

Using a Performance and Potential Grid to Guide Coaching Interventions

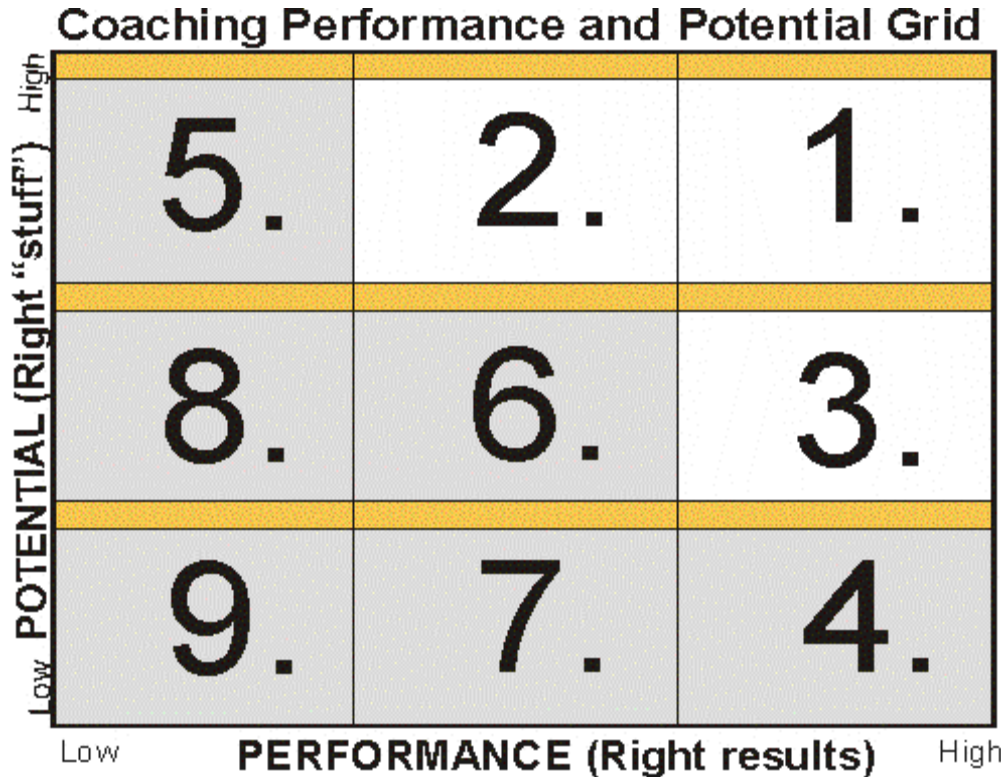
By Dr. Jon Warner



This article was written by Dr Jon Warner of Warner Results Coaching, an executive coaching business, which focuses across all sectors of the Performance and Potential Grid. Jon is an experienced coach with over 20 years experience in assisting individuals of all types and at all levels of management. He is also an experienced author having published several books in the leadership and coaching areas, as well developing several assessment instruments including the Coaching Effectiveness Profile, the Leadership Effective Profile and the Management Effectiveness Profile. Jon has an MBA and PhD in Organizational Psychology.

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The *Performance and Potential Grid*, or Matrix, is a well-known and useful model which has been used for the past twenty-five years by HR professionals and line managers to help determine individual's (and mainly manager's) organizational contribution. A simplified version of this nine-box grid is shown below:



Charts like the one above are commonly used (although they may vary slightly on occasions, for example having "performance" and "potential" the other way around). However, they all use a simple numbering system, such as that shown on the chart. Typically, the "1" at the top right represents those individuals whose performance and potential is seen as most optimal, with then progressively higher numbers in each box representing various contributions down to number "9", at the bottom left, representing the organization's "problem people".


The Performance and Potential Grid has been used most often for leadership development and on-going succession planning purposes. In this respect, most of the focus is on boxes 1, 2 and 3 shown here (with some performance management effort naturally also being directed at box 9). This usually translates into an often very detailed and focused effort to develop people in these top three boxes, with far less attention, time and money being spent on boxes 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. This may be quite a sensible way to allocate precious training and development investment but may do little to change the overall group picture for the better, over the medium to long term. This is because some individuals may continue to slide backwards or may not develop or improve because they are being left largely to their own devices and to flounder, often for years (also partly because termination of lower-performing individuals may be impractical).

Using the Performance and Potential Grid for Coaching

Although it has been little used for this purpose in the past, the Performance and Potential Grid is an excellent mechanism for considering possible coaching interventions for each type of individual in the boxes on the chart. In other words, we can utilize the basic Performance and Potential Grid to attach our own labels to the various populations of people we find in each instance and then look more closely at the behaviors (productive and counter-productive) that seem to be most prevalent. This then allows the most appropriate coaching interventions to be made.

As an example of this approach, in the detailed grid below, each of the nine boxes has been assigned a label and some broad and general descriptors of behavior added as illustrated. A range of applicable coaching interventions are then listed at the bottom of each box.

Coaching Performance and Potential Grid

		LATENTS	EMERGERS	STARS
POTENTIAL (Right "stuff")	High	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Inexperience/lack of maturity -Lack of competence in some areas -Over-pressured/stressed -Overwhelmed with tasks/work -Poor organisation skills Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Prioritisation/time management skills -Knowledge transfer in identified areas -Personal organisation/discipline coaching -Networking capability building 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Keen and enthusiastic to try new things -May not utilise others optimally -Detailed focused -Prefer familiar problems/challenges -Intuitive decision-makers Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Critical thinking ability -Goal/Target/Milestone setting ability -Dealing with under-performance -Communication breadth/versatility -Assisting/developing others 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Self-motivated/initiating -Helpful and co-operative -Effective and focused problem solvers -Wide networkers/communicators -Big-picture focused Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stretch Goals/Tasks/Projects -Cross-functional assignments for next job succession -Broader networking opportunities -Wider/more diverse presentations -Influence/Negotiation development -Assign senior mentors
	Medium	PLACEHOLDERS	TRANSITIONALS	CONTRIBUTORS
	Low	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Set personal and team targets at low levels -Work at slow or steady pace -Less prepared to get "hands dirty" -Some missed goals/deadlines -Potential "prima donna" attitude Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stretch goal-setting competency -Pressure tolerance/"tempo" skills -"Hands-on" project work/challenges -Cooperative projects and teamwork opportunities 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Focused on immediate issues/problems -May send mixed messages to other people -May work in "fits and starts" -Evolving team leader/people relationships -Unsure of themselves in face of change Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Emotional intelligence capability -Longer-term planning/organisation -Quality/Consistency of communication -Focused people management skills 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -High personal confidence -Individually competent -Tactically/operationally focused -Project/Task/Change management oriented -Effective resource allocators Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Setting higher/harder/more strategic goals -Evolved teamwork/collaboration skills -Wider commercial/business acumen -Presentation skills
		DETRACTORS	BLOCKERS	WORKERS
		Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Negative attitude at times -Poor relationships in evidence -Conflict/antagonism towards particular people -Low morale/self-esteem -Over-tolerant of mediocrity Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Self-awareness/discovery -Conflict management skills -Empathy/people sensitivity -Listening skills -Personal coping/pressure management skills -Performance manage or out-council 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Overly "traditional" thinking about issues -Low levels of initiative -Precious about personal knowledge -Directive or even autocratic style -Prone to micro-management Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Letting go/delegating work -Creativity/lateral thinking skills -Openness/flexibility of attitude -Self-starting techniques and personal motivation skills 	Likely Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -High personal work ethic -Low ability/need to delegate -Task-focused (possibly at the expense of the relationship) -"Silo" work area focused -Too little communication Coaching typically needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Greater forward planning and thinking -Analysing/designing work and the people to do it best -Becoming a team-player -Nurturing/Developing others
		 PERFORMANCE (Right results)		
		High		

As we can see, this already creates a useful “at-a-glance” summary to be used by a manager, internal coach, mentor or external coach as appropriate.

Issues arising from the Performance and Potential Grid when used in Coaching

When looking for the next generation of leaders or seeking the most likely successors for a more senior management role, the tendency to focus on the top 3 boxes on the grid is relatively logical. However, in seeking to lift overall performance of the organization, the grid can be used quite differently to achieve higher levels of success as discussed below:

Boxes 1, 2 and 3 individuals

Clearly, all individuals that are assigned to or reside in these boxes are generally well-regarded and worthy of some coaching and mentoring attention. For “contributors” in box 3, the main focus is on helping an individual to become as ready as possible for the next career step. For “emergers” in box 2, the main focus is on helping an individual to lift performance to best possible levels in the current job before moving on or up. Finally, for the “stars” in box 1, the focus is mainly on how to maintain their attention and to ensure that these more “at risk from poaching” individuals are not lost to other organizations.

Not surprisingly, all individuals in these 3 boxes are usually popular or attractive people to coach, as they are (in broad terms) looking at the future positively and seeking to find ways to enrich their contribution to the enterprise. However, even though such people may attract as much as 80-90% of the internal and external coaching effort, we also need to pay close attention to individuals in the “bottom six” part of the grid (who may collectively make up 70-80% of the entire population).

Box 4 individuals – “workers”

People in this “worker” box often operate “below the organizational radar” because they are likely to be working hard and achieving better than acceptable results most of the time. However, in many cases this can disguise underlying possible problems for the organization such as low levels of delegation and teamwork, an overly individualistic task focus and perhaps an unhelpful willingness to tell people what they are doing and why (all behavior which may have limited job promotion prospects). This can lead to too little time spent building the skills and experience of others, which can be a big problem if a person in this box manages many people.

From a coaching perspective, it is important with individuals in this box to assess the contribution that a particular person is making to the medium to longer-term strength of the organization. This will either be by transferring knowledge more openly to others or by taking on a more “nurturing role” for others in the team and using more opportunities to delegate, for instance.

Box 5 individuals – “latents”

At the other corner of the grid in box 5, “latent” individuals are often far more visible or “known” in the enterprise because they are likely to have demonstrated high potential earlier in their career (and therefore been promoted) and continue to show “flashes” of even higher potential in their current position. However, future capacity to contribute is not an excuse not to

look closely at current job performance and contribution. Coaching is therefore critical here because we can ensure that any continued lack of confidence or competence in getting the present job done well is properly highlighted and managed, before the individual seeks to press to move on to the next role.

From a coaching perspective, individuals in this box will benefit from coaching which allows the person to gain helpful job performance knowledge for their present role (to help build up confidence and experience) and to learn some of the major contributors to better current performance. This will potentially include task prioritisation skills, greater organizational ability and tools and project management capability, for instance. Help with building partnerships and networking with others at peer level may also be helpful with this group.

Box 6 individuals – “transitionals”

“Transitional” people are different to all others in the Performance and Potential Grid because they may be capable of moving into any of the other boxes on the grid quite quickly. Some people in this box may therefore be “on the way up” and some might be “on the way down”- time will tell. However, whether it is up or down, what all people in this box share in common is that they have to prove themselves in both performance and potential in the eyes of others.

Because as many as 25-30% of a managerial population may be assigned to or reside in box 6 of the grid, coaching interventions are critical here for two main reasons. Firstly, individuals may need direct and on-going help to move forwards (planning, organising, communicating more effectively etc). Secondly, individuals may easily start to slip backwards if they are not coached (which may quickly be felt as a competence shortfall by those they manage or deal with). Even the box 6 individuals themselves may start to feel unappreciated and overlooked. Being such a large population, we therefore often need to give people in this group more coaching time than they are typically getting.

Box 7 individuals – “blockers”

Although people in several of the grid positions can block the progress of others, individuals in box 7 are more likely to be the most obvious blockers simply because they have low or even no potential to move and are making only a basic or minimal contribution. Like box 4 individuals, blockers consequently often operate under the organizational “radar” and may only become visible if and when a higher performing or potential individual working with or for them criticises the individual concerned or a valued subordinate employee leaves the enterprise.

From a coaching perspective, intervention here is critical because we need to ensure that we do not have any immediate “at risk” issues as a result of these people’s contribution shortfalls. In addition, we also need to take the time to properly assess whether or not we could readily get a more effective contribution in the job, if performance is not improved. In actual fact, experience tells us that these individuals will often respond well to coaching, especially if it brings new ideas or helps to open up options for the target people that they have not previously considered.

Box 8 individuals – “placeholders”

Placeholders are usually those people who have more capacity and ability to contribute but find themselves doing the minimum possible when it comes to performance and results. Individuals in this box are often highly intelligent but may see their work to be repetitive or not challenging

enough. They may also see themselves as merely “passing through” and therefore fail to hold either themselves or others accountable for getting things done efficiently and effectively.

From a coaching perspective, once again this box might include a large population of people on the overall grid, and thereby offer many opportunities and scope for improvement in areas such as tempo of work, more “stretching” goals and greater team-work, for example.

Box 9 individuals – “detractors”

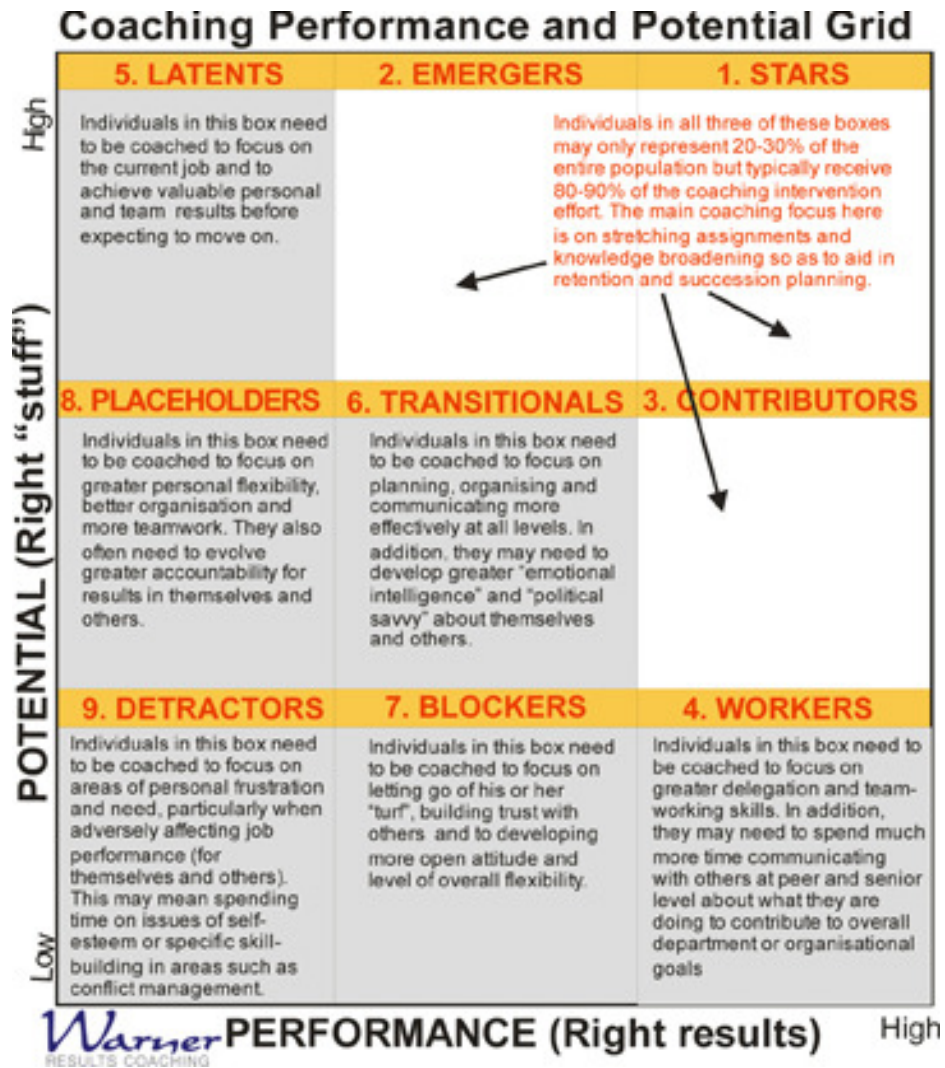
Obviously, box 9 individuals are problematic for the organization, having both low potential and a low performance or results contribution. However, the typical first response is a performance management intervention, when coaching may be a better first step.

Many individuals in this box in an organization, who end up leaving the enterprise, often say in external out-counselling sessions that they could have turned performance around and even had greater potential to reach higher levels if they could have had coaching to help in areas of high personal frustration or need (such as conflict handling or developing greater listening skills, for instance). Obviously this is a decision for the organization to make in terms of how much time and money it wants to spend with its “box 9s”, but once again experience tells us that even a small amount of coaching is likely to pay good dividends.

Summary

In this brief article, we have suggested that the familiar and popular Performance and Potential Grid, used mainly for leadership development and succession planning purposes is also an excellent tool to use in making balanced coaching interventions. Used in this way, rather than to focus on our box 1, 2, and 3 individuals most of the time, we are well-served to pay as much attention to the large proportion of the population who are likely to reside in the other six boxes on the grid (being perhaps as much as 80% of the population).

The chart on the following page offers a final visual summary.



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