

HOW TO RE-ENGAGE A HIGH POTENTIAL EMPLOYEE

At first glance, the title may seem counterintuitive. By their very nature, high potentials (HiPos) are assumed to be, or even defined as, very engaged. Yet, when we look at the evidence, this is not necessarily the case.



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A 2009 study by the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) discovered that 25% of HiPos were planning to leave their current organizations within a year. This statistic is particularly troubling, as the same research indicated senior human resources executives believe HiPos are almost twice as valuable to the organization compared to their lower potential counterparts and three times more likely to succeed as its future leaders.

This leads us to an important question: how can we engage or re-engage high potential employees? Based on the research, there are several questions leaders and HR executives should ask:

1

Do your high potential employees receive sufficient personalized attention?

An old axiom states “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” When faced with limited time and unlimited pressures, leaders and executives may dedicate most of their attention to the weaker performers

in the group. This practice can negatively impact the engagement of HiPos.

First, the high potential may feel resentment that their extraordinary work receives less attention because they create fewer problems or issues for their supervisors. This can also lead to feelings of being under- or unappreciated, as they may feel that their supervisors have a different set of expectations and standards for them than is used for the rest of the team.

2

Do your high potential employees receive sufficient professional development?

There may also be an embedded assumption that since HiPos are already performing at a high level, they do not need any further development. This could not be further from the truth. By their very nature, HiPos tend to thrive under conditions in which they can maximize their talents and test their limits. Investing time in these types of conversations can be a key aspect of maximizing the engagement of HiPos.

Not surprisingly, HiPos also bring high

standards and focus to career discussions. They want to see and understand how the leadership in their organization has plans for their future. As such, it is important that leaders and executives continually talk to their HiPos about their current and future plans so they feel a part of this journey.

However, promises must be specific, realistic, and feasible. I have coached several executives who expressed frustration at the unwillingness or inability of their leaders to articulate the next steps in their careers. When these HiPos pressed for concrete steps that would be taken to support their future career objectives, they were told “don’t worry about it, everything will be fine” or “keep doing what you are doing and it will all work out.” These sorts of vague and non-committal statements do little to engage and inspire confidence in a high potential. They are looking for something more. Managing a HiPo means raising your game to meet them at the level for which they consistently strive .

3

Do you appropriately leverage their strengths?

One of the primary findings in the research on employee engagement is the importance of leveraging strengths. Numerous research studies have found that employees who utilize their natural talents more often are significantly more engaged. Sometimes, leaders of high potentials may mischaracterize high level of performance as denoting engagement. This can be very frustrating for HiPos, because even though they are performing at a high level, they may not feel they are fully leveraging their talents and yearn for opportunities to do so.


A recent case study provides an example of this disconnect. “Bob” was incredibly bright and excelled in the technical elements of his work, such as processing documentation, integrating information, and writing compelling briefs and arguments in his area of practice. When presenting his findings in front of his col-



leagues he continued to shine, as people responded to his energy, enthusiasm, and insight.

However, although the technical elements provided a means to an end for him (e.g., document processing enabled him to do more public speaking/engagement), he felt there were missed opportunities for him to pursue his passion, which was more client- and people-facing. Unfortunately, his leader failed to capitalize on this opportunity. When he approached her, she wondered why he was unhappy with the situation, given how well he was performing. As he tried to explore further, she was quite dismissive, focusing on the value he delivered in the tasks he was currently performing. Deflated from this exchange, he started considering future options outside of the organization.

Conclusion

High potentials are a rare, prized gift to any organization. Unfortunately, the research highlights the possible pitfalls in terms of appropriately engaging their talents. Taking the time to understand who they are, what drives them, and how best to leverage their strengths, is a recipe for long-term success. This dynamic creates a winning situation for these invaluable employees, their leaders, as well as their organizations. 

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