



Visionary Leadership

Merritt Canfield

If you have heard me speak at an industry conference during the past few years, the focus was “The Talent War,” the lowest unemployment in 50 years affecting businesses of all sizes and recruiting, hiring and retaining talent in a competitive market. As we look toward 2021, organizations of all sizes now must ensure they have the right strategic, visionary leaders for three critical stages of today’s business environment: pandemic recovery planning, recovery and growth. What has not changed is that there is still a high degree of competition, a talent war for these high-impact leaders and impact players who can guide organizations through these stages.

Strategic, visionary leaders are looking at how their organizations can emerge more robust. They look at the business before the pandemic, what their workforce has faced in 2020, and the focus on short- and long-term planning in every area of their organization. These leaders must lead with empathy, kindness, courage and charisma, not knowing all of what their workforce has personally faced this year but appreciating that there have been significant struggles. More than ever, listening is vital, given the shift to a remote employee workforce or a combination “hybrid” approach with an onsite and remote workforce. These leaders are challenged to build efficiency and effectiveness in what a new normal will look like for their organization, to focus on workforce safety in even more ways than the industry has faced, and to evaluate what is now working and what will work in the future, while motivating, driving change, communicating and being an inspiration to every level in the organization.

In October, we all watched as Microsoft, followed by many other tech companies, announced permanently allowing their workforce to work from home. This will not be feasible for most in the rail industry. Still, there will have to be a concentration in all of these stages on technologies essential for the current and future workplaces. Transparency will be critical for these leaders, no matter where their workforce will be operating. Adaptability to drive and deliver necessary pivots to keep progressing an organization in all of these stages will be essential.

Strategic, visionary leaders are confident in the impact they have made in organizations throughout their careers. They reflect on who set examples for them, who became their most incredible mentors, and who developed their talent and why. They can undoubtedly state their measurable accomplishments at every point in their careers. They exhibit an exceptional work ethic that defines where they will continue to grow their careers.

Have you ever stopped to think about every strategic, visionary leader you have worked for in your career? In conversations, I often hear these leaders name every leader who mentored, impacted and advanced their careers. Visionary leaders in passenger and freight organizations will be thinking about pulling in new talent beginning their careers and educating them on what the industry offers, with succession planning as an essential part of these stages. Some leaders will still be able to grow their careers faster than in other industries due to retirements that will take place and the industry’s size.

The critical focus on people in an organization will be vital in the next few years. As we know, they are the biggest asset to any organization. For years, many C-suite and executive teams have faced challenges with their internal talent acquisition, recruiting, and hiring of impact players and the exceptionally talented at every level in their organizations. A global study published by McKinsey & Company focused on Fortune 500 executives and found that 82% felt they were not recruiting highly talented people. This must change in 2021 for organizations to compete and progress.

Talent acquisition efforts will be evaluated in all three stages, but the planning stage is a time to assess your processes and make sure that changes in hiring practices are concrete. Having a process in place ensures that a new hire at any level of the organization is educated in onboarding, and understands policies, procedures and expectations. Stop and think about what a new employee goes through day one, week one, month one, year one with a mixture of employees working remotely and onsite. High impact leaders focus on the talent acquisition process and drive an exceptional onboarding experience, keeping in mind the competition for top talent and the high cost to replace talent.

Does your organization provide an exceptional talent acquisition experience? Daily, I listen to candidates talk about their talent acquisition experiences with organizations leading through global challenges. Their stories are not always positive. No matter the size of your organization, high-impact leaders concentrate on people and, ultimately, their experiences from the beginning as a new applicant to a tenured employee. Making the right hire is extremely important. The right hire will help drive innovation, ultimately delivering results and perhaps the competitive advantage needed during these times.

I believe the talent acquisition experience is crucial to an organization's success. It is every detail that makes a difference in that experience and often where the experience lacks. Several years ago, I worked with a client who hired multiple C-suite executives and director-level leaders. As a partner to them, I stressed that it was incredibly important to go through the candidate experience. I assisted in creating a complete interview process, including the airport, hotel, corporate headquarters interviews, locations where they would be working, nearby restaurants, and more. Each candidate knew every detail from leaving the airport, their plane touching down, to returning to airport and everything in between. The feedback was that no detail was unturned, and many I am still in touch with refer to it as a "fantastic" experience.

Years ago, in the rail industry, I had a client interviewing several candidates at their corporate headquarters. When each candidate arrived, an individual from reception greeted them, providing a great experience until the interview team was ready. These candidates had all flown in, had rented cars and had driven more than an hour from the airport. After they interviewed, each candidate spoke to me about the incredible experience with the individual who greeted them and guided them through their interviews. After all the candidate feedback, I contacted the executive team to let them know the exceptional experience the candidates were receiving and the person responsible for it. Later, the individual got word of all the praise, contacted me to thank me, and was also ultimately promoted. Many years later, I had the pleasure at an industry conference of meeting this charismatic individual whose career had continued to grow within the company.

My point: By providing an incredible candidate experience, you will attract and hire the right talent, start them off with a positive experience, and position them to have a long tenure in your organization. The talent acquisition process will be more cost-effective.

Developing the most robust talent acquisition and onboarding experience with five working generations, four being the majority today, will be a priority and critical to every organization. Impact leaders look closely at managing the generations, their company's culture, and the critical things that need to happen for ultimate results. For an organization to flourish, these leaders focus on the commonalities being more important than the differences.

As Generation Z has entered the workforce, stop and consider that they have never known a life without devices, making them tech-savvy, fast learners and independent. Many need to work hard to further their compensation since many are faced with high student debt.

Next, millennials have been a big subject since they entered the workforce. They are focused on "new" ideas, social media, different ways to accomplish things, results, and career growth. They might be the best at working remotely and their constant focus on ideas may be strengths for recovery planning and recovery efforts.

Generation X is the smallest set between millennials and baby boomers, but do not forget their contributions. They are creative, shaped by technology, hardworking, independent, flexible, and communicate well, with a strong work ethic. This generation's independence helps organizations experience less disruption, and their flexibility will help during all stages. The baby boomers did not grow up with technology but have had to learn. They are hardworking and value developing relationships and doing business face-to-face. Recognition is essential to this group. Their ability to mentor and develop other generations is vital for all organizations, given the rail industry is one of the most tenured.

The generations' similarities are hard work, commitment and communication styles. The passion you find from workforces in the rail industry has always been strong. That passion, combined with these similarities, will be an asset in the next few years. I became an executive recruiter right out of college. I have never seen so much passion as in the rail industry. Finding creative ways to keep that passion strong is the strength of a strategic, visionary leader during these times.

Think about forging an internal group within your organization in which every generation is represented. Walk through how a new applicant is engaged in your organization, recruited, hired, and onboarded, first month, first quarter, first year, and how they gain knowledge to help provide the best experience. This process also allows you to gain invaluable feedback about your organization's corporate culture and market presence.

An essential fundamental step will be interviewing everyone involved in the hiring process to ensure they are on the same page and providing the same experience. Now is the time for this; it will make a difference in late recovery and growth. The remote interview challenges and the need to still see most of the final candidates in person will not change, but the above will help these leaders and your organization map a robust process. If you choose an external search firm, make sure they are a true partner to your organization, are always providing an exceptional customer and candidate experience, are communicating with your team, are an extension of your business, and advise you in every detail throughout the process and stages.

Leading through challenge starts with talent. Strategic, visionary leaders do not only look at their experience of how they were recruited, hired, onboarded, mentored, and developed and succession-planned, but also look more broadly and closely at the process and experience a new applicant/prospective employee/candidate receives. Creating a unique, positive new employee experience can be a competitive advantage in today's marketplace. Many organizations have challenges ahead, so it's important to ensure that the right strategic, visionary leaders are in place. In doing so, these organizations will have a better outlook for 2021, greater ease, stronger morale and clearer vision.

Wishing you a safe and prosperous 2021.

Merritt Canfield, Executive Search Consultant