



Talent management: The High Potential's perspective

Despite the best efforts of talent practitioners, talent management can be a frustrating and a controversial business. Responsible for talent management in a number of large FTSE 100 and equivalent organisations, I couldn't help but notice that, whatever the specific strategy in place, people we thought were talented often didn't convert to being effective senior leaders. Sometimes it seemed that our assessments were at fault, sometimes whole cadres of participants seemed to lack drive or leadership ability. Good practice advice was usually to keep doing the same things but to try to do them better.

Working as a coach though, and viewing the issue from another angle, it was clear that the expectations of organisations and high potential people around careers were often out of kilter. While some high potentials were excited at the prospect of the challenge of more senior roles, others had serious reservations about it. Sometimes the roles they were intended for didn't appeal to them, or weren't aligned to their long-term career goals. It seemed that high potentials' motivations and aspirations were much more unpredictable than our talent management programmes allowed for. But it was also clear that they were often unwilling to talk candidly about their aspirations with colleagues and line managers.

High potentials are often shadowy figures in corporate discussion. They are the object of assessments and development strategies, they're names in a nine box grid, they're a "pipeline" or "flight risks". Frequently the assumption is that what's good for the organisation is good for them. Tag people as talent and they will be grateful, motivated and capable of fulfilling their latent potential. But are these assumptions correct? How do high potentials really experience being a high potential? How do they think about their careers and what do they prioritise?

This article reports on the findings of a research study which explored the experiences of mid- to senior level managers in high potential development programmes. They offer no prescription for the perfect talent

management approach. But by focusing on the rarely-heard voices of people designated as "high potential", this study contributes to an evidence base for the talent management debate. It provides some surprising insight into what it's like at the sharp end of talent management.

A further article 'Coaching: perspectives from the High Potential and the Coach' explores the experiences of high potentials who received coaching as part of their development and the impact it had on them.

About this study

Undertaken as part of a professional doctorate, this qualitative research project used in-depth interviews with people who were designated as "talent" or "high potential". Participants worked in three household-name organisations: an insurance company, an online and high street retailer and an international automotive manufacturer.

Ambition, sacrifice, risk and opportunity

Talent is about both raw potential and the will to use it. And people's capacity to deploy their abilities will depend on how they understand "ambition" and "career" and how they prioritise them. While some high potentials enthusiastically embrace opportunities, for others, thinking about and managing a career is a difficult business. Being seen to be ambitious can have negative connotations: *"If I stick my head above the parapet, people may say, what, she thinks she's good enough to get to the next level? Really?"* But being seen not to be ambitious is also risky: *"Other senior members of the team may regard [me] as lacking ambition, and as a result I may lose out on opportunities."* Status and money are important, but not sufficiently motivating in themselves. High potentials are often looking for more meaningful rewards: *"The things that really motivate me are really enjoying what I do at work. It's not about the ambition, it's not about the grade, it's not about the money."*

Where there is ambition, it is not necessarily a constant. It comes and goes, depending on how important career progression is as part of the high potential's whole life at

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the time. Family life is a major factor. One study participant noticed what changed as her young children grew older: *"I just stopped being so tired, and my ambition started to come back."*

Forging a satisfying career can involve precariously balancing multiple factors, and the sacrifices involved are not always palatable: *"I see some of the directors and executive members here, they're on the phone at midnight, 2 o'clock in the morning, crack of dawn, work, work, work, that doesn't appeal to me."* Juggling all these factors, and making the right decision can be a very anxious business: *"The story I play to myself is if I make this one decision wrong I'll be sacked or lose my job or be selling the Big Issue."*

For some high potentials though, even where they feel a sense of risk, the motivation to realise their potential can be powerful enough to overcome it: *"Did I want to be someone else's number 2 because I'm really good at it, or should I take some responsibility and put my head over the parapet and move on? And I've decided to do that."* Confidence appears to be key to unlocking ambition: *"I actually feel that I was holding myself back, let alone before other people even started on me. And so the great thing for me has been realising, God what can I do, if I have this 'you can do it' attitude?"*

"I actually feel that I was holding myself back"

Passive or self-directed?

High potential people see the give and take of the psychological contract with the organisation in many different ways. Some are passive and seem to have little self-determination. Some see themselves as being involved in an unwritten bargain. They will stay while the benefits outweigh what they can find elsewhere: *"I am either going to go away and do the same thing for less money, or going to earn more money but they are going to want a lot more blood."* Others are powerfully self-directed, taking their fate into their own hands. In fact it was striking that, in many cases, career success seemed to have little to do with talent management programmes - a point worth noting for those responsible for talent initiatives. Many high potentials seem to achieve their

goals despite the organisation, not because of it: *"Success is driven by the individual, not by the management."*

Being in the game

For some high potentials, it's vital to be part of the talent pool, even if they don't take it very seriously: *"You have to play the game, and whether anyone likes it or not, it is a game."* Impression management is critical and it can seem as though performance takes second place to reputation: *"What I need both for my goal and my own personal success is a good reputation with the people who are important."* They feel the risks of a poor reputation very directly: *"When the new person came in, she brought outsiders into the team and questioned whether I had a role. It made me think, actually this stuff does matter, so I need to do something about it."* A reputation for being willing to step up is so critical that people may try to "game" the organisation to protect it: *"I have asked [my boss] not to make [the fact that I don't want to be promoted] more widely known on the basis that I believe that could be regarded as a negative thing."* Some though, far from managing their reputations, hand them over to others, and seem content with not knowing how they are regarded: *"My boss hasn't really shared that with me."*

"You have to play the game, and whether anyone likes it or not, it is a game."

When it comes to experiences of talent management processes, participants have some real frustrations. They report experiencing talent development programmes as poorly managed and secretive, and sometimes even counterproductive. Communication about talent judgments is often confusing: *"I think I was [talent]. Not sure whether I still am"*, and high potentials experience a chronic frustration with lack of transparency: *"It's really difficult to get transparency in succession planning. I try with my team to be as transparent as possible, but I have little or no discussion with my boss."*

"Why is he considered such a talent and I'm not?"

Organisational choices about who is talent and who is not are sometimes mystifying for those trying to benchmark themselves: *"Why is he considered such a talent and I'm*

not? I can't understand, because when I look at my work, I think my work is better." Sometimes the organisation's judgement seem superficial: "I look at the three men that I know who are on the talent team and they have characteristics which look really similar to me. They all make problems into strategic issues, they're articulate, they're good company. They have charisma and they all get bored easily. There's not much follow through. So they'll do a job for 18 months and they'll move on and other people mop up."

"It really knocked me, it knocked me personally."

But although talent judgements are often experienced as weak, not being considered to be talent can be devastating: *"It really knocked me, it knocked me personally."* Negative judgements can undermine self-confidence at a deep level: *"There was a bit of me which believed that I wasn't as good as these people."*

"Ultimately it's the Emperor's new clothes"

In the end, perceptions of poor talent management can lead to cynicism: *"You realise that people who've been on the course haven't been the ones that have been promoted. So then you kind of think is there any real impetus behind it? Ultimately it's the Emperor's new clothes."*

So, from the perspective of the talent, talent management brings risks as well as opportunities in the anxious and competitive business of managing a career. High potentials can feel their own ambition not as a constant force, but as something which comes and goes, depending on other priorities in their lives. Confidence seem to be a key factor in career success. Where high potentials are driven, it is often towards higher levels of satisfaction and a realisation of their own potential as much as towards status and material reward. They can be astute about their interests, and can "play" the organisation if they feel it's worthwhile. They are sensitive about their reputations, at least as much as about their performance. And just as for talent practitioners, for high potentials, talent management processes can be frustrating and, at worst, counterproductive.

Implications for talent practitioners

Above all, these findings test any assumptions we may have that the motivations and aspirations of high potentials are all the same, or that being a high potential is necessarily experienced as a good thing. This research invites us to listen to our talented people and to be curious about them. It asks us to consider how we can meet their very varied expectations (and whether we want to) and raises questions about the flexibility of our talent processes. It challenges us to address questions of transparency and fairness and how we maximise candour and openness.

This research offers no "drag and drop" best practice advice. But it does raise questions which talent practitioners will find it helpful to consider:

- In what ways are the interests of our organisations and our talent pools the same, and where do they diverge? How consistent are we in our expectations? Can we mitigate against hero to zero and zero to hero judgements?
- Is our proposition for high potentials all positive? What are the risks for them as well as the opportunities? How can we help people connect their careers with their personal sense of purpose?
- How can we get to know our high potentials as individuals? Are the candid conversations being had? Does our talent management pass the "felt-fair" test?
- If ambition is not a constant, how can our talent processes spot talent at all career stages? Is it alright for high potentials to step off for a while?
- Sometimes the sacrifices involved in senior roles don't look that attractive. What is the appeal of seniority in our businesses over and above status and financial rewards?

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