



**FAST TRACKERS,
SPECIALISTS and
UNsung HEROES**

FAST TRACKERS, SPECIALISTS AND UNSUNG HEROES

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE TALENT TYPES

By Professor Preston Bottger and Jean-louis Barsoux – March 2013

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

When executives talk about talent they usually mean their company's emerging or established leaders: highly-trained people with MBAs or an equivalent level of street smarts, and a track record of achieving business results.

But this understanding of talent is both misleading and incomplete. It implies that there is a single kind of brilliant person who is capable of slotting into any context and handling any assignment, when the truth is that companies need a broad, rich variety of people with complementary talents, not just those with "leadership potential."

In our experience, senior executives need to be aware of three types of talented employee, their different career trajectories, and the different ways in which they should be developed to make the most of what they have to offer the company.

Fast trackers. These are employees who are earmarked as future senior leaders. They might start out in one function associated with their educational background – engineering or marketing, for example – before taking on assignments in others to get more rounded experience.

The main development challenge with fast trackers is giving them assignments that stretch their abilities while still allowing the function in which they are placed to draw on their previous experience and high energy levels. The department must get a meaningful contribution; the assignment should not represent a one-way gain. The assignment should also be for a period that is appropriate to the context, such as a full sales cycle or until a change is firmly embedded. Too often, fast trackers are rotated through assignments at set time intervals, such as every six months, which means that they become experts at only one thing – starting new initiatives.

Specialists. These are great individual contributors who work with their intellects and creative capabilities. They can come from all sorts of backgrounds, from research and accounting to engineering and law. Their output is often highly regarded by others in their profession, and many receive regular calls from head-hunters.

Developing the specialists poses a different set of challenges. Some specialists might want to move into management, often for better compensation, while others can be pushed into management when they surpass others in their specialism. However, this transition is likely to succeed only if they have a talent for managing people, have already received developmental experiences, and are accepted by their peers.

Senior executives looking to switch a specialist into management should be cautious, and need to recognize that they are likely to need extra training in this area. For example, specialists often work in isolation from non-technical professionals, so they need to get used to working with colleagues in other disciplines, perhaps through secondments or participation in cross-functional teams. They also need limited-risk exposure to managing people, coupled with preparatory training in tasks such as delegation, communication, and making decisions when other people's interests conflict with their own.

It is also important to note that not all specialists will be interested in, nor cut out for, an executive role, but they still need to be kept fresh and energized in their specialist role. This requires varying their assignments and giving them time "off-line" to expand and deepen their learning. This could take the form of benchmarking visits to firms in other industries, or participation in professional conferences, for example.

Unsung heroes. These are the middle managers who not destined for senior leadership, but who possess highly developed management capabilities, deep knowledge of key processes, and play a critical part in making sure things happen.

This talent category presents two types of challenges to the senior executives. The first, and perhaps the more difficult, arises when people imagine that their capabilities are greater than they really are. There will come a point when some of these ambitious and talented mid-level executives will learn that, in spite of their crucial past and continuing contributions, their bosses do not expect them to break through into the senior executive ranks. The challenge for the CXO is to help the person digest this setback; if they are successful, he or she may be able to keep the person contributing at the same high levels as before.

Unsung heroes can start to feel undervalued when they see fast trackers bypass them and specialists gain more recognition. They can withdraw and start channeling more of their spare energy outside the firm. No one wins if they become cynical and bitter. Where they once served as enthusiastic agents for improvement, they can turn into passive – sometimes even active – resisters.

The team leader must pre-empt this loss of performance. To help talented executives come to terms with disappointment, he or she can propose new developmental and learning challenges. For example, they can be lent to other units or be put in charge of particular projects. In some situations, however, it might be best for all involved to encourage the employee to broaden their horizons outside the firm. The team leader's challenge is to anticipate this situation before talented individuals become toxic to their environment, rather than trying to deal with the fallout.

The second type of unsung hero are the people who have accepted the reality of their mid-level management career without the necessity of being told by others. Indeed, they are happy with the level of responsibility they have, and seek no additional responsibility or pressure. Despite this, the alert team leader will ensure that such a person remains fully engaged in the business. One useful method is to maintain and perhaps increase their involvement in the resolution of significant and complex issues, special projects that lie beyond their immediate job scope.

This is an edited extract from Leading in the Top Team, edited by Preston Bottger and Jean-Louis Barsoux, published by Cambridge University Press. Preston Bottger is Professor of Leadership at IMD, where he teaches on the EMBA and Orchestrating Winning Performance. Jean-Louis Barsoux is a senior research fellow at IMD.

Related Programs



ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE - <http://www.imd.org/owp>

The global business program for individuals and teams

Program Directors Bettina Buechel and Dominique Turpin

- Get exposed to the latest management thinking and to practical and innovative solutions for your business
- Anticipate global business trends
- Boost your performance, broaden your perspectives and expand your global network
- Design the program that suits you



EXECUTIVE MBA - <http://www.imd.org/emba>

Never stop learning

Program Director Philip Rosenzweig

- A rigorous, diverse and global program for experienced executives
- Sharpen your leadership skills, drive your learning into your company and fulfill your potential
- An execution-oriented program that focuses on turning ideas into action
- Thought leadership that you can put to use right away: earn a world-class MBA on the job