

Kim's response to a LinkedIn post questioning the value of the 9-box performance-potential matrix

Martin, if I build a house, I use various tools. A saw has a place as does a hammer, and I don't throw one tool away because it can't do the job of the other. If I understand your question, no, I don't use the 9-cell matrix strictly for "talent pooling," but I do use it to facilitate productive conversations in talent reviews and to help apply differential talent to talent.

Regarding talent pools, I believe most organizations need to address at least three. High professionals, specialists who have deep expertise and tend to stay one functional discipline throughout their career are mission-critical for most organizations. High professionals provide tremendous value, especially when their expertise is in support of the organization's unique value proposition. Generalists, on the other hand, have the ability to move from one function to another and, if capable of rising high and fast in the organization, form the ranks of our current and future general managers and executives. Fast-track talent are often referred to as high potentials, but since both have potential, my preference is to refer to top talent generalists and specialists. In both cases, they have the capability to move higher, to more senior positions, and to navigate the career path more quickly than the general employee population (altitude is to some extent a function of velocity). The specialist and generalist career paths are significantly different, and talent on those paths require different treatment in terms of development, engagement, deployment, compensation, etc. It's almost always advisable to address a third talent pool: emerging talent. These are early career high potentials who also need differential treatment and to be tested in terms of specialist and generalist career paths.

Most organizations do a pretty good job of differentiating talent when they're predicting long-term potential on a particular career path because they can draw inferences from past performance. But past performance is a poor predictor of future performance when the future involves significant changes in the position or career path. The 9-cell matrix is just a framework for facilitating meaningful conversation about talent and differentiating the treatment of talent. Although past performance does provide some evidence of promotability, it is not an accurate predictor of who will rise to a level we'd consider top talent. There are likely many people in your organization who deliver excellent results but are well placed in their current position or have limited capability for vertical advancement. In fact, most of your high performers are not on a career trajectory that will lead them to senior positions. Top talent (current and future) share common characteristics. They all meet a requisite level of intellectual horsepower and emotional intelligence and career ambition. All top talent will meet these three criteria in every organization.

In addition to IQ, EQ, and motivation, top talent may need to meet other criteria that are specific to your organization – they may need to be geographically mobile or they may need to model certain values, for instance. Top talent also has had (or soon will have) a variety of experiences that build mission-critical competencies. And one more key element is learning agility, a meta-competency and construct that is extremely well documented in research as a contributor to leadership success.

Learning agility is the ability to learn lessons from experiences and apply those lessons in completely different experiences. This is the single best predictor of success for people going into new roles. Learning agility is not significantly correlated with IQ, but like IQ, learning agility explains a lot of the variance between effective and less effective leaders. Learning agility is a far better predictor of future success in new roles than past performance. It's a better predictor than any other criterion, and it also has implications for the career path that will be most suitable for top talent. Learning agility is important for all leaders. It's absolutely critical for the generalists, for your high potentials, for those who will fill general manager roles. The need for learning agility increases significantly as role requirements shift from specialist focus to the role of a generalist. Learning agility requirements also increase significantly as the role requirements become more complex, ambiguous, and subject to pressure from the importance of the role due to its strategic nature or urgency. If all the roles in your firm are simple, transactional, predictable, and never deal with complexity, ambiguity, or urgency, you don't need to concern yourself with learning agility. All these issues are addressed at an individual level during talent reviews, and the 9-cell is useful in facilitating the conversations.