Kim's Response to a LinkedIn post about Labeling High Potentials

<u>Part 1</u>

If you're suggesting transparency about the organization's talent POV and practices to develop, deploy, and engage talent, I'm in agreement. If you're suggesting that we create transparent lists of those we've labeled as high potentials, I disagree. Here are some fundamental truths about talent:

- Virtually everyone has some potential – the capacity to learn and grow and enhance their contribution to the organization.
- Very few have high potential – the capacity and willingness to learn and grow and enhance their contribution at a much higher velocity and to rise to very senior leadership roles.
- There is no precise line in the sand that demarcates high potentials from the general employee population – potential is a continuum.
- Potential is comprised of many factors, e.g., general cognitive capability, motivation and drive to lead others, enough emotional intelligence to get along reasonably with others, self-awareness, learning agility, and cultural fit. Experience and skill in key competencies are also important. This isn't a complete list, but you get the idea – people are complex, and potential is a complex construct. By the way, there is strong research support for all the criteria listed.
- It's possible to be a high potential in one organization and not in another because of cultural fit. Also, organizations sometimes identify criteria that aren't universal – they're specific to their organization context. Global mobility is an example.
- Using self-selection for high-potential pools will fail miserably. None of the organizations that excel at leveraging talent that I know of treat talent like a herd of cats and let them self-select. Most people will fail to self-select into assignments that are the ones they truly need because those assignments are uncomfortable and there's a high risk of failure (we don't learn when we're comfortable and there's no risk of failure). The best organizations are transparent about their development strategies and work with talent to very proactively and in a hands-on way assign high potentials into appropriate assignments. They apply differential treatment.
- Unexplained variance is probably the largest slice of the predictive pie – people will always delight or disappoint us. That said, anything we can do to improve the accuracy of our predictions about talent (after all, making predictions about talent is a huge part of our jobs in talent management and leadership, in general) will yield phenomenal benefits to the organization. Most managers might as well flip a coin to identify hi-pos – that's how pitiful their prediction capability is, and this is one of the greatest blind spots in leaders who almost universally believe they know in their gut when they see top talent. They're wrong about half the time. Again, there's plenty of research to support this.
- The high potential path is a very difficult path. Most employees are not only incapable, they're uninterested in paying the high price – more challenging assignments, higher expectations, greater risk of failure, more stress, more hours, etc., etc. This is where you need transparency – to set realistic expectations about how careers are built and what it means to be given extra attention because of the organization's assessment of potential.

When you label people and are transparent about that, you will likely create a ton of problems. Here are a few:

- As good as you might be in recognizing and assessing the components of potential, you will have false positives and also good candidates who self-select out when faced with various life choices. High-potential is not forever.
- When you label someone as a high potential, you risk creating a sense of entitlement and unrealistic expectations in the candidate.
- When you fail to label someone as high-potential and that person perceives unfairness, you create a pissed off employee – and the shame of it is, some of these (a few) will actually be high potentials.

Sorry about the long post, but this is an important and little understand aspect of talent management, and there's a lot to consider. There's a lot more to this topic, and there is research and empirical support that can guide us.

Part 2

I recognize that we all look through our own lens and have opinions about what's right and what works. That's pretty normal, and it might also be an explanation for why there are so many fads and ineffective talent management strategies embraced. I recognize that I have opinions and implicit bias, and the best thing I can do is be skeptical of everything out there (skeptical, not cynical) and study the research and sound empirical examples that suggest things that work. While doing this, I need to guard against developing a dogma – better to maintain a degree of agnosticism and healthy degree of skepticism. That said, the research is quite clear about some related issues:

- Satisfaction does not equal engagement. All else being equal, an engaged workforce will outperform a simply satisfied workforce every time.
- People are not equal. They have different levels of motivation, different capabilities, and different potential to lead. Treating everyone the same is not only grossly unfair to employees, it's a disservice to the organization and its stakeholders.
- Leadership development, properly done, is not a perk. It's an arduous journey that most employees can't handle and don't want. The idea that providing an accelerated and more difficult path to a select group of employees might smack of elitism, but only when the nature of leadership development is misunderstood. The organizations that excel at leveraging talent and are leadership feeders for lesser organizations don't treat everyone the same nor do they have disengaged employees. They are engaging environments and generally produce outsized results.
- It's true that humans are complex, and identifying potential is difficult, but research does identify measurable attributes that explain a large degree of variance comparing successful with less successful leaders. General cognitive capability, degree of motivation, degree of skills in key competencies, nature of experiences, and learning agility explain a lot of the difference. The fact that there will always be a high degree of unexplained variance should not stop us from learning and getting better at identifying leadership potential.

When I consider organizations that try to make everyone happy and treat everyone the same, it makes me think of a group of grade school kids being led on the playground by a caring teacher. Everyone play nicely now. Everyone deserves a chance and gets equal playing time. Everyone gets a ribbon. Sorry, but those teams won't compete at higher levels. And teams that are successful at higher levels, the ones that are most rigorous about selection and development, are the very teams on which every good player wants to play. Our organizations are not so different.