

Reaching your Potential

28 April 2017

Where do you sit on the talent grid?

You know, the one that tracks performance on one scale and potential on the other - sometimes called the 9-box model, though I dare say there are 4, 16, and 25 box models as well. As with all the best management models, anywhere approaching the top right is the best place to be. Though of course, only a small percentage of people will sit comfortably in that rarified space, their reputation defying any attempts to pull them left or down. Performance ratings are tricky enough with some managers possibly confusing the performance against targets of the last year, with a need to protect their best people, ensure a good salary increase, and stay within organisational parameters (of course, no one likes to use the term quota). In any distribution of performers, or any set of scores for that matter, there will always be a top 20%. The trouble is, according to Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins, in their book, "Abolishing Performance Appraisals", 80% of people believe they are in the top 20% of performers - which is going to leave (at least) 60% of the workforce disappointed, when they get their ratings.

So lets assume that, like 70% of whichever population we are looking at, you sit somewhere in the middle of the performance grid. Now what about potential? Because we all have great potential don't we? Well, at some point in our working life, I'm sure we all knew that we did. Remember those early personal development goals where you said you wanted to reach your "full" potential? What does that phrase actually mean? If you reach your full potential, does that mean there is no more potential to achieve, or that you have already made it to the top?

Robert Kaplan ponders this in his HBR article on "Reaching your potential" (note he has left "full" out of the title). You can read it here <https://hbr.org/2008/07/reaching-your-potential>. He says we often ask ourselves, "Am I reaching my potential?" (a better question) and explains that this is not the same as asking, "How do I rise to the top?" or "How can I be successful in my career?" (or, we might add, how do I get viewed as a high potential?). Rather, he suggests, it's more about taking a very personal look at how you define success in your heart of hearts and then finding your path to get there. In coaching, this identification (and/or deconstructing) of desired outcomes is very often the hardest task - or as a colleague said recently, "much of the work is in figuring out what the work is". To do that, it helps to step back and reassess your career to this point —starting with the recognition that managing it is your responsibility. Too many people feel like victims in their careers, when in fact you have a substantial degree of control and you are the only one who can (manage your career).

Early Retirement?

I was struck by the news yesterday that English cricketer Zafar Ansari "announces his retirement" at the age of 25. This is a bold move from someone who as well as being selected for his national team, has a double first from Cambridge University, and said there were just too many other ambitions he

wanted to fulfil. What a great approach to managing your career and not getting stuck, and certainly taking the advice of the late Steve Jobs who famously encouraged the graduating class of Stanford University to "Never Settle". And don't they say that the best career advice is to do what you love and love what you do? (regardless of how well it pays). Loving what you do, according to Kaplan, gives you the strength to weather personal setbacks, overcome adversity, face and address your weaknesses, and work the long hours typically needed to reach your potential. For Kaplan, the key is to take a fresh look at your behaviour in 3 areas: knowing yourself, excelling at critical tasks, and demonstrating character and leadership.

Do we all have the same potential? This was the question posed on a message board recently. I thought the best answer was given by Tony Nguyen (written Oct 7, 2015). "Pick up an apple 1 meter above the ground and pick up another 2 meters above the ground. The second apple has more potential energy. Simple! Our potential, he says, depends on our circumstances, on what food we have available, the quality of our air, other people, etc. These vary from place to place - Given that, we don't have the same potential". Which reminds me of the assertion, that the difference between the person you are today, and the person you are in five years time, is down to who are the people you spend your time with. It seems to me, that the question of potential, when it comes to work, is all about perspective. If you find yourself with an unhelpful label that limits your potential, you need to find a way to get out of that box, rather than waiting for someone else to do so. Very often, the most self limiting scripts that stop us reaching our potential come from within.

The Anatomy of a High Potential

But lets say you are attracted to the notion of being a high-potential. According to another HBR article (<https://hbr.org/2010/06/are-you-a-high-potential>), "High potentials consistently and significantly outperform their peer groups in a variety of settings and circumstances. While achieving these superior levels of performance, they exhibit behaviors that reflect their companies' culture and values in an exemplary manner. Moreover, they show a strong capacity to grow and succeed throughout their careers within an organization—more quickly and effectively than their peer groups do." It's true that there might be 3-5% (as defined in the article) that meet these dizzying standards. For the rest of us, the depth of our potential, will depend very much on how we see ourselves. One of my early early trainers in the business of coaching was Olympic athlete, David Hemery. He used to say that within everyone there is "a spark of greatness" which fits very nicely with the amazing idea that we are all born in the image and likeness of God. If only we could see it.

As Kaplan says, there's nothing anyone can do to prevent you from reaching your potential; the challenge is for you to identify your dream, develop the skills, and exhibit character and leadership to get there. Then, you need the courage to periodically reassess, make adjustments, and pursue a life that reflects who you truly are.

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