

By INGA PIORO

➔ Most companies have their share of talented young employees, but without guidance these valuable high-flyers may not achieve their full potential. Could targeted coaching steer them on the path to leadership?

YOUNGER PEOPLE ARE generally overlooked for individual coaching, with organisations preferring to offer them more generic development programmes. However, it is vital to personalise the development of young talent, both to help them realise their leadership potential and to retain them.

High-flyers are talented employees who have demonstrated strong performance and have the potential to advance several levels up the organisation. Leadership is a long journey, however, and such development needs to start early.

Coaches must recognise the individual needs of the new generation of workers. Generation Y (aged 30 or younger) tend to have high expectations and are independent, confident and ambitious. But they are also ethically and culturally diverse.

This group will bring new ideas and values into the workplace. They are often highly educated, willing to learn and technologically savvy. Knowing and being sensitive to their needs will be key to developing them.

In order to reach young high-flyers coaches should consider the following.

1. Manage expectations

High-flyers often have an overly confident view of where they are, having been successful in academia or received lots of encouragement. They will probably have been measured solely on hitting targets, and think that to progress they need only work harder and faster. In fact, they will need to make a qualitative change, not just a quantitative one.

They can be impatient to fulfil their ambitions, raised in a world



Adam Howling

dominated by technology and instant gratification. They are likely to compare themselves with unrealistic role models, sometimes celebrities, who have progressed atypically fast.

Encourage them to be realistic, and consider a broad range of skills. Spend time finding out what their short- and long-term career goals and interests are.

Make it work

- Encourage a reality check: set up a more objective way of assessing their skills, such as 360-degree feedback.

- Push them to benchmark against a wider range of individuals within and outside the organisation.

- Set the boundaries of the coaching

intervention by clarifying what you can and can't help them with.

- Encourage them to research critical success factors in their chosen path.

Fatal flaws

- Defusing optimism by being cynical.
- Allowing them to retain an unrealistic view of what they can achieve.
- Assuming they want to become a leader – they may prefer to be a technical expert.

2. Identify motivations

Ask the individual to clarify what motivates them and how that fits with their ambitions. If they want to become a leader, ask what it is that attracts

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them to this path: income, power, status? Challenge them if you believe their motivation does not fit with what is expected. For example, being a leader is not about personal needs, but considering the impact on others. Younger high-flyers tend to have a great deal of energy and ambition. Make the most of this by tying in the personal benefits to them.

Make it work

- Ask them: “What brings you greatest satisfaction?” “What do you want to accomplish?” “Why?” “What sparks your interest and energises you?” “What motivates you to do your best?”
- Go with those motivations.

Fatal flaws

- Assuming motivations are static.
- Imposing your own values when discussing an individual’s motivations.

3. Balance short-term gratification

Highlight to younger professionals that it takes time to develop leadership skills and it is important to be deliberate and structured. Help them to map out what they want to achieve and work backwards, identifying development opportunities along the way. Help them to start practising leadership skills, such as relationship building.

Make it work

- Help them to balance short-term wins with longer-term goals.
- Give reality-check timescales.

Fatal flaws

- Making the plan too rigid.
- Mapping out detailed steps that will quickly become redundant owing to changing circumstances or economy.

4. Identify relevant experiences

While the individual may be high potential, it is vital that they learn from key experiences in order to fulfil it.

Make it work

- Determine critical experiences.
- Identify opportunities.
- Establish a learning circle for developing from the experience.
- Encourage the individual to keep an experience/learning journal.

Fatal flaws

- Not allowing time to gain depth and breadth of experience.
- Encouraging an opportunistic approach to gaining experience.
- Thinking narrowly about how to find opportunities.

5. Mitigate derailleurs

Derailleurs are often referred to as over-used strengths. Inexperienced professionals may have relied on a particular strength to be successful in the past, but have not recognised the counterproductive impact it can have if overused. For example, confidence may become arrogance and an inability to admit mistakes. Younger professionals might observe inappropriate behaviour in their role models and

assume it is a required leadership characteristic. By helping them to understand these potential derailleurs, the coach can help the person to moderate their behaviour.

Make it work

- Help the individual to see how a perceived strength can become counterproductive.
- Encourage them to see their behaviour in the eyes of others.
- Discuss role models who achieve success using appropriate styles.
- Coach them to develop a broader set of leadership tools.

Fatal flaws

- Inappropriately discouraging an individual from using a key strength.

6. Encourage relationships

Young high-flyers are often rewarded for being individuals, and their competitive streak is nurtured. However, research into what catapulted a company from good to great found that the more powerful leaders possessed both personal humility and professional will (*Jim Collins, “Level 5 leadership”, Harvard Business Review, January 2001*).

Coach them on networking skills, and focus on how they moderate their competitiveness in building relationships with peers.

Make it work

- Help the individual to look through an organisational chart to discuss who should be in their network, and why.
- Encourage them to see the impact of competitiveness.
- Coach them on establishing credibility and personal humility.

Fatal flaws

- Encouraging them to build several superficial relationships, rather than a few critical, strong ones. ■

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