Five Criteria to Identify High Potentials in Your Organization

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Today's organizations find it challenging to locate and put in place a new generation of leadership that is both proactive and pragmatic. Disproportionately this new generation of leaders will come from the pool of people within an organization, often referred to as, “high potentials.” But there’s the rub. By what criteria do we decide whether somebody is a high potential suited for a leadership position?

Face it, not everyone is a high-potential. Some have reached their potential and others are quite comfortable where they are. They are good, if not great, performers who are satisfied with their accomplishments and focused on doing what they do best. This doesn't imply mediocrity—it simply implies that the organization and the individual have converged and a degree of leveling has set it.

Then there’s the “me-me” group who are so enamored with their potential but never seem quite right for the next level of leadership.

So what are the criteria by which you evaluate whether someone can be a high-potential leader?

Here are five suggested criteria:

1. Knowledge
   They know their business. Simply put, high-potential leaders are those individuals who have displayed a certain amount of accumulated expertise. This expertise may be technical or it may be based in networks, but it’s invaluable for an organization.

   More importantly, they understand how their activities, their sector, and their realm of knowledge, is related to the wider organizational agenda.

2. Reputation
   They have legitimacy in the eyes of others. Others in the organization must appreciate the relevance of the knowledge base that a high-potential possesses. It’s a simple reality that having expertise or a skill base isn’t enough to make one a high-potential leader. High-potential leaders must also have the ability to garner the professional respect of others.

3. Ambition
   They have a strong career mindset. We want our high potentials to be ambitious—but we want them to be ambitious in a very focused way. And the best way to get a sense of their ambition is to evaluate their commitment to their career progression. High potentials need to be committed to accumulating new responsibilities, new successes, acquiring additional knowledge, and, for better or worse, achieving additional recognition.

4. Partnering
   They understand the importance of working with others. While a strong career mindset is important, high-potentials must also have a deep appreciation of partnership. A high-potential leader’s partnering ability shouldn’t be a politically correct exercise, but rather a pragmatic, tactical skill that will allow them to make better, more informed decisions. Lone-rangers and lone-wolves may be creative and ambitious, but they may not be suitable for the next leadership rung in the organizational ladder.

5. Courage
   They are bounded risk takers. High-potential leaders must understand that no matter how good they think a decision may be—they are making it under conditions of uncertainty. No matter how much information you have, no matter how many cost-benefit analyses you have done, no matter how many market surveys you have completed, a high-potential leader will know all information is limited. They’ll know that some decisions are inevitable, but they’ll also have the courage to take risks.

Identifying high-potential leaders requires an appreciation of what it is we want from our leaders. We want our leaders to know their business, and therefore knowledge is critical. We want others to accept their expertise, and therefore reputation is critical. We want them to be personally driven, and therefore ambition is essential. We want them to understand that nothing can be done alone, and therefore partnering is critical. And finally, we want them to know that nothing is guaranteed, and therefore courage is fundamental.

These five criteria, when identified appropriately—be it through skill matrixes, interviews, delineated questionnaires or peer review—will go a long way toward identifying high-potential leaders. Your next challenge is how to give them the skills they need…but that’s the subject for another article.
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About Samual B. Bacharach

Samuel B. Bacharach is the McKelvey-Grant Professor in the department of organizational behavior at Cornell University's ILR School. He is also the cofounder of the Bacharach Leadership Group www.blg-lead.com. He has been on the Cornell faculty for over 30 years and has chaired the department of organizational behavior. Professor Bacharach is the head of Cornell’s New York City-based Institute for Workplace Studies. He is the head of the ILR’s New York City-based Master of Professional Studies program in industrial and labor relations www.ilr.cornell.edu/mpsnyc. He has been principal investigator on numerous research grants and has published over 150 academic articles and over 20 books.

Among his popular leadership books are Get Them on Your Side and Keep Them on Your Side. He frequently gives talks and conducts trainings on the theme of proactive leadership and how to enhance the political and managerial skills that leaders need in order to execute their agendas. His widely read blog, www.bacharachblog, has become an essential depository for central ideas on pragmatic and proactive leadership.

Working in partnership with eCornell, he is the author of the High Performance Leadership certificate program, a 10-course sequence offered by eCornell. In the last year eCornell and Bacharach Leadership Group have combined their efforts to create a mixed modality delivery combining eCornell’s online capacity with BLG’s face-to-face training.

Among the many organizations that have been trained in his leadership methodology: Computer Sciences Corporation, PepsiAmericas, Starwood Hotels & Resorts, March of Dimes, Wal-Mart Stores, Citigroup, International Monetary Fund, Mellon Financial, Starbucks, BASF, BMC Software, Boeing, InterContinental Hotels Group, Chubb, Nintendo, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Devon Energy, TeleTech Holdings and Gap, Inc.