

**LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS
FOR HIGH POTENTIAL LEADERS**

by

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Foreword

Many organizations have programs to identify, track, and develop high potential leaders. Identification most often occurs after leadership experience discloses to senior leaders who has exceptional results and promise for increasing leadership responsibility.

There are some basics for being identified as a high potential leader. This Leadership Insights is written primarily from the high potential leader perspective, with some reference to organizational programs and needs.

Acknowledgments

We first perceive the impact of leaders as followers. Parents, siblings, teachers, early bosses, peers all contribute to our learning how to lead effectively. Some show us examples of how not to lead. We sometimes call them politicians.

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Leadership Insights for High Potential Leaders

I. Why We Lead

- Leadership is getting others to want to do what needs to get done.
- We lead to make the organization what it must become.
- We lead to develop our team members.
- We lead to serve.
- We lead to have impact on employees, customers, owners, the community.
- We do not lead for salary, perks, power, politics, or other self serving ends.
- The acronym STEVE describes who we are as leaders.
 - Selfless
 - Trustworthy
 - Enduring
 - Visionary
 - Effective communicators

II. How We Know We Want To Lead

- We all knew someone in 10th grade who already knew that she/he would be a physician, then went on to do exactly that. Part of us envied the certainty of their career goals. Part of us envied the clear evidence that they had the intelligence, drive and focus to become their dream.
- In a way, as high potential leaders, we're like that person we envied. Our interest in leadership likely developed early. But we were not as likely to be able to express the interest, since no kid "goes to the leader's office" like they "go to the doctor's office."
- We influenced our peers on the playground. They followed us. We didn't really know why.
- We may have been team captains or elected to class offices.
- We had early leadership experience, and for the most part, liked what resulted. When we failed, we learned to extract the lesson and move on. We learned to tolerate failure but never to enjoy it!
- We exhibit a pattern of rising aspiration for the size and impact of the team we'd like to lead.
- Now in our working lives, we're seen as competent in our discipline and obvious choices to lead. We likely are already leading, even if only informally.
- We have at least one coach.
- We are already a coach for others.
- We have at least one mentor.
- We are already a mentor for others.
- We plan to keep the coaches and mentors we have, and attract more of each to help us.
- We have already begun coaching and developing others, even as we seek such inputs ourselves. Give what you need.

III. Why Some Confidentiality is Good

- Be glad if your firm doesn't announce who its high potentials are.
- People often think in limited and personal terms. If you're designated high potential, are they less likely to be so designated?
- Envy is a very subtle, subversive emotion. Those who envy know it isn't an admirable emotion, so they work to cloak their behavior toward you if you're anointed.
- Bosses can also do this. I've seen repeatedly in one firm bosses who aren't high potential recommending removal of high potential designations from subordinates who are.

IV. Tendencies to Guard Against

- High potentials are often impatient. They're accused of having short attention spans. Make sure you do your work thoroughly. Don't move on or up too quickly. Earn your rewards.
- It is easy to think we can lead any activity. To do so successfully we must have experts who are our allies, and these are often our subordinates. Be sure they're dedicated to your success by dedicating yourself to their success. Help them develop. Your success is built from their success.
- We tend to be interpersonally competitive. Competition is for those with different colored organization logos. Inside the organization, we're a team, not in competition.
- Contact The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, NC, or in Brussels. Obtain and read *Why Executive Careers Derail*, which is available from CCL. Lack of personal humility underlies four of the six reasons for derailment.
 - Here is an example of lack of humility: While I led global leadership development for Shell Exploration and Development, a young leader made an appointment to see me. He was known to be self-centered, perhaps because he invested so little in peer relationships. Said he wanted my advice. He came with no notepad or pen. He told me he'd been designated high potential. About half way into the session I asked, "If you came for advice, why aren't you taking notes." His embarrassed reply was, "I can remember all this." Really?! His real goal was to have me speak well of him. How well do you think he achieved this goal?!
- Coming to believe the praise you hear. Listen to a Tom Hanks interview. He doesn't take his skills too seriously.
- Lack of humor. Your intensity is edgy to others. Cultivate humor that diminishes no one, with the possible exception of yourself. Jeff Foxworthy gets it about right: "If you know someone who has hit two or more deer on the highway, you might be in Pennsylvania!" No one gets singled out, Pennsylvanians laugh the hardest.

V. Your “Natural” Career Path

- You’ve moved beyond first-time leader. Have you extracted all the lessons, especially from what didn’t work?
- Whose leadership do you admire? In your organization? Why? Consider Ghandi or Dr. Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela. What was the impact of each of these three leaders? Did Ghandi succeed? Did Dr. King? President Mandela? What skills were needed?
- Let’s consider two skills present in all great leaders—VISION and COMMUNICATION. Each of the three leaders above had selfless vision that benefited many. Each was known for communication skill.
- Work on your communication skills first. Volunteer to address groups. Know your content, then focus on the audience. Communicate for them.
- Vision will come as you gain experience in human behavior, and gain confidence in sponsoring greater goals.
- Take work assignments that aren’t promotions. You want to know as much about other disciplines and functions as possible, since senior leaders have multiple functions reporting to them, and this is your target level later in your career.
- High potential leader careers are made in the white space on the organization chart. Your ability to link and extract extra value from your understanding of multiple disciplines and functions applies here.
- Become an external spokesperson for your discipline, your organization. Senior leader work is more strategic, more multidisciplinary, more external than leading from either the front line or from the middle.
- Remember that nearly all high potentials grow up in their organization cultures. This means that the decision to leave your employer is a decision to work in a new organization culture where you may have fewer career sponsors, and have shorter tenure assignments. I speak from personal experience here. High potentials are very, very rarely experienced hires.

VI. Key Skills

- Ethical behavior. Ethics are about right and wrong. No gray area here. Stealing, lying, bearing false witness are off limits—always.
- Have clear values. Values are beliefs held as truths. We choose values and choose not to have others. Developing employees is an example of a value driven behavior. Turnover is the result of not having this value.
- Demonstrate respect at all times—no exceptions. You can correct performance with respect, or you can attack the person. The latter is always more costly in time, productivity and trust than showing respect and learning how to correct with respect.
- Build relationships in all directions.
- Relationships lead to trust earned over time.
- Trust is the essence of why employees support the leader.

- Express appreciation. Saying “thank you” is powerful. It is several times more powerful when used with the person’s name.
- Select and develop future leaders. This is even more important because for you to move up, your replacement needs to be ready and obvious (even though you won’t select him/her, and the person may not come from among your direct reports).
- Having leaders as subordinates is different work. See my publication *Leadership Insights for Leading Leaders*.
- Select leaders who show **sincere interest in others** and a **generosity of spirit**. Those leaders who share leave space for the leadership of others. They enjoy long periods of support from all levels because they share, give credit, and develop their people.
- If you get two out of three selection decisions right, you’re success rate is above average. But there is a secret. After you select a new leader, you have to devote time, effort, and risk your reputation to assure that they succeed. Some experienced leaders have no selection failures because of the investments they make in people after they’re selected. CEOs of huge companies have told me with obvious emotion of the investments made by others in their personal success.
- Move the numbers. You’re not hired just to report them. You move the numbers through your people.
- And don’t just stand on the sidelines yelling, “Raise the score!” That contains no help. “Did you make your numbers?” is one of the worst things I’ve ever heard a CEO say. Too late, no information about how to improve. Drill your people in the basics. Encourage. Appreciate.
- Generate and capture discretionary effort (discretionary effort is the difference between doing just enough to get by and the effort of sustained enthusiasm). Your subordinates are capable of amazing results. When less it is mostly their leader (you or I) who needs to improve!
- Share credit. There is no limit to what can be accomplished if no one cares who gets credit.
- Learn to run effective, short meetings. Hire a facilitator, then learn everything she/he does. Practice. Have your staff take turns designing and delivering effective meetings. Summarize actions at the end. Follow up, and show the group the results.
- Be generous in help with peers, both other high potentials (you’ll likely work with them again) and highly professional experienced leaders who aren’t high potential. These leaders are the soul of the leadership group. They know how to do things you haven’t had time to learn.
- Learn and use people’s names. The sweetest sound to the human ear is the sound of one’s own name. Know spouse, partner, and children’s names. This provides identity to the employee. Each employee longs for identity (belonging), worthwhile work, meaning in our work, and to be well led. Help your employees see their identity, why their work is worthwhile, and the meaning in their work. Then your employees can feel well led.

VII. Ongoing Development

- Keep your task skills fresh, but let others be expert in these areas.
- Learn behavior skills through experience, coaching and mentoring, and formal learning.
- Interview good leaders around you for their ideas and support.
- Read. *Harvard Business Review* and the Center for Creative Leadership Library are great places to start. Read Jack Welch.
- Take notes from every speaker you hear. Separately note their content and their process.
- Hire a leadership coach. I'll give recommendations if you like. Contact me at kengraham8@msn.com.
- Take short, sharp courses.
- Attend a university executive program. These are especially good for vision/strategy and cross-functional leadership. Many are good. A few are quite good. In the collection of the best is one that is global, practical and even under priced because it isn't in Boston!
- Trust your subordinates to run the day to day. Be genuinely interested in their problems and their solutions. Build their future by anticipating it.

About the Author

Ken Graham is a consultant, author, lecturer, and leader. He has more than 25 years experience leading groups up to 131 people, teaching leadership to experienced leaders, and coaching individuals and groups of leaders.

Ken's favorite professional activities include working with leaders individually or in groups, and speaking at conferences. See www.getenergyevent.com for Ken's contributions at the Dubai 2007 event and London 2008 event.

Ken experienced command and control leadership in a steel mill, where being alive and uninjured at the end of a work shift was an accomplishment. He experienced leaders who serve and leaders who teach early in career. Becoming a better leader and helping others do likewise are the focus of his work. He finds the ground for such growth especially rich in the developing world. Ken has visited or worked in 85 countries.

Current and recent clients include Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Company, Technological University of Delft (The Netherlands), Boeing, Bury and Partners, IBM, Motorola, and Intel.

Ken's Ph.D. is in Strategy and Logistics from Penn State University, where he led Penn State Executive Programs. He has served as Vice President for Allstate Insurance, and most recently as Head, Global Leadership Development for Royal Dutch Shell Exploration and Production in The Hague, The Netherlands.

Ken has addressed conferences for GetEnergy, Limited, in Dubai (2006, 2007) for Management Centre Europe (2004), for Petroleum Training Journal in Abuja, Nigeria (2006), and for Southern Africa Development Council (SADEC) in Johannesburg (2007), and GetEnergy London (2008).

Ken became a single engine airplane pilot at age 20, and is an active pilot today. More recently he added floatplane flying to his license. Adventure trips have included Alaska, Yukon Territory, and Northwest Territories (to the Arctic Ocean). He owns a new type of short take-off and landing aircraft called a Savannah, which performs especially well in off-airport operations (think pastures, roads, etc.) See www.skykits.com for examples.

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