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Posting Date: August 31, 2009**By:** [William J. Rothwell](#)

As the economy improves, a critical responsibility of executives and managers will be talent management—to utilize staff as fully as they can by developing their people on a daily basis. Formal training should be supported by on-the-job opportunities for employees to illustrate their capabilities.

How should executives and managers assess such potential on a daily basis? Consider these possibilities.

Grooming Approach 1: Stretch Project Challenge

One way to test and develop the potential of individuals is to offer them a challenge that goes beyond the skills you have seen them previously demonstrate. As a simple example, pick one activity from your own job description and delegate it for a specific time span to those you want to assess and develop. Sit the people down and explain that you are going to challenge them. Detail what they are to do, how they should do it, and how you will check on them, and show them good and bad examples (if possible).

Take care with this approach. You will need to manage expectations, avoiding promises of promotions or pay raises.

Grooming Approach 2: An Action Learning Project

A second way to assess and develop people is go use action learning, which involves learning while doing. First associated with classroom-based case studies in executive education, action learning has recently expanded to on-the-job experiences.

Start with a real business problem. Form a cross-functional team of people who have the ability to solve the problem through full- or part-time project work. Choose people who could benefit from cross-functional exposure, perhaps because they have rarely strayed out of their silos. Unlike classroom training, which does not have consequences for failure; an action learning project has real stakes.

Grooming Approach 3: Delegate Your Responsibilities

A third way to assess and develop people is to delegate a “chunk” of your work responsibilities to an individual you would like to assess and/or develop. This approach is similar to grooming approach 1 except that, instead of giving people responsibility for only one of your work activities, you do so for a group of activities.

Grooming Approach 4: A Rotational Challenge

Job rotations are well-known approaches to exposing individuals to other parts of the organization. It is also a way to test promising people to in other venues as well as to develop their competencies. That may be well worth doing if you are concerned that your opinions of people have been colored by the “like me” bias. By spending people out of your area, you may give people the chance to be observed, assessed, and developed by others.

Grooming Approach 5: Challenge Workers with a Charity or Community Group

Your organization may not easily share people across silos. But a fifth way to assess and develop individuals is to send them out of the organization for a while on a more challenging opportunity with a local charitable organization or community group. Make sure that the job is not at the same level but rather at a higher level of responsibility than the person occupied in your organization. That way a test can be carried out in a way that will minimize the impact of mistakes made in your organization while people are learning.

Grooming Approach 6: Visibility with Higher Level Management

A sixth way to assess and develop individuals is by exposing them to higher level managers. That visibility may be informal—such as including your promising people in invitations to dinner or to golf—or formal such as including them when you deliver an oral report to the senior executive team or the board of directors.

The goal of giving people visibility is to put them in front of others. That will naturally prompt curiosity and focus attention on them. There is reluctance to promote people who are utterly unknown to the organization leaders. Take steps to make these people known.

Grooming Approach 7: Visibility with Customers, Suppliers, and Distributors

A seventh way to assess and develop individuals is to give them visibility to other key stakeholder groups in the organization. That serves the same purpose as grooming approach 6 except that customers, suppliers and distributors may have very different expectations than do the leader of your own organization. The feedback they provide may also yield valuable clues about how promising individuals may be—and what development needs those people may need to address before being assessed.

Grooming Approach 8: A Short-Term Tryout

An eighth way to assess and develop individuals is to give them a short-term job tryout. Unlike grooming approaches 1 or

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3, this one requires that the individual perform an entire job at a higher level, but the timeframe is kept short (no more than two to three weeks).

As with other methods, care must be taken to communicate how the individual's typical job duties should be handled while the person is performing the short-term tryout.

Grooming Approach 9: A Long-Term Tryout

A long-term job tryout is a ninth way to assess potential and develop individuals. This approach should be appropriate, for example, when a manager is on a long-term disability, is on family medical leave, or is otherwise indisposed for a period longer than four weeks. An individual is promoted to "acting manager" or "acting executive" for the duration of the job incumbent's absence. His or her normal job activities at a lower level are absorbed by others. This leaves the person free to tackle new learning and develop new and more challenging competencies at that higher level of responsibility.

Grooming Approach 10: Combine One or More of Grooming Approaches 1 to 9

A tenth way to assess and develop potential is to combine one or more of the new approaches previously listed. In short, it is not necessary or even desirable to choose only one way to assess and develop a person. More evidence results in better and more objective decisions about who is promotable and how development needs should be met.

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