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High Potentials as High Learners

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What is a high potential?

How do you find them?

Can you help someone be a better high potential?

THE PREMISE

A common definition of high potential in many organizations consists of a “right stuff” success profile listing several competencies that current executives have now or should have in the future. The identification process consists of looking for early signs of those skills in those less experienced. This approach makes sense.

Many attributes such as intelligence and certain personal traits typically found on those succession planning profiles are known to be stable over a long period of time (Howard and Bray, 1988; Bentz, 1986, 1990; Fiedler, 1996).

But what evidence exists that a promising 25-year-old looks like a younger version of a 50-year-old successful executive? Is that all there is to it? Will this explain how the person will deal with problem performers or shut down an operation or deal with change or fragmentation or any of the shifting demands placed on managers in organizations in the future?

The premise of this article is that if people learn, grow, and change across time (and consequently develop new skills) then comparing with the competencies of 50-year-olds will not be totally informative. Selection should be a combination of looking at those characteristics that don't change much and can be detected early (such as

intelligence) and those that flower across time as the person learns to deal with fresh situations.

In our view, learning from experience is how a person demonstrates what is termed high potential. Few would argue that potential can be detected from current performance in an area the person already knows well. The word potential according to Webster's means, "existing in possibility; capable of developing into actuality."

So it cannot be fully detected from what a person can already demonstrate—it requires that the person do something new or different. In our definition, potential involves learning new skills (or honing current ones) in order to perform in first-time situations.

To support this argument, we will deal with two issues. First, there needs to be some evidence that people do learn, grow, and change across their careers. Otherwise, we should just use the variables that can be detected quite early. Second, there needs to be evidence that measuring learning from experience, acumen, or agility can be accomplished reliably and that it relates to something of importance in organizations, namely one's designation as a high potential.

**THE CASE FOR
LEARNING,
GROWTH, AND
CHANGE**

While certain skills and attributes can be selected for, it seems what happens after hiring a person has as much or more impact on long-term worth as anything which has gone before. In the long-term AT&T studies (Howard and Bray, 1988; Bray, Campbell, and Grant, 1974) for example, those who were assessed low for potential were often more successful if they had developmental jobs and developmental bosses. A greater percentage of low assessed were promoted than were high assessed if their developmental opportunities were noticeably better.

Two of the studies at the Center for Creative Leadership (McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988; Morrison, White and Van Velsor, 1992) found that if people have certain powerful on-the-job experiences and learn from them, that this bodes well for long-term job success. Sternberg, Wagner, Williams and Horvath (1995) identify street smarts (or learning from experience) as far more correlated with level attained in organizations than IQ. In a similar vein, emotional intelligence (McClelland, 1999; Goleman, 1998) has been related to performance.

Thus the evidence is compelling for the building of managers across time. In addition to the studies cited above, the work of Hall (1986, 1995), Gabarro (1987), and Hill (1992) paint a portrait of the learning process necessary to make transitions from an individual contributor to the first level of supervision to the executive suite. McCauley, Eastman, and Ohlott (1994) have demonstrated how different job demands create different learning demands—how there is some pattern to what managers see and gain from their experiences.

More recently, Hollenbeck and McCall (1999) summarize the state of current developmental practices, and Conger and Benjamin (1999) detail the efforts of innovative organizations to improve their success rate in building leaders.

PEOPLE DIFFER AS LEARNERS FROM EXPERIENCE

It further appears that people benefit differentially from experiences: Some learn new perspectives and behaviors from life and work and some don't. In one of the Center for Creative Leadership studies (McCall et al., 1988), successful executives had a strong and similar pattern of learning from key job assignments. The derailed executives, all of whom had been successful for many years and had gone through many of the same key assignments as the successful executives, had virtually no pattern of learning from jobs.

DERAILMENT IS PARTLY NOT LEARNING NEW THINGS

In a companion study (McCall and Lombardo, 1983), one of the key reasons cited for derailment was being blocked to new learning. According to organizational insiders interviewed, people quit learning, thought they were infallible, became legends in their own minds, or couldn't make the transition to a different job or way of behaving. They relied on what had gotten them to where they were, ironically becoming victimized by their past successes. They got locked into standard ways of thinking and acting that didn't really meet the new demands. They also underestimated the newness of the demands, seeing them as just another version of what they had done before.

Once dug into this non-learning pattern, strengths tipped over into overuses and weaknesses as they did more of what had previously been a good thing. The bright sometimes lorded it over others and missed getting new ideas, the organized became detail drones and missed the big picture, the creative had their fingers in too many pies and couldn't innovate, the aggressive over-managed and couldn't empower or build a team.

FAILURES ARE USUALLY NOT LEARNING NEW THINGS

Failures to learn new things almost inevitably result in failures to perform over the long term. Changing circumstances call for rapid learning and fresh skills. Many studies (e.g., Sternberg et al., 1995) note learning quickness or street smarts as a key in performing in difficult transitions or new jobs. For example, the Benchmarks® instrument (McCauley, Lombardo and Usher, 1989) which is based on the learnings from experience reported by hundreds of successful executives, contains scales which correlated strongly with performance, potential, and actual promotion.

Another recent study (Spreitzer, McCall & Mahoney, 1997) related performance as an expatriate to learning. Expatriate jobs contain a high portion of performing under first-time and tough changing conditions. A major finding was that curiosity, learning adventuresomeness, and more effective learning from experience differentiated high potentials from average performers.

WHY WERE THE SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVES SUCCESSFUL?

In contrast to those with similar experiences who derailed, successful executives were different or were helped to become different in several ways:

- They sought and got more feedback (from self or others) on how they came across to others and what they needed to do to improve and perform better.
- They had roughly twice the variety (but sometimes the same number) in the “on the job” leadership challenges they faced.
- They responded to this newness and adversity by learning new skills and additional ways of thinking (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1989).

**SO WHAT DOES
THIS ALL MEAN?**

These independent streams of research provide evidence that effective managers and professionals learn and change across time and that this new learning matters for performance. The skills acquired so far is certainly an issue in selection of high potentials; more so is what they can acquire in the future—their skill in learning to do what they don’t yet know how to do. The measurement of potential can be strengthened by adding another concept to success profiles, that is, the willingness and ability to learn new competencies in order to perform under first-time, tough or different conditions.

WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE LEARNING AGILE?

This leads to the second question of what these learning agile people do and think and how they might be identified. Other than saying that all organizations would like to have people who eagerly learn new skills in response to tough, changing circumstances, how would such people be identified?

We conducted two studies¹ to see whether we could better define what a superior learner from experience (someone who is learning agile) looked like with the goal of creating an instrument managers could use to assist in nominating high potentials with greater ease and accuracy.

The questionnaire was somewhat based on a series of studies conducted at CCL. Through content analysis of interview and survey data of executives (Lindsey, Homes and McCall, 1987), as well as a research intervention study with 55 managers, it became apparent that those who succeeded in making a behavioral or attitudinal change had specific learning strategies that they could articulate to varying degrees.

Further review of relevant literature on learning strategies—such as studies of children who “spontaneously” learn to read (Pressley, Borkowski and Schneider, 1987; see Appendix: Selected Learning References for other listings)—indicated there were some common themes in learning something new.

Items were written to tap constructs of learning agility that were hypothesized from prior studies and relevant literature. All items were either explicitly learning oriented or required learning in order to perform under first-time conditions.

Someone who knew the person well, usually a boss or long-time associate, filled out over 400 questionnaires across the two studies. Ratees were also independently rated by a second person: usually a boss, Human Resource professional or succession planning officer with access to organization judgments/ratings of the person. Two ratings were completed: a performance/potential continuum and a propensity to get in trouble with others.

The first measure runs from (1) poor, to (2) OK performance, to (3) excellent performance but not promotable (usually due to lack of skills for higher jobs), to (4) promotable although not yet a high performer at this time (may be new in job as high potentials often are), to (5) high performer and high potential. We put performance and potential together purposefully so we could examine pure potential regardless of performance and also potential with performance.

The second measure, propensity to get in trouble, was included because some experience with active learners suggests that at their worst they can change things that don't need changing, alienate others, etc. We wanted to insure we were not measuring overly aggressive though not always successful change agents. While this might be somewhat indicative of learning acumen, it wouldn't often lead to effective change.

RESULTS

As a result of factor analysis, four factors that describe different aspects of learning agility were constructed.

1. **People Agility**—Describes people who know themselves well, learn from experience, treat others constructively, and are cool and resilient under the pressures of change.
2. **Results Agility**—Describes people who get results under tough conditions, inspire others to perform beyond normal, and exhibit the sort of presence that builds confidence in others.
3. **Mental Agility**—Describes people who think through problems from a fresh point of view and are comfortable with complexity, ambiguity, and explaining their thinking to others.
4. **Change Agility**—Describes people who are curious, have a passion for ideas, like to experiment with test cases, and engage in skill building activities.

Each of these factors was significantly associated with being considered a high potential and staying out of trouble. The four factors together correlated significantly with both criterion measures (R-square = .30 for both). Each scale correlates significantly with both criterion measures ($P < .0001$).

We also looked at the correlational patterns for five cuts of the data. A measure of learning skill should show similar and significant results across age, gender, levels of management and individual contributor positions, both line and staff positions, and hold across companies.

Learning acumen should not necessarily increase with age or level, for example, but rather reflect characteristics and skills of the person that help the person learn in new

situations consistently over time. If 45-year-olds had significantly better results than 30-year-olds, we might have to conclude that something else, such as the jobs they had held and the courses they had attended, influenced these skills along the way.

The results bore out our hopes. The correlational patterns were similar and significant for all five groupings. These findings suggest that learning skill or agility is important in the identification of potential for both genders, for varying age groups, for both line and staff roles, across levels of management and for individual contributor positions, and in all six companies in the studies.

SUMMARY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEARNING AGILE

From the data, we can say that people high in learning agility and therefore possibly high potentials are described as:

- Seeking and having more experiences to learn from.
- Enjoying complex first-time problems and challenges associated with new experiences.
- Getting more out of these experiences because they have an interest in making sense of them.
- Performing better because they incorporate new skills into their repertoire.

The face they show to the outside world is described as follows:

- Being eager to learn about self, others, and ideas.
- Showing genuine willingness to learn from feedback and experience and change their behavior and viewpoints as a result.
- Being interested in helping people think and experiment.
- Being resilient and philosophical about what happens to people who push change.
- Being uncompromising—while wide open to diversity, multiple sources and a range of views, once they incorporate these into their thinking, they are described as stalwart in pushing their notions. They rely on logic, perseverance, well-thought-through ideas, and cool communications to sell their points.

SOME HUNCHES

Going a bit beyond the data, we present two hunches about the learning agile.

1. **Learning as the Goal.** People high in learning agility seem to be driven to learn as a value in itself. They are interested in people, ideas, and so forth in order to learn. For example, they may not build a team because this is a “good” thing to do. If they build a team, it is because they think a team is absolutely necessary to carry out an experiment or push a change through. In other circumstances, they might be indifferent or even scoff at the value of teams. If they help others solve problems, it is probably as much for the mental discipline of learning about problem solving as it is in helping others. If they believe in diversity, it’s because

they know they can learn more from difference than sameness. Their characteristic behaviors, we hypothesize, are largely instrumental to their continued growth.

2. **Staying Out of Trouble With Balance.** Tinkerers can get into a lot of trouble in organizations, which necessarily run largely off systems designed to ensure sameness and handle exceptions. Since high learners can be like fingernails on a blackboard at times, our second hunch is that they stay out of trouble through self-knowledgeⁱⁱ. They know who they are and are especially likely to know their limits and learn from their mistakes—they apparently don't suffer from an excess of hubris. This may help them get away with being different—pushing change, enduring the heat, and being somewhat uncompromising, but balancing this with no glaring weaknesses and showing their concern for others through helpfulness and listening.

**IMPLICATIONS
FOR HUMAN
RESOURCES**

We are currently aware of six uses of the questionnaire within organizations:

To Improve the Pool of High Potentials

1. To help nominate high potentials. Some companies use the profile from the questionnaire along with performance track record and the usual subjective judgment of potential. All tracks need to be seen as positive for a person to qualify as a high potential. Some use it as a training tool to educate managers about the difference between performance and potential to help them nominate better candidates.
2. As an expansive talent search process, hunting out people who have the capacity to learn new skills and deal with change but who may presently only be lightly challenged or not in visible roles. In this application, large numbers of people are assessed to see if there are any high scorers among people not well known to top management. This broad screening technique might catch more females and ethnic minorities than the typical succession planning process. It also allows an earlier start to assignment management and experience building.
3. To cross-check existing high potential lists. As one source of data, along with performance and other considerations, some companies have looked at one's scores on the questionnaire to add or subtract people from the high potential list. It is also being used for situations where there is a difference of opinion. In that case, both advocates rate the person on the instrument to see if they can account for the difference.

To Develop the Best

4. As a tie breaker in selection for challenging assignments. Given several qualified candidates, the questionnaire has been used to inform the question of who could do the job and learn most from the assignment.
5. For development. A common use has been to write development plans against a person's pattern of learning agility scores—to help a person become more open to other points of view, for example. The goal is to increase a person's chances of learning from experience and therefore help him/her increase potential.
6. For risky assignments. In line with the expatriate findings from Spreitzer et al.(1997) cited above, the tool is used to make sure that the person assigned to a

tough, new and risky assignment can rapidly learn from experience and be successful.

CONCLUSION

To deal with change, organizations need to find and nurture those who are most facile in dealing with it. Identifying those who can learn to do something differently requires a different measurement strategy from those often employed, one that looks at the characteristics of the learning agile. In this article, we have explained some initial steps toward identifying the women and men with the most potential to lead, regardless of what the future may hold for them.

NOTES

i Due to space limitations, the steps followed in the research will not be presented here. Interested readers should contact Michael Lombardo mlombardo@mindspring.com for a technical summary.

ii In an intervention conducted while one of the authors was at the Center for Creative Leadership, the highest learners had no overdone strengths or notable flaws reported. They were characterized by being highly self-critical, eager to improve, and self-aware enough not to run into problems with others.

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