

## What Michael Phelps Can Teach Us about Training and Talent Management

Learning how to perform a maintenance task, whether a repair or a preventive maintenance inspection, requires training, proper tools and spare parts, and general knowledge relating to safety. But that's not enough. There is also a requirement for aptitude: a natural ability to accomplish the task at hand.

To be a qualified, competent maintenance technician, training and aptitude are no longer enough. The technology innovation and modernization of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has reached into nearly every aspect of equipment and facilities operations and maintenance, sometimes at an explosive rate. Couple the escalation of technology with a widespread skills shortage, and we have a critical shortage of maintenance and repair education providers—a serious problem.

As industrialist Henry J. Kaiser once said, “Problems are only opportunities in work clothes.” If we worry about our skills shortage, the assimilation of rapidly advancing technologies, and demands for high-performing, reliable equipment, they will not go away. So the big question is: How do we approach these threats in a positive, proactive manner? It's about talent—more specifically, talent management.

### Talent Management

While attending [Dematic's Material Handling & Logistics Conference](#) in Park City, Utah, two speakers' topics impressed me: One was a discussion about achieving your personal best, and the other was about talent management. On the surface, what might seem like two different topics became hard-wired together in my mind.

While it sounds like an individual discipline, achieving your personal best is about aptitude, interest, willingness, and a passion to succeed under the guidance of talented, dedicated coaches and mentors.

I listened with rapt attention as Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic medalist of all time, candidly discussed his award-winning journey. As I look over my copious notes from his interview session, I continue to be struck by two things: his vision to succeed (to win) and his passion for the sport.

At seven years old, Phelps dreamed he would win an Olympic gold medal. By 15, he could describe how he wanted to accomplish with Olympic-level swimming what Michael Jordan had done with basketball. At age 31, he has done just that. What began as a love for swimming and some very skilled and motivating coaches still required a compelling vision for what he wanted to achieve.

That's where the passion for the sport comes in. What on the surface may look like wanting to win, win, and win some more was really a passion for the sport and how it could be used for a bigger good. (See the [Michael Phelps Foundation](#)).

This brings me to a session on supply chain talent management led by Mike Burnett of the Global Supply Chain Institute (GSCI) at the University of Tennessee's Haslam College of Business. His topic is described in detail in a white paper entitled [Supply Chain Talent: Our Most Important Resource](#). Let's explore a number of timely and essential takeaways.

## **Talent Management Best Practices**

Now more than ever, hiring, developing, and retaining the right people should be the top priority for any business that depends on physical assets (machinery, equipment, facilities, and utilities). This process must also become a collaborative partnership between the front-line business leaders and the human resources professionals.

The GSCI supply chain talent management white paper provides a framework that makes sense for reliable equipment, plant, and facility operation well beyond the supply chain focus of the white paper. Their surveys and interviews of benchmark companies should help us create career pathways for our technicians and leaders. Here are some of the best practices the GSCI identified:

**Clear definition of the “who.”** Describing the talent, the “who” you need in terms of both technical skills and soft skills to be successful on the job and in the company’s culture

**Use of mentors, sponsors, and first coaches.** Having the right resources to support individual growth providing the help everyone needs to succeed

**Individual skills development plans.** Starting with a solid definition of the skills needed to be successful in the end-to-end supply chain, in supply chain disciplines, and in specific roles

**Internships and co-ops.** Providing opportunities for experiential growth in job skills, learning from diverse thinking, and evaluating a work culture fit

**Top university partners.** Finding students who best fit the definition of the “who” and then placing students in a role where they have the best chance for success

## **Talent Management Recommendations**

Employee training is a must, and on-job-performance qualification is the practical outcome of efficient and effective training. But let’s not blur the lines between talent management and training; they are not the same. Yes, training is a vital element of a talent management system, but talent management is the system that aligns the people-side of the organization with the needs of the business.

When I looked for the bottom line of the GSCI’s supply chain talent discussion, it was summed up in their three recommendations.

- **Create a clearly documented, talent development strategy.** This is the first and most important step.
- **Employ best-in-class talent development programs.** Include educational and experiential components with a mixture of internal and external experiences.
- **View talent development as owned by the business and driven by ROI.** Manage talent like you manage your supply chain (your business).

## **Olympic Swimming and Talent Management**

Now, back to my notes from Michael Phelps’ interview. Again, what struck me most about his story was his vision to succeed (to win) and his passion for the sport. As we look ahead to

developing talented people to succeed in our business, to install, maintain, and repair equipment and facilities, we must find ways to excite our in-school youth.

Sure, some of our youth have keen interests in sports because of what they see on TV, at sporting events, and what their friends are doing. There are students who get excited about computers and software, about writing code. There are those who end up pursuing teaching because of the role models in their schools and classes. Some students want very much to preserve our planet or to pursue agricultural interests. Some have a passion for mastering welding for their own use but later find out that they can earn really big bucks as a certified welder.

Our challenge is to find ways to instill the vision to succeed and a passion for their futures, their careers, in their educational journey relating to our business goals. Sure, the focus on STEM education is resurfacing. But that's not enough. We need more of the younger students learning what rewarding careers we have in manufacturing, in utilities, in process industries, in buildings and facilities, as equipment and systems technicians.

Look for ways to invite students, teachers, school administrators, and school boards into your facilities with plant tours, career days, bring your child to work days, co-op experiences, and summer internships. What if Michael Phelps never saw a real swimming pool, learned to swim, or had a motivational mentor who recognized his aptitude and talent?

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