



Do you know what your High Potentials want?

Evaluating the High Potential programme from the individual's perspective

Increasingly companies run programmes for staff they have identified as high potential, relying on these to deliver their future leadership. However, research has indicated that companies don't always acknowledge the experiences of, and risks to, employees identified as high potential.

Whilst using high potential programmes to develop future leaders is now a widely used organisational tactic, little is known about how the individual actually feels about taking part.

With the research analysis still underway, initial findings show that companies wanting to reduce their risk of unwelcome results would benefit from developing programmes on a more individualised and honest basis with participants.

An approach that is too generic and an over-reliance on programmes to develop all the senior talent requirements across the business, places unrealistic expectation on programmes to deliver.

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The consequences for companies of getting it wrong are much debated and, indeed, research points to only one-in-six employees entering a high potential development initiative going on to succeed in a senior role*.

However, research by Alison Rose, former Talent Director at Sodexo and now executive coach at MDV Consulting, suggests that one cause might be the potential personal downsides which come alongside the opportunities involved in being identified as a high

potential. Concerns include the anxiety and sacrifice required to deliver on more and harder work, expectations of international travel or relocation at the expense of family life, the amount of personal change involved and the reputational and future career risk of not performing as expected.

With the most common reason cited for investing in talent management as the 'development of high potential individuals'**, Alison's research examines the experiences of participants taking part in corporate high potential programmes as well as executive coaches working with such individuals.

Participants were mid to senior managers working within a cross section of industries including automotive, financial services and retail. They had all received coaching within a talent development programme in the previous two years.

With detailed findings due next year, there are already clear themes emerging which have implications for companies' approaches to identifying and managing high potentials.

Lack of clarity

There is a general lack of clarity in high potential programmes in respect of their objectives and what constitutes successful outcomes. Alison highlights many intrinsic and external reasons for this.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, definitions of what is meant by high potential and how well this is communicated varies from organisation to organisation. More worrying, however, is the lack of clarity seen amongst different stakeholders within an organisation. If the definition is not clearly understood and agreed by different groups such as senior management, nominating managers and talent practitioners, participants will be put forward for inconsistent reasons.

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Unclear communication exacerbates this. Although some participants were aware of their high potential status, what is expected of them and the support they will receive, others were unclear whether they were considered high potential. This contributes to confusion about the purpose and focus of their coaching.

Strategic changes in the business and alterations to key personnel leads to subjective changes as to what is required of high potentials. Participants who were deemed suitable at the programme's start may see their status change, through no fault of their own, as organisational priorities or regimes change.

Individuals may just not deliver on their potential - research suggests that half of high potential participants drop out of their programmes*. Reasons for this failure to achieve may be as simple as the person's career aspirations changing at different stages in their career or a change in family circumstances which makes it more difficult to deliver. Organisations may, however, see these let-downs as a malfunction of the entire programme, adding further uncertainty about whether correct definitions and processes are being used.

Overuse of generic approaches

The research also highlights a misalignment between companies' use of a blunt 'one size fits all' approach to high potentials and what those individuals actually want.

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Alison Rose, who carried out the research said:

"Conversations with participants highlight a much more idiosyncratic view of their careers than organisations take account of. There is a tendency to assume that all high potentials have high career aspirations whilst the reality is that, while most of them see the opportunities, many of them also have reservations. These might be about the extra responsibilities involved in more senior roles, about the sacrifice of personal and family life which could be called for, or about whether the organisation is able to offer sufficiently interesting challenges which set them up for the future."

Despite this, the majority of participants embrace the opportunity as well as the development benefits and they see the risk to career progression from opting out.

"Talent practitioners would do well to ask themselves 'what is a successful coaching assignment?'"

Hit and Miss Coaching Provision

The research found that coaching within high potential programmes is often deployed with little consideration of the outcomes required for each participant, or evaluation of the assignment. That's not to say that good work isn't done – coachees are typically highly appreciative of coaching and find it beneficial, even if the benefits may not be what the organisation is expecting. And good coaches are not fazed by a lack of clarity – indeed, many of them enjoy the challenge involved. But from an organisational perspective, a more sensitive deployment of coaching could create better engagement and improve outcomes. Talent practitioners would do well to ask themselves:

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- when would coaching most benefit the person's career?
- what learning should be happening?
- is the coaching to prepare the individual for what's expected of them in senior roles or to focus on behavioural changes now?
- is the person receptive to coaching?
- what is a successful coaching assignment?

Over-reliance on programmes to deliver all talent

Her many years working in the talent arena also lends Alison to believe that companies are not always clear on how high potential programmes integrate with the rest of their people strategies. With companies investing heavily in these programmes, there can be an expectation that they will deliver all their talent needs. This is clearly not the case and companies embarking upon talent programmes need to remain open to alternative ways, such as hiring in, to source the right talent.

Conclusion

Successful programmes are the sum of two parts - the organisational approach and the participant's aspirations. Aligning the plan with overall people strategies, taking a more distinctive personal approach and greater consideration on how best to use coaching will all go some way to reducing the risk of unwelcome results.

* CEB Report - Improving the Odds of Success for High-Potential Programs

** CIPD - Reflections on Talent Management Report

For more information please contact:
Alison Rose

MDV
Leadership and talent consultants

www.mdvconsulting.co
