

Giving Feedback to High Potentials and Executive Sponsors

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High potential talent is the lifeblood of any organization. By giving feedback the right way you can help them reach their full potential.

One day I expect to walk past an executive parking lot and see a bumper sticker that says “my high potential is better than yours.” More about that later.

In this series on high potentials we have talked about “not being fooled by likeability” and how to find and groom high potentials in your technical workforce. In this final post of the series we want to address providing feedback to high potentials, and providing feedback to the executive sponsors.

To prepare I consulted with two well-known practitioners in the field of high potential development: Traci Clayton Ph.D. and Arabelle Fedora Ph. D., both Principal Consultants with Right Management. Both Traci and Arabelle are renowned for their work in developing and coaching high potentials in a variety of industries. All of us agree that when it comes to receiving feedback, high potentials most often fall into one of three buckets:

Group #1 – Open and hungry for feedback. The people that fit this category are self-aware, emotionally sturdy and resilient, and understand feedback is crucial to personal and professional success. This is the easy group.

Group #2 – The people who deflect anything that might be seen as criticism and not reinforcing their positive self-image. The research is pretty clear that overprotective “Boomer generation” parents have spoon-fed praise and kept some millennials from experiencing constructive criticism and feedback. The people in this group are often well-defended, but underneath the surface have insecurities that will derail their path to personal and professional success because they never confront the core developmental needs that hold them back.

Group #3 – Never got much feedback – don't know what to do with it. This group is often focused on technical and job skills and not tuned in to their impact on others. By being good at something, they have kept important emotional feedback at a distance, especially if that feedback was independent of their job performance.

To maximize the effectiveness of providing feedback to any of these groups it is important to address both the "what and the how." A highly effective methodology is to provide tangible examples that the high potential can relate to and then move to insight. Allow the individual to see the connection points and then generate insight in his or her own way. Providing an empathetic non-judgmental approach to the feedback helps to disarm defensiveness, but the feedback must be specific and observable. Don't lead with the insight you want them to take away; insight is a personal process that is critical to long-term success as a leader. Good healthy insight and self-awareness can lead to self-modification of style and behaviors that will open the gateway to wisdom and improved leadership effectiveness. Insight cannot be provided in the feedback; it is a byproduct of good feedback.

Now, let's get back to the bumper stickers in the executive parking lot. Over my career I have delivered hundreds of feedback sessions and debriefs to executives about the talent in their organizations and most of these sessions were excellent conversations that led to productive development plans.

However, every so often, a situation arises in which the executive does not seem to hear the development needs being communicated about the high potential. The executive deflects, rationalizes, and may even defend against the constructive feedback. This may be a reflection of how the executive takes feedback (see the groupings mentioned above). But, I also think another factor is at work: namely, the competitive drive of successful executives.

In our ultra-competitive business world, we often see and hear executives defending people, policies and strategies that are under attack. In the feedback process take away any competitive aspect that might make an executive feel they have to defend the high potential. Executives have enough issues to expend competitive energy on; defending high potentials should not be one of them. Your objective is to create dialogue and good healthy discussion about development, mentoring and coaching. Do not inadvertently create an adversarial situation where defensiveness and competitive instincts take center stage – that is a recipe that does not help the high potential develop. Executives allowed to lead with their insights versus being pummeled by the

feedback from the professional are naturally going to feel more engaged in getting to the core of the developments needs of the high potential.

Several years ago I worked with a CEO who had promoted a high potential to run a business unit. This high potential leader had several strong qualities, but also some significant derailers. Although we had discussed these concerns at length the decision was made and the high potential leader moved into the key role. Over the next few years the same derailers kept surfacing even though business performance was good. How the business was being led was not congruent with the core values this company held dear; as a result, employee engagement, team effectiveness and customer loyalty were eroding despite good top-line and bottom-line numbers.

This courageous CEO recognized he had missed an opportunity to round out a top emerging talent by moving ahead with a promotion without addressing the most important development needs. Now he needed to replace that person because his derailers had become too big to overcome and too much of a deterrent to the company culture. The CEO took full responsibility and throughout the rest of his tenure was far more open, candid and transparent with the development needs of the emerging talent in the organization.

High potential talent is the lifeblood of any organization. It is incumbent on all of us to make sure we are finding the right talent and not be blinded by likeability, or neglect to see emerging leadership in our technical groups. Most of all we have to provide good actionable feedback to both the high potential and the executive sponsor in order to truly help these individuals reach full potential.

About Right Management

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Right Management is the global career expert within ManpowerGroup (NYSE: MAN), providing tailored global workforce solutions that identify, develop and transition talent to optimize business performance. As career experts, we enable companies to win by helping employees build successful careers in the Human Age.

We drive better outcomes through our expertise in organizational effectiveness, career management and individual development. Right Management has offices in more than 50 countries and partners with companies of all sizes, including more than 80 percent of the Fortune 500.

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