

The Leadership Journey Focus on High Potential Employees



Last year I worked with a regional group of leaders interested in designing a learning community for managers. We discussed who should participate in the learning community. I was intrigued when the leaders immediately identified managers with persistently poor performance as participants in the learning community. I was equally intrigued by what motivated them to consider these people as participants. They believed educating poor performing managers “one more time with feeling” would turn them into high potential employees. They believed this despite expressing how exhausting it was to use their leadership energy this way.

I listened respectfully. However, in my head I was thinking, “What would happen if leaders spent the majority of time identifying and developing high potential employees?” I wondered, “Why do leaders spend so much time on people they should coach or fire off of a team?” I posed these questions and, after an enlightening discussion the decision was made to open the community only to high potential managers. The leaders became energized by the opportunity to recognize high potential employees.

Leaders are often consumed with managing the work of persistently poor performers. The fear of being disliked or busyness contributes to the resistance to remove poor performers from a team. While focused on these employees, leaders assume high potential employees are doing fine, when nothing could be further from the truth. Changing focus from poor performers to high potential employees is highly recommended, requiring a paradigm shift in thinking. High potential employees become frustrated with leaders who do not manage persistently poor performers. Over time high potential employees become disillusioned and will even leave organizations.

John C. Maxwell, a leadership expert and author offers a strategy in his book, “**Developing the Leader Within You.**” Maxwell encourages leaders to use the 20/80 rule, known as the Pareto Principle, to shift focus to high potential employees. In short, the principle encourages leaders to focus 80% of their people development time on the top 20% of high potential employees.

Maxwell believes 20% of the people in an organization are responsible for 80% of the success. He suggests once these people are identified and developed they become role models for the next 20% and over time this trend leads to increased numbers of high potential people in an organization.

I learned many lessons while working with and designing the learning community last year. In retrospect, I can see how the Pareto Principle was at work. The learning community gained important knowledge and learned, among other things, how to apply of the 20/80 concept when working with high potential employees. Additional principals the community leaders learned...

- **High potential employees** can be found throughout organizations. Leaders need to take time to recognize them.
- **High potential employees** want to be identified by employers for development. Leaders must tell employees they recognize and honor their potential.
- **High potential employees** eventually leave managers who are focused on managing poor performance. Leaders must quickly deal with poor performance to retain talented employees.

High potential employees contribute to the success of a leader and the organization. Leaders who develop high potential employees create generations of confident, competent and courageous