



LET'S COACH HIGH-POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES FOR SUCCESS

Coaching high-potential employees should not be a 'one size fits all' approach but something more subtle, according to [Joseph C. Santora](#), [Gil Bozer](#) and [Jan Posthumus](#).

Peter Drucker, perhaps the most influential management thinker of the 20th century, has often been credited with identifying three key questions for business strategy: Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How will we get there? These same three questions should be applied to the development of high-potential employees (HIPOs) who display the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) to assume strategic and future leadership positions in their organisations. Although there is no universal definition of 'high potentials', there is consensus among most scholars and practitioners about the core characteristics of successful HIPOs: intelligence, learning agility, engagement, readiness to step into a dynamic environment, and ability to manage one's energy and self.¹ On average, HIPOs represent about 10 to 15% of an organisation.² High performers are not necessarily HIPOs. They are rated high in their current positions, but often do not display a willingness or potential to advance to the next organisational level. HIPOs may very well be both. In fact, many high performers make strong individual contributions to their organisations but are not interested in managing or leading others, while other high performers have poor interpersonal skills that threaten their relationships with other stakeholders.

Developing and nurturing HIPOs are essential responsibilities for any organisation. It is therefore rather fitting that coaches play a significant role in the development of these important organisational assets and future leaders of organisations. However, while coaching HIPOs might appear to be a simple task, it is actually highly challenging.³ Despite their propensity to lead an organisation, HIPOs need guidance to navigate the often complex nuances of their companies, address the KSAOs gap required to succeed in future roles, and make smooth transitions into leadership positions, since 'what got them *here* won't necessarily get them *there*.' Just because an employee has been identified as a HIPO it does not necessarily mean that he or she will fulfil the organisational goals and expectations of their employer. For example, according to a 2013 report by Emerge Leadership Group⁴, only 16% of executives were viewed as fully adapted into their new jobs. The remaining leaders were viewed as somewhere 'in transition' between approaching their work as an individual contributor and approaching their work as a leader. Therefore, a coach can help prepare a HIPO for promotion from one organisational level to the next by providing the orientation required for success in their new

positions.⁵ HIPOs can self-actualise or maximise their potential under the sponsorship of the right manager.

Approximately 60% of HIPOs fully dedicate themselves to the job, about 25% revealed they were seeking new career opportunities elsewhere, and for about 20% of them their ‘personal aspirations’ are misaligned with the organisation’s plans for the HIPO. Thus, the task of matching a coach and a HIPO is not always easy or simple. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence to support the claim that HIPOs are not always up to the challenge. In one case, a HIPO was so engaged in multiple projects that he became a free rider when he was paired with two other HIPOs in a team setting. He was behind schedule in all his projects, and he was not contributing to any of them. In the end, the organisation dropped him from its HIPO list, as it believed he was not good leadership material.

SOME COACH-HIPO CHALLENGES

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the coach–HIPO relationship, organisations must not only have clear guidelines for who is defined as an HIPO and why, but also identify and consider the specific personal and professional attributes, needs, and preferences of each HIPO (remember: not all HIPOs are the same) and match that HIPO with the right coach (remember: not all coaches are the same). For example, being identified as a HIPO is not enough to ensure effective coaching if the individual is not motivated and ready to engage in coaching or there is an issue of trust and discomfort between coach and HIPO. To better understand the important contribution that coaches may have on HIPOs’ development, we have created a list of key roles coaches should play in the coach–HIPO relationship to promote coaching effectiveness.

Coaches should be:

- role models who build credibility and rapport with HIPOs, inspire them and have a positive moral influence on them;
- an integral part of the overall organisational learning and development processes;
- honest in their appraisal of HIPOs, as some HIPOs will never be part of the leadership in an organisation;
- aware of the halo and recency effects*;
- sounding boards for new ideas and experiences;
- observers, listeners, and commenters on the behaviours, attitudes, and viewpoints of HIPOs to increase their self-awareness and unlock unique opportunities to acquire new skills; and
- able assessors of HIPOs’ suitability for leadership roles in the organisation.

To be successful in these roles, coaches should:

- be attentive to the needs of HIPOs to increase their motivation and readiness to engage in coaching process;

- teach HIPOs to think differently, move them from their comfort zones, and help them reach ‘aha’ organisational moments – personal reflections and insights that help them to reshape their minds and make a difference in their organisations; and
- develop the HIPOs’ leadership skills to enable them to make the upward transition to more senior roles.

IN SUMMARY

Coaching HIPOs is a highly collaborative exchange between the coach and the HIPO in which HIPOs learn by doing through both a formal and informal active learning process. Every coaching relationship is contingent on the specific HIPO, and unfortunately there is no single most effective practice of how coaches should work with HIPOs. However, evidence-based HIPO frameworks offer guidance about focusing on the most important elements needed to coach a HIPO. Each coach may have his or her unique coaching styles and strategy but should seek to accomplish a basic outcome: to ensure that the HIPOs they coach have maximised growth and developed under his or her sponsorship and guidance to become the next generation of organisational leaders.

Coaches provide the feedback that is essential for developing HIPOs. It is vital to approach feedback sessions with a mindset of: ‘it is not what you say, but how you say it.’ Timing (the optimal time for both coach and HIPO, all baggage left at home) and setting (a neutral place) are essential when delivering feedback.

The final message: coaches should work with other institutional stakeholders such as HRD personnel and senior management to structure a development and retention plan for HIPOs. HIPOs who perceive that an organisation provides coaching for continuous learning with supportive leadership are more likely to commit to coaching engagements, experience improved competence in their knowledge and skills, and foster self-determination with respect to their ability to assume future leadership roles and make a sustainable impact in the organisation.

* Refers to two common biases: the halo effect, where positive characteristics are attributed to an individual based on other, unrelated positive characteristics; and the recency effect, where undue weight is given to the most recent encounter.

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