“Welcome to your first day on the job at Beige State University, ‘Where People are Paramount’.” You found our vaguely written ad, endured our tedious search process, and now you’re fully prepared to be disillusioned. Once we find you a desk your orientation will be complete. As your new boss, I look forward to providing meaningful feedback the next time they tell me I have to. Again, congratulations!”

The way some universities hire, integrate and nurture staff, it’s a wonder anybody works there. The rush to fill a slot, the ambiguity of committee-written position descriptions, and the view that new hires should sink or swim practically ensures hit-or-miss personnel decisions.

“It’s ironic,” says John W. Moore, president of Penson Associates, Inc. and president emeritus of Indiana State University, “that, although our mission is the development of human capital, we invest only minimally in the training and development of our people.” Instead, “new faculty are left on their own, promotion occurs without systematic evaluation of performance, socialization is left to chance, and we keep our fingers crossed that the right people will influence their careers.”

“Deliberate, Unified Process”

It doesn’t have to be that way. During the past decade, the concept of “talent management” has emerged as a business-world response to the perennial and expensive challenges of finding, energizing and retaining productive people. The goal is to reduce the cost and disruption of turnover, enhance a sense of teamwork and worth, and focus the efforts of employees on a clear-cut mission.

Broadly defined, talent management includes such elements as:

■ Having and implementing coherent strategic business plans;
■ Creating candidate profiles and attracting new staff in light of those plans;
■ Integrating new hires into the culture of the institution as much as the job;
■ Developing, keeping and promoting current staff; and
■ Communicating useful feedback and sharing overall objectives.

Taken in isolation, there’s nothing new about the items on the list. In practice, however, they tend to remain isolated, becoming the responsibility of human resources, the hiring department, the supervisor, the employee, or no one. What’s often lacking is the commitment to making this a deliberate, unified process that’s practiced at all levels of the organization throughout the person’s employment.

Moore, who coordinates AASCU’s annual New Presidents’ Academy, says he challenges universities to look at their budgets for professional development. While the needs are different for faculty and staff in student affairs, finance or advancement, the “HR office is usually not a high priority, nor is the training and development of talent,” he says. All too often, universities focus on hiring and terminating and the rest is neglected.

“Talent management is the healthiest possible practice of good human resource management.”

—Tom Courtice
“Speak to People’s Hearts”

An off-campus leadership role provided one president, James C. Votruba of Northern Kentucky University, with a new perspective on the problem of getting the most from his institution’s greatest strength. For him, chairing an 18-month regional strategic process “deepened my understanding of how important talent management is for the university and the community.”

Whereas states used to attract companies with tax incentives, he says, “they now put the whole package together: clean air, quality schools, affordable housing. The same is true for talented people. We used to talk only about salary and benefits. Today, we talk about a balanced portfolio: vacation time, professional development, a larger number of sabbaticals, and such intangibles as a sense of community and purpose. We speak to people’s hearts as much as to their intellect.”

Votruba was influenced by a classic 1994 book, Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies, by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras. “The authors said those companies had an almost ‘cult-like’ devotion to a core ideology or identity,” says Votruba, “and actively encouraged employees to develop an ideological commitment to the company.” He says he learned two lessons from the book: “The companies were very clear about what they produced and for whom, and every element of the organization was aligned to support those outcomes.”

Profile as Litmus Test

Votruba observes wryly that there can be “a disconnect between what a president says is important for the university and what criteria are used for promotion and tenure at the department level.” Still, “whether they are faculty or the people who paint the classrooms, they all want to feel they are making progress and their work matters, that it’s important.” That’s why Votruba meets with all new faculty and staff in small groups. “I look in their eyes,” he says, “and I try to convey the Northern Kentucky mission.”

The talent management concept, says Tom Courtice, president of Academic Search, Inc., “is, in fact, the healthiest possible practice of good human resource management.” A former college president himself, he likens talent management to the process of selecting new executive leadership.

“First, you find out what people think the institution needs,” he says. “You perform a reality check and develop a profile that’s candid and straightforward. You spend an extensive amount of time at the front end. It’s important to have an honest evaluation of the opportunities and challenges, so that no one sees the institution through rose-colored lenses.”

What he’s describing is talent management in practice: having strategic plans, using them to create a desired profile, actively recruiting candidates who fit the profile, and then staying with those employees as they transition to their new jobs.

Addressing Turnover

A number of universities teach talent management principles, generally to a business-oriented audience and often through an executive M.B.A. program or the equivalent (one example is the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, which offers an executive education course on “Talent Management Strategies.” Topics include creating a “talent mindset” and thinking about talent as a “supply chain” problem).

Less clear is the extent to which universities—whether they teach about it or not—actually implement talent management. John Moore notes, “We probably don’t tap into faculty expertise that might help us with the talent management concept. There are experts right under our noses and we’re not always asking them to help out.”

Some institutions do see merit in talent management and implement it in a deliberate way. One of the best-known examples is the University of California,
Irvine, where Christy Cates serves in University Advancement as senior executive director of strategic organization and talent management.

“About four years ago,” says Cates, “we were ramping up for our billion-dollar campaign but were losing too many staff to other universities. We really had to address the problem. Talent management was our solution.”

“A Very Definite Culture”

Cates came to UC-Irvine from the hospitality industry, equipped with a strong background in recruitment. “Recruitment is like development,” she says. “It’s modeled on how you interact with donors in a long-term relationship.”

Part of talent management at UC-Irvine involves branding University Advancement as a preferred employer. “We have a very definite culture, a DNA,” says Cates. “We are positioned as a young institution that is entrepreneurial, optimistic and performance-based. We are hiring to fit that culture.”

There are 150 advancement officers at UC-Irvine. When a vacancy occurs, Cates can draw upon an extensive pool of potential candidates she and others have gotten to know at conferences around the country. “When we go out to search,” she says, “we hope we already have a good pool. Searches that used to take a year now take two to three months because we function like an executive search firm.”

When someone is hired, the “on-boarding” process takes three to four weeks. Goals and expectations are laid out for the first year and the first performance evaluation occurs after just four months. “We both have a clear understanding, starting out, of the expectations for the first one to two years,” says Cates.

University Advancement holds quarterly team meetings, produces a monthly staff newsletter, and recognizes achievements through Tipping Point Awards (Teamwork Initiative Performance). The school is taking the process even further by developing an extensive internal training program. Staff who are relatively new to the profession will be able to grow in the field without feeling the need to leave for another university.

“Develop Talent You Already Have”

In higher education, talent management probably works best in areas such as advancement, where goals are explicit and measurable and the competition for staff is intense. “It’s a pretty big thing to implement,” says Cates, “so we didn’t do it all at once. We focused on two prongs—recruitment, and training and development—and took them point by point.” In her view, the program has been a success in terms of the recruitment, development and retention of staff.

Using the same approach with faculty or administrators can be more challenging. Talent management has its own jargon, and some may dismiss it as a corporate fad. It also requires ongoing commitment—time, money, energy—and places expectations on managers to be better organized, more open and more intentional about how they supervise and motivate staff.

Even so, Cates feels pieces of talent management could work elsewhere on campus. “After all, our values in advancement mirror the UC-Irvine values,” she says.

Cates is also pragmatic about talent management. “People are afraid to leave their jobs now, so it’s a great time to develop the talent you already have. It’s also a great time for organizational changes that have a good return on investment and create opportunities.”

Kevin Boatright is director of communications in the Office of Research and Graduate Studies at the University of Kansas.