SURVIVING THE HIGH-POTENTIAL EXPERIENCE

What every HiPo needs to know to make the most of accelerated development

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Congratulations, you’ve just made it into your company’s accelerated development program. Sounds great, right? After all, now that you’re officially a high-potential employee, you can expect to be given a series of testing assignments that will prepare you to move towards a top management position.

But before you start planning what life will be like in the corner office, beware: the fast track comes with traps that can derail the most promising career, and companies can sour quickly on HiPos who run into trouble.

Here are four traps that you need to avoid.

**The HiPo label**

Don’t expect a big welcome when you start a new assignment. While HR and top management find you roles that will offer development opportunities, your new boss will not care about your potential, and has no reason to invest in your development. All he or she cares about is whether or not you can deliver results. This means that the first thing you need to develop is the ability to work out what your new boss needs from you and how you can cultivate a productive working relationship. The faster you can do this, the greater your chance of success.

Questions to ask yourself include:

- Where is this boss in his or her career?
- What does he or she care about?
- How can you make him or her look good?
- What pressures does he or she face?
- Does your boss feel anxious about you and, if so, how can you reduce this?
- How does the boss like to operate, and, consequently, how must you adapt your own style?

You also have new subordinates to contend with. They know you are only there temporarily, so many will simply keep their heads down and wait for you to move on. The usual assumption is that HiPos add little and may, in fact, leave a mess. You will have to work hard to establish goodwill before trying to put your stamp on the unit.

**Entitlement Syndrome**

It’s all too easy to develop a sense of entitlement when you’re being groomed for leadership, particularly if your organization thinks of its up-and-comers as stars. People suffering from entitlement syndrome tend to become so full of themselves that they cannot see their limitations, and they get angry when they don’t get the promotion or assignment to which they feel entitled. Effectively it means that they see leadership as a chance to increase their own status rather than an opportunity to contribute to the business and to grow others. This will not endear them to anyone.

So remember this: being a HiPo does not entitle you to anything. In fact, it means that you must continue to prove yourself worthy of responsibility.

**The whistle-stop tour**

In too many companies, HiPos are whisked through multiple assignments without ever staying in one position long enough to experience a full business cycle. As a result, they do not fully understand either the detail or the big picture of these areas and – critically – they might never have to live with the consequences of their decisions. As such the learning experience might not be as complete as the HiPo or the company imagines.

To counteract such negative consequences, some companies offer systematic post-assignment reviews, but this practice is by no means widespread. It is therefore your responsibility as a HiPo to take the initiative: ask your boss to help you review the choices you made (or missed) and what you can learn from the completed assignment. One advantage of doing this is that it will demonstrate your commitment to self-development but, more importantly, it will give you a critical external perspective on your abilities. It’s all too easy to delude yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, but if you are serious about moving into top management you must have a clear-eyed view of exactly what you need to do to improve.
The ‘yes’ too far
When you sign on as a HiPo, you do not have many chances to turn down or negotiate assignments. At the outset this is fine. You will be operating within a corporate structure, so your dutiful acceptance of these assignments wins you points.

But in time, often when you move into general management, you will reach a stage where the next step is far less structured. You will face multiple tasks outside your experience, whether functional, commercial, or geographical. You are now the person in charge – and the first in line when things go wrong.

Do not let the excitement of the challenge cloud your judgment: the last thing you want to do is to sign on for mission impossible. In particular, do not agree to specific targets in an environment that is very volatile and in which you do not have command over the necessary resources.

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

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you will need to negotiate with your boss to ensure you get the people, time, funding, and other resources that you need to do the job well. Be aware, however, that this negotiation will need to be ongoing so that you can adapt as conditions become clearer.

Ensuring you get the right attention and support is not easy, but it is a key part of your development. As you move up the hierarchy you must learn to deal with high-caliber people who are difficult, strong-willed, and who know how to get what they want. Becoming a leader isn’t simply about having commercial know how and technical ability: it’s also having the fire in your belly to handle the trip to the top.

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