Are Boomerangs Your Best Leadership Strategy?
By John Boudreau
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To develop future leaders, the best approach may be to toss them away and catch them when they return.

A skilled operator can make a boomerang perform amazing feats. It can be tossed a long distance, precisely travel a planned arc, and then return to the hands of the thrower at exactly the right place. *Its value is realized only when it's thrown away.* To someone who does not understand that, or lacks the skill to make it happen, it seems quite logical to grip the boomerang tightly and use it as a hand-held club.

In the same way, companies typically rely primarily on long-term employment to build skills, talent and leadership. Even if a company gets lots of its work done with contractors or part-timers, the basic assumptions often reflect a traditional "buy and hold" employment model, particularly for high-potential employees destined for top positions. Yet, when you see long-term employment as only one option, you may realize that tossing away your best talent may be your most formidable development strategy.

In September 2013, Microsoft acquired the handset and services business of Nokia, and the main storyline was about the potential synergy of vertically integrating the phones that rely on Microsoft software and the maker of that software. Buried several paragraphs deep within many of the articles about the deal was a potentially much more significant fact: Stephen Elop was among the 32,000 employees Nokia employees that would join Microsoft in the $7.2 billion cash transaction.

Before joining Nokia in September, 2010, Elop had served as president of Microsoft's Business Division since February 2008. In other words, Elop is a "boomerang," tossed to Nokia only to return to Microsoft just as the CEO, Steve Ballmer announced his retirement. Was this planned? Steve Ballmer said that the first calls he made outside Microsoft to discuss his retirement were to Elop and the Chairman of Nokia's board, Risto Siilasma. Some reports suggested a "Trojan

Horse" strategy after uncovering clauses in Elop's employment contract that created a personal incentive to engineer just such a sale.

Peter Voser, the CEO of Royal Dutch Shell from July 2009, retired in May 2013. It is not surprising that Voser had more than 25 years of experience at Shell, having joined Shell in 1982. Historically, Shell's top leaders spent their careers at the company. But unlike many Shell leaders, Voser's career at the company was not continuous. He spent two years as the CFO of power and automation company ABB, from 2002 to 2004, before returning to Shell as CFO.

In an interview in 2009, when he became the CEO at Shell, Voser said, "I left Shell for a short period to go to work for ABB. The main driver for me was to be CFO of a quoted company. I wanted that experience. I was ready and impatient with myself, and I couldn't see that happening fast enough at Shell.… [At ABB] it was about survival, and we restructured the company, while sustaining sharp operational performance. Had we not done that, we would have gone under. I learned that it's better to drive change yourself first than to be forced by external events to do it. So my time at ABB was truly a formative experience."

The article pointed out that Voser's ascension to the CEO role, after he returned to Royal Dutch Shell, was notable for a "blunt" memo describing the need to change a culture that was "too consensus oriented," to create a stronger performance culture. Voser was qualified to make such observations, given his credibility as an insider with 25 years' experience at Shell, but perhaps his most unique qualification was the formative experience at ABB. Had he not tossed himself away from Shell, returning at just the right place, he would have been less qualified for the CEO role.

Typical talent management and leadership systems still operate on traditional employment assumptions such as:

- The objective is to get people to join and stay.
- Hiring executives from outside is a last resort when we fail to develop talent internally.
- Minimize turnover among the highest-potential employees.

- Discourage employees from close relationships with competitors, for fear of losing them, their intellectual property or both.

These assumptions can set you up for failure to capitalize on opportunities like those of Elop and Voser, much like holding tightly to a boomerang as if it were a club.

The Elop and Voser cases were most likely not a planned part of the organizations' leadership strategy, but winning future organizations may want to create such opportunities. They will challenge traditional employment assumptions and embrace new approaches to building talent, by disintermediating, fragmenting and dislocating talent systems just production and sales systems have done for decades.

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John Boudreau is professor and research director at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and Center for Effective Organizations, and author of Retooling HR: Using Proven Business Tools to Make Better Decisions About Talent. *He can be reached at editor@talentmgt.com*.