

## Review article

## Leadership in recruiting and retaining talent in academic dentistry

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## ABSTRACT

A major challenge for leaders in academic dentistry is the recruitment and retention of talented individuals. Six aspects of this challenge are considered – spotting, recruiting, developing, managing and mentoring, retention and 'letting go' talent. Skills in this important aspect of leadership can be learnt and acquired, thereby building capacity to build and retain effective academic teams.

## 1. Introduction

Academic dentistry is witnessing rapidly changing dynamics, with a diversity of evolving trends. The many, different challenges facing dental schools include growing financial pressures, preparing graduates to meet ever-increasing expectations, the metamorphosis of dentistry from a “technically predominant profession” to “an analytical and scientific profession”, burn-out and early retirement of experienced faculty, increasing competition for new faculty, compounded by the rapid increase in the number of dental schools globally, and the international trend of a widening pay gap between academics and their peers in successful clinical practice [1–4]. As the future success of dental schools, the quality of its graduates and the oral healthcare they go on to provide are closely linked to the talent and commitment of dental school staff, individuals in leadership roles in dental schools must succeed in the recruitment and retention (R&R) of talented individuals. Talented human capital is a pivotal resource that largely determines the standing of a dental academic centre. How can leaders in academic dentistry secure this resource?

The R&R of talented individuals in academic dentistry is too important to rely on just putting vacant positions out to open competition and ‘gut feelings’ during selection. R&R strategies must be structured, proactive, adaptable and, wherever possible, ‘ahead of the curve’. Leaders and organisations without R&R strategies must recognise that they are in competition with institutions which do have strategies, and in many cases these R&R strategies and arrangements are sophisticated.

## 2. What is talent?

“Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organisational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential” [5]. One can also describe talented individuals as “those who exhibit certain behaviours that indicate superior potential either as a result of task commitment or synthesis of thinking skills” [6].

Talent may be viewed as potential based on natural flair, aptitude and ability [5–8]. Talent is a gift, not an attribute which can readily be learnt or acquired. It may be multifaceted or limited to a specific activity or endeavour.

In his research, the renowned American psychologist, Renzulli, presented a model of three interlocking sets of traits that talented professionals possess. According to Renzulli's research, professional excellence is an amalgamation of the three traits which ultimately defines talent [6] (Fig. 1).

Talent in academia, notably academic dentistry, given the multifaceted nature of the discipline, comprises a range of flairs, aptitudes and abilities. This makes a talented academic dentist a precious resource, with characteristics critical to the advancement and vitality of the art and science of oral healthcare [10–12]. As stated by Michaels et al. “Talent matters, because its value is high and talent itself is scarce” [9]. Also, in the words of Peter Schutz, former CEO of Porsche: “Hire character. Train skill” [13].

In the process of recruiting in academic dentistry, it is important to look beyond the simplistic approach of matching the recruit to the duties. Leaders need to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances in recruitment and develop skills in the six key aspects of leadership in

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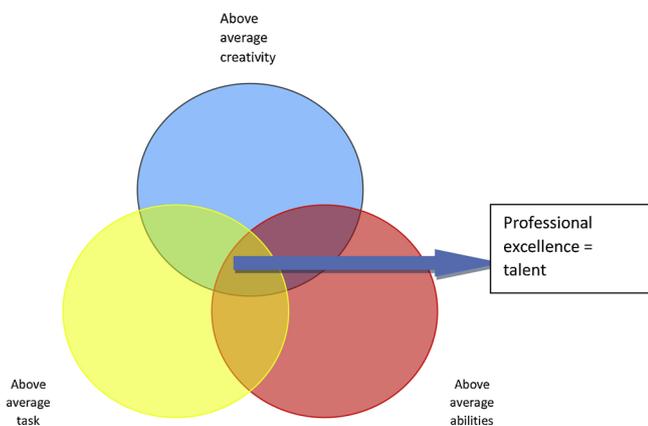


Fig. 1. Renzulli's three-ringed model of talent traits.

the R&R of talented individuals:

### 2.1. Spotting

Success in the power dynamics of recruiting talented individuals often starts with proactive, talent spotting [14]. This requires leaders in academic dentistry to be 'out and about', networking and head-hunting at meetings and other events which attract talented individuals of the type being sought. 'Stay at home' attempts at talent spotting, based on, for example, general enquiries amongst colleagues, word of mouth, and calls for expressions of interest may only be successful by good fortune. Talent tends to be found, rather than it finding you.

Good talent spotting starts with defining the talent being sought. Generic features of talent include peer credibility and respect, lateral, novel thinking, accelerated career development, a dynamic, often energetic approach to problem solving and confidence to tackle new, demanding challenges. Future leaders in academic healthcare often chose their career for humanistic or intrinsic reasons [15].

Talented individuals tend to be somewhat modest rather than extrovert, let alone arrogant. Interestingly, they are not always gifted at getting themselves into the right place, at the right time to best realise their potential. Also, talented individuals can be their own greatest critics. As such they can be surprised to have been 'spotted'.

Other aids to identify talent include a collective approach by existing faculty, using websites, social networks and digital platforms. Engaging current faculty in helping to spot talent greatly increases the possibility of identifying gifted individuals who may not be seeking a new position. Individuals who existing faculty considered to be talented deserve careful consideration. In encouraging existing faculty to adopt a collective responsibility to talent spotting, it is important to impress on them the value and importance of attracting 'new blood' talent. Talent spotting amongst existing students and trainees strengthens continuity, which must be weighed against the possibility and negative effects of 'inbreeding' [16].

Institution websites must attract attention, be easy to navigate and capture the attention of surfers if, amongst other functions, they are going to help identify talented individuals. Talented individuals are unlikely to be drawn, let alone motivated to act on what they see and read on a website, unless it is inviting, engaging and intriguing. Besides dedicated website, there are a multitude of other portals, apps and social networking spaces that may be used to help identify talent.

The use of job boards (a website that posts positions) and digital platforms provides cost effective opportunities to cast a far-reaching net to help capture the attention of talented individuals. The challenge is choosing the right job boards and posting details which will appeal to talented individuals. On the basis that it 'takes one to find one' recently recruited talent may be of great assistance in crafting the offers posted on job boards and other digital platforms.

There are no data available on the use of modern communication technologies in the recruitment of dental academicians. In the world of commerce, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has reported that 84% of companies use social media sites for recruiting passive candidates [17], with LinkedIn being the most effective site (73%) followed by Facebook (14%). Social media is especially effective in identify under-represented groups and candidates in diverse geographic regions [17].

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in recruitment has become popular in some disciplines. Apps and many websites provide services to match the profile of individuals with the requirements of organisations. Only when a perfect match is found is dialogue recommended. While such approaches are presently expensive, AI is anticipated to play an increasing role in matching individuals to defined roles [18–20].

### 2.2. Recruitment

Recruiting talent starts with developing 'a pitch' which appeals to the talent you wish to attract. Lack-lustre job descriptions, with little, if any, vision, opportunity for personal development and innovation, together with a heavy routine workload are unlikely to attract talent. The proposed position, in addition to providing suitable remuneration and security for the individual to demonstrate their potential, should excite and appeal to talented individuals [21]. Talented individuals rarely opt for short-term, 'quick-fix' positions.

If 'talent' has been spotted and is prepared to consider being recruited, it is best to 'under-promise' with a view to 'over-delivering'. Opportunity and resources to address a novel, demanding challenge of national or international importance, even if associated with some demanding performance indicators, may be more appealing than enhanced salary provision. If previous appointments have brought talented individuals into the school, department or academic unit, and these individuals are content in their positions, then they can greatly facilitate the recruitment of new talent, adding to dynamism, a sense of importance and possibly urgency to achieve goals-talent can help attract further talent, and enhance productivity and excellence.

Evolving trends support the view that organisations cannot rely on "best talents" applying for positions organically. A focused, proactive approach to attracting the "right candidates" is required. A four-tier platform comprising strategic planning, branding, pipelining and a holistic experience helps recruit talented candidates [22].

- Strategic planning

This forms the foundation of the process by defining the talents and capabilities sought. A noteworthy example of such planning is the technological giant Apple. Apple's recruiting strategy is to hire talent with diversity. An entire page on their website displays their progress towards creating a "truly inclusive Apple". The company has successfully attracted and recruited talent with great diversity from across the globe [23,24].

- Branding

Organisational branding reinforces the message 'this is the place to work'. Media, social networking sites and the website of the organisation should be viewed as 'external branding sources' to promote the attributes of the organisation that may positively influence prospective candidate's perceptions. For example, "a day in the life of organisation" piece can be posted on the organisation's website to provide insights into the dynamism and positive culture which drives the organisation. This may have special appeal to talented millennials for whom "a job is no longer just a job- it is their life as well" with work-life balance being weighed against remuneration and career opportunities [22,25–28].

- Pipelining

Pipelining is the process of nurturing relationships and the interests of candidates. Regular communications and ‘geared-up’ interactions using, for example, WhatsApp or Facebook can be a powerful tool. Pipelining is a form of ‘internal branding’ whereby candidates increasingly associate themselves with the organisation. Successful pipelining provides “ready-to hire candidates” attuned to the goals and culture of the organisation [22,27–30].

- Holistic experience

Candidate’s experience during hiring colours their opinion. A negative experience can discourage them from joining the organisation, with the possibility of this outcome being shared with peers, thus ‘nose-diving’ the reputation of the organisation. For a hiring experience to be positive, creating a ‘honey pot effect’, it must be efficient, seamless, transparent, with the candidate gaining a sense of value, purpose and belonging. A long-drawn-out process tends to discourage candidates and devalue the organisation [22].

### 2.3. Development

There are at least two aspects to developing talent in organisations: ‘cultivating your own’ and building the capacity of new recruits. Both processes, which are typically intertwined in organisations requires strong, sustained leadership, time, money, incentives and opportunity for personal development [12,15,31–34].

- ‘Cultivating your own’

‘Cultivating your own’ has been recommended as a mantra to secure future talent in academic institutes, including dental schools. ‘Cultivation’ should enhance academic skills and facilitate academic career planning [1,3,4,28,29]. The concept revolves around initiatives to stimulate interest in academic dentistry and prepare talented students and recent graduates to thrive in the challenging “milieu of academics” [30]. So, how can institutions grow students and recent graduates to become the talented, competent individuals needed in the future? An important first step is to develop a pool of networked mentors with a common approach to skill building and career planning. Such an approach has been initiated in several universities in the USA [30].

- Capacity building

Leaders, faced with many, different cost pressures, often fail, possibly at their peril, to invest sufficient resources in the development of their team. A culture of talent development requires resourcing and leaders to give priority to understanding and addressing the needs of the members of their team. Also, it requires leaders to develop their own skills and approaches to management.

Cross-training is an interesting approach to create opportunities for an individual to work outside their ‘job functions’, expanding their perspective with new responsibilities that expand their skill sets. In adopting this approach organisations need to have a culture of learning and encourage a ‘fluid approach to learning and work’, with the removal of any barriers to the development of proficiencies and dynamic growth.

### 2.4. Managing and mentoring

- Management

Talent management, which can be demanding, requires a coherent strategy and sustained, systematic effort [1,34]. Delegation of responsibility and authority can be a powerful management tool. Successful execution of delegated roles and functions can give talented individuals

a great sense of accomplishment. Praise is typically well-received and appreciated.

Offering a talented individual job security may translate into engagement and long-term commitment [4]. Without security, even talented academicians tend to pursue only safe, quick-fix outcomes.

As talented individuals tend to seek and pursue higher risk initiatives and projects, occasional setbacks can be expected. Invariably, however, high-achievers tend to attribute setbacks to ‘the system’ not being up to speed and ‘ahead of the wave’, or possibly circumstance conspiring against them, rather than any form of personal failing. Mood and attitude swings may be something of a feature of talented faculty, but such swings, which tend to be short-lived, given the drive to move onwards and upwards, may be simply managed by suitable reassurances. Major setbacks, differences of opinion and conflicts with colleagues, some of whom may be envious or even resentful, may require carefully considered line-management, or interventions aimed at redirecting attention and focus, i.e., providing a way out with opportunity to get ‘back on track’ [21].

Creating a high-performance environment that offers opportunities, including time to exchange ideas and investigate ‘blue-sky’ initiatives can promote, amongst other positive outcomes, creativity. For example, Google’s 20% time policy has led to the development of products including iPod and iTunes!

- Mentoring

Mentoring – “a voluntary and reciprocal interpersonal relationship in which a person with acknowledged expertises shares the experience with a less experienced mentee” is a cornerstone in effective personnel management. Caution must, however, be exercised in assigning mentors to mentees as subsurface envy, differences in goals, generation gaps and differences in personality may result in negative outcomes [1].

### 2.5. Retention

“The only thing worse than training employees and losing them is not training and retaining them” – Henry Ford.

Talented, successful academician need to be retained for many different reasons [32,33]. Undesirable loss of talent can be disruptive, if not damaging. Talented faculty are more likely to remain if they have a sense of ‘connectedness’ [33]. Retention may often hang on workload and flexibility to attend events considered to be important to career advancement. For some talented individuals opportunity for flexible working can be important to retention. In suggesting such arrangements, it is acknowledged that they are difficult to provide if human resource budgets are under pressure. Other factors which strongly influence retention include, distinguished, approachable leadership, opportunity to grow and develop, relevant yet challenging work profile and a congenial environment.

### 2.6. Letting go

At the right time in their career development talented individuals should be encouraged to move on, especially if their retention by means of internal promotion will make an academic department top heavy. Better to have happy and loyal former colleagues working in centres you may wish to collaborate with, than a department with ‘too many chiefs and not enough indians’, especially if the various chiefs increasingly loose the wish to be team players. Having ‘talent’ that you spotted and nurtured, appointed to a highly sought-after position in another institution of good standing should be cause for celebration. ‘King makers’, amongst other things, are generally best placed to recruit replacement talent.

Letting go of talent gives leaders opportunity to recruit new talent and restructure the organisation, possibly enhancing existing faculty’s status and thereby boosting their professional satisfaction [12,32,33].

'Intention to leave' may, however, be an indicator of diminishing morale and concerns over the direction of travel of the organisation. Losing talented individuals for concerns or reasons of dissatisfaction, especially if an organisation has invested heavily in the individual, should trigger reflection. Exit interviews can reveal the need for both new strategic planning and the need to manage things better the next time around.

Regrettably, one of the most common reasons for leaving clinical academic positions is need for more income and the lure of greatly enhanced remuneration in clinical practice [3,21]. Failing possible arrangements for clinical practice-academic combination working, all may not be lost. 'Boomerang employees'- 'come back kids' may provide opportunity for leaders to reap the benefits of previous investment and save the cost of recruiting and developing new employees.

### 3. Concluding remarks

Spotting, recruiting and retaining talented individuals can add greatly to success in academic leadership. Skills in this aspect of leadership can be learnt and acquired, building capacity to develop effective academic teams. Academic units with a dynamic pool of talent may benefit from a 'honey pot effect', with success breeding success.

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