

ROCK STAR



TALENT

How to Spot It, How to Nurture It, How to Keep It

By Missy Kline

Every organization has them — rock-star employees. The up-and-comers. The go-getters. The high-potentials. The ones who consistently outperform their peers. The ones who are high achieving and highly engaged, goal-oriented and career-focused, quick learners and self-motivators. You can likely think of a few such individuals at your workplace. But is your organization doing a good job of developing them? Of nurturing their potential? Of leveraging their talent to help the organization meet its goals and deliver on its strategic imperatives?

If your organization spends more time and effort managing mediocre and poor performers and trying to engage the disengaged than it does nurturing high potentials, that's not surprising. Last year, Gallup polled more than 80,000 working adults on their level of engagement on the job and found that nearly 70 percent of U.S. workers were disengaged, and since disengagement has been shown to negatively affect performance ... well, you can do the math. Doesn't leave much time or resources to devote to your all-stars, does it?

In too many organizations, high-potential employees don't stick around for very long ... perhaps they feel bogged down from their disengaged coworkers; perhaps they feel like they're not being challenged; perhaps they see no opportunity for growth or advancement. Regardless, they're the ones who are more likely to leave than their lower-performing peers. But mediocre, disengaged employees probably aren't the ones you want leading your organization into the future. That's why it's critical — indeed, a business necessity — to pay attention to your rock-star employees. They've got the talent, the drive, the competence ... they just need the support. And if your organization isn't providing it, they may just take their talent elsewhere.

Identify Your High Potentials

Who exactly are high-potential employees? What traits and characteristics do they display? And how can you spot a rock star in the making?

High potentials are commonly thought to be the top 3 percent to 5 percent of an organization's workforce. In the article "Are You a High Potential?" in the June 2010 issue of *Harvard Business*

Review, researchers Douglas Ready, Jay Conger and Linda Hill define high potentials as "[employees who] consistently and significantly outperform their peer groups in a variety of settings and circumstances. While achieving these superior levels of performance, they exhibit behaviors that reflect their companies' culture and values

in an exemplary manner. Moreover, they show a strong capacity to grow and succeed throughout their careers within an organization — more quickly and effectively than their peer groups do."

In the article, Ready, Conger and Hill, who have extensively studied high-potential employees in a number of industries and organizations, go on to identify some "x-factors" of high-potential employees ... things they say may not show up on lists of leadership competencies or performance review forms. These often intangible skills include "a drive to excel; a catalytic learning capability (the capacity to scan for new ideas, the cognitive capability to absorb them, and the common sense to translate that learning into productive action for their customers and their organizations); an enterprising spirit; and dynamic

sensors (a feel for timing, an ability to quickly read situations and a nose for opportunity — in other words, a knack for being in the right place at the right time)." In the Forbes.com article "Who to Promote? 10 Keys to Identifying People With High Potential" (September 18, 2014), leadership development expert Jack Zenger identified 10 traits high-potential employees exhibit: (1) they have strategic perspective, direction and clarity; (2) they have the ability to inspire and motivate others to high performance; (3) they're results focused; (4) they're effective collaborators and readily engage in teamwork; (5) they have high ethical standards, uphold organizational values and act as role models; (6) they have a deep expertise and display business acumen; (7) they champion change; (8) they're willing to innovate and take risks; (9) they're powerful communicators; and (10) they have an interest in and the capability to develop others.

Organizations should be careful not to confuse high-performing employees with high-potential employees. While high-performing employees often exhibit many of the same traits as high-potential employees, not all high performers are high potentials. In the article "High

High-potential employees have the talent, the drive and the competence to succeed and help move their organizations forward ... they just need the support to do so.

Potentials and High-Performing Employees Are Not One in the Same" on Entrepreneur.com (July 7, 2015), Andre Lavoie, cofounder and CEO of talent management solution firm ClearCompany, writes "High-potential talent are employees who have the ability and aspiration to be successful leaders within an organization. While it might make sense for a high-performing employee to also have high potential, that's not always the case. An employee might be great at [his or her] job and take pride in [his or her] work and accomplishments, but may not have the potential (or desire) to assume a leadership role." According to Lavoie, high-potential employees take a proactive vs. reactive approach to problem solving; they're leaders vs. followers; they're receptive vs. unreceptive to feedback; and they know the business vs. simply knowing the job.

So, now that we know what makes a high-potential employee, let's look at how organizations can cultivate, develop and nurture this talent.

Nurture Your High Potentials

High-potential employees aren't content to simply come to work every day and "do a job." They don't want to stagnate or remain idle. They are looking for opportunities to prove their worth, to take on more responsibility and to contribute at a high level to organizational success. If high potentials feel like they aren't being challenged or aren't being given enough opportunity to improve and expand upon their skill sets, they likely won't stick around your organization for very long.

Therefore, managers and organization leaders need to commit to carving out the time, resources and attention necessary to develop and nurture their high-potential talent. Robert Grossman, a professor of management at Marist College, in his article "The Care and Feeding of

High-Potential Employees" in the August 2011 issue of *HR Magazine*, offers several tips on how organizations can cultivate their high potentials. Among them:

- Delegate real responsibility to help high potentials learn to manage projects, lead teams and be accountable for outcomes.
- Tap effective mentors — preferably individuals who are currently where the high-potential employee strives to one day be.
- Foster visibility and provide access to senior leaders.
- Provide many and varying opportunities for learning, professional development, leadership and stretch assignments.
- Put in place a standardized process for identifying, assessing and selecting high potentials. It can't just be "manager's choice."

How to Manage Rock Stars

Given the right support, guidance and encouragement, rock-star employees often become rock-star leaders — the kind your organization needs to thrive. And the more rock stars you can cultivate, the easier it is to move your organization to excellence. April Castaneda, executive director of human resources for California Institute of Technology, in a session at last year's CUPA-HR Annual Conference, provided some insight into how to treat high-potential talent. Here are four tips she shared:

1) In order to keep rock-star employees, you've got to treat them like rock-star employees. Managers should provide high potentials with ongoing opportunities for growth and development. They should actively interact with them (including spending one-on-one time with them), allow and encourage them to leave their comfort zones, give them stretch assignments, and provide them with opportunities to take on leadership roles.

2) High-potential employees should be given some degree of decision-making authority, and managers should seek their advice and input on projects and ideas whenever possible. Managers should also help their high-potential employees create a career growth plan to help them advance through the organization.

3) Reward and recognize high performers and high potentials. This could be as simple as acknowledging their achievements and successes in front of coworkers; having a one-on-one conversation to let them know that they are a valued part of the team; or providing them visibility and access to those in the organizational hierarchy.

4) It starts with HR. As HR professionals, we know how important our rock-star employees are to the success of our organizations — truly exceptional talent is worth its weight in gold. But do our managers fully understand the role they should be playing in helping to nurture these individuals' careers? Do they have the tools, the know-how and the resources they need to identify, engage and manage the high performers on their teams? If we want to help our organizations hold on to exceptional talent, we've got to take the lead in helping our managers and leaders learn how to manage and lead their rock-star employees.

Randall Beck, managing partner at Gallup, notes the importance of offering what he calls “breakthrough experiences” for high-potential employees. Writes Beck in the April 2012 *Gallup Business Journal* article “Building a Talent Machine,” “[organizations need to] provide intentional developmental experiences to help [high potentials] grow. This process starts by conducting interviews with leaders in your company who are already stars. You must study this group extensively to determine what experiences accelerated their growth into leadership roles in your company. You’re trying to find more people like them, so listen closely for significant experiences that sparked their growth.”

As management consultant John Hagel of Deloitte Consulting wrote in a December 2012 post on the Deloitte University Press blog, “Talented people seek out opportunities to grow, and they will flock to organizations that provide ample opportunities to do so ... If companies are truly serious about attracting, retaining and developing high-quality talent, they need to view themselves as growth platforms for talent where people can develop themselves faster than they could elsewhere.”

Bottom line: In order to keep top talent engaged and committed to your organization, a high premium must be placed on growth and development, including mentoring, coaching, education and on-the-job experiences.

Keep Your High Potentials

High-potential employees expect to be treated like high-potential employees; if they’re not, the odds of them becoming disengaged, disenchanted and disconnected increase exponentially. Writes Jean Martin and Conrad Schmidt of the Corporate Executive Board in the article “How to Keep Your Top Talent” in the May 2010 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, “[B]ecause they work harder (and often better) than their peers, they expect their organizations to treat them well — by providing them with stimulating work, lots of recognition, compelling career paths and the chance to prosper if the organization does.” Because high potentials are much more confident than their rank-and-file peers about their ability to find new jobs and are much less passive about researching other opportunities, writes Martin and Schmidt, they won’t stick around an organization that they feel doesn’t appreciate them.

Here are some ways you can increase your odds of holding on to your rock-star employees.

Tell Them They’re Special

In the *HR Magazine* article mentioned above, Grossman cites a Center for Creative Leadership study that found

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that only about 40 percent of employers tell high potentials of their status. According to Grossman, another study from the center found that of the high potentials who were not formally told of their status, one-third were actively looking for another job; of those who were told they were special, only 14 percent were job hunting.

Reward, Motivate and Engage Them

Talent management company Halogen Software offers some tips on how to use rewards, motivation and engagement to retain your high potentials:

- Clearly articulate your organization’s compelling vision and set of values, and regularly communicate these to all employees;
- Ensure your senior leaders support this vision and these values in their words and actions;
- Include high potentials in strategic planning initiatives and programs that aim to improve organizational competitiveness;
- Provide high potentials with the tools, resources and work conditions they need to work to the best of their abilities;
- Equip all managers, but especially those overseeing high potentials, with solid management skills and ensure they are effective in their roles; and
- Support the career progression and professional growth of all employees, but particularly of your top talent.

However, organizations should take care to avoid the one-size-fits-all approach, as different facets of rewards, recognition, motivation and engagement are of varying value to different individuals. For example, according to Halogen, “employees with an entrepreneurial spirit may want ‘skin in the game’ or a stake in the rewards the company receives from their work; those with an innovative spirit may want time to dabble or experiment, unfettered by management constraints; others will value time off, group activities, prestige, perks, development opportunities, plum work assignments, more independence or autonomy, the opportunity to mentor someone ... the list goes on.” Halogen recommends that management and organization leadership take the time to get to know high potentials as individuals in order to discover what motivates and engages them.

Listen and Act

Stay interviews are a great way for an organization to keep its ear to the ground and learn what employees love — or loathe — about their jobs. These one-on-one conversations between managers and employees can be helpful in identifying what’s going well, sources of motivation and demotivation, what might need to change and more.

Halogen Software on its website offers several topics a stay interview should encompass in order to obtain an accurate snapshot of how the employee views his or her job.

These include:

- What the employee likes/dislikes about his or her role;
- What the employee feels are his or her top strengths;
- What things the employee would like to learn or what experience(s) he or she would like to acquire;
- What, if anything, the employee would change about his or her job, department or organization;

- What things bring the employee satisfaction, ignite his or her passions and make the employee want to come to work every day;
- What would make a “great day” at work;
- What things demoralize the employee;
- What forms of recognition are most appreciated/desired;
- What talents, skills and abilities does the employee wish he or she could make more use of; and
- Is there any reason why this is not the “right” place for him or her to work.

It’s not enough, however, to simply be a listening ear. Organizations that are most successful in keeping their top talent act on employee feedback and actively address concerns.

Rock-Star Employees Make Rock-Star Organizations

An organization is only as good as its best talent. That’s why identifying, cultivating and keeping your high-potential employees is a business imperative. Those individuals who are 100 percent invested in your organization, who come to work every day with the intent of giving all they have, who strive to climb the career ladder and contribute to your organization’s strategic goals — that’s the talent you should be focused on holding on to and helping grow. After all, they’re the ones who could occupy your organization’s future C-suite. 

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