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Leadership development and talent management in constrained resource settings: A strategic HR perspective

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Abstract

Leadership development and talent management are critical for organizational sustainability, yet they pose significant challenges in constrained resource settings. This paper examines key barriers such as limited funding, talent shortages, and inadequate infrastructure, highlighting their adverse effects on organizational performance and employee retention. Strategic human resource (HR) approaches are proposed to address these issues, including cost-effective leadership development frameworks, innovative recruitment and retention strategies, and succession planning initiatives. Technology, mentorship, and non-monetary incentives are emphasized in fostering employee engagement and enhancing leadership capacity. Additionally, the importance of external collaborations with governments, NGOs, and private sector entities is explored as a means to augment organizational resources. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for HR leaders and policymakers to implement sustainable talent management and leadership development strategies in resource-limited contexts. By adopting these measures, organizations can build resilient workforces, drive long-term success, and maintain operational effectiveness despite significant constraints.

Keywords: Leadership development; Talent management; Constrained resource settings; Strategic human resource management; Employee engagement; Succession planning

1 Introduction

1.1. Overview of Leadership Development and Talent Management in Constrained Resource Settings

Leadership development and talent management are critical components of human resource (HR) strategies for organizations worldwide. However, these functions face significant challenges in resource-constrained settings, where financial, technological, and infrastructural limitations are prevalent (Whysall, Owtram, & Brittain, 2019). Leadership development involves nurturing the skills, competencies, and behaviors required for current and future organizational leaders, while talent management refers to the strategic process of attracting, developing, and retaining skilled individuals to achieve organizational goals. Together, these two elements underpin organizational resilience, adaptability, and growth (April & Dalwai, 2019).

In constrained resource settings, such as low-income countries, nonprofit organizations, or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating on tight budgets, the lack of adequate resources amplifies the difficulty of implementing leadership and talent programs. For example, organizations may lack access to training facilities, mentorship programs, and standard professional development tools in more resource-rich environments. Similarly, high employee turnover,

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competition for skilled talent, and limited opportunities for career advancement further complicate efforts to build effective leadership and maintain a sustainable talent pipeline (Shkabatur, Bar-El, & Schwartz, 2022).

Despite these challenges, leadership development and talent management remain indispensable. Effective leaders are essential for guiding organizations through uncertainty, fostering innovation, and ensuring strategic alignment, especially in constrained settings where agility and resourcefulness are key to survival. At the same time, strategic talent management ensures that organizations have the right people in place to meet immediate and long-term objectives. Organizations risk stagnation, operational inefficiency, and an inability to compete in the global marketplace without a well-structured approach to these HR functions (Joel & Oguanobi, 2024).

1.2. Significance of Addressing HR Challenges in Constrained Resource Contexts

Addressing HR challenges in resource-limited environments is not just a matter of organizational success; it is also a matter of equity and sustainability. For organizations in these contexts, leadership development and talent management are often viewed as luxuries rather than necessities. This perception can lead to a reactive, short-term approach to HR, where immediate operational needs overshadow long-term strategic planning. However, this perspective is counterproductive, as it overlooks the transformative potential of strategic HR in overcoming systemic barriers (Brown, Rizzuto, & Singh, 2019).

Organizations in constrained environments often operate in sectors that directly impact societal well-being, such as healthcare, education, and community development. For example, a nonprofit organization operating in rural healthcare cannot afford to ignore leadership development, as strong leaders are essential for mobilizing resources, engaging stakeholders, and driving impactful programs. Similarly, retaining and developing talent ensures continuity in service delivery and helps build institutional knowledge, which is crucial for long-term success (Werhane, Newton, & Wolfe, 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of investment in leadership and talent development in such settings perpetuates a cycle of mediocrity, where limited resources lead to underperformance, and underperformance justifies the lack of investment. Breaking this cycle requires deliberate strategies to optimize existing resources, build partnerships, and embrace innovative solutions. By addressing these HR challenges, organizations can unlock latent potential, enhance operational efficiency, and contribute to broader societal goals, such as poverty alleviation, social equity, and economic development (Burnett, 2024).

1.3. Objectives of the Paper and Its Strategic HR Perspective

The primary objective of this paper is to explore practical and innovative approaches to leadership development and talent management in constrained resource settings. It aims to provide a strategic HR perspective that emphasizes long-term planning, resource optimization, and the integration of low-cost yet impactful solutions. By focusing on actionable strategies, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between organizational aspirations and resource realities, offering theoretically grounded and practically relevant insights.

Another key objective is to highlight the importance of adopting a systems approach to HR management. In resource-constrained contexts, leadership development and talent management cannot operate in silos. Instead, they must be embedded within a broader organizational framework that aligns HR practices with overall strategic goals. For instance, leadership training programs should focus on individual skill development and fostering collaborative leadership styles that enhance team performance and organizational cohesion. Similarly, talent management strategies should prioritize internal mobility, succession planning, and employee engagement to ensure that organizations can adapt to changing circumstances without relying heavily on external hires.

This paper also emphasizes innovation's critical role in addressing HR challenges. In resource-rich environments, organizations can often afford to adopt off-the-shelf leadership development and talent management solutions. However, in constrained settings, there is a need for customized, context-sensitive approaches that leverage technology, partnerships, and local expertise. For example, e-learning platforms and virtual mentorship programs can provide cost-effective alternatives to traditional training methods, while collaborations with universities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can help offset resource limitations.

By taking a strategic HR perspective, this paper aims to offer a roadmap for organizations seeking to navigate the complexities of leadership and talent management in constrained resource settings. It recognizes that while resource constraints pose significant challenges, they also present opportunities for creativity, collaboration, and resilience.

Through a combination of theoretical insights and practical recommendations, this paper seeks to empower HR professionals and organizational leaders to turn constraints into catalysts for growth and innovation.

2 Challenges in Leadership Development and Talent Management

2.1. Key Barriers in Constrained Resource Settings

Leadership development and talent management are inherently resource-intensive processes, requiring investments in training, infrastructure, and incentives. In resource-constrained settings, such investments are often difficult to sustain (Group, 2020). One of the most significant barriers is limited funding, which impacts the ability to design and deliver effective leadership programs or provide competitive compensation to attract and retain skilled talent. Organizations operating in low-income economies, underfunded public sectors, or nonprofit spaces often prioritize short-term operational needs over long-term HR investments, leading to underdeveloped leadership pipelines and inadequate talent retention strategies (Horst, McClintock, & Hoey, 2024).

Another critical barrier is talent shortages, which are prevalent in sectors such as healthcare, education, and technical industries in constrained settings. These shortages may stem from a lack of access to higher education, brain drain, or insufficient professional development opportunities within the local workforce. For example, rural or underserved regions often struggle to attract and retain qualified professionals due to the absence of career growth prospects and basic amenities (Farndale, Thite, Budhwar, & Kwon, 2021).

Inadequate infrastructure is another obstacle, encompassing both physical and digital resources. Training facilities, access to modern technology, and even reliable internet connectivity are often unavailable, making implementing advanced training programs or technology-driven talent management solutions difficult. For instance, e-learning platforms and virtual mentorship programs, which have proven effective in resource-rich environments, may be infeasible in areas with limited connectivity (Jamil, 2021).

In addition to these tangible barriers, resource-constrained settings also face issues related to organizational rigidity. Many organizations in these environments operate with hierarchical structures that resist change, making it challenging to adopt innovative approaches to leadership development and talent management. Similarly, weak HR systems and policies often fail to provide the structure or support needed to build effective leadership pipelines and manage talent strategically (Chun & Evans, 2023).

2.2. Impacts of These Challenges on Organizational Performance and Sustainability

The barriers outlined above have profound implications for organizational performance and sustainability. One of the most immediate effects is ineffective leadership at critical moments. Organizations with underdeveloped leadership capabilities struggle to respond swiftly and effectively when crises are common—such as public health emergencies or economic downturns. This can result in operational inefficiencies, missed opportunities, and even organizational failure.

High employee turnover is another significant consequence, particularly in sectors where skilled workers are in demand. Talent shortages and the inability to provide competitive compensation packages often lead to employees seeking better opportunities elsewhere, leaving organizations with gaps in expertise and institutional memory. This churn also incurs additional costs related to recruitment and onboarding, further straining limited resources (Ayodele, Chang-Richards, & González, 2020).

The lack of investment in leadership development and talent management also undermines employee morale and engagement. When employees perceive limited growth opportunities, they are less likely to remain motivated and committed to organizational goals. This can lead to reduced productivity and a weakened organizational culture, further eroding the organization's ability to achieve its objectives (Kwon & Jang, 2022).

Moreover, these challenges create a vicious cycle: constrained resources lead to inadequate leadership and talent management, which in turn hinder the organization's ability to perform and attract additional resources. Over time, this cycle threatens the organization's long-term sustainability, leaving it unable to compete or deliver value effectively. For example, poor HR practices in nonprofits and social enterprises can compromise service delivery, diminish donor confidence and further restrict funding.

2.3. The Role of Cultural, Economic, and Organizational Factors

The challenges associated with leadership development and talent management in constrained settings are not solely resource-based but are also shaped by cultural, economic, and organizational factors. Cultural norms and expectations often play a critical role in determining how leadership is perceived and practiced. For instance, in hierarchical cultures, leadership may be associated with authority and control rather than collaboration and empowerment. Such perceptions can hinder the adoption of modern leadership practices, such as participatory decision-making or servant leadership, which are more effective in dynamic and resource-limited environments (King & Vaiman, 2019).

Economic factors, particularly in developing economies, exacerbate the challenges. Economic instability, inflation, and weak labor markets limit the availability of skilled workers and discourage organizations from investing in long-term HR initiatives. Furthermore, systemic issues such as unequal access to education and professional opportunities disproportionately affect marginalized communities, further reducing the talent pool. For example, women and underrepresented groups in many regions face additional barriers to accessing leadership roles due to societal biases and discriminatory practices, depriving organizations of diverse perspectives that are critical for innovation and problem-solving (Ha, Kose, & Ohnsorge, 2019).

At the organizational level, strategic misalignment is a common issue. Many organizations in constrained settings lack a clear vision or strategic plan for HR development, treating leadership and talent management as peripheral concerns rather than core components of organizational success. This is often coupled with weak governance structures and inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems, which make it difficult to measure the impact of HR initiatives or adapt them to changing circumstances (Ateş, Tarakci, Porck, van Knippenberg, & Groenen, 2020).

Finally, the role of external factors cannot be overlooked. Political instability, regulatory challenges, and insufficient government or industry bodies support further complicate efforts to address HR challenges. For example, inconsistent policies on workforce development or inadequate public funding for training programs can leave organizations with few options for developing their leadership and talent pools (Ricucci, Naff, & Hamidullah, 2019).

3 Strategic HR Approaches for Leadership Development

3.1. Frameworks for Developing Leadership Capabilities under Resource Constraints

Developing leadership capabilities requires a structured, strategic approach that maximizes impact while minimizing costs in resource-constrained environments. Traditional frameworks for leadership development often rely on extensive funding and infrastructure, making them impractical in settings where resources are limited. However, organizations in such environments can adopt alternative frameworks that prioritize adaptability, resourcefulness, and the alignment of leadership development with organizational goals (Adegbola, Adegbola, Amajuoyi, Benjamin, & Adeusi, 2024).

One effective framework is the “70-20-10” model, which emphasizes experiential learning. According to this model, 70% of leadership development should occur through on-the-job experiences, 20% through mentoring and coaching, and 10% through formal training programs. This approach is particularly useful in constrained settings because it leverages existing resources, such as job roles and internal expertise, to build leadership capabilities. For instance, organizations can assign high-potential employees to challenging projects or cross-functional teams, allowing them to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills in real-world scenarios (Mughal, 2023).

Another useful framework is succession planning, which focuses on identifying and grooming future leaders within the organization. Succession planning helps mitigate the risks associated with talent shortages by creating a pipeline of capable leaders who are already familiar with the organization’s culture and operations. Even in resource-constrained settings, this framework can be implemented by systematically identifying high-potential employees, providing them with targeted development opportunities, and monitoring their progress over time (Amanquah, 2021).

Additionally, organizations can adopt community-based leadership development models emphasizing collaboration and peer learning. In this framework, employees work together to share knowledge, solve problems, and develop leadership skills collectively. This approach fosters a shared responsibility and teamwork culture, which is essential for resource-constrained organizations that rely on collective effort to overcome challenges (Suriyankietkaew, Krittayaruangroj, & Iamsawan, 2022).

3.2. Focus on Cost-Effective Training, Mentorship, and Upskilling Programs

Developing leadership capabilities in resource-limited settings necessitates cost-effective solutions that deliver measurable results. Formal training programs, which are often expensive, can be replaced or supplemented with more affordable alternatives such as mentorship, peer learning, and focused upskilling initiatives.

Mentorship programs are particularly valuable in constrained environments, as they allow organizations to utilize internal expertise rather than relying on external consultants or training providers. Senior leaders or experienced employees can mentor less experienced staff through one-on-one coaching sessions or group discussions. This approach builds leadership skills and fosters strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of community within the organization. For example, a nonprofit organization with limited resources could establish a mentorship program where senior managers mentor emerging leaders, offering guidance on navigating challenges and making strategic decisions (Busch & Barkema, 2021).

Upskilling initiatives are another cost-effective approach to leadership development. These programs focus on enhancing skills critical for leadership, such as communication, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. Upskilling can be achieved through short workshops, webinars, or self-directed learning resources, many of which are freely available online. For instance, organizations can encourage employees to participate in open-access leadership courses offered by platforms such as Coursera, edX, or LinkedIn Learning (NWOKEOCHA, 2024).

Cross-functional training is also an effective way to develop leadership capabilities. By rotating employees through different departments or roles, organizations can expose them to diverse perspectives and challenges, enabling them to develop a broader understanding of the organization's operations and strategic goals. This approach is particularly useful in constrained settings with limited financial resources for external training programs. Lastly, peer-to-peer learning is an accessible and cost-effective method for leadership development. Employees can participate in group discussions, workshops, or brainstorming sessions where they share insights and best practices. This approach builds leadership skills and strengthens collaboration and knowledge-sharing within the organization (Zhang & Guo, 2019).

3.3. Utilizing Technology and Innovative Learning Solutions to Enhance Leadership Capacity

Technology offers immense potential to enhance leadership development, particularly in resource-constrained settings where traditional training methods may be inaccessible or unaffordable. By leveraging digital tools and platforms, organizations can deliver high-quality leadership training at a fraction of the cost of in-person programs (Swanepoel & Clark, 2019).

E-learning platforms are among the most effective technology-based solutions for leadership development. Platforms such as Khan Academy, Coursera, and Udemy offer affordable or free courses on leadership topics, allowing employees to learn at their own pace and convenience. These platforms are particularly valuable in constrained settings, as they eliminate the need for physical infrastructure and reduce costs associated with travel and accommodations. Additionally, many e-learning platforms provide certificates of completion, which can serve as tangible evidence of an employee's commitment to professional growth (Headrick, 2019).

Virtual mentorship programs are another innovative solution that utilizes technology to build leadership capacity. Organizations can overcome geographical barriers by connecting mentors and mentees through video conferencing tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams and provide mentorship opportunities to employees in remote or underserved locations. For example, an organization based in a rural area could pair emerging leaders with mentors from urban centers or even other countries, providing them with valuable insights and perspectives (Tinoco-Giraldo, Torrecilla Sanchez, & García-Peñalvo, 2020).

Mobile learning applications also offer flexible and accessible options for leadership development. Apps such as Duolingo for language skills or Udemy's mobile app for leadership training can be particularly useful in constrained settings where employees cannot access computers but can use smartphones. These apps enable employees to learn during downtime, such as commuting or breaks, making leadership development more practical and integrated into daily routines (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Gamification is another innovative approach that can enhance leadership training by making it more engaging and interactive. Organizations can use gamified e-learning platforms to simulate real-world leadership challenges, allowing employees to practice decision-making and problem-solving in a risk-free environment. For example, a healthcare organization operating in a resource-constrained setting could use gamified simulations to train future leaders on crisis management and resource allocation.

Lastly, collaborative digital tools such as Slack, Trello, and Google Workspace can be used to foster teamwork and leadership skills. These tools enable employees to work together on projects, share knowledge, and develop collaborative leadership styles. For instance, an organization could create a virtual leadership development program where employees work in teams to complete assignments or solve organizational problems using digital collaboration platforms (Katari, Thota, Chitta, Venkata, & Ahmad, 2021).

4 Talent Management Strategies for Resource-Limited Organizations

4.1. Recruitment and Retention Strategies Tailored to Constrained Settings

Effective recruitment and retention are critical for resource-limited organizations, where financial and infrastructural constraints often challenge attracting top talent. Organizations must adopt innovative and tailored strategies that go beyond traditional methods to navigate these limitations. One key approach is emphasizing the mission and purpose of the organization during recruitment. Many individuals, especially those in nonprofit or development sectors, are motivated by opportunities to make a meaningful impact. Highlighting the organization's goals, community contributions, and potential personal growth can attract candidates who value purpose-driven work over monetary rewards. For instance, a rural health clinic may focus on showcasing its role in improving local healthcare access to attract passionate professionals willing to work in underserved areas.

Additionally, flexible work arrangements can serve as a valuable recruitment tool. Offering remote or hybrid work options, flexible schedules, and job-sharing arrangements can make positions more attractive to candidates whom low salaries or difficult working conditions might otherwise deter. This strategy also expands the talent pool by allowing organizations to recruit from outside their immediate geographic area (Alsulami, Mabrouk, & Bousrih, 2022).

Retention, meanwhile, requires a focus on creating an environment where employees feel valued and supported. One effective strategy is providing non-monetary incentives, such as opportunities for professional development, recognition programs, or additional leave days. While financial resources may be limited, showing appreciation for employees' contributions can significantly improve job satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, organizations can foster a strong organizational culture by emphasizing collaboration, transparency, and mutual respect, which enhances employees' sense of belonging and reduces turnover (Ushakov & Shatila, 2021).

Another critical retention strategy is career development support. Employees are more likely to stay with an organization if they see opportunities for growth and advancement. Resource-limited organizations can offer mentorship programs, stretch assignments, and internal promotions as cost-effective ways to support career development while retaining talented staff (Witter et al., 2020).

4.2. Succession Planning and Internal Talent Pipeline Development

Succession planning is vital to talent management, especially in constrained settings where external recruitment may be costly or impractical. By developing an internal talent pipeline, organizations can ensure continuity in leadership and critical roles while minimizing the risks associated with sudden departures or retirements.

An effective succession planning process begins with identifying high-potential employees who demonstrate leadership qualities, adaptability, and a commitment to the organization's mission. Once identified, these employees should be provided opportunities to develop their skills and gain exposure to different organizational roles. For instance, cross-functional training and rotational assignments can help employees build a diverse skill set and a comprehensive understanding of organizational operations.

Knowledge transfer programs are also essential for succession planning. In resource-constrained organizations, experienced employees often possess valuable institutional knowledge that is difficult to replace. Formal knowledge-sharing mechanisms, such as documentation, shadowing, or mentorship programs, ensure critical information is passed on to the next generation of leaders. Finally, succession planning must include clear communication and transparency. Employees should be aware of the organization's commitment to internal development, which can boost morale and motivation. When employees see a clear path to advancement, they are more likely to remain engaged and loyal to the organization (Döring & Witt, 2020).

4.3. Promoting Employee Engagement and Motivation with Limited Financial Incentives

Engaging and motivating employees in resource-limited organizations requires creativity and a deep understanding of what drives job satisfaction. While financial rewards may be limited, other strategies can be equally, if not more, effective in fostering a motivated workforce.

Recognition and appreciation are powerful motivators that cost little but have a significant impact. Simple gestures such as public acknowledgment, personalized thank-you notes, or awards for exceptional performance can make employees feel valued and respected. Recognition programs that celebrate team achievements can also strengthen a sense of community and collaboration.

Providing growth opportunities is another key strategy for boosting engagement. Employees who feel they are learning and advancing in their careers are more likely to remain committed to their roles. Organizations can offer workshops, webinars, or informal skill-sharing sessions to support professional growth without significant financial investment.

Empowering employees through autonomy and decision-making authority can also enhance motivation. Allowing employees to take ownership of their work and contribute to organizational decisions fosters a sense of pride and responsibility. For instance, employees in a resource-limited nonprofit could be involved in designing and implementing community programs, giving them a sense of agency and purpose. Lastly, creating a supportive and inclusive workplace environment is crucial for engagement. Employees who feel their well-being is prioritized are more likely to remain committed to the organization. Simple initiatives such as wellness programs, team-building activities, or open-door policies for management can significantly enhance morale.

4.4. Building Partnerships and Leveraging External Support

In constrained resource settings, partnerships with external organizations can provide critical support for talent management. Organizations can access additional resources, expertise, and networks by collaborating with entities such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and private sector partners. NGOs and international development agencies often provide funding, training, or technical assistance to organizations working in resource-limited settings. For example, partnerships with global health organizations can help rural clinics access leadership training programs for their staff. Similarly, NGOs focused on education can support schools by funding professional development initiatives for teachers.

Government partnerships can also be highly beneficial. Governments may offer subsidies, tax incentives, or capacity-building programs for organizations operating in underserved areas. For instance, a small business in a low-income community could collaborate with local government agencies to participate in workforce development initiatives (Walters, 2020). In addition to formal partnerships, organizations can leverage volunteer networks and pro bono services to support talent management. Professionals from various industries may be willing to provide mentorship, training, or strategic advice voluntarily. For example, a legal aid organization could partner with a law firm to offer pro bono leadership training for its managers.

Finally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) can provide sustainable solutions for talent management. Organizations can work with private sector entities through PPPs to co-create programs that address talent shortages, leadership development, and employee engagement. For instance, a partnership between a technology company and a nonprofit could result in developing an e-learning platform tailored to the needs of resource-constrained organizations (Liu, Mostafa, Mohamed, & Nguyen, 2021).

5 Conclusion

Leadership development and talent management in constrained resource settings are critical yet challenging aspects of human resource (HR) strategy. This paper has explored the key barriers organizations face, such as limited funding, talent shortages, and inadequate infrastructure, which hinder efforts to build leadership capacity and retain talent. It has highlighted the detrimental impact of these challenges on organizational performance, sustainability, and employee engagement, underscoring the need for innovative solutions tailored to resource-limited environments.

To address these challenges, several strategic approaches were identified. For leadership development, resource-constrained organizations can adopt cost-effective frameworks focusing on mentorship, targeted upskilling programs, and technology-driven solutions such as e-learning platforms. These approaches enable the development of leadership competencies without excessive financial investment, fostering a culture of continuous growth and adaptability.

In terms of talent management, innovative recruitment and retention strategies, such as emphasizing mission-driven work, flexible arrangements, and career development opportunities, were proposed to attract and retain skilled employees. Succession planning and internal talent pipeline development emerged as vital components for ensuring organizational continuity, supported by knowledge transfer initiatives and transparent career pathways. Engagement strategies, including recognition programs, non-monetary incentives, and a supportive workplace culture, were also recommended to maintain employee motivation and satisfaction.

Finally, leveraging external support through partnerships with NGOs, governments, and private sector entities was highlighted to access critical resources and expertise. These collaborations can amplify the impact of HR strategies and provide long-term solutions to address resource constraints.

Recommendations

HR leaders and policymakers must take proactive and collaborative actions to ensure the effective implementation of these strategies. For HR leaders, prioritizing low-cost, high-impact initiatives is crucial. The primary focus should be developing leadership capabilities through mentorship, internal training programs, and e-learning platforms. Moreover, organizations should institutionalize succession planning by identifying high-potential employees early and providing them with growth opportunities. Regular employee surveys and feedback mechanisms can help identify motivation gaps and shape tailored engagement strategies.

Conversely, policymakers have a vital role in creating an enabling environment for resource-limited organizations. This includes offering tax incentives or subsidies for HR development programs and funding capacity-building initiatives, particularly in underserved sectors. Policymakers should also encourage public-private partnerships to ensure sustainable talent management solutions, such as co-developing training programs or facilitating knowledge-sharing platforms.

Finally, fostering a supportive ecosystem through collaboration is essential. Governments, private organizations, and civil society must work together to provide resources, technical assistance, and funding for leadership and talent development in constrained settings. By prioritizing these efforts, HR leaders and policymakers can build resilient, future-ready organizations capable of thriving despite limited resources.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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