



TALENT DEVELOPMENT,  
AS SEEN FROM **THE**  
**WRESTLING**  
**RING**

SVP of Talent Relations and Talent Development  
Sean Cleary shares management tips gleaned  
ringside at WWE

**BY STEPHANIE HARRIS**

Talent development is a natural extension of the human resources (HR) function. And when your talent pool is comprised of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Superstars and personnel who produce global entertainment, your role in developing said talent is a dynamic one. Such is the case for Sean Cleary, Senior Vice President (SVP) of Talent Relations and Talent Development for WWE, the legendary federation with more than \$3 billion in total assets, headquartered in Stamford, Connecticut.

“As WWE has grown, especially in transitioning to a public company, the identity of the organization has matured with that,” said Cleary, who joined in 2012 as SVP of HR, and, it could be argued, personifies what the organization is essentially about—the marrying of business, sports and entertainment for a diverse global audience.

If it is his business credentials you are looking for, look no further than his former role as SVP for Bank of America, or the nine years he spent with worldwide spirits purveyor Diageo in various leadership roles. Sports and entertainment expertise, you say? Cleary is well versed in these areas, having spent eight years as a collegiate and professional basketball coach with the likes of the Boston Celtics, the University of Pittsburgh Panthers and the Manhattan College Jaspers.

Reflecting on his diverse background, which to the casual onlooker may not seem to have much in common, Cleary was quick to point out: “Regardless of the companies I’ve worked for, each organization was focused on talent, and while the products and services they offered were very different, at their core it was always about talent development.”

And develop talent he does. In an opportunity to return to his career roots and work with world-class athletes, in October 2013 Cleary assumed the role of SVP, Talent Relations and Talent Development, for WWE. His team focuses on recruiting future WWE Superstars and overseeing their development at the WWE Performance Center in Orlando.

“In many ways, this role is HR for our most-prized asset—our talent,” he said. “They are the only natural resource we have, and I see my primary role as being their internal advocate.”

Cleary and his team also work with internal and external partners on sponsorship opportunities, ensure WWE’s health and wellness programs support their athletes, and manage the day-to-day interactions of all talent, including their travel itineraries and public appearances.

### A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

Before transitioning into his role in Talent Relations and Talent Development, Cleary served as the SVP of HR. As any strong HR professional could attest, the

## Wiggin and Dana congratulates Sean Cleary for being featured in Forefront Magazine

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“Sean’s ingenuity and effectiveness as an HR leader in the fast-paced WWE environment allows him to exceed any challenges that come his way. Sean consistently provides strong HR leadership, balancing employee relations and business interests. We are pleased and honored to be in partnership with Sean and with the WWE, and look forward to continuing this partnership in the years to come.”  
— **Mary Gambardella, Partner, Wiggin and Dana LLP**

man who transformed a family business into a multibillion-dollar enterprise as he is for being one of the most controversial figures within sports? According to Cleary, the challenge is marginal.

“Vince’s high-performance orientation matches my core beliefs,” said Cleary, who noted that while their relationship has been nontraditional—due in large part to the role McMahon plays within the organization, as well as his public persona—it is a symbiotic relationship that is critical to



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“It has been a pleasure working with Sean and his staff at the WWE. As a full service employment screening firm, we are known for our personal service while offering a full spectrum of background checks to clients nationally and globally.” **-Gordon Basichis, Co-Founder at Corra Group**

“THERE’S ACTUALLY A GREAT DEAL OF **OVERLAP** BETWEEN COACHING BASKETBALL AND RUNNING AN HR DEPARTMENT.”

stronger the relationship with their Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the more successful the business will be.

But how is the issue compounded when your very visible CEO, Vince McMahon, is as well known for being a savvy business-

achieving shared strategic goals.

When Cleary oversaw the HR function, he and McMahon met regularly to discuss issues and formulate solutions. “I always found he has a terrifically open mind and is a great thought partner,” Cleary said.

“He knows the business so well and has terrific instincts. Many of the conversations we had helped me formulate the right solution to a particular issue at hand, and also served to get buy-in up front.”

Cleary also said that in joining WWE, he found a partner that, much like himself, was not afraid of taking risks.

“During my interview with Vince, I voiced my thoughts on the XFL [an American professional football league, founded by McMahon, that failed to gain traction and was shut down after just one season], and in fact, it was one of the reasons I chose to join the company—not many organizations would take that level of risk,” Cleary said. “From a cultural standpoint, the company is, to a large degree, very cutting edge.”

### THE BUSINESS GAME

As it relates to his team and goals for the department, Cleary said much of what he learned as an organizational leader was forged in the world of sports.

“There is a strong correlation between sports and business,” he said. “Think about your life as a basketball coach. How do you go about succession planning? At the collegiate level, if a player is graduating, how will you replace that person? There’s actually a great deal of overlap between coaching basketball and running an HR department.”

Cleary has noticed a turnaround in WWE’s HR Department since he joined the company, due in large part to placing a greater emphasis on making those around him feel valued.

“The reality is that we have truly great professionals here,” he said. “From a business standpoint, we placed a larger emphasis on recruiting, so our cost and time-per-hire has gone down. But from a credibility standpoint, the HR Department was recognized for providing core services that the business clearly sees value in.”

It should come as no surprise that an organization as bold and dynamic as WWE has had such a well-rounded, forward-thinking leader as Cleary taking center stage in the HR and Talent offices.

*Stephanie Harris is a freelance writer based in Chicago, Illinois.*



## WWE'S BRASS RING PROGRAM

For Cleary, WWE is another organization that places a premium on talent acquisition—something he has been very familiar with throughout his career.

Since joining the team, he has launched its Brass Ring Program. It is a platform designed for a select group of organizational directors and VPs that not only have a performance imprint, but also carry with them an expectation that they will grow into larger roles with added responsibility.

“It’s a nine-month program that combines many different learning opportunities, some of which are lecture based, while other facets are more active and experiential,” Cleary said. “We try to touch many different areas of interest over those nine months to create a well thought-out learning program.”

The feedback from those involved in the program has been extremely positive and has provided insight into organic improvements that can be made to further strengthen it for incoming participants.

“We learned things along the way,” Cleary said. “We made adjustments, but almost universally there’s been exceptional high feedback. It’s not an easy time investment, but it’s one that we see as highly worthwhile.”

# Forefront

## MAGAZINE



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