

Engaging and Involving Managers in the Strategic Staffing/ Workforce Planning Process

For any workforce planning efforts to be successful, line managers must fully embrace, support, and participate willingly in the process. Yet many organizations try to implement workforce planning processes in which managers participate reluctantly, or perhaps even not at all. What can an organization do to ensure that managers will be active players in workforce planning? How can we get managers to value the process and enthusiastically implement the staffing strategies and plans that result?

Clearly, the active involvement of line managers is critical to the success of any workforce planning process. But before managers will become actively involved in workforce planning, they must be fully engaged in the process. This chapter describes how you can gain that engagement and, building on that engagement, ensure the active involvement of your line managers.

Engaging Line Managers in Workforce Planning

Managers will always support processes that they find valuable—those whose results outweigh the time and effort that the process requires. Usually, many of the managers who are not engaged in the workforce planning process just don't feel that it helps them to manage more effectively or to meet their day-to-day objectives. These managers may recognize that workforce planning yields some "greater good" or macro-level benefit for the organization as a whole, but they often feel that there is nothing in it for them as individuals. If workforce planning really did help these people to manage more effectively, they would participate in the process will-

ingly. However, traditional workforce planning processes often waste managers' time by asking them do things and provide data that are simply not valuable or required. Here are just a few examples:

- Workforce planning processes routinely require managers to “forecast” staffing requirements too far into the future—beyond any time frame where those estimates can be realistic or useful. This forces managers to provide forecasts that at best are guesses, just to fill in the blanks on a form. Ask an IT manager (or any manager in a unit where technology is changing rapidly) how confident she is about estimates of staffing requirements three to five years in the future, and just how valuable staffing plans based on those estimates might be. The answer you will get will probably be “not very.” Yet these long-term estimates are often included in many workforce planning processes. The time that managers spend on these meaningless forecasts is simply wasted, and any workforce or staffing plans based on those forecasts cannot be valuable.
- When implementing workforce planning, HR often asks managers to analyze all positions in the process, including those for which longer-term staffing strategies and workforce plans are just not warranted or valuable. Creating long-term staffing strategies for positions where simple short-term staffing plans are more than adequate represents time lost and effort wasted—more reason for managers to shun the process.
- HR sometimes tries to “sell” managers on workforce planning by telling them that the process will be helpful to the organization as a whole in the long term. Yet organizations usually hold managers primarily accountable for achieving shorter-term objectives for their specific units. This causes at least some managers to see workforce planning as a corporate responsibility that does not affect their ability to manage their units effectively in any appreciable way. They feel that they are not rewarded at all for doing what they are asked to do in this area; in fact, the time needed to do it must be taken from some other activity that they do value. Consequently, they see no direct, personal benefit or value in participating in the workforce planning process. For some of these managers, workforce planning becomes a task that they just want to get off their desks as quickly as possible with as little effort as possible.

You must convince managers that the workforce planning process is indeed valuable—that each of them will benefit from the process in ways that exceed the time and effort they must expend to participate in it. But

you won't be able to gain their cooperation and support by making an inappropriate workforce planning process more efficient. It is not a matter of reducing the work or the time needed to complete forms or baseless forecasts, nor of finding a system or software that will greatly facilitate the gathering of meaningless data. Instead, you must greatly increase the effectiveness of the workforce planning processes that you implement, so that managers see and realize tangible benefits. What changes must you make to develop and implement workforce planning processes that are truly effective?

The answer to these questions is, at least in part, "workforce planning at 30,000 feet"—the hybrid approach to workforce planning that is described in Chapter 6. With this approach, companies mandate workforce planning processes that have common approaches and parameters up to a point (i.e., the 30,000-foot level), but allow managers flexibility in how they develop, implement, and apply workforce planning below that level. This approach ensures that workforce plans are developed in a consistent way across the organization, yet allows managers to tailor the process so that the workforce plans they create address what they perceive to be their most critical staffing needs.

Implementing the following four solutions within the context of the 30,000-foot approach will ensure that workforce planning is effective and that managers will value the process and its output.

- **Solution 1: Explain to managers that the new approach to workforce planning (including the redefined objective) will help them manage more effectively right now.** If we define the objective of workforce planning to be "avoiding future staffing problems," we are in effect asking managers to expend time and resources now to help their future successors—something that they may be less willing to do. On the other hand, if we define the objective of the process to be allowing the organization to make effective decisions right now, managers themselves will realize some direct, immediate benefits from participating in the workforce planning process. Managers will obviously be more willing to support a process that they perceive as helping them to meet their own performance objectives (as opposed to those of their successors).

When done effectively, the workforce planning process provides both longer-term staffing strategies (describing how staff needs are best met across planning periods) and staffing plans (defining specifically what should be done to meet staffing needs in any given planning period). Explain to managers that by taking these two components together, they will be able to define the most effective, efficient near-term staffing plans possible (within the context of longer-term staffing strategies).

- **Solution 2: Define an overall direction for workforce planning, but do not force managers to use a particular approach.** While a common direction is usually helpful, not all components of the workforce planning process need to be exactly the same and applied consistently across an organization unit. Provide managers with some high-level commonality, but allow them the flexibility they need to tailor a particular approach beneath that 30,000-foot level.

Your common, overall direction for strategic staffing/workforce planning should include:

- **A clear understanding that workforce planning is a management accountability.** Before you worry about the process, make sure that all managers understand that they will be held accountable for identifying and addressing the staffing implications of their strategies and plans (in both the long and the short term) on an ongoing basis. Also, make sure that managers have the skills and understanding needed to do this effectively.
- **A consistent definition of the process.** Define for managers (from an overall/overview perspective) what the workforce planning process is (e.g., defining and addressing the staffing implications of business plans and strategies) and what its expected results are (e.g., both long-term staffing strategies and short-term staffing plans). However, do not define the process in detail or specify exactly how managers must implement it. Of course, you may wish to provide and support a suggested process that managers may choose to use if they have no alternative method of their own.
- **Mandated output, but not process.** Hold managers accountable for identifying critical staffing issues and for developing and defining the staffing strategies and plans that will address those critical issues most effectively. However, don't force them to use a particular "one-size-fits-all" process to accomplish that. If managers can achieve the expected results using a workforce planning process that is different from the one developed corporately, let them. On the other hand, be prepared to help them implement the suggested approach to workforce planning should they want to use that method.
- **Developing corporate staffing strategies only where absolutely necessary.** Strategic approaches to staffing are absolutely required for some staffing issues—but not all staffing issues. Don't waste managers' time and resources by forcing them to spend time creating corporatewide staffing plans where such plans really are not required. Workforce planning addresses critical staffing issues; don't assume that there needs to be one coordinated, integrated "plan" that addresses all the staffing issues a company is facing.

• **Solution 3: Allow managers to tailor the process to better meet their needs.** While the organization's direction and objectives must be common among units, process need not be. At the detail level, don't implement a single approach to workforce planning or force consistency for consistency's sake. Instead, allow managers the flexibility that they need to develop and implement the staffing strategies and plans that they think address their most critical staffing issues most effectively. This might include:

- **Developing "issue-oriented," not "unit-oriented," staffing strategies and plans.** Make sure that managers develop the staffing strategies and plans that they need in order to address critical issues, but do not ask them to develop strategies and plans for their organization unit as a whole.
- **Allowing managers to identify the staffing issues that they think are most critical.** Let managers choose which staffing issues warrant the time and effort required to apply the workforce planning process. Don't force them to apply the process everywhere or to address staffing issues that they just don't think require a strategic perspective.
- **Letting managers identify the jobs to be included in the process address each issue.** Not all jobs are so critical that they should be included in a truly strategic workforce planning process. Because workforce planning requires a lot of time and effort on the part of managers, maximize the effectiveness of that time and effort by allowing managers to focus solely on those positions that require such a high level of scrutiny that comprehensive workforce planning is, in their minds, warranted.
- **Allowing managers to define critical planning parameters.** Different units will be facing staffing issues that have different rates of change and levels of detail. While mandating a long-term view, don't define what the length of that view needs to be. For some units that are facing rapidly changing conditions, "long term" might be 18 months; in other areas facing less change, "long term" might be three to five years. Also, don't try to set one level of detail to be used by all units. In an IT area, for example, a small number of particular technical skills may adequately define staffing requirements, while a longer list of more generic management competencies might be appropriate at senior levels in another part of the organization.
- **Solution 4: Provide resources, tools, and support that managers find helpful.** Don't just tell managers what to do. Instead, provide them with whatever tools and resources might help them to understand work-

force planning better and implement the process most effectively. Here are some specific suggestions:

- **Clearly show what you think the workforce planning process should look like.** While not holding them to a particular approach, provide managers with a fully developed version of a workforce planning process that they can choose to implement if they wish to identify critical staffing issues and develop the staffing strategies and plans that best address those issues.
- **Provide tools and support that are consistent with the approach you are suggesting.** Develop and widely distribute the tools, templates, forms, and other resources that managers might need to support their workforce planning efforts. This might include process outlines and diagrams, spreadsheets that can be used to define staffing gaps and surpluses, completed examples of staffing strategies and plans, workbooks and resource guides, and easy access to workforce planning web sites. However, don't mandate that managers use these resources (e.g., that they have to fill out a particular form). Let managers use any resources that they feel are necessary and helpful. Do provide ongoing, tailored internal consulting help that directly supports workforce planning, regardless of the specific process that a manager is using.
- **Involve managers in staffing strategy development.** Don't expect that HR should be solely accountable for developing staffing strategies and plans across an organization. Instead, have managers work with HR business partners or functional staff to develop staffing strategies and define staffing plans. Involving managers in this aspect of the process ensures that the solutions that are developed are appropriate for each unit and increases the chances that those managers will actually support and implement those solutions.
- **Provide customized support.** Where feasible, work with individual managers to provide the specific support that they need. Some may need help identifying critical issues, but no help at all in developing staffing strategies and plans for addressing those issues. Others will be able to identify the issues, but may need help in implementing workforce planning to address those issues. Still others might need assistance in the more quantitative aspects of workforce planning, such as calculating staffing gaps and surpluses. Whatever assistance is needed, keep the focus on addressing critical staffing issues, not on following a given process by rote. HR business partners, functional leads, and workforce planning staff can all help provide this service.

In summary, never ask managers to participate in an ineffective workforce planning process. Garner their support by implementing workforce planning processes that address the staffing issues that they find most critical. Strike the right balance between “common” and “tailored.” By implementing the four solutions given here, an organization will develop workforce plans that are adequately consistent in approach and output to address those staffing issues whose solutions span units. Yet by allowing for tailoring of the process—and thus ensuring that the value of managers’ time and effort is maximized—you will produce workforce plans that are effective and realistic. This will ensure that you will engage managers willingly and directly in the process, instead of dragging them along kicking and screaming!

Involving Line Managers in the Process

Once managers are engaged in and support workforce planning, it is time to define the role that they will play in the initial and ongoing implementation of the process. Line managers must play an active role in the strategic staffing process—after all, it is their staffing needs that the process is designed to meet. Managers also provide critical information at key points along the way, such as estimating staffing requirements and evaluating the feasibility of proposed staffing actions.

Before attempting to involve line managers in workforce planning, you will need to ensure that they fully understand the workforce planning process and are willing to buy into its results. They will need to know what is being done (e.g., the steps of the process), agree with the information and assumptions you use, understand the expected output, and feel comfortable with the staffing strategies, plans, and actions that the process suggests. As you work with line managers to develop and implement your strategic staffing process, make sure that they:

- **Understand what is in it for them.** As described in the first half of this chapter, managers must be engaged in the workforce planning process and understand how implementation of the process will help them to be better managers right now. The development and implementation of the strategic staffing process will ensure that managers have the talent they need in order to implement their business plans and meet their near-term performance objectives and bonus targets. In practical, day-to-day terms, this means that their needs for talent will be quickly identified and met (e.g., the time needed to fill openings with well-qualified talent will be reduced significantly).
- **Understand the objectives and outcomes of the process.** Verify that managers fully understand the objectives of the process and the expected

level of detail of the output. This is especially important when you are implementing the more focused approaches to workforce planning that are suggested in this book. Some managers will have participated in the past in processes that were burdensome or that produced lackluster results. Make sure that these managers understand how this process will be different from what they have done before. Explain that the process will not use a one-size-fits-all approach and that planning parameters (such as the overall time horizon) will be tailored to reflect their particular needs. Make sure they understand that the analysis will be applied only where necessary (e.g., for critical jobs) and need not be applied to all jobs. Show them that the output (i.e., staffing issues, staffing strategies, and staffing plans and actions) is realistic, specific, and implementable.

- **Are familiar with the process itself.** Managers need to understand how the strategic staffing process will be implemented (especially for the first time). They need to understand the various components of the process and how these components fit together. They need to feel confident that the process is robust, yet is flexible enough to reflect changes, emerging priorities, and other contingencies. However, there may be some managers who will not be interested in the details of the process. These managers need to know just enough about the process to allow it to proceed. If there are managers who do want to see and understand the detail, then provide them with as much information as is necessary to secure their support. Don't give all managers all the detail just because some of them want or need it.

- **Understand the role that they will play.** Managers want to know what their role in the process will be. They want to know the extent of their involvement, particularly how much of their time will be required. Therefore, you need to clearly describe what their role will be. Initially, managers must identify and discuss the staffing issues and implications that they think are most important. Usually, they also provide at least some of the information that the process requires (e.g., defining the capabilities and staffing levels that will be required in the future). Often, they help to develop various planning scenarios and staffing assumptions. Finally, they need to provide input regarding the feasibility of the staffing actions that are the result of the process.

Remember to clearly differentiate the level of effort and management participation that will be needed during the initial implementation of the process from the level that will be needed to maintain the process on an ongoing basis. There is quite a lot of information that managers will need to provide the first time you implement the strategic staffing process. However, when it comes time to update the process, managers can simply modify or revise the information that they provided initially. Clearly, this

updating will require far less time and fewer resources than were needed to develop this information from scratch.

Make sure that you strike a proper balance here. Identify the information that managers must provide, and make those requirements known. Identify areas in which management input is welcome but is not required, and provide ample opportunity for managers to provide this input as they see fit.

Much of this communication and dialogue with managers can be facilitated if you have a prior example of the process that you can share. Nothing makes some of these points better than seeing what a good example of the process looks like. Rather than describing the benefits in conceptual terms, share the actual benefits that were realized in a prior implementation of the process (e.g., one from another unit or one that addressed a different staffing issue from the one being faced now). Better yet, get a manager who has seen the value of the strategic staffing process to share his perspective with the managers with whom the process is to be implemented. Instead of showing managers conceptual models, show actual spreadsheets and results. Don't describe what their role could be; share what the actual level of involvement of a prior group of managers was.

When launching a strategic staffing/workforce planning process, it is usually most effective to present the process (at an overall, overview level) to a group of managers, then follow up with each manager individually. Included in the computer files that you can access from the book's web site at www.amacombooks.org/go/StrategicStaff2E is a set of slides that can be used for this type of group presentation. In its current form, it highlights the process at an appropriate level of detail, providing a big-picture overview of the process and its implementation. The presentation can be edited if you need to tailor it to meet your own particular needs. Above all, remember to be open to questions at all times and to be readily available for management discussions on an ongoing basis.

Defining Staffing Implications: An Interview Guide

There are times when business plans or strategies simply don't contain the clearly defined, detailed information that is needed to identify staffing issues and implications. Staffing profiles don't exist, and there is no obvious information regarding staffing requirements. In such cases, the needed information can often be gathered quickly and efficiently by interviewing the line managers and planners who were responsible for creating the plans.

This section contains some hints that you can use in preparing for and

conducting such interviews. In general terms, you will need to prepare by identifying current staff availability (both skills and staffing levels) for the manager's unit. During the interview, discuss the manager's business plans and objectives for the coming period, and then discuss the impact on required capabilities and staffing levels that implementing those plans will have. These discussions are also good opportunities to identify staffing issues, propose staffing strategies, and test the viability of staffing plans and actions.

Preparing for the Interview

Prepare for such an interview by learning about the manager's business (if you don't already know). Make sure that you are familiar with:

- Services and products currently offered
- Business objectives, strategies, plans, and unit performance measures (if any)
- Longer-term changes in strategies and objectives

Once you are fully familiar with the nature of the unit's business itself, define current staffing levels for the unit (in broad categories such as job family or management/nonmanagement) and the broad capabilities of each job category. Next, review the business plans for the unit in detail and identify and highlight any changes or aspects of the plan that you think might have staffing implications. You may even want to create a staffing issue crib list (or maybe even a little table) that identifies key business changes and suggests staffing implications for each change. You can also use this list during the interview to make sure that all issues are addressed. Staffing issues/implications might include the following:

- Significant changes in business activity may affect staffing levels (e.g., through growth or contraction).
- Major changes in products offered may imply changes in required capabilities (e.g., new technology may create a need in one area and a surplus of individuals with obsolete skills in another).
- New services that may require skills that are currently unknown or undefined.
- Plans may require you to recruit for skills that the company has not needed previously (e.g., it will take time to identify new sources or develop new selection criteria).
- Implementation may require skills that are scarce or for which there is high competition among employers.

- There may be instances in which the obvious or traditional solutions are no longer feasible (e.g., where training and development might normally be used, but would now take too long).
- There may be instances in which the indirect impacts are as critical as any of the direct staffing needs that you define (e.g., changes in one job category may affect the number and type of staff needed in another category).

Identify and write down the staffing issues that you think are the most critical. Test each of these with the manager you are interviewing. Don't just focus on these, however. Be prepared to supplement this list with issues that you did not identify prior to the session itself. If you have already identified possible solutions for some of these issues, document your suggestions clearly so that you can discuss them with the manager.

Finally, schedule the interview. Ideally, try to reserve an hour and a half with the manager. Realistically, make full use of whatever time you are offered.

Conducting the Session

During the interview itself, set your sights on identifying critical staffing issues (i.e., gaps or surpluses) and their implications. Initially, focus on problems, not possible solutions. Work to define the right question when you are presented with answers (e.g., when an interviewee says, "What we need to do is . . .," get that manager to define the problem for which that approach is the solution). Try to stay focused on future issues and implications, not on the problems that the unit is currently facing (unless, of course, these are critical and can be expected to continue). Where necessary, ask follow-up questions to ensure that you fully understand the issues that are raised. Finally, get at least some input regarding priorities (e.g., by asking if the issue just discussed is more or less important than the one that was discussed previously).

It is often helpful to focus on change—how the business is changing. Change nearly always has staffing implications. Refer to the staffing drivers that are defined in Chapter 6 of this book. Remember that your objective is to define significant changes in required staffing levels, required capabilities, or both. Discuss possible solutions only after you have obtained some level of agreement regarding the issues that are to be faced.

In most cases, it is most effective to conduct these interviews with individual managers following a more general session in which the basic concepts regarding strategic staffing have been presented to a group of managers. In these situations, use the interview to obtain feedback on the

process that is being proposed. If, however, no such general session is conducted, make sure during the interview that the manager fully understands the process that is being suggested.

Possible Interview Guide

Here is an outline of a guide that you can use to structure the interview itself.

Introduction/Stage Setting

- Thank the person for taking the time to meet with you.
- Give the person an overview of your project/objective (or ensure that the perspective of it that the person already has is accurate).
 - Human Resources (HR) has a need for a high-level corporate staffing plan that identifies staffing issues that span business units.
 - The plan will help ensure that the company has the staff it needs in order to implement its overall corporate strategies.
 - This plan will provide a context for creating specific, shorter-term staffing plans.
 - Consider reinforcing this point by showing the person the “upside-down T” diagram (Figure 2-1).
 - Clarify that you are there to talk about staffing issues, gaps, and problems, not answers or solutions.
- Discuss with the manager what the overall process for creating a staffing strategy will look like (or obtain the manager’s perceptions of the process if it has already been presented).
- Tell the manager how the information you gather will be used or shared.

Discuss Business Plans/Changes

- Provide a quick overview of your understanding of the unit’s current business.
 - Potentially, you could take the lead here, summarizing the business and getting the manager to supplement or clarify your description.
 - “It seems to me that currently your business does this/provides this. . . .”
 - Get the manager to confirm or expand your understanding.
- Review and verify current staffing levels (from a face validity or “looks pretty close” perspective only).

- Get the manager to describe future changes.
 - Ask the manager to talk about what is to be accomplished during the planning period and the ways in which that represents a significant change from the current situation.
 - Provide prods or hints and ask clarifying questions (e.g., “It seems to me that . . .”) based on your knowledge of the business plans (from your homework) to make sure that you really do understand what the business is going to accomplish.

Discuss Staffing Issues/Implications of Future Plans

- Ask the person what staffing issues are foreseen.
- Identify the areas or job families that will be affected:
 - First
 - Most
- Remember to address both skills and staffing levels.
- Identify any major changes in organization or structure (e.g., a change from a product focus to a customer/market orientation, not at the level of who will report to whom).
- If discussion lags, use your potential staffing issue crib list and your definition of current staffing levels to encourage it:
 - “It seems to me that this expansion will mean an increase in staffing levels.”
 - “It seems that this proposed change in technology will have a real impact on required skills in your technical workforce, but not much impact on Customer Service.”
 - “Right now you have about 100 people in this job family/category—will that go up or down significantly when you implement this change?”
- Clarify any broad statements that the manager makes, but don’t be too detailed.
 - If the manager says “more,” get her to differentiate between “a lot more” and “a few more,” but don’t worry about whether the number is 67 or 72.
 - If the manager generalizes, get him to identify specific job families.
- Address all the potential issues on your crib sheet.
- Ask the manager if she thinks that any of these issues are being faced by other business units (and thus might be addressed from an integrated perspective).
- Try to assess criticality (i.e., identify the most critical issues).

Obtain Feedback Regarding Proposed Solutions

- Ask the manager for feedback regarding staffing strategies (e.g., “One way of addressing this issue would be to do X. What do you think of that? Would that work here?”).
- Ask the manager for feedback regarding staffing plans.

Close the Interview

- “If you could address only one of these issues, which would it be?”
- “What questions didn’t I ask that you thought I would?”
- Tell the manager what he can expect from you, if anything.
- Thank the manager for her time and input.

Summary

When implementing strategic staffing, appropriate line management engagement and involvement is crucial. Make sure that the line managers fully understand the process and its value. Ensure that they are actively engaged in the process and prepared to implement (or at least consider implementing) its results. Above all, make sure that they understand how the implementation of strategic staffing will make them better managers right now. Finally, when you talk with managers to obtain the information that you need (e.g., staffing requirement information), be prepared. Understand their business and define their current staffing availability (both staffing levels and capabilities). Discuss with those managers how their business will be changing, and then (and only then) discuss the impact that these changes will have on future staffing requirements.

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