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Musings

#38: Grooming Your HiPos April 29, 2020

For those not versed in HR speak, a HiPo is a high-potential employee. These are the members of the team who are exhibiting great potential for future leadership. They deserve some special attention.

First, you have to identify them. I look for the person who “wants the ball.” Rather than avoiding accountability, they want it. Ryan Holmes (CEO of HootSuite) identified five characteristics of a “Unicorn Employee” that I agree with:

- 1) **Not limited by job title:** Flexible and intellectually curious
- 2) **Thinks big AND small:** Sees big picture of market but also in the details
- 3) **True grit:** Dogged persistence even during choppy times
- 4) **Respectful by nature:** Ability to work with others at all levels
- 5) **Gets shit done:** Produces actual results

Right now in a time of crisis, you see the people who “step up.” To Ryan’s #1 characteristic, you see the employee who offers to order the dinner for the late night meeting or help someone carry a box. You see the employee who is creative and offers ideas on how to handle a problem. These are your HiPos.

After identifying them, you can’t let bureaucracy get in the way. The standard organization rule is to invite all people at a certain level of seniority to certain meetings or events. So a meeting might be for the Vice Presidents and “above.” Ignore that standard and invite a HiPo with a “lower” title. The bureaucracy-loving VP will complain but your organization needs to be a meritocracy regardless of title. Send that message.

Most organizations do salary adjustments once a year. Consider a mid-year move if you see superior performance. A HiPo’s market value will accelerate quicker than the norm. Think, if my HiPo came in tomorrow and resigned because someone had made him or her a better offer, what would I do? Then, do that now before the HiPo gets poached. Hopefully, your organization will become known for growing good talent. The poachers will be in the parking lot. You need to protect your team.

Keep giving them more. HiPos will want as much as you can give them. Push them into areas outside of their comfort zone. I know one company which takes general managers and makes the HiPos serve a stint in HR. Give them responsibility for a “unit” if you are in a multi-site model even if the model is for someone to own all stores in a given area. See what they do with that one unit.

Finally, create a discrete development program for HiPos. Many of the recipients of these musings were members of a leadership institute we created some years ago. It was far from perfect but the program allowed us to directly message to these HiPos that we were going to invest in them and they had a bright future.

Remember that the smartest people are usually the hardest to manage. They won't just accept something but rather question it and maybe suggest a different path. Don't immediately get defensive – be open. They likely will teach you something. HiPos will test your patience but you don't want the compliant lower-potential employee even if it makes your life temporarily easier.

Inevitably, you will lose some HiPos. No matter how fast your organization might be growing and how much you can give them. They may get poached. Don't get too down about it. It is something to be proud of.

Be safe.

Jml

Second Thoughts

A Wall Street Journal editorial page on telehealth popularity. [zoom doctor](#)