

# The Five Mistakes You're Making With Top Talent

By [ROLAND SMITH](#)

With today's stale job market limiting employees' mobility, executives have a unique opportunity to boost the motivation and productivity of their top talent without spending lots of money. Unfortunately, many companies are missing the mark – especially when it comes to managing their emerging leaders, or "high potentials." Here are the five biggest mistakes companies are making with high-potential talent:

## **1. Ignoring the view from the pipeline.**

This is the first big mistake – and it fuels the others. Talent managers and executives tend to discuss the leadership pipeline as if it is theirs to define and control. But talented people inside the leadership pipeline bring their perspectives and experiences to the process. Do you know what they think? Have you asked what they want? Are expectations on both sides understood? Is your relationship with your talent transactional or a mutual and reciprocal relationship?

High-potential talent can always go somewhere else. Center for Creative Leadership research shows that even though 95 percent of high potentials say they are committed to their organizations, 21 percent are still actively looking for another job. In a down economy, they are weighing trade-offs. On the plus side: staying in their current role means greater responsibility, highly visible assignments, good money in a recession. On the negative side: brutal hours, no support from senior team, uncertainty as to what's next. If you could move "senior team support" to the pro column, for example, you've boosted your chances of retaining a valued employee.

## **2. Treating all high-potentials the same.**

If you aren't considering the view from the pipeline, chances are you have a one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with top talent. High potentials expect (and usually get) greater visibility and access to senior managers, special assignments and training, and greater responsibility. But they also want some say in how these perks and assignments play out. If relocating every few years is the primary way for high potentials to increase their value, you automatically lose when a manager needs to stay put for a spouse's career or family commitments. Don't wait to find this out during an exit interview. Have "stay conversations" with your top talent before it's too late.

## **3. Leaving high-potentials on their own.**

It's a mistake to give high potentials free rein to direct their careers. While they want to influence their direction, they are also more committed and engaged when they have a clear career path. High potentials want to know what the next steps are in terms of development, experience and movement. Plus, companies need to be sure the talent they have is the talent they need and that it's deployed well. You need to intervene, redirect or

coach if a high potential is staying in a position too long, not building needed skills, or is in danger of derailing (and yes, high potentials can derail).

#### **4. Not using high-potentials to develop others.**

While high potentials receive increased opportunities and investment, they are also powerful talent developers in the organization. They have insight and experience needed for developing the next layer of high potentials as well as the larger talent pool. To multiply the impact of your top talent, train them to coach others and have effective developmental conversations. You should not only hold them accountable for doing it, you should reward them as well.

#### **5. Being unclear about high-potential status.**

Using your high potentials well means knowing who they are – and ensuring they know it, too. Organizations that do not formally identify their top talent (or keep it under wraps) are undermining their performance – and run the risk of losing valuable people. CCL research found that formal identification as a high potential is important to 77 percent of managers. Not being formally identified as a high potential keeps the door open for doubt, lessens engagement and weakens commitment. Only 14 percent of formally identified high potentials are seeking other employment. That figure jumps to 33 percent for employees who are informally identified as high potentials.

Loyalty may be dead – for both employers and employees. The best strategy for growing and maintaining top talent in today's workplace is to understand it's all about mutuality and reciprocity. When you think about your talent from their point of view, the relationship becomes less transactional – and organizations and high potentials will benefit.

#### **About the Author**

Roland Smith is a senior faculty member at the [Center for Creative Leadership](#), a Greensboro, N.C.-based provider of leadership education to companies, government agencies, nonprofits and educational institutions.