



High Potential...to Do What?

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SUMMARY

Most high potentials are selected on the basis of their technical talent and the extent to which their behaviors exemplify and promote their organizations' operating cultures—the norms and expectations that represent how things actually get done—which often are quite different than their organizations' highly touted visions and values. As a result, organizations have become very good at promoting high potential individuals for doing more of the same. This article highlights what talent managers need to look for and develop in their high potentials (and the commonly-made mistakes they should avoid) to move their organizations toward realizing their visions, values, and goals.

Your company has just identified its “high potentials”—the rising stars amongst your organization's ranks. According to a recent article, high potentials are those who outperform their peers and “exhibit behaviors that reflect their companies' cultures and values in an exemplary manner” (Harvard Business Review, June 2010, p. 80). This assumes that the *operating cultures* of organizations—that is, how things are currently done and what's really expected—are aligned with their visions and values—that is, what they say is important and want to achieve. The *Organizational Culture Inventory*® has been used to quantitatively measure and compare the operating cultures to the stated values of thousands of organizations and rarely do they match—and in many cases are quite

different. Furthermore, data on the impact of managers and leaders, including high potentials, show they tend to encourage the people around them to behave in ways that are more consistent with their organization's operating culture than its values.

Certainly there are organizations that live their values and promote managers who exemplify and reinforce them. Unfortunately, they seem to be in the minority. Based on the research of culture and leadership expert Dr. Robert A. Cooke, along with Dr. Janet L. Szumal, operating cultures are created and reinforced by the behavior and decisions of the organization's leadership and management and the systems, structures, and technologies they put in place, all of which people inside the organization have to deal with on a day-to-day basis (*The Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, 2000). And the truth is that rising stars usually aren't those who rebel against their organization's management and leadership. Instead they tend to be your “good soldiers”—exemplifying their organization's operating culture, regardless of whether it is consistent with its values.

For talent managers, this means taking a critical look at your company's criteria and practices for high potentials to ensure that they identify and develop the potential for moving your organization closer toward its vision, values, and goals.

Step 1: Identify Your Organization's Values

This sets the foundation for establishing your organization's criteria and practices for high potentials. Most organizations publish their

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values in employee handbooks, company reports, and on their websites. If they are not explicit or if it is questionable whether they are still relevant, consider using a validated survey to identify them. The advantage of this approach is you can gather information from a variety of people in the organization relatively quickly and inexpensively. Though an organization's values are usually defined by its leadership, data from a variety of people enables you to gauge the extent to which those values are shared.

An organization's values should support and reflect its mission and vision and promote its long-term effectiveness. Interestingly, for just about every organization, what we call "Constructive" thinking and behaviors top the list. This type of thinking and behavior is driven by what psychologist Abraham Maslow called "higher-order needs" to take responsibility and achieve, develop mutually satisfying relationships, develop oneself and others, and continuously improve. In organizational settings this requires a balanced focus on both task and people—tasks need to be coordinated and done well and relationships need to be genuine and productive. The quest to make these values part of the operating culture is well worth it. Research shows that Constructive operating cultures are associated with a number of desired outcomes including profitability, sales growth, product and service quality, teamwork, and employee motivation, satisfaction, retention, and well-being.

Step 2: Use Your Organization's Values to Identify High Potentials

For example, if your organization values responsibility and accountability, cooperation, and continuous improvement then these should be exemplified by the behavior of high potentials. However, most organizations make two major errors when using their values to identify high potentials:

- **They focus on the results achieved and assume that high potentials behaved in**

ways consistent with their organizations' values.

Assumptions about behavior based on results or other outcomes are not always correct—and we have outstanding organization (e.g., Enron) and industry (e.g., banking) examples that demonstrate the dangers of making these assumptions.

- **They exclusively rely on reports by higher-level leaders and peers.**

How people behave around higher-level managers and peers is not necessarily how they come across to direct reports—and those who want to be high potential know they have to look good to those who have the power to promote them.

Thus, you need to directly assess rather than make assumptions about how high potentials achieve results. Observe them in action, ask them how they achieved a particular result(s), and talk with people who work with them, including their direct reports (and, preferably, not just their favorites).

Step 3: Evaluate the Impact of High Potentials on the People around Them

Management and leadership are about bringing out the best in others. This means also asking people—including direct reports and peers—about the impact that high potentials have on them. Data on managers at all levels of organizations show that those who drive defensive, self-protecting or self-promoting behaviors are less effective at moving their organizations toward their vision and goals; create insecurity, stress, and dissatisfaction amongst the people around them; make people want to leave; and are not perceived as ready for their current position (much less promotion to a higher-level). In contrast, managers who motivate people to behave in Constructive ways are viewed as highly effective at moving their organizations toward their visions and goals; foster a greater sense of confidence

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and satisfaction amongst the people around them; make people want to stay; and are perceived as energized and ready for promotion.

Step 4: Assist High Potentials in Understanding their Current Impact

Chances are your high potentials approach certain responsibilities effectively from an impact on others standpoint but, perhaps in order to get things done quickly or look good, inadvertently do other things in ways that, long term, have a detrimental impact on the organization. Unfortunately, the feedback provided by most organizations often focuses on *whether* high potentials carry out their responsibilities rather than *how* they carry them out. Data on a variety of managers, including high potentials, shows that different ways of approaching the same responsibility yields a different impact on other people. Consider, for example, the responsibility of managing work activities. High potentials who provide others with autonomy and check if people are able and willing to do a task before they delegate it motivate those around them to take initiative, plan their own work, and coordinate and cooperate with others. In comparison, high potentials who dictate the details of assignments and unilaterally commit people to projects and deadlines drive those around them to simply obey orders without question, build and maintain their own power bases, and avoid the appearance of any errors or mistakes.

Providing high potentials with feedback from others on how they approach their responsibilities and the impact it has on the people around them enables them to see how certain approaches, though possibly effective in the short run, are counterproductive from a broader, longer-term perspective. Supplement this feedback by asking high potentials to describe how they carry out particular activities. Then identify with them more effective language, practices, and approaches in

terms of the impact on other people. Finding ways to modify their approach to certain responsibilities can enhance their effectiveness in their current role as well as prepare them for future roles, where the span of their impact likely will be greater.

Step 5: Establish Commitment to and Accountability for Self-Development

Those selected as high potential may not necessarily have a highly Constructive personal style and impact on the people around them right from the start, particularly if they were strictly selected on the basis of their accomplishments. And some of them—because of the operating culture, their managers, or the behaviors that worked for them in the past—may not understand that they're responsible for making their organizations' visions and values a reality. If you have people who really don't buy into the organization's vision and values, it's better to find that out before you promote them rather than after they are holding one of the top positions. By comparing their current behavior and impact on other people to your organization's values, you'll be able to discuss what they need to do to develop the behaviors and skills that differentiate truly great managers and leaders from those who get short-term results regardless of the longer-term effects. High potentials who commit to this investment will need their managers' support. Often management development programs go nowhere because ongoing support and accountability for achieving these types of goals is lacking. Consequently, some organizations now require as part of their programs that participants share their development goals and strategies (but not necessarily their feedback) with their immediate supervisors or managers who, in turn, incorporate them in future performance evaluations. In this way, the developmental feedback received by participants remains confidential yet they are held accountable for acting on it in ways that

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further develop their potential to contribute to their organization's goals and maximize its long-term effectiveness.

High potentials can be identified by finding high performing individuals who exemplify the organization's values and motivate the people around them to do the same. More commonly, however, they are selected solely on the basis of the results they achieve—with the hope that they'll be willing and able to develop the skills and abilities required to take their organization to the next level. The latter approach is obviously more difficult than the former. By following the steps outlined here, you can strengthen your organization's potential for realizing its longer-term vision, values, and goals.

Human Synergistics International is dedicated to "Changing the World—One Organization at a Time®". For information regarding our products and services, visit www.humansynergistics.com. Dr. Szumal is a senior research associate at Human Synergistics/Center for Applied Research, Inc. and the co-author of Management/Impact®, a 360° feedback tool for managers.