

HUMANEMENT

HARNESSING HUMAN POTENTIAL: CRACKING THE CODE

By Mark Brenner



Performance potential is a vast subject that virtually encompasses the whole story of the human race. If you narrow the concept down to its workplace application, it's a matter of first recognizing that everyone has boundless potential and then finding a way to capitalize on it. Easier said than done.

Last month's article in this series on the people value chain (talent attraction, targeted recruiting, high-accuracy hiring, proactive onboarding, talent identification, performance enhancement, career acceleration and succession management) observed that leadership quotient (LQ) – which is all about displaying leadership, stimulating team intelligence and executing – is more important than IQ in

executive positions. Similarly, many books on the psychology of achievement assert life is much more about “I can” and “I act” than it is about “IQ” and “I know.” Since what is true of life in general is also true of work, the question is, “How can you nurture high-potential employees to become aspiring achievers?”

What Is Achievement?

You could read everything that's ever been written on how to harness human potential over the centuries, but it all boils down to a four-step process: craft a personal vision (i.e., find personal meaning and inspiration) > set goals > design an action plan > execute.

But if you closely examine this four-part process, you'll discover that there is more to it than just these four steps. The three arrows beg a huge question: What's going on in the white space surrounding them?

In fact, the arrows signify an “intervening variable” which operates to drive the four-part process forward. In essence, the arrows represent a fundamental motivational vector, which acts as the catalyst for achievement. This vector is often glibly called “positive mental attitude,” which is more precisely called “determined self-discipline” with a generous splash of “resilient optimism.”

The omnipresent series of Accenture ads that feature Tiger Woods dominating some golf course capture the essence of the psychology of achievement: The ads say that the anatomy of performance is 50 percent aptitude and 50 percent attitude. Leaders who genuinely comprehend this elementary message about human possibility know what needs to be done to capitalize on the full potential that resides in their organization. They need to apply the people value chain: create a gripping strategy and sense of purpose, grow a performance-promoting and talent-attracting culture, raise leaders and build a company that offers an abundance of opportunities to stakeholders.

Beware the Labyrinth

What, then, impedes a company's ability to make the most of its talent potential? In many cases, the organization has become trapped in a treacherous labyrinth of barriers and dead ends. If its leaders are shortsighted to boot, it can remain in denial for years about being in the labyrinth. The first obstacle to overcome is a senior leadership team with a narrow, mechanistic view of talent management. These leaders tend to limit their understanding to “succession planning” rather than taking an aggressively proactive approach to talent development.

Another barrier is a culture that just doesn't “get” development. The company's philosophy is one of “the cream will eventually rise to the top” and “talent will take care of itself.” Thus, the succession planning process is little more than tagging specimens rather than nurturing high potentials.

The greatest barrier to talent cultivation is a leadership group that proclaims a deep commitment to talent management and development when organizational behavior belies this claim. They have not done the hard work of designing and implementing a comprehensive and well-integrated system that informs and strengthens the people value chain.

Organizations stuck in the labyrinth lose talented contributors and mis-promote people time and again. They just can't seem to stop going down the same dead ends. Why? First, it's not easy for them to visualize the hard and soft costs that result from the talent churn. It's much easier to keep one's head in the sand about it. Another major factor for remaining trapped is that, for many leaders, the apparent soft and squishy challenge of aggressively strengthening the people value chain seems just too enigmatic and daunting. So, they persist in perpetuating a purely tactical approach to talent and become inured to their under-performing people practices over the years.

The Way Out

The strategic approach is to build a strong people value chain and use it as an engine for talent development. Here is how to go about it:

1. Set the strategic foundation – This comes from having top leaders be “talent champions” and fully embrace the commitment to cultivating high potentials and, in this way, make talent development a steadfast priority. Leaders and managers must all consistently walk the talk of their talent credo and be fully accountable for delivering on it.
 - Communicate the cultural message whose headlines are:
 - Our enterprise is a meritocracy.
 - Individuals advance based on merit, merit and then merit.
2. Managers who spot talent and develop it selflessly also advance, while those who don't, don't.
3. Reinforce the message with an effective performance management system – In this way, managers are held accountable for delivering on the talent credo. Organizations then learn to base promotion decisions, in part, on how well a given manager has contributed to cultivating talent within his or her purview.
4. Develop assessment techniques to spot and nurture talent – Don't stop with consistent high performance in the current role. To gauge future potential, ask critical questions such as: To what degree is this candidate a learning athlete? Does this candidate's personality demonstrate sufficient flexibility to develop the EQ capabilities of a true leader and of someone who can develop the potential of others? Does this individual exemplify the values and benchmark behaviors of our culture?
5. Nurture candidates – Once candidates are placed in the high-potential pool, give them the development resources and opportunities they need to advance along the leadership arc. The vast majority of high potentials require stretch experiences such as a chance to manage a struggling business unit or the opportunity to launch a significant, new initiative.
6. Assess again to determine if the candidate is ready for the next step – Assessment expertise becomes a core capability for any organization that is committed to aggressively developing its high potentials.
7. Remain continually vigilant in order to prevent derailment – Even “winners” are bound to have one or two vulnerabilities that could knock them off their ascending career arc. Particularly, fast-trackers and potential champions may have lots of determination, flash and speed, but they can also be sensitive, reactive or quirky. Manage them with finesse. Be prepared for setbacks and catch problems as early as possible.

Climb to the Top

The 2004 Accenture High Performance Work Force study demonstrated a strong correlation between financial performance and the level of priority organizations place on human capital development. High-performance businesses more effectively exploit the collective intelligence and motivation of their work forces, Accenture says, and their CEOs take a much more visible and direct role in people development initiatives. Understand that there are no shortcuts. Only disciplined and systematic approaches such as the one described above will pay large dividends to your company and employees. **USBR**

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