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Designated as high-potential?

It doesn't mean
you're home free.

THE FAST TRACK TO FAILURE

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Congratulations:

You've made the high-potentials list. As a HiPo, you're now a prominent blip on HR's radar. More importantly, you are about to be sucked into the machinery of the company's accelerated-development system, the centerpiece of which is probably some kind of rotation: a "better than random walk" through a series of assignments designed to test your mettle, provide you with a "macro view" of the firm, and prepare you for top management positions. According to HR consultancy Development Dimensions International, four in ten U.S. employers have some such fast-track program.

But before you commence your meteoric ascent, here's a warning: The fast-track system contains four inherent traps that HR may not have mentioned when you signed on—traps that can derail the most promising career.

TRAP #1: THE HIPO LABEL. Don't expect a big welcome. Whether or not the HiPo program is public, people will soon figure out that you are being parachuted in and that top management expects you—and not necessarily them—to go on to bigger things. That is not exactly an incentive for your new boss, who may not have been tapped for the program, to eagerly invest in your personal and professional development.

Remember: The new boss does not really care about your *potential* and, in that respect, has a very different agenda from HR or top management. Your boss wants to see *results*.

So the first thing you must develop is a good diagnostic system to determine the needs of new bosses as you move across assignments—to try to understand their perspective and figure out how to cultivate the most productive working relationship possible: Where is this boss in his or her career, and what does he or she care about? How can you add value to the new boss and make him or her look good? What pressures are sitting on the boss? What are your boss's feelings of anxiety about you, and how can you allay them? How does the boss like to operate or interact, and how must you adapt your style? Most HiPos can work this out in time, but the more quickly you do so, the greater your chances of success. Too many working relationships never recover from poor starts.

At the same time, you also have new subordinates with whom to contend. They too have you tagged, especially if you are the latest in a series of supervisors to occupy what has become a "developmental post." Conscious of the fact that you are unlikely to be around for long, employees will simply keep their heads down and wait for you to move on. In the words of one HiPo appointed as country manager of the Australian subsidiary of a U.S. information-services firm: "Surviving the boss had become a sport. It was like, 'I wonder how long this one's going to last?' Re-engaging those people took a lot of effort."

HiPos rarely start off with a clean slate. They come in pre-labeled. Typically, the expectation is that they will not add much—and may, in fact, leave a mess. So incoming HiPos need to be mindful of that reputation and work hard to establish goodwill with their new subordinates before trying to put their stamp on the unit.

TRAP #2: THE ENTITLEMENT SYNDROME. It's not just other people's expectations that need to be managed—it's your own. Being groomed for leadership responsibilities can breed a sense of entitlement; we meet all too many HiPos who have grown accustomed to being rewarded for being bright and creative.

There is a societal dimension: Ongoing research stretching back a quarter of a century reveals that narcissism levels have risen steadily among U.S. college students. Narcissism is associated with self-importance and expectations of special treatment—and the current generation's mean narcissism score approaches that of a celebrity sample of movie stars, reality TV contestants, and famous musicians.

Another driver of this attitude is the organizational system that designates up-and-comers as stars. Anointing people early on and in a quasi-irreversible fashion can lead them to believe that they have automatic ascension rights. HR heads describe to us line managers who become so full of themselves that they cannot see their limitations and grow angry when they don't get what they feel entitled to in terms of interesting new work, plum developmental assignments, or promotions. As one HR manager described it: "It's as if they just needed to collect enough Boy Scout badges to get themselves to the next level."

For them, leadership becomes a consumption item—associated with having a glamorous and powerful position in life—as opposed to an opportunity to contribute, build, and grow others.

Aspiring leaders need to ward off this insidious mindset, which often accompanies repeated successes in relatively structured situations. HiPos must continue to prove themselves worthy of responsibility, not simply to be recipients of accolades and promotions.

TRAP #3: THE WHISTLE-STOP TOUR. In too many companies, HiPos are whisked through multiple assignments and never stay long enough in any position to experience that assignment's complete business cycle. As a result, they lack a full appreciation of either the detail or the big picture of these areas; critically, they may never have to live with the consequences of their decisions—or to draw the necessary conclusions. In short, they do not adequately develop the capabilities they were missing.

This risk was apparent to George Buckley when he became CEO of 3M, where executives had been changing jobs at intervals of eighteen months or less. Executives “have to be in the job long enough, not only for their successes to visit them, but for their failures to visit them. We all have both,” he told *USA Today* last May. “When people move too often, there is more thought given to the next place, not to developing people and developing relationships. I didn’t like the merry-go-round. I changed that immediately.” In particular, forcing executives to occupy jobs for longer stretches significantly altered their incentive to help develop others.

Another facet of the whistle-stop tour is the lack of systematic post-assignment reviews to articulate truly what was learned and how it adds to the executive’s experience base and mental models. Exceptional bosses do this spontaneously, but often HiPos must take the initiative in extracting this feedback—to help them review the choices made (or missed) and key lessons generated from the completed assignment. This exercise is often the most critical aspect of the experience—an aspect essential to locking in and leveraging the learning.

HiPos can too easily delude themselves about their strengths and limitations. If you are serious about moving into top management—and of course you are—you must make some tough choices about how much effort to devote to which areas, in order to grow the capabilities that enable the exercise of extreme responsibility.

One practice that often prevents this type of (self) reflection is companies’ tendency to transfer individuals from one assignment to the next without the slightest gap in between. In some cases, the assignments even overlap—the executive starts the new job while still handling bits of the old job.

Executives do not always have a great deal of say in the length of their assignments or the time between assignments. But simply engaging in that conversation indicates an interest in deep development and a desire to make a meaningful contribution to the company. Even if top management can’t—or won’t—change its plans, this is a conversation that demonstrates maturity.

TRAP #4: THE “YES” TOO FAR. Upon climbing on the high-performance track, you give up much of your power to turn down or negotiate assignments. Often, in the early part of your career, the situation you deal with—while it might feel like a mess—is relatively structured: You operate within an existing framework or boundaries, and the targets are mostly extrapolations of the current trends. Your dutiful acceptance of these assignments wins you points.

But you will reach a stage in your advancement where the next step is total ambiguity, where the challenge is both novel and unstructured. Often this coincides with the shift to general

management responsibilities. You suddenly face multiple tasks outside your zone of past experience—whether functional, commercial, or geographical. You are now “the person in charge,” a “decision-maker”—and the first in line when things go wrong.

You need to recognize this discontinuity and not let the excitement of the challenge cloud your judgment about the long stretch involved. The last thing you need is to sign on for “mission impossible.” In particular, you don’t want to agree to specific targets in an environment that is very volatile and in which you do not have command over the necessary resources.

When that opportunity presents itself, you need to assess the defining features of the situation: Is it a start-up, a turn-around, or an invigoration challenge? Is there a lot of external uncertainty in the economy/market or internal uncertainty in that the project is outside or marginal to the organization’s core business?

Then, you must enter into a negotiation with the boss(es) about the resources required to do the job well: in terms of funding, people, timeframe, or scale of the targets. But often the issue is less about getting all this agreed in advance and more about engaging a negotiation process that can evolve over time as the conditions beyond your control become clearer.

Ensuring that you get the right attention and support is not easy, but it is a key part of your development. As they move up the hierarchy, HiPos must learn to deal with high-caliber people who are difficult and strong-willed and who know how to get what they want.

The work of leadership certainly requires business smarts, technical capabilities, and cultural sensibilities. But above all, it is about having the necessary fire in the belly to fight for leadership power and to handle the higher stress involved. Being selected for a high-potential program is a vote of confidence from top management that you have that fire along with everything else you bring to the job. Don’t let it go out. ■

