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Align with Your Stars

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BY SUSAN CRAMM



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Think back. Reflect on your career and write down your five biggest leadership disappointments.

If your experience is typical, your list will include losing top-quality talent. The memory of “suddenly” losing one of your best and brightest never seems to fade. The story is always the same: They weren’t looking, but a great opportunity just fell into their lap.

(Right. Sure it did.)

Hearing the news makes your heart sink and shifts your reality. It’s not just business; it’s personal. They aren’t just leaving the organization; they’re leaving you. Despite all the time spent together making plans, overcoming adversity, and celebrating accomplishments, they have decided that your best efforts

as a leader weren’t good enough. To cope, you rationalize: People are responsible for their own career. You say to yourself: They come and they go. There’s nothing I could have done. No one is indispensable. No big deal.

But it is a big deal, of course. Losing high performers is painful, both personally and professionally. Consider the story of Sean, a high-potential employee who left a company after five years because he felt disconnected and disrespected. His direct supervisor did little, if anything, to sponsor him. All the groundbreaking work led by Sean, while apparent to his team, peers, and customers, was invisible to the powers that be. When he pitched requests for additional resources, he was turned down. And when he expressed interest in an opportunity for promotion, he was politely but

firmly dismissed. When Sean had finally had enough and landed a better position with a rival, senior managers were at first surprised and then dismayed, as they were barraged with complaints about his departure from his former colleagues. As is often the case with external hires (of which 46 percent fail, according to Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ), lacking organizational context and trusted relationships, Sean’s replacement was struggling, unable to pick up where Sean left off and finding it difficult to connect with colleagues who were holding on to the past.

High potentials have plenty of options to think and act in their own best interests, along with the confidence to do so. According to a study by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB), as many as 25 percent of high-potential employees plan on leaving their jobs within a year. To understand why, consider the reasons others gave in the CEB study for *not* leaving:

- **They feel connected:** “I like the people here. They’re my friends. This feels like a team—like a family. I might make more money if I left, but I don’t want to leave the people here.”

- **They feel challenged:** “I’m finding meaning and happiness now. The work is exciting, and I love what I’m doing.”

- **They feel developed:** “I can follow my dreams. This organization is giving me the chance to grow and do what I really want to do in life.”

When these conditions do not exist, high performers will head for the exits.

Leaders who excel at retaining top talent truly care about the people delivering the performance.

They are inspired by the vision of their employees coming home after work, with a smile on their face, saying, “Guess what I did today.” These leaders invest time to help their most valuable contributors understand their capabilities and career goals, improve their performance, and get the necessary sponsorship and support. They consider talent development one of the most important—and satisfying—parts of their job, and they invest their time accordingly (on average, 20 percent of it, according to research from Aon Hewitt).

As a development-oriented leader, you should care about all of your employees, but invest disproportionately in your high potentials because they deliver more value today and will deliver even more tomorrow.

Although these attributes may appear neat and tidy, the process to identify those who possess them is anything but. The process of senior leaders meeting annually to calibrate and identify top talent is typically quite painful. Participants try to appear objective and arrive at consensus, but their information is often flawed, a combination of insights sourced from limited interactions and sketchy office gossip.

You can help counterbalance faulty decision making by spending more time with your people. Take note of employees who are associated with successful initiatives, names that are repeatedly mentioned when tough assignments need to be staffed, and the sources of the insight that bubbles up about what is going on—both within the

humming along). This last group is made up of employees of long tenure who know how work gets done—lose them, and performance will suffer.

Understanding Their Goals

Leaders can reduce the risk of losing good people for the wrong reasons by working with them to understand their passions and career goals and serving up challenging assignments that help them grow from where they are to where they would like to go.

Customizing opportunities to each employee requires understanding that person’s goals, motivations, and values. It’s a simple process, but very few leaders do it—or even know how to. Take a look at these questions and answer them as you believe one of your direct reports would:

- What are your proudest accomplishments and biggest disappointments? Why?
- Which activities energize you and which drain you?
- How would you rank the following rewards: financial gain, power and influence, autonomy, affiliation, lifestyle, intellectual challenge, competence, recognition?
- If you died tomorrow, what would you want your legacy to be?
- What is your five-year career goal? If you don’t have one, what’s your best guess?

Don’t feel bad if you’re left with a lot of white space. You aren’t alone: Over the past 15 years, not once have I met a leader who could answer the majority of these questions. Typically, leaders get to know their people within the context of their current assignments, treating their past and their imagined future as unimportant to the task at hand.

But they are important, and you

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(People designated as high potentials are three times more likely to succeed as future leaders than the average employee, according to the CEB research.)

Identifying Top Talent

To retain top talent, you have to know who the stars are. Begin by looking around. Who are the professionals who go the extra mile to deliver strong results, master new types of expertise, blaze new paths with a feel for opportunity and timing, forge strong relationships, and serve as a role model and mentor for others?

organization and with competitors and the industry. Remember the people who raise their hands and volunteer for new assignments, who shine as positive role models, and who are able to retain staff and easily fill open positions.

With careful listening and observation, your list of high potentials will shape up pretty quickly. In addition, be sure to include the “diamond in the rough” employees (those who appear to have high potential but are performing below expectations) as well as the highly capable and valuable “aces in their places” (who keep operations

should care. Kick-start the process of getting to know your top talent by meeting with them one-on-one for 90 minutes. When scheduling the meetings, let them know that you want to get to know them better and discuss their passions and career goals. Send them the questions above, requesting that they provide written responses along with their most current resume prior to the meeting.

In preparation for the meetings, review their answers and ready yourself to facilitate discussions that get to the core of who they are and what they love. For example, why did they enjoy the acquisition project, or find the new product rollout frustrating, or highlight “feeding the poor” as something they want to be remembered for? Note any

Employees who have participated in these discussions tell me time and time again that this is the first time their supervisor—or any supervisor—invested time to get to know them with the goal of actively sponsoring their career development.

Determining Their Capabilities

Now that you have a good understanding of what makes your high potentials tick, it’s time to help them better understand their capabilities and the type of learning experiences that will help them get from where they are to where they want to be. At this point, you may want to engage a coach—internal or external—to assist your efforts. Coaches can effect changes you cannot because they have specialist know-how, dedicated

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inconsistencies among their motivators, values, and career goals (for example, that they want to spend more time with their family but are interested in working in a global position). Last but not least, determine whether their five-year career goal is specific and aspirational enough to be used as a touchstone in career and performance conversations that follow.

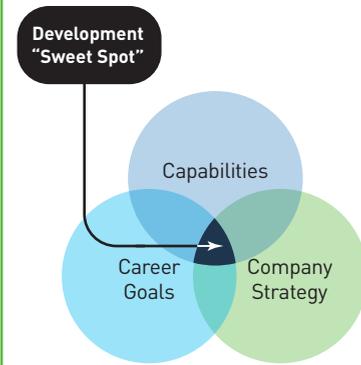
Make the meetings all about them. Ask questions, reflect what you hear, and be encouraging. Don’t provide feedback or advice—just listen and learn. If you follow these simple steps, your people will leave the meetings feeling honored, respected, and energized.

time, and the ability to create a non-threatening climate in which your high potentials can come to grips with their capabilities and work on their development.

Evaluate capabilities by using a 360-degree assessment. If your organization doesn’t have a standard 360 tool and program in place, you can obtain “good enough” feedback using an online survey tool, asking the following question to generate rich narrative feedback: To be even more effective, what should the participant do more often, do less often, and not change?

In partnership with the high potentials, identify which of their strengths can be leveraged and which

Exhibit: Aligning Three Priorities



weaknesses need to be mitigated in light of their career goals. Help them answer the question, “What type of assignments will help me build the capabilities I need while adding value to the company?” I think of the intersection of capabilities, career goals, and the company’s strategic interests as the development “sweet spot” (see Exhibit).

Twenty percent of high potentials believe that their personal aspirations are quite different from what the organization has planned for them, note Jean Martin and Conrad Schmidt in the *Harvard Business Review* article “How to Keep Your Top Talent” (May 2010). By targeting learning opportunities to the sweet spot, you strengthen the developmental partnership and position high potentials for greater contributions while fostering their inherent motivation to make an impact.

Crafting the Right Challenges

In a hypercompetitive business climate, it’s relatively easy to identify challenging opportunities that tap into the goals and motivators of high potentials. As a leadership coach, I rarely have to recommend job changes in order to find rich learning opportunities for my clients. Likewise, you can serve up opportunities on virtually a real-time basis by sculpting positions to

fit development needs rather than the other way around.

Once you and your high potentials have defined their development plans and supporting experiences, get together with each of them monthly to review progress, remove obstacles, express appreciation, and

Rewarding High Potentials

When it comes to recognizing top talent, ensure that promotions and compensation occur at a steady pace. Fight the good fight to ensure your high potentials are paid and promoted equitably, but don't focus so narrowly that you overlook other,

found that almost everybody values senior-level exposure as it provides access to information and the opportunity to influence and burnish one's brand.

Of course, these are generalizations. You can personalize rewards by discussing various options with your high potentials, keeping their "top three" in mind, gauging their reactions, and confirming your insights by asking the question, "What would cause you to take a job with another company tomorrow?"

Personalize rewards, and confirm your insights by asking, "What would cause you to take a job with another company tomorrow?"

provide encouragement. With frequent interaction, the annual or semiannual performance review should be easy to prepare. Just be sure to give feedback within the context of your high potential's broader career objectives, rather than related to his or her current assignment, as the former will be deemed more important and demonstrate that you are keeping your employee's long-term interests at heart.

From time to time, high potentials will stall or fall short of their goals. When this occurs, increase the frequency of your interactions, extracting learning from their experiences and revising goals and plans accordingly. Career goals are, at best, educated guesses about desired future outcomes. As we progress through our careers, we learn more about our strengths and passions and, more often than not, will need to refine our goals. Stay close, remain supportive through good times and bad, and be flexible. Doing so will turn your development partnership into a lifelong relationship, benefiting both parties as changes in jobs and companies occur.

often more powerful opportunities.

Take another look at the top three rewards identified in the "what makes them tick" discussion and align rewards accordingly. In my experience, the highest-ranked rewards are power and influence, intellectual challenge and stimulation, and competence. People who rank power and influence high enjoy autonomy and/or authority over decisions and resources. You can foster their motivation by delegating decision rights that you would normally retain, inviting them to important meetings, and asking for their involvement and advice on key decisions. Those who rank intellectual challenge and stimulation as a top reward love to solve problems and to sink their teeth into difficult, often risky assignments. People who value competence are a bit wonky in that they are committed to becoming an expert, often showing a preference for developing in place. They will appreciate your help in positioning them as a company expert, and eventually industry expert, through assignments, education, and networking. As a final note, I have

Tracking Your Progress

Although retaining top talent requires a lot of effort and expense, the gain is worth the pain. Track your progress and refine your efforts over time by keeping an eye on metrics such as:

- **Bench strength:** percentage of key positions for which you have people ready now to step in
- **Capability:** performance of newly promoted employees
- **Engagement:** scores on employee engagement surveys and rate of turnover

It's hard to overstate the importance of staying in close contact with your high potentials. Make it hard for them to leave you by making sure you don't leave them. +

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