



# Coaching High Potentials:

## WHAT TO KNOW AND WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

What behaviors and practices make a high potential, a true high potential? Rob Kabacoff describes new leadership research that coaches can use to help employees become high potentials, succeed in senior positions, and avoid derailing along the way.

A few years ago, I knew a bright, hard-working manager named William. He had impressed senior management with his drive, focus on results and vision for the future, and was quickly promoted to lead a large division within the organization.

In his new role, William discovered that many of his employees were experienced, accomplished and independent professionals. They expected to have a role in decision-making and significant input on strategy. William was used to driving results himself, and became increasingly impatient and frustrated with the need to keep them in the loop with his plans. Over time, he came to see his employees as entitled, demanding children, standing in the way of his ambitions. He resorted to increasingly autocratic and domineering behaviors in order to achieve his aggressive goals. As a result relationships with his staff deteriorated. The week that William landed the biggest contract the division had ever received, the staff initiated a walk-out and

demanded that the CEO remove him from his role. The CEO reluctantly agreed.

In today's war for talent, organizations are constantly on the lookout for high potentials — employees with the potential to grow into effective senior leaders. So, as coaches, how could we have helped William and his organization avoid the pain and disruption this failure caused for everyone involved?

### NEW RESEARCH

Assessment specialists Management Research Group (MRG) recently completed three large-scale studies of the leadership development process, and the results provide insight into how coaches can help their clients become high potentials, and more importantly, successful leaders. We looked at the characteristics that differentiate high potentials from other

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employees, the characteristics that are most important for success in executive positions, and behaviors that can lead executives to derail.

### Study #1: IDENTIFYING HIGH POTENTIALS

In the first investigation, we studied 29,000 mid-level managers and individual contributors, who completed detailed 360-degree assessments as part of ongoing organizational development activities. Each participant was assessed on 22 leadership practices and a wide range of competencies. In addition, we asked their bosses to identify those individuals who were considered high potentials.

Fifteen percent of participants were identified as high potentials, and they differed from other employees in a number of important ways. They were more likely to think strategically, taking a long-term, playful approach to problem-solving and decision-making. They demonstrated a strong orientation towards achievement, maintaining high expectations for themselves and others, and a strong focus on accomplishing goals. They were quick to take charge, seeking to exert influence, and leading the efforts of others. Finally, they were quick learners, comfortable in fast-changing environments, and willing to take risks and consider new and untested approaches.

As coaches, it is helpful to understand what behaviors contribute to an employee being identified as a high potential. Each of these behaviors can be developed with effort, practice, and coaching.

### Study #2: COACHING HIGH POTENTIALS ONCE THEY'RE PROMOTED

Are the behaviors that can lead to a high

potential track the same as those needed to succeed once promoted? To address this question, our second study looked at 29,000 senior executives who completed comprehensive 360-degree evaluations. Again, each leader was evaluated on 22 leadership practices and a wide range of business and interpersonal competencies. At senior levels, we found that a strategic approach and desire to take charge remain critical for success. However, two additional behaviors were found to be particularly important for executive success: empathy and communication. Leaders who were most successful (as rated by their bosses, peers, and direct reports) demonstrated active concern for the wellbeing of others and formed close and supportive relationships with their colleagues. Additionally, they took care to articulate what they wanted and expected from others, and worked to provide a constant and appropriate flow of information to others.

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Early in their careers, mid-level managers and individual contributors can demonstrate their ability and organizational value through drive, task accomplishment, and vision. However, once managers are promoted, other skills become equally important. These new executives can no longer do the work alone — they will need to develop and manage a team of individuals in order to accomplish significant goals.

In many cases they won't have authority over everyone they will need help from. Relationships become critical. These new executives will also become increasingly responsible for employee engagement and development. To accomplish these new tasks, they will need to develop new skills.

### Study #3: AVOIDING DERAILMENT

When a manager who is expected to become an effective senior leader fails to live up to expectations, the costs (both personal and financial) can be enormous. There is a human toll on the leader and others impacted by the leader. The organization suffers from the lost investment, lost productivity, and lost human resources. Are there warning signs when a leader is derailing? As coaches, what can we do to help leaders stay on track?

MRG's third study assessed derailing behavior. We looked at the leadership behaviors of 1,500 senior executives who were seen as ineffective in their role. We also looked at patterns of behavior in another group of 4,500 managers and executives who were seen as low in overall effectiveness. Again, these studies were based on comprehensive 360-degree evaluations of leadership behavior and competency.

Three distinct patterns of derailing behavior emerged. In the first pattern, leaders were hard-driving, take-charge leaders, who were dominating and critical in their interactions with others. They saw their own needs as most important, and rarely asked for input from others before making decisions: the 'My way or the highway' approach.

In the second pattern, leaders were highly deferential to superiors and led through a strong reliance on policies and procedures.

They lacked passion and excitement, were less likely to display empathy than their colleagues, and were uncomfortable with innovation. They were also more likely to tell others what to do, rather than try to persuade them. We called this approach 'It's all about the rules.'

The third pattern of behavior among ineffective leaders involved a reliance on friendly and gregarious behavior, deference to authority, and high levels of delegation. These individuals also lacked a strategic approach and an emphasis on analytical problem-solving. Although they might be described as 'Hail fellow well met,' we also called this approach 'Not really thinking.'

As coaches, we need to be aware of the behaviors that can derail our clients. In particular, a dominating stance that diminishes the value of others, deference to rules and regulations over goals, and a failure to engage in effective analysis and planning can be detrimental.

### PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Early in a potential leader's career, certain behaviors will gain them notice as a high potential and further their value to their organizations. Coaches can help individuals identify these behaviors and develop them. Once a high potential is promoted, additional behaviors become particularly important for success. These are relational skills that help leaders build effective alliances, accomplish goals through teamwork, and support the development of direct reports. Relational skills are especially

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notable in their absence, manifest in lost productivity, increased conflict, and a lack of employee engagement. Coaches can help new executives to be aware of the additional requirements for their new roles and help them to develop the skills necessary for success. Finally, there are behaviors that

can be particularly toxic and derailing for leaders. As coaches, we need to keep our antennae tuned for such behaviors and help new leaders nip them in the bud. Leadership development is a career-long process and coaches have a valuable role to play, each step of the way.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Kabacoff was the Vice President of Research at Management Research Group ([www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com)), an international leader in creating high-quality assessment tools and conducting extensive research in leadership, career development/personal growth, sales and service. Rob has spent more than eighteen years studying diversity and leadership, cross-cultural issues, and the development of effective leaders in a global economy. He works extensively with organizations around the world to help them identify critical leadership practices for personal and organizational success.