

# The Deblieux Report

July 2020

## Succession Starts with Opportunity

Creating Potential Before Getting to High Potential

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There is a lot of talk in HR circles about “high potential” employees. “Hi-po’s” are individuals who senior leaders deem to have what it takes to move up the leadership ladder.

Hi-po’s are typically identified through a sophisticated succession planning process. They are most often people who have some experience being in charge. Senior leaders see them, if not every day, at least a few times a year. They are people who learn the language and practice of management through formal and informal association with higher ups.

**The Flaw:** The flaw in identifying high potential employees is the failure to ask:

How do our employees get their foot on the first rung of the leadership career ladder?

The honest answer is someone opens a door. Someone creates an opportunity for an individual contributor to show a glimmer of leadership ability.

The fact is you get to be a leader because someone takes a risk with you before they see you as a potential leader. They ask you to take care of something important. They give you a challenging assignment. They leave you in charge for an hour while they are away. You do a good job; they start thinking about your leadership potential. There is no drum roll. There is no written record. There is a subtle upward shift in your value to the organization. No opportunity, no upward shift.

**The Pool:** Recruiters like to talk about the “candidate pool.” In general terms, the candidate pool is a group of people who appear to have the basic qualifications for an open position.

When it comes to leadership, there is more than one leadership candidate pool. There is a different pool for each rung on the leadership career ladder. Each pool at each rung gets smaller. Fewer people get to swim in each higher level pool.

Suppose your organization has an opening for a Team Lead. Assume the division where this opening exists has one hundred employees. In theory, all one hundred are in the Team Lead candidate pool. In theory, they all have the potential to be promoted someday. (We will come back to this theory in a second.)

For now, assume a Team Lead is selected. A few months later a Team Supervisor opening is posted. Who is in the Team Supervisor candidate pool? The Team Supervisor pool does not hold one hundred people. It is much smaller. It only holds ten people - our new Team Lead and the other nine who were already in the Team Lead pool. They are the ten swimmers in our Team Supervisor candidate pool. This phenomenon continues to the top of the career ladder. You cannot get into the second or third pool without having had admission to the first pool. You cannot get into the first pool without some help. Someone has to “see” you. Someone has to create an opportunity for you to show some of your “stuff.”

**The Assumption:** Let us return to our assumption that one hundred people from the general employee population pool are eligible for consideration as a Team Lead. The assumption does not hold true. Some of the one hundred:

- Do not want to move into leadership
- Are not performing well enough
- Have only recently joined the organization
- Were not seen as potential leaders because they were never given the opportunity to lead

The last point, **not given the opportunity**, is the **point** of this article.

**The Opportunity:** We can argue if leaders are born or developed. We cannot argue that individual contributors get a chance to get into the first leadership pool because somebody notices them and extends a helping hand (opportunity) before they become a Team Lead candidate.

There are many reasons why every individual contributor does not get an opportunity to show they have leadership potential. Some are legitimate. Most are subtle. Too many are linked, unintentionally or unknown to the decision maker, to characteristics like race, sex, gender, age, and more. Whatever the explanation, the result is a **decreasingly diverse candidate pool** at each level of the leadership career ladder.

It is not easy to spot leadership potential in individual contributors. It is even harder when some are invisible. It takes work to see everyone. It requires risk to create opportunities.

Think of all the missed opportunities for high potential candidates in your organization. Who was not given a pre-leader opportunity because they were not seen as a potential (never mind high potential) leader when they were an individual contributor? Why were they not “seen” as someone who could be trusted with an important assignment, much less left in charge for a couple of hours? Contrast them with those who were given a free pass into the leadership candidate pool because of shared hobbies, or other similarities with the boss.

**The Challenge:** We humans tend to do what we are rewarded for doing. It is why we eat a candy bar even though we are trying to lose weight. It feels good at the moment. It does not support our long-term goal. Decision makers are human (although some may argue). They get rewarded when they surround themselves with people like themselves (smooth relationships, less effort). They get rewarded when things go well (not having to fix mistakes).

If succession is to create opportunity, the rewards for decision makers must change. The big boss must ask some tough questions and create accountability around the answers. Questions like:

- Why do you depend so much on one person?
- Who have you overlooked for an opportunity?
- What are your criteria for trust?
- What are your biases?
- Why isn't there more diversity among the formal and informal leaders on your team?

Maybe a term for what we are talking about here is pre-potential, pre-potential leaders. Maybe it is time to talk about how we identify those pre-potential leaders and what we do to open a door to help them dog paddle in the leadership potential pool.

If you are a leader, you know it is normal to have favorites. But you must also recognize that having favorites gives you blinders. Blinders keep you from creating opportunities. Opportunities create visibility. They increase the diversity of the first leadership pool, the quality of your leadership team, and the future success of your organization.

You can start by looking at your own habits. Who do you leave in charge? What projects on your desk could provide an opportunity for someone to show a sliver of potential you have not seen? Who have you not talked to about what it is like to be a leader? Why are you not willing to take a risk to create an opportunity? These are tough questions. You need a clear mirror in front of you to see the true answers. Maybe your honest answers could create an opportunity that would make a difference.

Maybe. Just maybe.

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