

CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS®

CHICAGOBUSINESS.COM | NOVEMBER 21, 2005

YOUR VIEW

For management lessons, look to champ White Sox

The desire to populate organizations with A-level players is based upon a widespread—though unfounded—belief that a gaggle of high performers solves all ills. The management of the World Series champion White Sox knows something about talent and ambition. From them, we can all take a lesson: Focusing the competition for talent only on A-level players is seriously flawed and potentially costly, on at least two fronts.

A-level players cannot be reliably identified in sufficient quantity. Predictors of top performance are unreliable. Early rock producers were often surprised when the B-side of a record became the hit, such as the Rolling Stones' "I Wanna Be Your Man." Business executives cannot be confident in accurately identifying the qualities of an A player, nor can they be certain that a predicted B-level player will not yield a higher level of performance. In a world of bell curves, the closer you move to the curve's center, the greater the variation, risk and reward.

Organizations that recognize B-level players' potential and focus on that part of the talent pool are the ones

most likely to gain a competitive advantage. Conversely, assuming high-value talent exists only within the A-level pool diminishes the future growth and contributions of the majority of a workforce.

There can be too many A-level players. The New York Yankees of recent years epitomize the misguided tendency to overpopulate with A-level players. Consistent playoff appearances and unparalleled revenues make them a *good* example of business and baseball success. *Great* baseball teams, however, are a mixture of superstars and specialists. On the 1999 Yankees, for example, for every Derek Jeter there was a Scott Brosius. The Yankees of recent years, by contrast, have focused on landing the big names (e.g., Jason Giambi), thereby sacrificing vital supporting staff and their baseball dominance.

Similar fixations plague corporations. Focusing solely on A-level acquisitions risks overlooking the critical roles played by others.

For a clear example of how so-called Bs represent the versatility and depth of the talent bench, look no further than



Howard E. Males is CEO of *Research Pros Inc.*, a talent research firm in Chicago.

the 2005 White Sox. The team had a resilient bench of emerging stars such as Paul Konerko, as well as previously lesser-known players such as Joe Crede and Geoff Blum.

For far too long, organizations have ignored the potential B-side contributions to overall success. Looking at the Sox, the takeaway is clear: Pay equal attention to the stars and the supporting cast in order to maximize the transition from good to great.