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Lever, John and Swailes, Stephen

People and process: at the court of talent management

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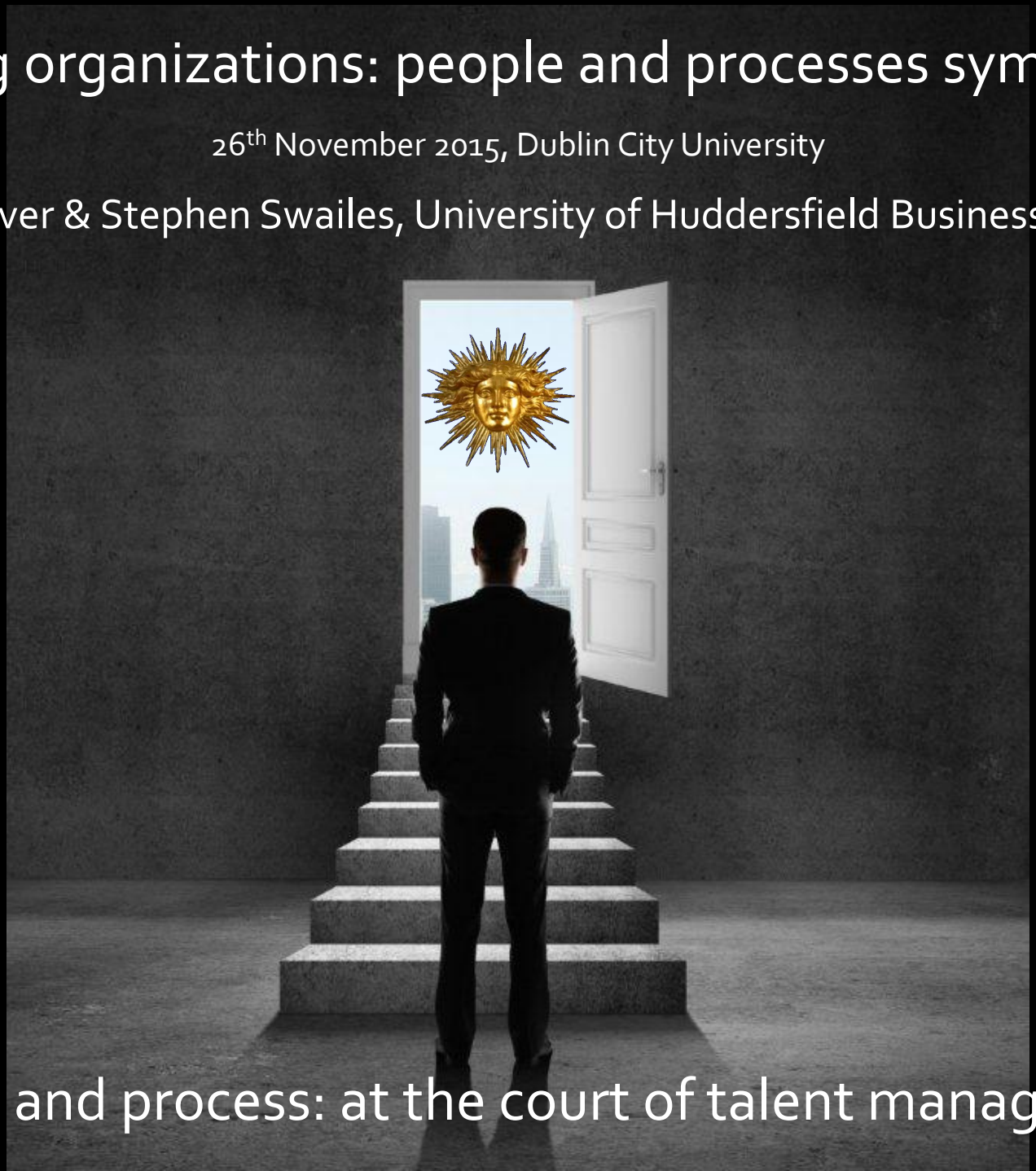
Figuring organizations: people and processes symposium

26th November 2015, Dublin City University

John Lever & Stephen Swailes, University of Huddersfield Business School



People and process: at the court of talent management

Ballet for the Sun King

Louis XIV loved dancing.

In 1653 he appeared as the Sun in Ballet de la Nuit

In 1661 he founded the Royal Dance Academy

Modern history of talent

- 1950s – US research on ‘promotability’
- 1970/80s – emergence of HRM & SHRM
- 1980s/90s – interest in the high performance work place
- 1997 - “War for talent” mantra captured practitioner imagination & created a new discourse
- 1990s ‘Resource-based view’ of the firm became influential in explaining performance

Elitist view of TM

- TM – using complimentary HRM practices to attract, develop and retain high performers and high potentials, and fit them into key positions
- Talent – people who you perceive as delivering outstanding results in relation to what you want to achieve.

Core assumptions of elitist TM

- Some skills & attributes contribute more than others
- These skills can be described and assessed
- Some positions contribute more than others
- Talent in key positions is critical
- Talent is scarce
- Talent identification is fair and unbiased
- Failure to manage talent compromises organizational performance

9 box grid example

Timescale for promotion

Potential rating	Unknown months	12-18 months	0-12
	Emerging star Under performs but has potential	**Future star** Performs well, has potential	**Superstar** Exceptional performer with high potential
	Potential star Under performer with potential	Rising star Performs OK and has potential	Star Exceptional performer with potential
	Under performer	Solid performer	Strong performer
	Unsatisfactory	Good	Excellent

Performance appraisal rating

Why has TM caught on? (A sticky meme)

- The idea is simple, seductive, and fits with other ideas about leadership and change
- The idea warns of danger and taps into fears of inaction
- Lack of a competing idea, except inaction
- Ambiguity – adapting to fit organizations

Stickiness continued..

- TM short-cuts the complexity of managing large organizations
- TM satisfies the need for execs to ‘consume’ the same talent. People don’t actually need to be more talented.
- TM is spread by successful people

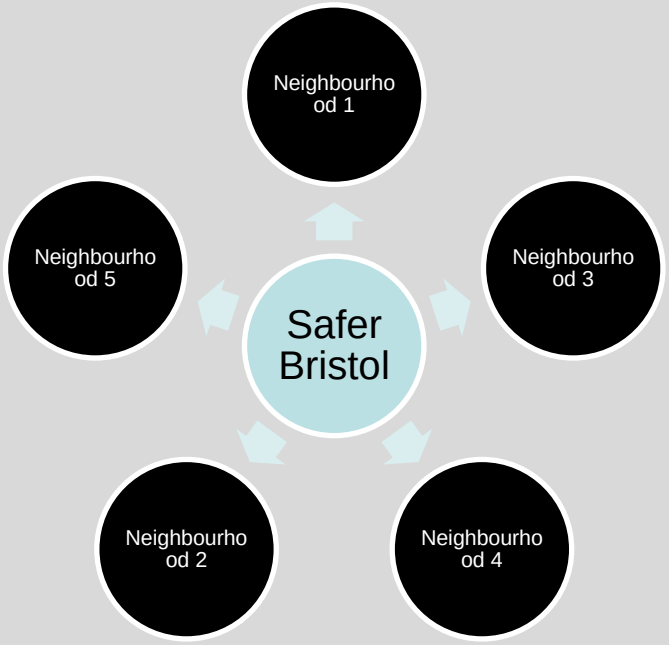
TM & Elias

- TM is a strategy to maintain order via the creation of differences, distinctions and differentiation.
- Competitive relations among the talented paralyse rebellion (de Swaan 1990).
- TM plays to dominant, powerful discourses
  - The 'talented'' need the execs, and execs need the 'talented'.

Ballet for the Sun King

- Louis used ballet to control his court.
- How you danced affected your power with the King.
- Consumed by dance, courtiers had no time to plot against the King.

The Emperors New Courts



Lever, J. (2011) 'Urban Regeneration Partnerships: A Figurational Critique of Governmentality Theory, *Sociology*, 45 (1), pp. 86-101

Community safety addressed through:

- Neighbourhood/ community led bottom up approach
- Top down government led managerial agenda

At the *Court of Talent Management*

- Individuals in talent programmes indicated that there are good listeners in their organisation, but that these 'managers' do not do much beyond listening:

  - *'The talent team, well If I'm honest they're really good listeners with good ideas, but they don't have a great deal of influence when it comes to finding me new opportunities'*

- There was a feeling that the 'talent programme' is to some extent an 'open space', and that real opportunities only lie beyond the 'open door' on the far side of the space, which individuals have to be motivated to go though:

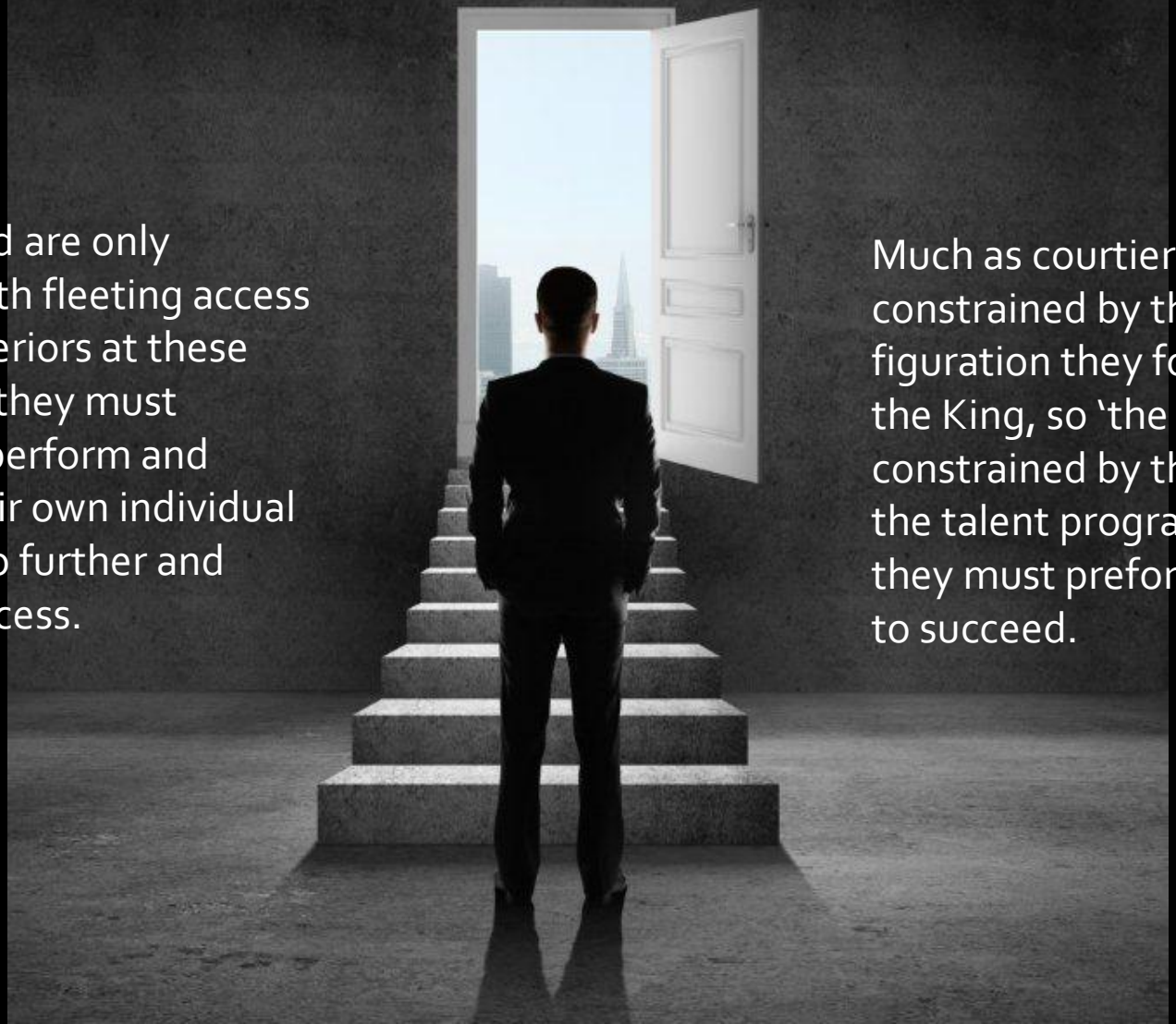
  - *"They open the door [but] they don't walk you through [it]."*

At the *Court of Talent Management*

- Most individuals do not have the motivation and ambition to go through the 'open door':
  - *'Your face needs to fit… there aren't a lot of opportunities out there for me, and if there were I'm not sure I'd know which ones to choose or how to go about getting them.*
- Those that do have the motivation must adopt the right strategies:
  - *'I know what is required and I introduce initiatives to make things happen.'*

Talent programmes allow organisations to control individual subjects by observing their performance in rituals where particular forms of etiquette are required.

The pressures faced by the individuals working in this environment are intense!



The talented are only provided with fleeting access to their superiors at these rituals, and they must constantly perform and develop their own individual strategies to further and maintain access.

Much as courtiers were constrained by the wider figuration they formed around the King, so 'the talented' are constrained by the demands of the talent programme, and they must preform accordingly to succeed.

Le roi danse - Ballet de la nuit (1653)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYHPNgSUIoE

Figurational sociology provides key insights into role of talent programmes within organizations.

Thank you for listening!