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Coaching the High Potential Leader: A Developmental and Holistic Perspective

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Organizations today are concerned about the impending shortage of leadership talent as a result of the looming baby boomer generation's exodus from the workforce with fewer "GenXers" and "GenYers" to replace them. 2008 is heralded by the media as the first year of the exodus. Consequently, companies are focusing more resources and time on talent reviews, identifying future leaders and succession planning. Preparing today's high potential talent for tomorrow's leadership roles is an urgent and pressing business priority.

The companies that are the best at developing leaders utilize an integrated talent development approach to solving their leadership development challenges. Coaching is an integral part of an integrated strategy. According to the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC), "coaching is highly valued by senior executives as a key development activity. It is ranked in the top five of development interventions and it ranks ahead of any other formal development program" (Corporate Leadership Council, 2003). Supporting the high potential leader's development agenda with coaching is a high leverage, high impact talent management practice.

THE HIGH POTENTIAL LEADER

Who are we talking about when we refer to the "high potential leader"? A search on the Internet for "definition of high potential leader" yields approximately 5,540,000 results. The volume of results is representative of the multiple and varied points of view about the meaning of "high potential". In their October 2005 research report, *Realizing the Full Potential of Rising Talent*, the Corporate Leadership Council attempted to clarify the definition issue by defining the high potential employee as "someone with the ability, engagement, and aspiration to rise to and to succeed in a more senior, more critical role" (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005).

In the 1991 movie "City Slickers", Curly Washburn, the character played by Jack Palance, sums up his philosophy on the secret to happiness and contentment being "One Thing".

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Curly never reveals specifically what that one thing is and he leaves it to the movie's other characters to figure out. And so it is with defining a high potential leader, there is no "one thing" for achieving happiness and contentment with the one perfect and right definition of a high potential leader. Each organization must define what "high potential" means in the context of their culture, goals, strategies and future leadership capability needs. However, the CLC definition does provide three key characteristics – ability, engagement and aspiration – that are valuable for crafting a definition. The CLC calls out that of the three, ability is the most important. They define ability as a combination of the innate characteristics (mental/cognitive agility and emotional intelligence) and learned skills (technical/functional skills and interpersonal skills). Engagement, defined as commitment (emotional and rational), discretionary effort and intent to stay, is the second most important. Aspiration, as third in importance is defined as the extent to which an employee wants or desires prestige and recognition, advancement and influence, financial rewards, work-life balance and overall job enjoyment. Although the CLC reports a hierarchy of importance, they emphasize that all three must be present. For the coach these characteristics are important to keep in mind because in the natural course of the coaching engagement, the process will involve exploring with the client elements of each. Understanding the characteristics and the degree of importance to the client helps to inform the work.

Today's high potential employee (HIPO) is most frequently a member of Generation X, a title for those generally accepted to have been born between 1965 and 1980. That period of time currently places them in the age range of their late 20's to early 40's with the mid-range being 35 years of age. To this point in their lives they have been about establishing their identity and independence, establishing their careers, creating important professional and personal relationships, and starting families. Frederic Hudson succinctly and beautifully describes the "Thirty-somethings" life stage in his book, *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal*. He states:

... young adults unconsciously set for reaching the goals that so often constitute 'making it': career recognition, financial attainment, marriage and having babies, friendships, status, acquisitions, lifestyle, leisure life, travel and social leadership roles. There are many variations, some excluding marriage, others including marriage without children, and still others creating alternate lifestyles. The pressure is the same: make life happen to its fullest in this decade.

He goes on to state,

The thirties may well be the most complex adult decade to manage When you're thirtysomething, you develop an increased ability to reflect on your life. Through intro-

spection you begin to reevaluate your life decisions. You are still challenged to reach your goals, but you also wonder, ‘Is this all there is? Is this what my life is all about?’” (Hudson, 1999, pp. 155-156)

Our understanding the GenXer is further expanded by considering the Corporate Leadership Council’s report on the Generation X and Generation Y employee. Their research results indicates that the characteristics most often found among GenXer’s are that they are motivated by independence in the workplace, instant gratification for work (short projects with instant reward), a nurturing work environment, opportunity for rapid advancement and unique work experiences (e.g., global assignments) (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). In my personal experience of working with the Generation X employee these characteristics are evident.

In my work with HIPO leaders of this generation, I also find them to be smart, well educated, and comfortable with technology. They have high expectations of themselves. They are confident, independent, dislike hierarchy and see their managers more as colleagues than bosses. They love learning and are learning agile. They want and appreciate feedback. They are committed to their organizations, but are impatient with the status quo and are not timid about initiating and leading change. They value diversity, have a global perspective, are mobile and enjoy international assignments. Work/life balance is very important to them. To illustrate the emphasis of work/life balance: during the last week of Nike’s six months-long leadership development program for high potential leaders, there is a half-day workshop focused on teaching principles for sustaining high performance while maintaining healthy, happy and balanced lives. The workshop is consistently rated among the highest workshops presented throughout the program and at the end of the program almost every participant includes a developmental goal to achieve greater life balance across the spectrum of their personal and professional lives.

In addition to their high expectations for themselves, the company’s expectations of the HIPO leader are high. They are perceived by senior management to be bright, committed, capable, aspiring, and having a history of high performance. The expectation is that they will remain on an upward career trajectory, assume ever more responsible roles at an accelerated pace, and continue to deliver exceptional results. In the context of the organization’s expectations, the HIPO faces significant headwinds in the current business environment – rapid changes in the market place, increasingly multiplying and aggressive competitors, a demand for continuous innovation, and challenges related to technology, globalization and economic uncertainty, to

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name a few. The opportunities for success and the risks of failure are real. Because of their identification as “high potential”, their successes and failures are highly visible to those who are watching and evaluating.

COACHING THE WHOLE PERSON, WHOLE LEADER

It is probable that high potential Generation X leaders have by now experienced a series of life’s “developmental opportunities” – adversity, mistakes, disappointment, accomplishments and successes – that have played a part in shaping their character and their leadership style. David Dotlich, James Noel and Norman Walker wrote about these formative and developmental experiences in their book, *Leadership Passages: The Personal and Professional Transitions that Make or Break a Leader*. They describe thirteen passages that, depending on how they are managed, can either accelerate leadership development or derail it. One can quickly see examples of these formative transitions with a view of the book’s chapters in the Table of Contents – Moving into a Leadership Role, Assuming Responsibility for a Business, Coping with a Bad Boss and Competitive Peers, Dealing with A Significant Failure, and Facing a Personal Upheaval. Dotlich, Noel and Walker (2004) propose that “there’s more to leadership development than taking on a variety of work challenges” and that a holistic approach involves a combination of work experiences and life experiences that include adversity and diversity. It is highly probable that a client is involved or is facing into one of these “developmental opportunities” while they are working with their coach. Learning to successfully navigate through the challenges of these experiences enhances their “ability” factor by developing their emotional maturity and interpersonal skills. The coach plays an important role in helping them with learning about themselves and how they deal with adversity, ambiguity, and success, and helping them devise strategies to navigate and manage the challenges effectively.

It is into a four-way intersection of the high potential/Generation Xer’s life-stage dynamics, personal and professional transitions, the organization’s expectations, and a continuously changing and complex business environment that the coach enters the coaching engagement. In his book, *High Flyers*, Morgan McCall writes about having the “right stuff” which he says translates in the corporate world as “executive leaders demonstrate they have the right stuff by amassing a track record of performance under difficult circumstances.” He contrasts development by “survival of the fittest” with development by “acquisition of new abilities”. His point is that the latter is “more rational than hoping that the cream will rise” (McCall, 1998). Coaching the high potential leader is a purposeful and deliberate process for helping them develop their leadership capabilities in the context of the totality of their personal and professional lives.

At the Generation X “Thirtysomething” life stage, they are at mid-career and the HIPO set have positions that are generally at the “Managing Managers” level or “Functional Manager” level described in *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company* (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2001, pp. 52-79). They are preparing for a career passage to the next level. These transitions are occurring at a time when, as Frederic Hudson noted, they are asking themselves: “Is this what my life is all about?” It is a time when they deal daily with the pressures and the joys of adulthood – financial obligations, balancing relationship and family responsibilities with work demands, having a meaningful social life, rewarding friendships, travel and entertainment opportunities, and so on. As noted previously, it is also a time when they are questioning what really gives their life meaning and that raises questions about purpose and values. At this life stage and career level the coach is working with multiple facets of their personal and professional lives. One is about their personal purpose, meaning and values. Another is about how the roles of their human system (e.g., family, social, leisure, work and career) (Hudson, 1999, pp.137-138) works to shape, to challenge and to fulfill them. And another is about developing the leadership capabilities they need to lead effectively now and at the next level.

Passage from one level to the next involves a transition. Research recently completed by the Learning and Development Roundtable concludes that forty-six per cent of transitioning leaders underperform in their new role. The report states that in any given year, nearly half of an organization’s workforce feels the direct effects of leaders undergoing transitions (Learning and Development Roundtable, 2005). Those are alarming and significant data points. The value of transition coaching to the individual and to the organization is to accelerate the process by collapsing the time needed to learn the new job, to build trust and credibility, to lessen the impact on the people in their organizations, and to speed up the time for delivering results. The coach plays a key role in helping the transitioning leader in two ways. First, helping them identify the new business situation they are facing and helping them devise strategies to address the business issues that are appropriate for the situation. Second, helping the individual understand and acquire the new skills and behaviors required at the next level.

In his book, *The First 90 Days*, Michael Watkins writes,

The challenges of transition acceleration vary depending on situational factors. It matters a great deal whether you are making a key career ‘passage’ in terms of level in the organization, whether you are an insider or and outsider, whether you have formal authority, and whether you are taking over a successful or troubled group (Watkins, 2003, p. 10).

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Watkins continues by providing the following advice to the reader: “Practical advice has to be tailored to the situation, the level of the new leader, his or her experience with the organization and the conditions of the business” (Watkins, 2003, p. 11). Substitute “practical coaching” for “practical advice” in the preceding sentence and the message is the same for the executive coach, i.e., the coaching needs to be tailored to the situation. Guiding the client to identify, diagnose and evaluate the organizational factors that will impact their performance is an important contribution of the coach. Watkins’s “STARS” model (an acronym for Start-up, Turnaround, Realignment, and Sustaining Success) is a succinct and useful model for diagnosing the business situation.

The authors of *The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company* (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2001), propose that transitioning leaders must acquire three new ways of managing and leading – new skills, new time applications and new work values – and that each of these are different at each level of leadership. The authors point out that most leaders attempt to succeed in a new role by employing those skills and behaviors that have worked in their previous position. The new *skill requirements* are the new capabilities required to execute the new responsibilities. *Time applications* are about the new time frames that govern how one works. *New work values* are what people believe are important and are therefore the focus of their efforts (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2001, p. 6). The skill requirements at the next level are very different than those at the current level. The adage of “what got you here won’t get you there” applies to developing leaders. The model is useful for the coach in helping the client identify the differences between the new level and the current one.

Referring again to the Corporate Leadership Council’s definition, “ability” is defined as possessing a combination of mental and cognitive agility and emotional intelligence. As I have already noted, HIPO’s are smart. They have demonstrated their mental ability and that is a part of why they are evaluated as high potential. They are well educated. Many are graduates of business schools where they were trained in strategy, financial management, marketing, product innovation, etc. But business schools do not teach emotional maturity. Emotional intelligence is a critical element in becoming a whole leader. The HIPO must know and understand the influence of their emotions on their leadership behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on others. In their *HBR* article, “Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance”, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boytzis and Annie McKee (2001, p. 44) write: “our research ... showed an incontrovertible link between an executive’s emotional maturity, exemplified by such capabilities as self-awareness and empathy, and his or her financial performance.” Self awareness constitutes one’s understanding of themselves – their personality, their

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strengths, their weaknesses and their impact on others. Goleman, Boytzis and McKee go on to say, "... leadership demands more than putting on a game face everyday. It requires an executive to determine through reflective analysis, how his emotional leadership drives the moods and actions of the organization, and then with equal discipline, to adjust his behavior accordingly" (2001, p. 44).

David Dotlich, Peter Cairo and Stephen Rhinesmith (2006) have further developed the concept of the whole, complete leader in their book, *Head, Heart & Guts: How the World's Best Companies Develop Complete Leaders*. Their point of view is that the demands of leadership in today's business environment requires that a whole leader must show up for any given situation and be capable of applying the appropriate combination of head, heart and guts to lead relative to that specific situation. The next situation the leader faces may be significantly different which will require a different combination. They propose that most organizations reward their leaders because of their cognitive abilities and intellect. But in today's tough business environment being the smartest person in the room is not enough. The coaching relationship with the high potential is an opportunity to help them develop their "heart" skills and "gut" skills, to help them integrate all three skills, and to know when and how to apply the right mix for different business situations and challenges.

WHOLE PICTURE VIEW

To coach the high potential employee in the context described above – whole person, whole leader – it is important to have a complete picture of the person. One that includes insights and understanding of the organizational environment in which the client works, the challenges of the specific business situation they are managing, a clear understanding of the performance expectations, insights about their leadership style, strengths, challenges and personality, and an awareness of the individual's life-outside-of-work circumstances. There are some executive coaches who do not value using a 360 feedback process. I find that using a 360 process, especially an interview process, to be an essential tool to help me understand the business environment in which the client works and to provide me with insights to the client's perceived leadership effectiveness, strengths and areas for development.

My experience with high potential leaders is that they love feedback and appreciate its value to inform their development focus. It is my opinion that the 360 feedback information by itself is incomplete and provides only a part of the picture. Using psychometric instruments provides additional insights to the client and me. I use a combination of measures that provide insights about personality, potential derailing behaviors, values, motivational drivers, and teamwork. Debriefing the results with

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them provides additional information to explore and consider in our work together. When these measures are combined with 360 feedback data and the rich discussion that occurs during the debrief discussion session, I feel that I have a whole picture of the individual. Having the more fully developed picture is most helpful to me in my work with them.

One of my clients that I will name as Sarah for the purposes of this article manages a sizeable global business for one of her company's prominent product lines. She manages a team of managers who in turn manage others. Sarah has a track record of achieving highly successful results at her previous employers. Her performance history during the three years at her current company is one of exceeding expectations. Her reputation is that she is smart, has deep knowledge of the industry, is on top of her business, consistently gets results regardless of the challenges, always meets or beats deadlines, and she is valued as a team player who will do what ever it takes to meet the team's goals. She is identified as a high potential leader as a result of the company's rigorous talent review process. Sarah's next level, assuming a continuation of her career progression, is general management. Based on feedback from her manager, she has determined that for her to move to the next level she must change some of her behaviors and develop new skills that are essential for a general manager. Sarah's desire for coaching support is to help her develop her visioning and strategic thinking skills, to gain more confidence to present her point of view with greater impact, to have broader influence within the company, and to broaden her global perspective.

We used her company's 360 feedback survey process to provide us with insights to other's perspective on her strengths and areas for development. It was not a surprise to see the ratings for each of the measured dimensions at the upper (positive) end of the rating scale. The results made it clear why she was so highly valued by the organization. From my initial sessions with Sarah, I had the context of her family and educational background, her career experience, her personal and career aspirations and her perception of her strengths and development needs. The 360 survey feedback provided additional insights to how others perceived her leadership effectiveness. The completion of a full picture of Sarah as a whole leader was achieved through use of the Hogan Leadership Forecast Series.

The results confirmed her previously mentioned strengths. The results also provided deeper insights and understanding of aspects of her personality that she can leverage and aspects that will present some challenges to her achieving her full leadership potential. Behaviors that can produce potential derailment were identified. The data also highlighted the skills she needs to develop to demonstrate her readiness to lead at the

general management level. These skills included more effective delegation that would provide her more time to be in the marketplace to gain insights to market trends and consumer preferences, greater focus on the big picture and the future, and the ability to confidently present a cogent and compelling point of view to influence buy-in to her direction for her business. Lastly, the Hogan measurements provided her and me with insights to her core values and motivators that provide the basis for defining her purpose and her goals. The combination of multiple information points produces a full and complete picture of Sarah that informs where to focus our work together that to help her achieve her leadership development goals.

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

A leader develops as a result of life experiences, work experiences, formal training, learning from others and obtaining self-awareness of how their behaviors and actions impact others. The development plan is the thing that integrates all the challenges and opportunities for learning and development. One of the coach's high value contributions is that of helping the high potential leader integrate learning from personal and professional experiences with self-knowledge and understanding into a sharply focused development plan that focuses on the critical few, highest impact development actions. The plan's key elements should include the developmental issues, goals, and specific actionable items needed to achieve the goals, and how success will be measured. After the plan is completed and agreed to by all who have a stake in the individual's development, begins the coaching stage where practice and application of behavior changes, new skills, attitudes and habits require the greatest support for transformation and sustained change. It is during this time that the leader will experience the greatest challenges to executing their plan and achieving their goals. It is a period of time that requires the most effort for them to resist returning to old patterns of behavior and relying on those things that made them successful in the past and to stay focused on those things that will make them successful in the future. Intensive coaching during this phase provides the critical support to succeed with staying on plan and achieving their leadership potential.

CONCLUSION

In summary, coaching is a valued and vital talent management practice for developing high potential leaders. It occurs in the context of complex factors that affect the high potential leader's life and leadership effectiveness – the responsibilities and roles of their life stage, their aspirations, their questions about purpose and meaning, the organization's culture and expectations, the constant whitewater of a highly competitive and changing global marketplace, and how effectively they manage themselves

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through their leadership passages. The goal is to facilitate learning and change that develops them as whole and complete leaders, equipped to live effective lives and prepared to rise to and to succeed in more senior, more critical roles.

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