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## Talent Management

Research confirms that talent management is a top issue for HR as 40% to 70% of all senior executives in most major corporations will become eligible for retirement in the next 5 years (Gandossy & Kao, 2004). In our increasingly knowledge-driven economy, intellectual property is everything, so organizations are right to fear this "brain drain," suspecting that when senior executives leave the firm, the business may follow (Bannister, 2005). Yet high potentials – those most likely to rise to fill those highest positions – account for less than 8-10% of the talent pool. So finding and retaining such rare talent is a mission-critical challenge for organizations and their HR directors.

Talent management includes all types of talents, from star performers to stable contributors to technical specialists. Some organizations have specific strategies for each type of talent, to develop and retain all types of solid performers. There is a lot more secrecy around who represents the top 8-10% of talent, the high potentials. These gems and diamonds in the rough are rare and thus coveted by the organizations that have, want, or need them. Even those selected as high potentials may not know that their names are atop the talent list.

## Who are these high potentials?

What differentiates a high performer from a high potential? Being a high potential entails more responsibilities, more commitment, and often more mobility. Using Lominger's (CITE) research-based definitions, a high performer consistently delivers results over time. The focus is on an individual's sustained, not just recent, performance (Walker & LaRocco, 2002). A high potential, by contrast, has "learning agility," Lominger's research-based predictor of high potentiality. Learning agility means an individual "can quickly respond to diverse, intense, varied and adverse assignments...demonstrates superior performance under first-time or different, not repeat, conditions... [and] eagerly learns new competencies in order to perform." (CITE)

Thus the high performer's redeeming quality is sustained performance over time in relatively similar situations. The high potential goes beyond this, with an uncanny ability to learn how to deal effectively with first-time or changing situations, applying new and prior learning to each new challenge. Both kinds of talents are valuable to the organization. High potentials have simply not reached their full potential. Having almost unlimited capacity for growth, they are groomed for senior or C-suite positions. Why are high potentials so rare? They are high performers who also demonstrate incredible learning agility, outstanding results in constantly changing environments, and a tenacious commitment to growth and change.

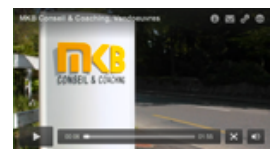
## Secrecy

Some HR directors believe that focusing on 8-10% of the talent pool is unethical and detrimental. Such focus might categorize employees into elitist "haves" and "have nots," which may demotivate and disappoint strong contributors who want the prestige of being considered high potentials, and move them to leave the company. By developing all employees to their potential, the organization may be better served by a broader focus on career strategies for all rather than a long-shot bet on 8-10% or less of their people.

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Nevertheless, high potentials get a lot of attention, though many companies are not willing to inform these select few that they are being carefully watched and groomed. HR often fears creating disappointment if situations change or the individual voluntarily or involuntarily is no longer part of the top talent list. For example, a high potential is on the fast track. His wife has a terrible accident and is in a wheel chair. The high potential may no longer want to be mobile or dedicate most of his time to work. As he is no longer mobile, the career progression is hampered and he is taken off the fast track list. Yet other HR directors believe that, with a good process in place, it is important to be transparent with the organization's intentions and success criteria.

## Interviews on the dream high potential

To better identify the attributes of these organizational superstars, I interviewed three HR directors who defined their dream high potentials: Mr. Ronny Vansteenkiste, Global Head of Organization and Leadership Development for Novartis Consumer Health Division SA in Basel; Mr. Eric Junes, HR Development Guidance Manager for Belgacom Mobile NV/SA/Proximus in Brussels; and Mr. Jérôme Dano, Human Resources Manager for Nestlé's Research Center in Lausanne.

**Mr. Ronny Vansteenkiste**, Global Head of Organization and Leadership Development, Novartis Consumer Health Division SA: Mr. Vansteenkiste is himself very bright and analytical, with a great ability to apply concepts to other situations. He has a clear definition of the attributes necessary for Novartis Consumer Health Division's high potentials:

- Intellectual horsepower: high grades at school; thinking broadly, strategically, and analytically; a transformational thinker; street smarts; and the ability to see patterns in situations.
- Integrity: a prerequisite, which cannot be developed; good character, which translates behaviorally as good judgment; daring to be different.
- Self-awareness and emotional stability leveraged into more acute learning-
- Learning agility which is as a combination of 'mental, results, change and people agility.

"The high potential individual consolidates these assets into successful performance and results. In turn, HR and management need to provide the high potential with skill-building experiences in both functional and leadership roles. Most importantly, the high potential brings learning capacity: learning agility, openness to learning, speed of learning, and the ability to apply that learning. The combination is every HR manager's dream high potential."

**Mr. Eric Junes**, HR Development Guidance Manager, Belgacom Mobile NV/SA/Proximus: Mr. Junes has the self-confidence and courage of his convictions to challenge the status quo.

- Independent thinking: managerial courage, to express even unpopular opinions, and speak one's mind with the right words, at the right time, with the correct decision makers; challenging people in an encouraging way
- Accountability: keen insight on what needs to be delegated and what must remain his or her responsibility; going beyond what the job needs; doing more and proving more.
- Customer focus: conscious ability to go beyond the boundaries of the usual internal and external customers. Delighting the customer requires being critical and demanding towards ourselves.
- Humility: show self-confidence but no arrogance.

"A lack of transparency towards the high potentials denies them the opportunity for HR to explain the desired criteria and level of responsibility. More and more, the high pos like to take charge of their own careers. Therefore, they need to know where they stand." The accent should be on having potential for the organization in a specific market environment and not on 'being' a high potential. This makes 'potential' relative. The HiPos are expected to accomplish a project for the organization with the identified potential.

**Mr. Jérôme Dano**, Human Resources Manager, Nestlé Center for Research (CRN): Young and dynamic himself, Mr. Dano is hard working, and already accomplished by getting on the CRN team at a relatively young age. Mr. Peter Brabeck, Chairman and CEO and Mr. Helmut Maucher, Honorary Chair, issued in 1997 Nestlé's Management and Leadership Principles. The qualities and characteristics desired from a leader from Nestlé were clearly stated:

- Courage with the capacity to manage stress
- Learning with intuition and an open mind

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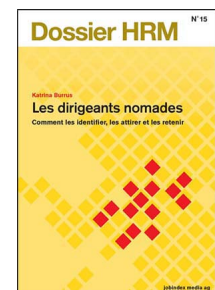
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"More specifically, high po's need the ability to manage complexity at a fast pace by leveraging their knowledge and/or through their ability to learn. Outstanding results are expected." In the CRN, it is necessary to creatively and proactively use knowledge by integrating it into business applications. "Our leaders need to have a greater ability to motivate people towards the strategy that they define." And on the competition for high potentials, Mr. Dano notes, "We need to fight for talent now. Before, it was simply good enough to say we were Nestlé. Before, Nestlé managed your career; now, we have many discussions. Our talent wants to be freer and own their careers."

## Higher demands on HR

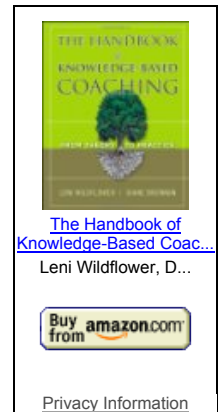
Both the similarities and distinctions in the definitions are instructive, of the high potential overall, and the distinctive needs and goals of specific organizations and markets. The HR directors interviewed concur that the pool of high potential talent is declining, and there is increasing competition for high potentials across industries. Maintaining and growing talent is also perceived as being more strategic.

So the pressure is on for C-suite HR to define, find, attract, develop, and retain these rare high potentials, inside and even outside their core industries. And as the long-shot nature of this bet increases, HR has to attend to motivating and retaining all sectors – hi potentials, hi performers, core contributors, technical specialists – and make each feel valued. The onus is on HR and leadership to be more proactive with high potentials. The scarcity trend is not going to change in the near term. So organizations must realize that high potentials will leave if they are not groomed, treated carefully, rewarded, and constantly challenged.

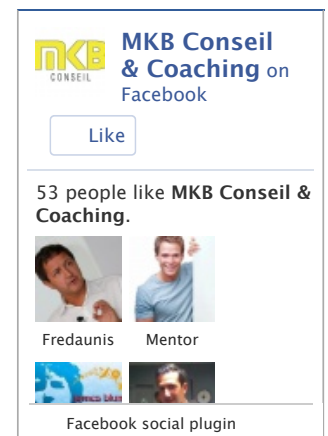
HR must set aside its fear of disappointing individuals and communicate more fully the criteria, expectations, and opportunities for high potentials – and then let them flourish in a challenging, and rewarding environment. It's a delicate balancing act: negotiating transparency, global organizational needs and targets, with individuality, motivation, and impatience in a dynamic and competitive market for talent. Recommended strategies for HR:

- Get clear on who you want and what your organization is willing to do to get them.
- Be more proactive with high potentials. Shift their mindset from being a high potential to having potential for the organization
- Make the process more transparent
- Communicate expectations and opportunities clearly, and deliver on them consistently.
- Walk the talk; ensure that senior leaders model the characteristics sought in high potentials.

in the excellent *Handbook of Knowledge-Based Coaching: From Theory to Practice*.



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