



High Potential Mentoring Programs

High potential employees are defined in a Harvard Business Review article titled “Are You a High Potential?” as employees who “consistently and significantly outperform their peer groups in a variety of settings and circumstances.”

These employees stand out in their performance, but they also fit the company culture. The article goes on to further describe high potentials saying “they exhibit behaviors that reflect their companies’ culture and values in an exemplary manner. Moreover, they show a strong capacity to grow and succeed throughout their careers within an organization—more quickly and effectively than their peer groups do.”

To keep high performers at their best, having mentors is crucial. Mentors can provide guidance, introduce new opportunities, and connect high potential employees with the networks that will prepare them for continued growth.

As a mentor to a high potential employee or a mentee who’s been identified as a high potential, this guide will break down how you can make the most of your mentoring relationship.



Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

High potential employees are more than just hard workers. They are consistently exemplary and great fits within the organization. The authors of the HBR article mentioned in the previous section identify the X-factor that sets high potentials apart from their peers.

The X-Factor That Sets High Potentials Apart

- 1 A drive to excel.
- 2 A knack for learning new things that positively impact their organization.
They can translate their learning into productive action for their organizations.
- 3 An enterprising spirit.
What new paths do they want to explore?
- 4 A sharp sense of discretion.
Their enterprising spirit could potentially lead them to make foolish decisions, but keen awareness helps them decide, for example, when to pursue something and when to pull back.

The mentee's strengths are important to identify because they will inform where their motivations lie. However, each trait listed above can have adverse effects when taken to an extreme.

For example, having an enterprising spirit that always looks for new paths can lead them to make unwise decisions. Without a keen awareness that helps them decide, they may not know when to pursue something and when to pull back.

As a mentee, reflect on what your strengths are. As a mentor, what do you notice as a strength in the mentee?

Determine the Mentee's Motivations and Goals: Do You Want to Be an Expert or a Leader?

As high potentials grow out of their current roles they will most likely begin getting groomed for leadership positions. If they want to become a leader then they'll have to, as the HBR authors state, "demonstrate a behavioral shift from "fit and affiliation" to "role model and teacher."

Adopting a Leaders Mindset

The behavioral shift in high potentials will develop their leadership traits. They'll exhibit traits such as:



A confident humility



An ability to win people over; and helps others succeed without coercion;

High potentials rarely stay where they are. As employees progress, however, it is natural to expect them to take on managerial positions. This may not always be the best case.



Not Everyone Wants Leadership Positions

Vince Molinaro, Ph.D., a researcher, author and CEO of Leadership Contract Inc. writes in an article on choosing leaders that we should make it acceptable for someone to say no to a leadership role:

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At times a candidate may feel tremendous pressure to say yes to a leadership role. In many organizations, people feel, when the opportunity emerges, the only acceptable answer is yes. We need to make it okay for people to say “No!” or “I’m not ready.”

Employees must be able to say no without fear that they will be written off or taken off a high-potential list, or never asked to take on a leadership role in the future... saying no to a leadership role that one isn’t ready for is, in fact, a mature leadership decision.”

Mentors should be aware of their mentee motivations. Likewise, a mentee should know that there are more options for high potentials to pursue than leadership positions alone. They could double down as an expert in their particular field.

Becoming the Expert or Advisor

Should they remain where they are and be an expert and advisor or move into a leadership position? This is a question to propose to high potentials mentees. What do they want?

Their innate drive to excel will rarely keep them where they are, but becoming a manager may not be the mentee’s desire. Instead, the mentee can take up advisory roles and be the most reliable source for their specific domain. They’ll assist in creating the strategies that managers will then execute on. On the spectrum between a leader and expert mentors should work with their mentees to define where they land.



Identifying Stretch Assignments

From ICEDR's report on Developing Enterprise Leaders, they interview Jonathan Donner, an executive at Unilever. Donner explains how they continue to challenge their high potential mentee's:

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We don't just throw our high potential enterprise leaders into a job and hope that good things will happen. We identify stretch assignments for these high potentials— but then make sure they are coached and mentored, and networked with other enterprise leaders in Unilever, so they feel as though they have a variety of lifelines in those choppy waters.

For both future leaders or experts, mentors should determine the assignments that will challenge their mentees to keep growing. As the mentees grow through accomplishing those projects they should have a high level of communication around the following:

What is challenging about the assignment?

Does it align with your long-term goals and intrinsic motivations?

What experience or guidance can the mentor provide that would be helpful?

What specific strengths are developing or weaknesses revealed through the assignment?

Learning Through Hands-on Experience and Reflection

Much learning comes through reflection and communication rather than the hands-on experience alone. Mentors should follow Kolb's learning cycle to encourage their mentees to maintain a high level of awareness around why they are doing what they are and what they're learning from it. Kolb's learning cycle is a reflective practice designed to help mentees gain conclusions and ideas from an experience.

KOLB



Concrete Experience Doing/
Having the experience



Active Experimentation
Planning/ Trying out what
you have learned



Reflective Observation
Reviewing/ Reflecting on
the Experience



Abstract Conceptualization
Concluding/ Learning from
the experience



Further reading



If you want to go deeper on the topics discussed above, we have resources on our website that unpack them further.

They include:



[High Potential Employees](#)



[Making the Most of High Potential People](#)



[How to Hang onto Your High Potentials](#)



[Developing High Potential Talent](#)

Sources

- **Are You a High Potential?**
By Douglas A. Ready, Jay A. Conger, and Linda A. Hill
- **Be Mindful of Whom You Put into Leadership Roles**
Vince Molinaro
- **ICEDR Special Report**
Developing An Enterprise Leadership Mindset
By Douglas A. Ready Project Lead, M. Ellen Peebles, and Chantal Olson
- **Getting started with Reflective Practice**
By Cambridge International Education Teaching and Learning Team



Conclusion

High potentials are a rarity, so their mentors should work with them to identify their goals for their career and give them stretch assignments that will bridge the gap. In doing so, mentors will be instrumental in their mentee's continued growth and development.

Here are some key takeaways:

- Identify the mentee's strengths and weaknesses as well as which X-Factor trait they most align with.
- Discuss what the mentee's career goals are and if leadership is a route they want to pursue.
- Identify stretch assignments that will challenge the mentee and keep them growing.
- Utilize Kolb's learning cycle to reflect on your stretch assignment and identify key learnings.

