

What does talent look like?

Critical to any talent management process is the identification of individuals who are perceived to have the potential to advance further in the organisation. But how is potential defined? Is it obvious for all to see? Excited claims are often made that a person has 'it'. Many leaders state they know 'it' when they see 'it'. But are they valuing the same elements of potential? Can we answer what it is about a particular person that gives us the confidence they have what it takes to perform well at the next level?

While there is no argument everyone has the potential to grow and contribute more, talent management processes seek to identify, develop and deploy the most talented individuals. So what are the differentiators for those designated as the 'most talented'?

The 9-box matrix of performance and potential is used by many organisations to classify and identify high-performing individuals, and to categorise them further by the perceived amount of potential they possess. While the tool is a useful visual consolidation of employees and their relative performance and perceived potential levels, it does not provide a clear picture of the distinguishing characteristics of individuals. The lack of distinctions makes it difficult for line managers and executives to consistently assess their employees as low, medium or high potential. Some leaders, for example, make these distinctions based on the perceived future capability of the individual to perform at various levels within the organisation, but not all.



However, this still begs the question – what is it about this person that gives you confidence they can move significantly higher in the organisation compared to other high-performing individuals?

If leaders all agree a certain individual is identified as “top right hand box” (i.e. both high performing and high potential), does it matter if we don't know why they assess them that way - do leaders have to articulate their reasons? However, are we identifying potential by looking at what is already showing above the surface? Surely the real challenge is recognising hidden potential below the surface?

Many studies have shown there are traits, characteristics or psychological attributes people with the highest potential consistently possess and demonstrate. These can be different from those articulated in organisations' competency models.



One such attribute is drive, which has consistently been identified as a distinguishing characteristic of high potentials. But it is generally accepted this cannot be developed – an individual's potential will simply remain unlocked if they do not possess the drive or ambition to take on future challenges.

For leadership roles, in addition to ambition, I would be looking for a willingness to lead others, the demonstration of sound judgment exercised at both the business and interpersonal level, adaptability to change, self belief and a proclivity to achieving results to name a few elements.

If we leave the definition of potential at the level of “we’ll know it when we see it”, or classify it as low, medium or high, junior and middle managers will continue to struggle to become astute talent spotters. We also need a robust vocabulary to use in conversations with people who are not deemed to have the potential for more complex and responsible roles because not all identified gaps can be developed.

While the identification of potential will never be a science, a clearer articulation of what leaders are looking for needs to be present. When talent is in such demand, we should be able to clearly describe what “it” looks like.

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