

WHERE ARE YOU IN THE NINE-BOX?

THE NINE-BOX IS A SUCCESSION PLANNING TOOL. IT RATES YOU ON THREE DIMENSIONS, PERFORMANCE, PREPARATION, POTENTIAL. IT ASSESSES YOUR READINESS FOR MOVING UP THE MANAGEMENT CAREER LADDER.

In a formal succession plan, executives and HR develop criteria for each of the nine boxes. They use the boxes to look at the past, predict the future – your future. A typical nine-box looks like this:

Nine-Box Potential/Preparation Matrix			High
Potential	5 Low Performance Lacks Preparation Good Potential	2 Acceptable Performance Some Preparation Strong Potential	1 Top Performance Strong Preparation Clear Potential
	8 Low Performance Lacks Preparation Moderate Potential	6 Acceptable Performance Preparation Progressing Good Potential	3 Top Performance Preparation Gaps Good Potential
	9 Poor Performance No Preparation No Potential	7 Acceptable Performance Lacks Preparation Low Potential	4 Strong Individual Contributor Limited Potential
Low	Performance		

You may not know where you are in the nine-box. Your employer may not have a nine-box. It may not have a formal succession plan. Rest assured, however, your boss and everyone above you on the organization chart has a nine-box in their head. Your name is assigned to a box. Your box impacts your future. If you expect to move up, you need to be in a green box 1, 2, or 3). If you hope to move up someday, you need to be in a yellow box 4,5, 6 or 7). If you are in a goldenrod box (7 or 8), you have work to do. The red box (9)? It may be time to move to another job.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, YOUR PLACE IN THE NINE-BOX STARTS WITH YOU. IT IS A RESULT OF WHAT YOU DO AND HOW YOU DO IT. IT IS THE ACCUMULATED PERCEPTION OTHERS HAVE OF YOU. IT GROWS OUT OF EVERY MEETING, EVERY PROJECT, EVERY OPPORTUNITY, EVERY DAY.

Job Performance

How well do you perform your job? Does your boss rate your performance at the same level you rate your performance? Do you really know what your boss expects? Have you asked?

People who do well in a nine-box assessment pay close attention to what the people above them expect. They listen. They observe. They adapt. They treasure feedback. They relish a challenge. They embrace change.

Executive expectations for job performance are not particularly complicated. They are not secret. They include things like:

- Strategic vision, mission, values: You will not reach the green boxes without understanding and supporting the strategic vision – that which sets your organization apart from the competition. You must understand the mission – who your employer serves in the marketplace. You must live and breathe corporate values – the written and unwritten rules of right and wrong.
- Completed staff work: Most likely, your boss used to do your work. They of course did it perfectly. You get their support when you do the work they assign to you at least as well, and preferably better, than they did it when they had your current job title. (If your boss did not precede you in your position, she expects you to perform in the way she thinks makes sense to her.)

- Play well in the management sandbox: The higher up you go on the career ladder, the more important relationships become; the less time you spend in your own little silo. Nine-box success stories are rarely written on the backs of people who do not get along well with others; who fail to value and practice collaboration.
- Develop your bench: The day you became a workplace leader, you became a teacher, a coach, a cheerleader. The nine-box committee pays attention to how well you do each of these things. There is some truth to the idea of having to groom your successor to make room for your next step up the management ladder.

Preparation

The nine-box identifies future leaders. Future leaders understand each rung on the management career ladder requires new knowledge, skills, abilities. They understand each rung takes them another measure away from what made them successful as an individual contributor.

Think of it this way. A front-line supervisor guides a team. They communicate with individual contributors. They make work assignments, measure performance, provide feedback. A front-line manager communicates through supervisors (usually two or three) to deliver a message to individual contributors. They attend meetings with managers from other departments, disciplines, locations. They develop budgets, set priorities, measure the success of several units. Succeeding as a front-line supervisor guarantees no success as a front-line manager. Success depends on learning to communicate differently, to manage new, different responsibilities. It is too late to start learning these new knowledge, skill, ability requirements after you get the promotion.

This may sound harsh, but your preparation for the next step in your career is not the responsibility of your employer. It is your responsibility. You prepare yourself with:

- Mentoring and advocacy: A mentor is a close personal advisor (not your boss) who is bone honest with you. They are seasoned. They know

what they are doing. They keep you honest. They keep you humble. An advocate takes you places, introduces you to people, gets you involved where you have not previously been involved, to broaden your perspective. You need one of each. It is your responsibility to find them, to treasure them.

- Education: Maybe your 1995 high school diploma carried you this far; maybe your 2005 Bachelor's Degree hangs proudly in your den. Treasure them, but if you want to get ahead, keep learning. The nine-box looks for leaders of the future; not leaders resting on the laurels of their past. Education comes in a lot of ways. It can be a one-off university course. It may be an advanced degree. It can be a workshop, a professional meeting, a national conference. It could be a self-help group for future leaders. It might be reading a book, learning a language, volunteering in the community. You decide, but you need to do it.
- Alternative assignments: Go to a party. Sit on a plane. Talk to your friends. Listen carefully. You will quickly learn how "normal" it is for professionals to work overseas, to play a role in a special project, or take over another department while the regular manager is on a medical leave. People in the nine-box green raise their hand when the boss asks for a volunteer. They seek and relish opportunities to manage a tough project, turn-around a struggling business unit, learn about another culture.

Potential

In the end, the nine-box is about somebody adding up what they know about you, your experience, your preparation to decide if you have the potential to succeed further up the management career ladder.

In the parlance of succession planning, having the potential puts you in the green; it makes you a high potential leader – a "hi-po" in the recesses of corporate headquarters. You have the label. You do not have the job. Your star is bright. It can fall from the sky in heartbeat. One misstep. One ill-

timed moment of gloating, of being too big for your britches, of taking your potential for granted and your green fades to yellow.

The well-intended “hi-po” term may be your Achilles heel. It puts a target on your back. It creates a “can’t miss” picture. It might be more accurate, more realistic, to call it, highly prepared, or “high-prep.” You are prepared. You are ready. You are not proven.

The simple fact is “hi-po’s” most often fail for lack of a single characteristic – emotional intelligence. They look good on paper. They fall apart in the heat of battle. They crumble while waiting for their door to open, or shortly after they ascend to their long-awaited opportunity. They fail on one or more of the four critical dimensions of emotional intelligence:

- **Self-Awareness:** Do you know you? Self-awareness is about knowing what makes you tick, what affects you, what you feel. It is about being aware of what lifts your spirits, what starts your moods. One team watched each morning from their third-floor office as their manager got out of her car. They could tell by the way she closed her car door what kind of day they would have. She might have been a great performer with super preparation. Her potential for going higher was in the red.
- **Self-Management:** Peter Drucker famously postulated you must manage yourself well before you can successfully manage others. Some less famous advisor suggested you should dress for the job you want, not the one you have. Living in the green means carrying yourself at the level you want, not the one you have. It means carrying yourself with dignity. It means living the calmness, the maturity, the perspective of the position or leadership level you are preparing to assume.
- **Social Awareness:** Employees often comment, “Our manager doesn’t remember being one of us.” Social awareness is about remembering. It is about knowing what other people are experiencing; seeing things through the eyes of others. It is about being empathetic enough to

sincerely care about the wants, needs, concerns of others.

- **Relationship Management:** Despite all our technology, nothing gets done without people. Relationship management is about making friends along the way. It is about keeping in touch with them. It is mostly about keeping a quid pro quo balance in the give and take of working with others throughout your career.

Here is the test the succession planning committee uses to assess your performance, preparation, potential package:

“Lee performs well. Lee is prepared. But, I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. There is something about Lee keeping me from lending my support.”

The “unknown” lies in the emotional intelligence quadrant. You may not see it. The committee does. More importantly, the selection committee (executive) feels it.

CONCLUSION

YOUR CAREER DEPENDS ON YOU MONITORING YOUR OWN PERSONAL NINE-BOX.

If you expect to get ahead, you need to self-assess your job performance, your preparation for the next level, your emotional intelligence quotient. You need to continuously conduct your own personal 360-degree evaluation of you through the eyes of the succession planning committee as the well as the hearts and minds of those who will accept (or not accept) you as their next leader.

Mike Deblieux (mike@deblieux.com) designs and presents people management seminars. He works with individual workplace leaders through his unique 1.2.1 Management Development program. He facilitates team retreats.