed at encouraging changes in observable and measurable behaviour and internal attitudes, beliefs, and values emphasising a *behaviourist* perspective too.

Personal effectiveness workshops and mentoring sessions emphasise critical reflection on contextual understanding, assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons. It is focused more on building self-awareness and personal growth highlighting *transformative learning*, according to Mezirow in the 2000 article 'Learning as Transformation' (as cited in Allen, 2007)

Education-oriented classroom conceptual and theoretical sessions are informative in nature. It ignores the level of knowledge in various individuals and focuses on formally lecturing on the same topic addressing all learners on the same platform, thus emphasising a *traditional pedagogical approach.*

Thus, it can be said that the talent development model as presented in Figure 6.1 for high-potential leadership talent, as observed in the Indian context, is multi-pronged in terms of intent and design. It attempts to have a mix of programmes adhering to multiple learning theories and seems to be focused more on conceptual understanding, cognitive and leadership skill, and behaviour building and also on relationship-based learning to understand leadership in context but less on being transformative in nature. However, no organisation measures the effectiveness of the talent development programme at the end of it all.

Fig 3: TD Intent and Design Model
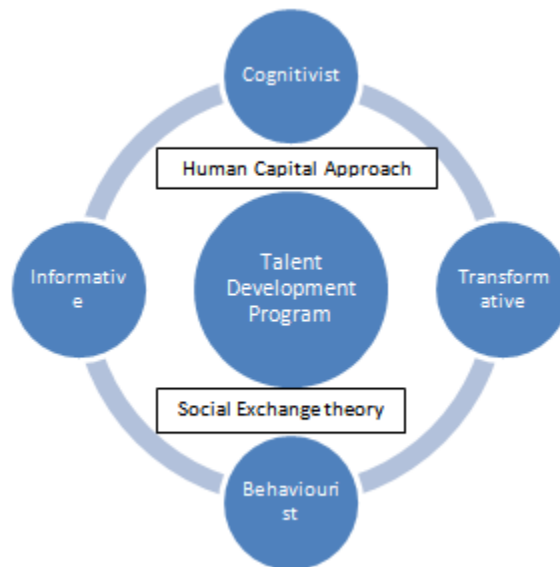
Linking High Potential Talent Development to Learning Principles

Organisations plan development modules for high-potential talent since it is believed that this is the process whereby a person evolves, grows and matures to a higher level of thinking which enables him to better adapt to the changing environment. According to Stewart and Riggs (2011), the outcomes of a person's learning and development is essentially reflected in the enhancement of their cognitive skills , sensory skills, emotions , self concept and esteem, attitudes, and overall approach of life. In the individual, this greater learning opens up the path to better way of understanding and responding to environmental challenges which opens the door for further learning. Development is thus a shared responsibility of the individual and the organisation.

High-potential talent development modules generally adhere to the adult learning principles. A practical and problem-centred approach based on real examples is used while encouraging the participants to use their work experience and knowledge as a resource. This involves the participants in the learning process. There are opportunities to reinforce learning by practicing. The module is usually arranged at a location away from the working environment to enable learning in an informal, safe, and supportive way. The high-potential talent development model promotes respect and self-esteem. However, the one aspect where it falls short or meets the criteria halfway is it allows very minimal manoeuvring to talent.

Learning cycles presented by the Kolb model and Honey and Mumford models provide an understanding on how individuals learn. An important implication arising out of these models is that organizations cannot assume one learning programme for all its talent (Maycock and Ikumola, 2015). Mumford even identifies significant blocks to learning (see fig 4) which may impede development at the individual level (Collin 2001).

Fig 4: Learning Blocks (See Collin 2001)

Perceptual	Not seeing that there is a problem
Cultural	The way things are here
Emotional	Fear and Insecurity
Motivational	Unwillingness to take risks
Cognitive	Previous learning experience
Intellectual	Limited learning styles; poor learning skills
Expressive	Poor communication skills
Situational	Lack of opportunities
Physical	Place, time
Specific environment	Boss/Colleagues unsupportive

However, all identified talent are considered to be of the same type and hence the uniform designs of the module within the organisation. This leads the researcher to conclude that the talent development program is specifically designed on the following basis:

a) Assumed Premises – That the identified high potential talent is a motivated learner and is strongly focussed on accelerating the learning curve. That the intensity of the program and the extensiveness of the same will be sustained by the identified high potential talent. That the High Potential talent will be sufficiently developed after the fast track program to assume higher or broader roles which otherwise he may not be able to.

b) Inherent Belief – That the organisation will be able to meet the raised expectations of the talent post the completion of the module

c) Future Preparedness – That the design of the module would enable the preparedness of the high potential talent to face any uncertainty or change in the business context presently or in future and take rational and profitable decisions.

The clarity on these would be available only if the effectiveness of implementation of high potential talent development program is undertaken by the organisations which presently are not seriously done.

Caveats and Challenges of the Fast track Talent Development Program

Whether or not the entire programme stands true on all the points is for the organisation to judge but it definitely brings forth certain caveats (Gandz, 2006; Blass & April, 2008) of the programme architecture:

a) An unintended consequence of the fast-track paths would be the non-congruent emotional development or arrested moral development of the high-potential talent. This may contribute to a sub-optimal approach by talent in matters of ethics and decision-making.

b) The true spirit of talent development lies not in packing of the talent to business schools and expecting magical results. It is best to acknowledge that talent development is an ongoing journey intended to fill gaps as well as to enable talent to eventually flower.

c) The development architecture must address its purpose keeping the future perspective in mind. Development today needs to fulfil the talent needs of tomorrow for the organisation.

d) Development modules for talent are mainly happening in places away from workplace and this may create a distinct boundary between learning at work and in classroom. Treating them as distinct activities may reduce the benefits. Key would be to integrate the entire development experience as a seamless effort in continuum and shifting the focus from class-based to experience-based.

V. Conclusion

High Potential TD in the Indian context is found to be widely prevalent not only in large and established organisations but also in the small and young ones too. All the formal organisations in the study were stable with more or less formal HR architecture. They have all been found to have TD practices on similar lines which demonstrate its suitability in stable environments and in rationalistic, systematic profit driven organisations. The need for a cohort of high potential talent to sustain the organisational performance would be perpetual which will drive the sustenance of this module. However, the suitability of such a set of practices for uncertainty based businesses is not predictable and so also in view of the changing mindsets of the newer generations that seek more involvement and ownership.

High Potential TD practices are found to be essentially similar to the western models and also more top-down than bottom-up. The focus is more on executing it rather than on the measuring the effectiveness of it. An article by Anthony Abbatiello, Digital Leader, Human Capital Practice at Deloitte, states that Leadership programs are evolving rapidly. Formal learning instructor based approaches may be fading away in the years to come. According to him, reliance on standard leadership training is an approach used by organisations considered less mature on leadership spectrum. Due to low retention in classroom based standard approaches and technology acting as a disrupter, advancements in learning and development platforms with organisational

context in focus would be ruling the day. According to Meager and McLachlan (2014), the shape of future leadership development needs to be towards a more "whole person" development and away from the traditional skills-based approach. This will support leaders to be healthier, more successful and better role models

Thus, developing top talent is more than just the next step in a well-managed high potential program; it represents a tremendous opportunity for building critical mass for the organisation and thus securing for itself a competitive advantage. If it turns out to be more of a pre-established standard traditional program and opportunity module, it runs the risk of becoming mechanistic, routine or out-dated unless kept evolving, more emotional and experiential in nature.

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