

Kone's Leadership and Talent Review (LTR) programme seems to be a success. Tuomas, the HR VP who started a few years before Alahuhta<sup>1</sup>, was able to implement a structured program to guide decision-making about employees.

Kone's global talent management activities can be summarized as follows: "(1) Identify high potentials, (2) nominate successor candidates to key positions, and (3) decide on development actions for key people." (p.5) This is important for a few reasons, namely that this target comes from the top management and requires the manager to consider who to promote out of the unit, and who will replace the manager himself or herself. It weaves into the daily tapestry, an image of impermanence or "change" – that this is the way things are supposed to be.

The decision to change the working language in China to Chinese was a dramatic step. Is this something that has hindered them or helped them, in terms of top management's ability to see what is happening but also to have the personal contacts with important decision-makers, both within and without the company? It has probably helped, but it does perhaps create some issues where, as was mentioned, the Chinese speakers suddenly gain their voice. Is Global Management (the top executives in Finland) able to grasp what is happening? Or... is that necessary? Perhaps the American Johnson is so able to translate and adapt that KONE is not at risk putting too much power into one man's hands.

If there were changes to be made to KONE's HR practices, I am certainly not the one to comment. If they want to keep their 3-year model of promotion, in the face of daily poaching in China of the key staff, or even simply experienced staff, then it probably is a good idea to keep it. When I worked in Russia, we had a few problems when our key operations and service staff were sent abroad. They didn't speak English, but came to a 3-day training session in English. When asked why he sent non-English speaking staff to an English training, one senior manager in Moscow said, "Because they have earned a trip abroad and the Head Office is paying." Another issue is that the competencies they were learning in the organization were making them both more attractive to our competitors, and more interested in leveraging their new knowledge in a highly competitive market. Head-hunters called and asked, "What do you want to do?" and we had already worked with them on a vision. I don't know what the solution is.

How would I prepare to teach this? Depends on the module. I could use this in a course on narrative and discourse, because there are wonderful constructs used. For example, "must-win battles" is quite a strongly militaristic phrase. What do students think of baptising organizations "Army Battalions"? Another example is the labelling of employees as "talent" under an umbrella of human resource management. We have "talent resources" as though we were an acting agency in Hollywood searching for a show in need of a tall, dark-haired hero and a brainy but fit, blond sidekick. It's now a show and not an army? Or is it both?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all attributions and/or quotes are from the case study "Pushing the right buttons: Global Talent Management at KONE Corporation" by Smale, Björkman and Saarinen (2015)

Teaching this case study, I would ask, “How does the text reveal the owners and senior managers’ views about people, about organizations, markets, etc.?” or “What does it mean to give an organization agency, as in the line, ‘KONE knew that its competitive advantage...’ (p.9)?” In terms of Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic power, evidenced in deference to authority, how does the text show us deference or defiance to senior managers’ attempts to control or guide individuals’ behaviours?

**Teaching objectives:** I would like to deconstruct the narrative of success and planning with students. That students would know how to critically expose the core assumptions evidenced in the text... but that they would also be able to acknowledge the financial and social success of KONE. After breaking down the text, what explains KONE’s success – or the success of the owners, in choosing the right Board, and C-suite actors?

**Method:** Let the students read the case and ask them to reflect on the ontological and epistemological ideas revealed. Next, do a 10-minute lecture on something useful. Set them loose to rewrite the 5 main sections (in groups) in two styles. One, completely raw exposé of what is really meant and two, a gentle yet personalized (no granting humanity to a KONE) account of what happens (in that paragraph).

**My expectations:** That students will debate intensely on the meaning of the words used and realize that they can construct both the organization and the individuals in it, through discursive practices.

In my own field, if I would do a case study, I think I would start with a review of the major media and online information about the firm. History, financials, etc. Based on that, I’d interview the main players. Perhaps also a few minor staff members or Bottom of the Pyramid types. Then an image or idea would arise from these second and first-order data sources. Once I had that articulated – that mystery that remains unsolved somehow – I would start writing the introductory fictional paragraph of, “It was cold outside. The snow and gravel crunched under Tiina’s boots as she crossed the parking lot of the world’s second-largest paint company. Her father and mother had both warned her not to leave her job and now she was trudging back to that old workplace to pitch a revolutionary idea – one that would establish her new company, and help her old company become the largest paint company in the world.” Then... I guess I’d have to backfill the story enough to explain the dilemmas she faced, how she dealt with them, and eventually reveal the greater issue every start-up entrepreneur may face... whatever that is. The main challenge would be walking the line between projecting onto the data too much meaning, and missing the meaning that is there in the data. In the case of KONE, Alahuhta says, “So we changed the target level to recruiting only the best possible people.” This sentence can be interpreted and acted upon in many different ways. But in what way does the reader understand and apply it? That is a point.

Finally, it sounds like Alahuhta was great. And perhaps he was. That the LTR was great. And perhaps it was. Tuomas and Johnson – also great. But where is the link between cause and effect? Sure they had a great programme and were great guys, but the link between **that** and the money isn’t established in this text. It feels somewhat unrealistic that this went as clearly as it did.