

Set Your High Potential Talent Up to Fail. Really.

┌ The best thing you can do for your high potentials is to give them learning experiences outside their comfort zone. Failure and feedback in a controlled setting will help drive successful behaviors in real pressure situations when effective leadership matters most.



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OK, so “fail” may be a strong word, and I’m not advocating sabotage. What I mean by this advice is to stretch your high potentials’ learning capacity beyond their comfort and capability zones. Stretch it to where failure is an option. Ah – that changes the rules doesn’t it?

Think back to the lessons or experiences you had in the past that have stuck with you over time. What most people remember best is a failure – a failure in the “school of hard knocks” perhaps. Winners can’t recall every competition in which they won a trophy, but they rarely forget the ones they failed to win. The same is true for your high potentials, and I bet even for you. Think of the lessons that have impacted your life the most. Did they arise from successes or from failures? Did you learn more from your correct decisions or from your mistakes?

This topic is important because, to fill critical leadership gaps, studies show that organizations worldwide are more likely to grow talent and promote internally, rather than hire externally. That begs the question: what is the best way to develop high-potential talent so that these nascent leaders are prepared for the rough and tumble of today’s complex global marketplace?

Ranking of key strategies for leadership development

Respondants selected top three choices.

Grow talent internally by identifying high performing leaders	78%
Provide learning opportunities (i.e., experimental learning, formal classroom programs)	62%
Provide coaching, mentoring, job shadowing, rotational programs	55%
Improve leadership succession planning	45%
Identify high potentials earlier in their careers	31%
Hire more leaders from the open market	15%
Use special tools and systems that rely on technology	4%

N=654

Source: The Conference Board, Inc.

Right Management’s joint research with The Conference Board – as well as our years of experience in helping companies address this issue – tell us that **experience-based learning methods**, such as action learning projects, simulations, coaching or mentoring, and rotational programs have significant impact on a leader’s development.

With experienced-based activities, such as business simulations and challenge labs, participants have the opportunity to make decisions, take initiative, learn from their actions, and be held accountable for results. That latter part is important – holding them accountable for results. This includes failure. By the way, failure does not mean punishment. True high potentials don’t take setbacks lying down, and they are quick to examine what they did right and wrong, and draw important lessons from failure. Typically, more is learned from failure (and re-examination) than from success.

To prevent failure turning into punishment, safety nets and governance policies are set up to protect the individual person and his or her engagement. That means risks are acknowledged up front and coaching and mentoring is provided along the way. Risk mitigation is also a key element, but even so, high potentials are allowed to make mistakes. The point is we want them to **fail in a controlled setting** rather than later when they are leading a business or a function.

Almost by definition, failure hurts. For many the hurt is due to punishment provided by others, but many self-demanding people are often harder on themselves. These people often learn quickly and don’t make the same mistakes twice. By creating a controlled setting in which participants are allowed to take risks and potentially fail, you have the opportunity to modify or reinforce behaviors “in the moment” without the negative risk of punishment, and impart learnings that will stick with participants long after the program has ended.

Blended with other methodologies – including executive coaching, mentoring, and self-directed study – experiential learning can be powerful tool to help your top talent gain insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their current leadership behaviors, adopt more effective approaches as needed, and sustain those new behaviors over time.