

COMMUNICATING ABOUT ACCELERATION

What to Say, When to Say It, and to Whom It Should Be Said (or Not)

On the surface, the decision to accelerate leadership growth seems easy enough. But as we discuss in *Leaders Ready Now*, it is anything but. It means having to differentiate among people in ways that are not always familiar to those charged with that task. For example, referring to some leaders as “high potential” might be construed to mean that other valuable players are less important to the organization’s future. Clearly, such a message would be a mistake. So, what are the right messages to share?

Leadership shortages cripple business progress and fuel the urgency for accelerated development. Yet, we have seen some of the most determined organizations embark on the effort to identify high-potential leaders, only to be stymied by philosophical resistance to the concept of differentiating among people's potential. Their rationale often sounds something like this: "*We can't create an elitist culture,*" and "*What will we say to the ones who aren't identified?*" And yet, business logic dictates precisely that it is imperative to distinguish those most likely to return the investment in growth from those less likely to do so. This is a perfect moment to summon the boldness that we discussed in the introduction of our book.

Recall that acceleration is primarily an investment in the business and secondarily an investment in the culture. The following are essential points of departure that you likely will need to reiterate each time you host a session to identify leadership potential:

- Accelerating the growth of a subset of leaders (with high potential) is a business necessity.
- Everyone is eligible, although not everyone can participate at the same time.
- Those receiving specialized development experiences will rotate periodically.
- Those receiving specialized development are not guaranteed promotions; all promotions are based on readiness for the requirements of the role.
- Everyone in the organization still receives development.
- Not being offered accelerated development does not reduce one’s value to the organization or limit one's prospects for advancement (those judgments stem primarily from job performance).

Before proceeding to identify high-potential leaders, it is critical to restate these fundamental commitments. Clearly, there are nuances that must be crafted to fit your unique circumstances, but in general, the more open and aligned you are able to be about these tenets, the more likely that you will sustain success.

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The word “potential” is dangerous in the hallways.

What do you call the people who have been identified as having high potential and who are likely to receive accelerated development experiences? This is a very real messaging challenge. *High potentials. High-po's. Key talent. Top talent. Pivotal players.* We've seen all of these terms used, and all can be easily misconstrued as permanent designations, thus causing anyone not identified among them to feel permanently excluded. To avoid this stigma, acceleration-minded organizations often try to use such terms only behind closed doors, which then promulgates unhealthy secrecy in the process.

A useful distinction is to avoid naming people in the process and instead name what those people will experience. We favor the term *acceleration*. Throughout *Leaders Ready Now* we refer to anyone participating in an accelerated learning process as an accelerated learner, which could mean a leader at any level, experiencing any level of learning. We prefer the term *acceleration process*, but some of our client partners have opted for labels like *specialized learning, accelerated learning*, or other terms branded specifically to suit the organization's lexicon. Under this approach, people are referred to as *process participants*, which suggests temporary involvement and avoids characterizing them; instead, the focus is on the process. Ultimately, the terms selected will be only as good as the consistency with which they are used and explained, but choosing those that are most consistent with system intent is very important in sustaining support for the process.

Offer Accelerated Learners a Choice

Clearly, the prospect of accelerated development is difficult (if not impossible) to achieve if the people targeted for development aren't aware of the intent. But it's not enough to simply inform high-potential leaders that management thinks highly of their future leadership prospects. That alone won't cultivate the engagement needed to drive accelerated learning. Individual leaders must be offered the choice to participate in accelerated development or to opt out without negative consequences. Oddly, this practice is routinely overlooked. Perhaps in days gone by leaders were more uniform in their desire for advancement. Not so in today's environment. Fewer leaders seek leadership advancement, and those who do often have conditions.

Are you making offers your high-potential leaders can't refuse?

"None of us signed up for this."

Let's call him Tim. A sales superstar with a phenomenal track record, people love working with him. A straight talker, he transforms complicated problems into action plans and makes hard work rewarding.

Tim has had his share of chances to be promoted, but he likes what he does. He doesn't see the corner office as his destination.

But the company has a leadership shortage, and management needs people like Tim to step up. So, they asked him to do just that. Actually, they sort of asked him.

"This is a good development opportunity for you. . . . You really need to do this." That was the "invitation" from Tim's boss to join a group of a few dozen high-performing leaders and participate in special development opportunities that would accelerate his growth and position him to possibly take on an executive role down the road. It was a clear business need for the company and a great career opportunity for Tim.

But Tim was hesitant about the proposition, a sentiment that was echoed by others. In the orientation meeting to kick off the initiative, a latecomer (by five minutes) was publicly berated as being uncommitted to the company. Suddenly, this didn't sound so much like an opportunity.

OK, so perhaps Tim never should have been invited in the first place, and perhaps this organization's process is broken. Maybe so. Probably so. But there's more.

We asked Tim if he would be interested in accelerated development under any circumstances. He said he would *"if they were serious about involving me in the real business issues."* As it turned out, Tim is more interested than we thought. But his engagement doesn't have to do with the job he might get; it's about being a part of the solution. It's about having impact.

Accelerated development isn't a one-way street. It isn't something you wrap up and "give" to someone, particularly when that someone has a track record of success. Accelerated development is something that executives and high-potential leaders do together. Growing a cadre of emerging leaders means building a community whose purpose is to solve the most pressing business problems at hand. Everyone learns. Everyone steps up. Everyone grows together.

Are you building a learning community, or making offers that your highest-potential leaders can't refuse?

Tell Learners They Are Being Accelerated

Across the world, by far one of the most frequent questions organizations have asked us and their peers is, “*Do you tell people they’re high potential?*” The concern, of course, is not about the people who are high potential; rather, it’s about those who are not. While it’s easy to envision a healthy discussion between a manager and a leader who has just been called out as one of the company’s top performers with the highest potential, it’s more difficult to imagine a similar healthy response each time a leader asks his or her manager, “*Why not me?*” Gaps in the effectiveness of the performance management system, coupled with a lack of skills among top leaders to navigate these conversations, can create resentment among those not identified as high potentials (i.e., because they don’t get a sound explanation of why they’re not high potential, or they’re left with a feeling that their advancement possibilities are limited). Without strong communication, such concerns are legitimate and can threaten to break any high-potential identification system, no matter how well intended.

We’ve seen many organizations adopt policies of secrecy around leadership potential, keeping the names of high-potential leaders known only to the senior leadership team and Human Resources. High-potential leaders are not explicitly informed that they have been identified as such, thereby avoiding the need for senior leaders to field difficult questions about purpose and intent of the process or, worse, challenges from individuals feeling they were passed over or incorrectly evaluated. But while this approach seems to sidestep the communication challenges, it undermines the original intent of the acceleration effort.

Consider this situation from the perspective of the leader who has been identified as high potential: You are experienced and accomplished in your role. You work exceptionally hard, and your track record shows it. Management has discussed your potential and holds high hopes not only for your long-term future, but also for the near term. Management not only hopes, but *needs* you to acquire new skills and capabilities, and quickly. The business situation dictates that you (and others like you) accelerate your growth and become ready for one or more positions that right now might seem like long reaches to you. You’ll need to stretch yourself to take on development challenges that feel both exciting and intimidating, and that cause you to try new approaches to complex assignments. You may be asked to participate in key projects that can teach you crucial lessons, or you may attend powerful learning experiences that provide instrumental insights. But alas, no one has mentioned any of this to you.

From this frame of reference, the absence of clear communications to accelerated learners is exposed as ill-advised. The good news, however, is that there are ways to communicate effectively and openly—in almost any organizational culture—that do not risk damage to employee engagement. To the contrary, well-executed communications enhance engagement in development among *all* associates (not just those in accelerated learning programs) and preserve the integrity of the acceleration effort. These communications begin with a simple and often-forgotten step: asking high-potential leaders if they are interested in accelerated development.

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Send the Right Messages to Each Audience

It's not necessary to communicate all elements of the acceleration system to the entire organization. To the contrary, specific messages must be selected to meet the specific demands of the system and the organization's unique culture. Following are the primary messages we have found to facilitate adoption and engagement in high-potential identification efforts. Note that these messages presume that leadership acceleration is an organizational imperative.

What acceleration participants (accelerated learners) should know:

- The business purpose for identifying and accelerating individuals with leadership potential (i.e., rapid development of leadership is critical to business success).
- They have been identified as having leadership potential.
- The criteria used to identify potential.
- They have an option to engage in accelerated development, or not.
- Opting out of acceleration will have no negative impact on their value to the organization; they may be asked again in future years if unique circumstances (e.g., family, health) prevented participation at this time.
- Promotion/Advancement is not guaranteed to accelerated learners (high-potential leaders), nor is it denied those not participating in an acceleration process.
- Development will involve learning experiences and stretch assignments, which may at times require an extra effort and/or time commitments.

What managers of acceleration participants (accelerated Learners) should know:

- The business rationale for identifying and accelerating the growth of people with leadership potential.
- Which direct reports have been identified as high potential and are participating in an acceleration process.
- The criteria for identifying people with leadership potential.
- The commitment that will be required in the accelerated learning experiences and the support that they, as managers, will need to provide.
- Participation in accelerated learning should not keep participants from their primary job responsibilities, but some support from managers might be required to make learners available for development experiences.

What all employees should know:

- All employees will be developed.
- All employees are eligible for advancement/promotion.
- Each employee will have his or her personalized development plan.
- Management will at times ask people to participate in specialized (accelerated) development experiences to respond to critical business needs.
- Participation in specialized (accelerated) development requires that current job performance be fully proficient and sustained.

What people NOT currently participating in the acceleration process should know:

- The criteria used to identify leadership potential.
- Participation in specialized development will rotate. New people will be invited to participate periodically. Everyone is eligible, at any age.
- Improving current job performance is the best way to increase one's chances of being asked to participate in accelerated learning.

Acceleration at a Glance

Acceleration Imperative	Key Systems and Activities	Who Does What ¹			
		CEO	Senior Management Team (SMT)	Talent Management (HR)	Individual Leader (Learner)
<p>COMMIT</p> <p>Adopt acceleration as a business priority.</p> <p>Chapters 1–2</p>	<p>Acceleration Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align talent needs with business and culture strategies. Specify the highest-priority leadership growth initiatives and outcomes. Complete Leadership Capacity Analysis to strengthen the business case for talent growth. Determine short- and long-term talent system priorities (i.e., how capacity gaps will be addressed). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish importance of accelerated talent growth to the business. Clarify expectations of all leaders with respect to talent management. Charter the senior management team’s role in the acceleration process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss and agree on talent needed to execute business strategy. Agree on SMT member accountabilities. Agree on measures of success in talent management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a provocative business case for acceleration. Facilitate development of a talent strategy. Ensure that outcomes are measurable. Establish routine for progress evaluations. Ensure role clarity among all stakeholders 	N/A
<p>AIM</p> <p>Define leadership success for your business context.</p> <p>Chapter 3</p>	<p>Success Profiles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align competencies to the few leadership challenges that are most central to business success. This provides the business foundation for a success profile. Align success profiles across all leadership levels, illustrating key transitional challenges. Articulate knowledge, experiences, competencies, and personal attributes needed at each level of leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share insights on leadership needed to drive business and cultural success. Ensure input from all appropriate senior leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share insights on leadership needed to drive business and cultural success. Review and approve final profiles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate development of success profiles for all levels of leadership. Ensure stakeholder input, business relevance, and research foundations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share insights on leadership needed to drive business and cultural success.

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¹ Note that not every role is addressed in this table. Roles of managers (to whom high potentials report), mentors, executive coaches, and other key stakeholders are discussed in the specific chapters referenced for each mandate in the Acceleration Imperative.

Acceleration Imperative	Key Systems and Activities	Who Does What ²			
		CEO	Senior Management Team (SMT)	Talent Management (HR)	Individual Leader (Learner)
<p>IDENTIFY</p> <p>Make efficient, accurate decisions about whom to accelerate.</p> <p>Chapter 4</p>	<p>Talent Review (Identifying Potential)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efficiently review performance and growth of critical positions, units, or groups of leaders against business needs. Accurately identify high-potential leaders Determine whom to accelerate and how. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Champion the need to identify leadership potential. Ensure that senior leaders adopt enterprise view. Support use of objective data to support process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize organizational talent over unit-level talent. Review and evaluate leaders with rigor and objectivity. Support judgments with behaviors and examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design and facilitate rigorous processes. Ensure use of objective data to support judgments. Ensure focus on potential and growth, not only performance and results. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share personal motivations regarding development, advancement, and leadership.
<p>ASSESS</p> <p>Accurately evaluate readiness gaps and give great feedback.</p> <p>Chapters 5–6</p>	<p>Assessment and Feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess individual and group readiness for future leadership challenges. Assess high-potential leaders and possible successors against critical positions, assignments, or levels. Evaluate for Key Actions to enable precise, targeted development. Gather analytics to objectively examine readiness against future business scenarios and common/critical leadership challenges. Cultivate a dynamic, proactive feedback culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Champion use of high-quality assessments to enhance placement and development decisions. Support and become familiar with objective, valid readiness assessments for key leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support and become familiar with objective, valid readiness assessments for key leaders. Leverage assessment to enhance selection, succession, and development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure valid assessment systems for all critical positions, assignments, and role levels. Drive common application and high integrity use of assessment to improve decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step up to objective assessment to identify personal strengths and growth needs. Invite feedback to understand growth opportunities. Provide thoughtful and accurate self-evaluation.

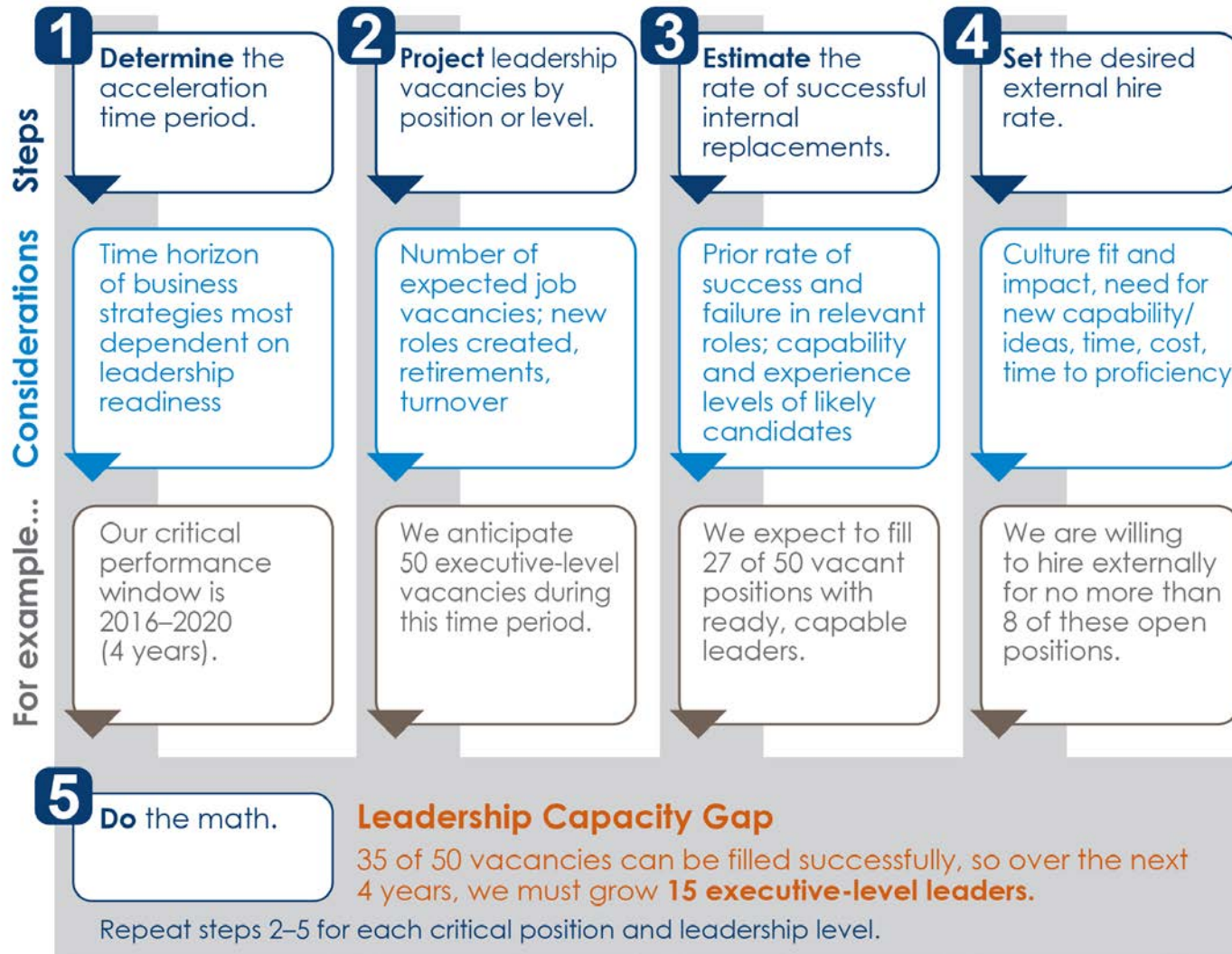
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Acceleration Imperative	Key Systems and Activities	Who Does What ³			
		CEO	Senior Management Team (SMT)	Talent Management (HR)	Individual Leader (Learner)
<p>GROW</p> <p>Make the right development happen.</p> <p>Chapters 7–11</p>	<p>Development Solutions (Individual and Group)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure a diverse array of development alternatives to support unique learning needs. Align development solutions with both aggregate (business-level) needs and individual growth needs. Foster the application and practice of leadership skill sets required for business success. Make leadership development an ongoing process and blur the lines between learning and performing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure sufficient organizational resources to support development. Hold senior management accountable for talent growth. Devote personal time to catalyzing growth of key leaders and senior team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support investments in development. Devote personal time to catalyzing growth of key leaders and/or groups. Be accountable for talent growth. Apply creativity and risk in generating high-value learning opportunities for key leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assemble diverse development alternatives to support unique learning needs. Ensure role clarity and support for development. Cultivate executives as mentors to enhance impact and business relevance of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commit time and energy to growth opportunities. Take on “stretch” assignments to cultivate new skills. Seek feedback and input from colleagues and mentors to improve approaches.
<p>SUSTAIN</p> <p>Aggressively manufacture the energy for growth.</p> <p>Chapter 12</p>	<p>Measurement, Accountability, and Communication Tactics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure top management modeling and active engagement in acceleration activities. Drive global alignment and engagement. Ensure system alignment and full accountability among senior management. Secure skill-building opportunities for all process players. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create positive growth tension by setting bold targets and high expectations for growth. Drive accelerated growth within the senior management team, including self. Ensure routine review of progress against measures of success. Communicate plans and progress clearly and often. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Champion the focus on achieving talent growth outcomes. Model process discipline. Initiate action to drive stretch development and sustain energy toward goal attainment. Hold high potentials and managers accountable for growth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustain growth tension by monitoring progress against growth metrics. Facilitate peer reviews of development progress to promote mutual input and healthy competition. Ensure skill development for coaches and mentors to enhance development support. Communicate clearly and often about plans, roles, and progress. Celebrate and communicate successes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take charge of personal development, and stretch self to conquer new and unfamiliar challenges. Communicate support needs to management to ensure that development stays on track. Ensure that development goals are measurable and business relevant. Develop strengths and derailers with equal vigor. Expand self-awareness by enlisting input from a network of colleagues.

³ Note that not every role is addressed in this table. Roles of managers (to whom high potentials report), mentors, executive coaches, and other key stakeholders are discussed in the specific chapters referenced for each mandate in the Acceleration Imperative.

CAPACITY GAP CALCULATION PROCESS

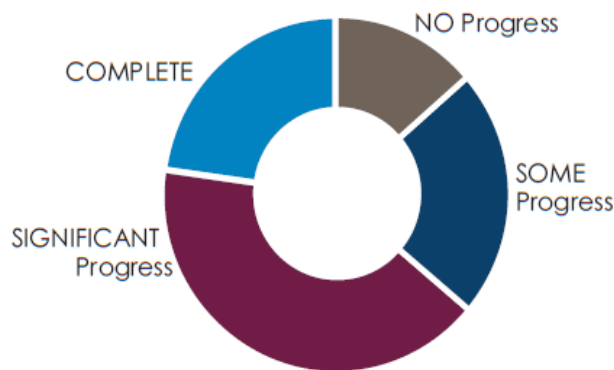


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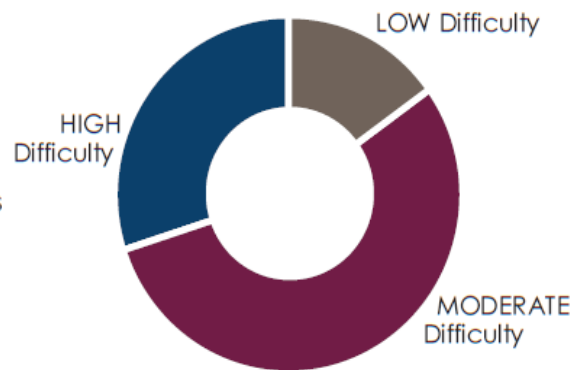


Sample Acceleration Dashboards

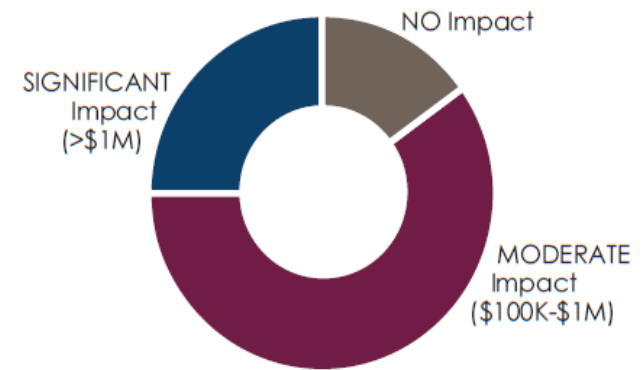
Acceleration System Dashboard



Progress Against Development Plans



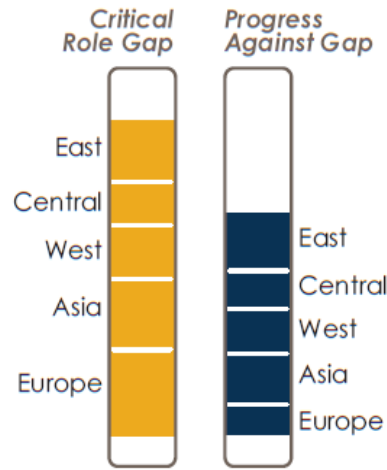
Difficulty of Development Plans



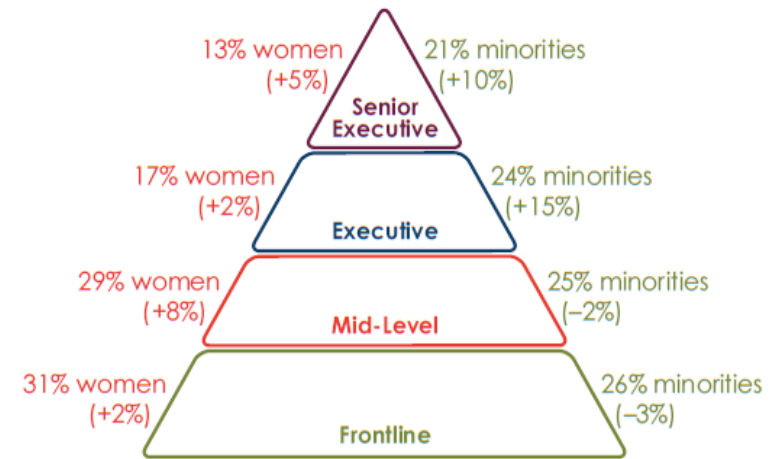
Business Impact of Development Plans (in dollars)



Speed to Completion of Development Plans



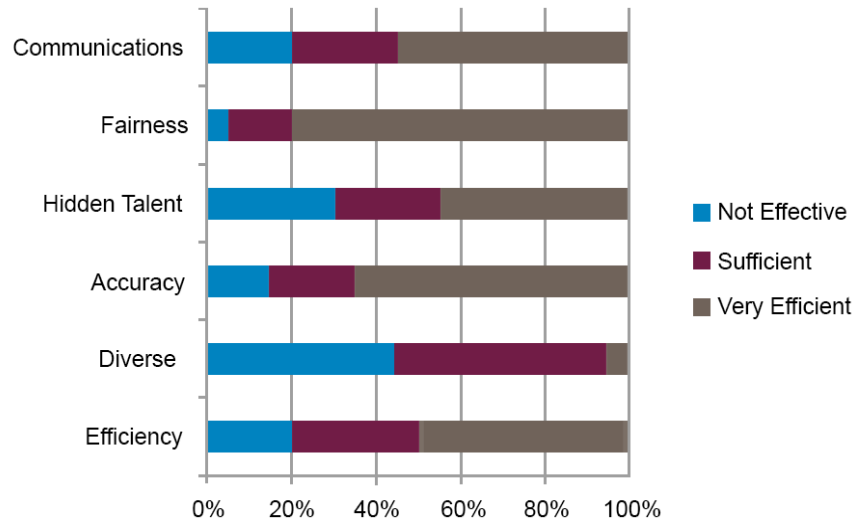
Readiness



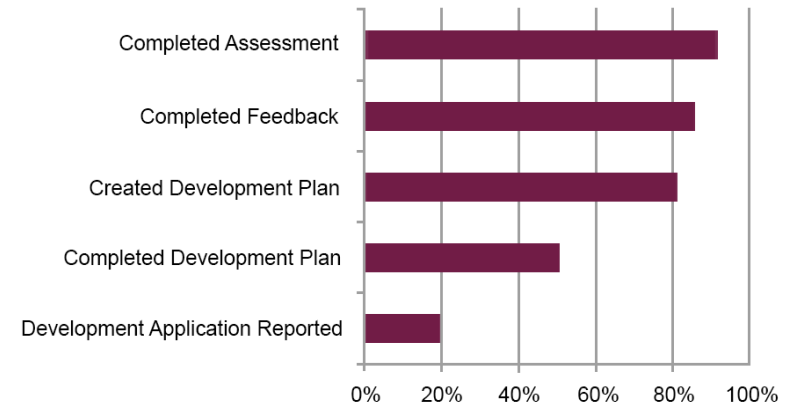
Diversity

Acceleration System Dashboard

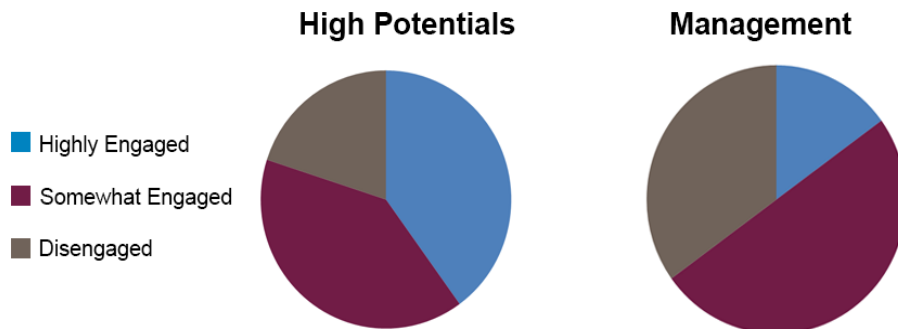
High Potential Identification Effectiveness



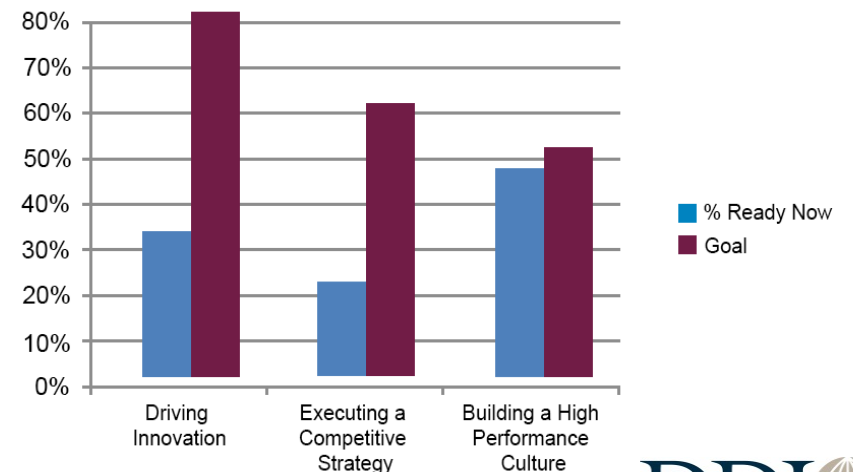
Development Activity



Engagement in Development

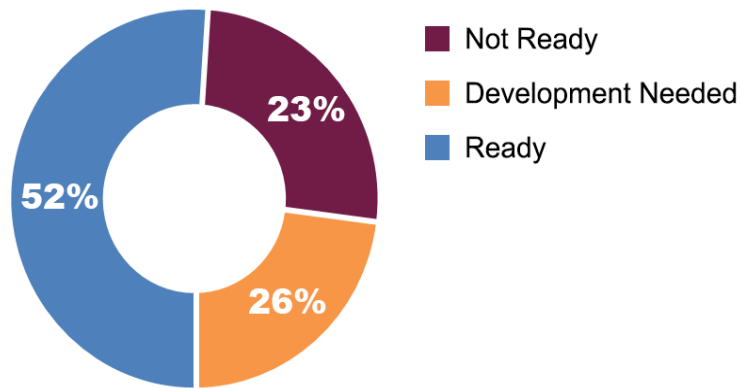


Business Driver Readiness Growth Rate

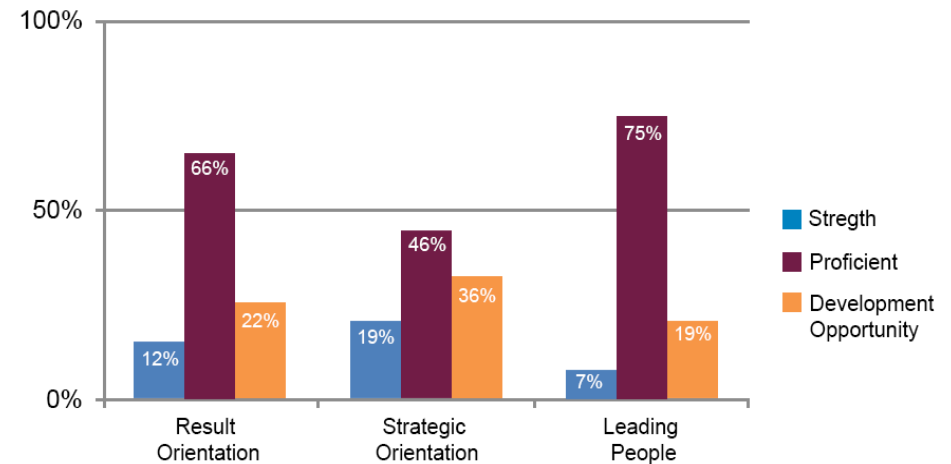


Business Driver Progress Update (Driving Efficiency)

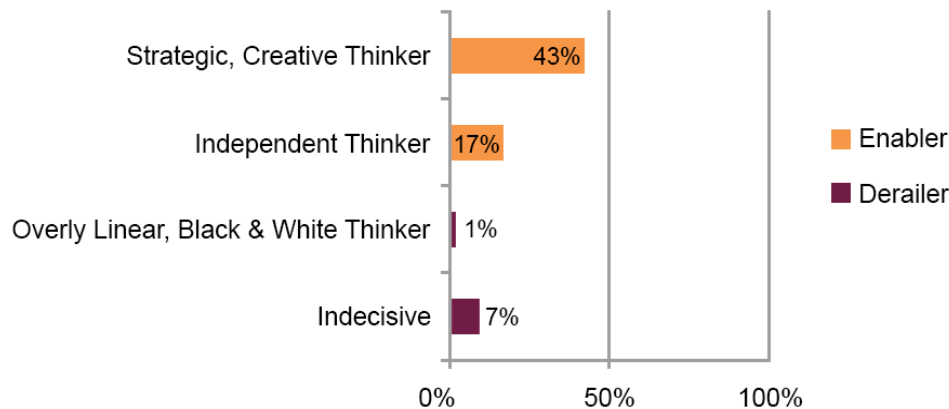
Ratings in Percentage



Competency Ratings in Percentage



Personality Patterns for Driving Efficiency



More than 35% of your leaders need development in Strategic Orientation in order to successfully execute on Driving Efficiency.

Nevertheless, the enabling patterns suggest more than **40% of your leaders are strategic/ creative thinkers.**

COMMITTING TO ACCELERATION

Acceleration is a discipline, a way of operating that makes your talent systems work better and faster to produce more leaders *ready now* for your business. As such, it requires that you and your senior management team commit to acceleration in the same way you commit to other top business priorities. But in order to quicken your systems, it's essential to be clear about where you're going in the first place and how you plan to get there.

At Fifth Third Bank, CEO Kevin Kabat's strategic architecture for leadership acceleration helped to see the firm through the financial crisis of 2009 and emerge as a stronger, more competitive player. Dan Neary, CEO at Mutual of Omaha, has led a decade-long focus on leadership growth that has fueled success that he deems would have been impossible without the emphasis on acceleration. Add Quest Diagnostics' Ken Freeman and Nissan's Carlos Ghosn to the list of Jack Welch (GE), A.G. Lafley (Procter & Gamble), Larry Bossidy (Honeywell), Bill George (Medtronic), and others who have shown that a disciplined, sustained focus on growing your own leadership talent brings value to the bottom line.

These well-known CEOs didn't share a secret manual with step-by-step instructions for how to manage talent. Each adapted an approach to suit the unique business environment and culture, but their tactics are bound by several common fundamentals. They did more than simply nod to talent growth as a perfunctory activity to maintain a positive organizational culture or retain key players. They didn't delegate the growth of talent to others or stop at the sanction of programs that others led. They saw a vital connection between growing talent and growing the business, and they made a strategic, personal commitment that required their own deep involvement and focus, and that of all leaders in their organization. To them, the job of managing talent was a constant preoccupation that steered the organization forward in the same way as business plans and budgets. To achieve that level of focus, an explicit acceleration plan is required, and discipline in managing to that plan is the way each of these leaders achieved success.

What exactly are we asking senior management to commit to?

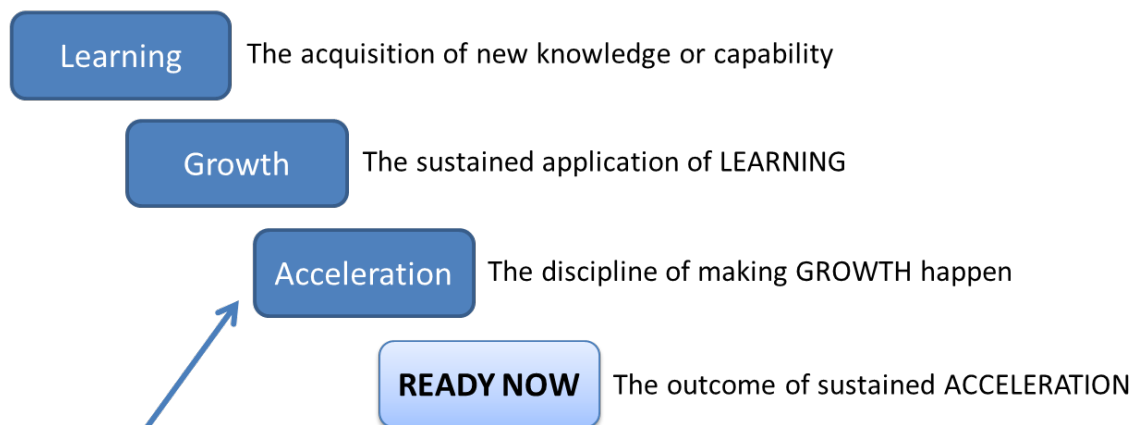
When organizations launch new products or take on new sales objectives, few have difficulty understanding that there must be a clear plan for how those new targets will be achieved. Detailed metrics of success are declared, and specific action plans are outlined to realize results. Clear accountabilities are set.

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However, when new business demands raise the bar for leadership, the strategies for securing that capability seldom reach the same level of specificity. Why? Many CEOs and business leaders do not recognize or acknowledge that it is both possible and essential to enact a strategy that will grow leaders for a specific business context, and that this can be done rapidly enough to respond as business conditions change. And for those who do recognize this need, many lack a clear notion of how to make it happen. The result is an unwittingly partial commitment to increasing readiness, emphasizing *learning* but not *growth*. That's not enough. Acceleration requires that your senior management team commits to the discipline of acceleration, and not simply to creating opportunities for people to learn.

Committing to learning versus committing to growth.

Where most organizations commit



The commitment required to become Ready Now