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Career Compass No. 124: Are You a Hi-Potential?

To get choice assignments and further your career, it's not enough to be a high performer. You must cultivate certain X factors to be recognized as a high-potential employee.

By Dr. Frank Benest | June 30, 2026 | ARTICLE

I'm a management analyst in the public works department for a city government located in the East. I'm a hard-working staff person who is often a go-to person for my boss, the public works manager, as well as the public works director. Whenever I'm given an assignment or project, I stay on task and get results.

Our organization has a lot of older senior managers who have just retired or are getting ready to retire. To grow future leaders, the city manager recently decided to start a leadership development program for "high-potential" employees. The program participants are chosen by the city manager and department heads. While the public works director put my name forward, I was not selected by the other department directors for this first go-around group.

I am very disappointed that I was not chosen. I'm loyal, committed, and get the work done. I have the skills to succeed. What am I missing?

Response

I know it is disappointing that you were not selected for the high-potential leadership development program. In the next few years, other emerging leaders in your organization (including you, I hope) will be invited to participate.

In the meantime, the key questions for you are two-fold:

1. How do you develop yourself so that you are truly a "high-potential" (or "hi-po") employee?
2. What do you do so that you are perceived as a hi-po by senior managers across the organization?

What is a hi-po?

A hi-po is defined as an employee who can adapt to ever-changing environments and grow into new roles. You may have good skills and be a great performer. Those qualities are necessary but insufficient. Given the uncertain and volatile environment of local government, the question is not whether employees have the right skills; rather, do they have the potential to learn new ones. (See Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, "21st Century Talent Spotting," Harvard Business Review, June 2014.) In the turbulent and messy world of local government, technical skills become quickly obsolete.

A given is that hi-pos are high-performers who deliver strong results and outperform their peers. They must also exhibit behaviors reflecting organizational values and culture. In other words, they must be exemplars for others. There are many individual contributors who don't have much positive impact on their teams or units. In contrast, hi-pos are "force multipliers." They increase the productivity of others by modeling behaviors that shape the culture.

Recognizing that emerging leaders must cross boundaries (inside and outside the organization) to achieve any positive result, hi-po's have learned how to collaborate, engender credibility and trust, and influence others.

Most certainly, hi-po's must also demonstrate the capacity to learn and grow. (See Douglas Ready, et al, "Are You a High Potential?" Harvard Business Review, June 2010.)

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What are the Five X Factors?

Let's talk about the general markers or intangible "X factors" of hi-po's. While hi-po's may not have all of these attributes, they must have some of them. Moreover, there is a bit of overlap among these X factors.

I have identified five X factors or markers for hi-po's:

1. **Drive to excel.** They do whatever it takes to achieve results (most often with others) in the pursuit of unselfish goals. While they have ambition for themselves, they are mostly ambitious for organizational and community goals. (See Douglas Ready, et al, "Are You a High Potential?" Harvard Business Review, June 2010.)
2. **Social skills.** Hi-po's have the ability to manage themselves and lead others (formally or informally). They often address adaptive challenges and thus need to engage stakeholders inside and outside the organization. They have demonstrated capacity to actively listen, incorporate the ideas of others, effectively deal with conflict, form alliances, and influence others even without formal authority. (See Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic et al, "What Science Says About Identifying High-Potential Employees," hbr.org, Oct 3, 2017.)
3. **Curiosity and learning agility.** Hi-po's seek out opportunities to learn new skills and capabilities and challenge themselves. They have a curiosity about confounding new problems. They not only accept new stretch assignments; they actively seek them out. (See Career Compass #73 "How to Get and Benefit from a Stretch Assignment?")
4. **Enterprising mindset.** Local government agencies are faced with numerous adaptive (vs. technical) challenges. These adaptive challenges (for example, homelessness, affordable housing, climate protection, traffic congestion) have no right or wrong answers and involve many stakeholder groups, all of whom have different preferred solutions and conflicting values. To move forward on these problems, hi-po's reach out to all affected groups, including those who are often marginalized; ask a lot of questions; engage everyone in creative problem-solving; and find resources from many sources.
5. **Highly engaged.** Hi-po's are optimistic, committed, "all-in" employees. They look forward to addressing new challenges and enjoy engaging in conversations with others and learning along the way. They have a "Thank God, it's Monday" attitude. (See Career Compass #37 "Engaging Employees for Success.") Actively engaged employees also tend to be resilient, a necessary attribute in today's messy local government environment. (See Career Compass #9 "Bouncing Back from Defeat.")

Again, hi-po's may not have all these X factors but need several of them. The five X factors listed above can serve as a development agenda for those wishing to be considered as a hi-po.

What Can You Do to Foster High Potential?

To become a hi-po, I suggest the following:

Reflect

To begin this learning journey, you must first reflect and focus on self-awareness. In what ways do you embody the X factors of hi-po's? In what ways do you fall short on some of the intangible markers?

Here are some self-development questions that will promote your reflection:

- What's working that I should pour energy into?
- What's one thing I should do differently?
- What's it like to interact with me?
- When do I create friction without realizing it?
- What new behavior might serve others well?
- How do I react when someone challenges me?
- What worked in the past, but not today?
- What am I learning and how is it changing me?
- How do I want to show up today?
- What new behavior can I test this week?
- Who does this new behavior well? What do they do differently?
- How am I seeking out new opportunities across the organization to foster my development?
- Whom can I seek out in other departments to serve as a coach or even as a sponsor?

(See Dan Rockwell, "Don't Coach the Dead," Leadership Freak blog, Feb 4, 2026.)

Get feedback

In respect to your potential, it is helpful to get feedback and perspectives from your manager, a coach or two, and/or trusted colleagues.

Focus on learning by doing

The best development is learning by doing (not classroom training). Therefore, with the help of your manager, department director plus any coaches, you want to seek out stretch assignments.

The "sweet spot" of learning is when there is a 50-70% chance of success. If you get a new assignment with a 90% chance of success, it's too easy. You won't learn anything new. If there is only a 40% chance of success, it will be overwhelming and too stressful. You may easily withdraw. Learning requires some discomfort but not too much.

Couple learning by doing with helpful coaching

As you work on stretch assignments, candid feedback from managers and coaches helps you make course corrections and create some sense of the experience. (See Career Compass #48 "How Do I Benefit from a Coach?")

Seek out development opportunities

Don't just accept stretch assignments—actively seek them out. Let managers and colleagues know that you are on the look out for new projects and team leadership opportunities. (Most adaptive challenges require multi-department, cross-cutting teams.)

Ask questions and seek understanding

Don't just seek to understand what is happening in your department silo. Use staff meetings to ask questions and demonstrate curiosity about what is happening in other departments and the larger organizational context.

A good way to learn is to debrief with your colleagues all experiences. Ask what went well, what did not go so well, and what did you all learn for future practice.

Another way to further your understanding, especially about the political context of your organization, is to request at staff meetings that the Department Director translate what happened at City Council meetings. Why did an individual City Council member as well as a majority of the Council vote the way they did? (See Career Compass #31 "Political Savviness.")

Develop sponsors

You need coaches to provide feedback, guidance, advice and encouragement. However, you also need sponsors who advocate for you. Sponsors are typically higher-level managers or department directors who know your work and your potential. They are therefore willing to be on the lookout for opportunities as new issues arise and advocate for your involvement.

How Can You Be Perceived by Senior Managers as a Hi-Po?

Assuming that you take some of the actions above, how do you get seen as a hi-po by senior managers throughout the organization?

The best way is to get on cross-cutting teams involving a number of respected staff from other departments. It is insufficient for just your manager and department head to recommend you as a hi-po. You need other department directors to recognize your potential. In addition to your manager and department head, your coaches and sponsors can recommend you as a member (or even team leader) of a newly forming team addressing an adaptive challenge.

What Can Top Management Do?

It is certainly a good sign that the City Manager and the Executive Team recognize the talent challenge facing the organization and have created a high-potential program.

In addition to creating a leadership development program, here are a few suggestions for top management:

1. Recognize that most hi-potential programs are really high-performer programs. They involve performers who have done well in the past and are assumed to do well in the future. Given the volatile environment of local government, this is no longer a safe assumption. (See Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, "21st Century Talent Spotting," Harvard Business Review, June 2014.)

   Therefore, top management needs to create leadership development programs focused on "soft" social skills (communication, influence- and relationship-building, collaboration, creative problem-solving). It is the soft skills that produce the hard results.

2. Acknowledge that the organization has limited funding for a high-intensity leadership development program for hi-po's, yet all employees want opportunities to learn and grow. The only solution is to focus attention and resources on hi-po's and offer low-resource opportunities that are available to all. (See Career Compass #109 "Succession Planning--Nine Classic Mistakes to Avoid.") Cost-effective examples include lunch and learn sessions, book clubs, and free or low-cost webinars offered by professional groups, such as the those provided by the ICMA Coaching Program.

3. Enhance the ability of the Executive Team to spot and develop talent. Executive Teams are encouraged to use the online fillable "Template for Talent Development Discussions" provided by Cal-ICMA. (Go to Talent Initiative - Engaging Future Leaders — California Local Government Management Collaborative (Cal-ICMA) for the no-cost Template plus a sample completed Template and a video on how to use the Template.) The Template is aimed at helping department directors identify, challenge and support their emerging talent.

4. Train managers on how to conduct development conversations and support hi-po's or those wishing to be perceived as hi-po's. (For a simple coaching model for managers plus a training video, go to Talent Initiative - Engaging Future Leaders — California Local Government Management Collaborative (Cal-ICMA). On its "Talent Initiative" webpage, Cal-ICMA also offers an online fillable "Menu of Development Opportunities" that managers can use in their development

conversations with staff. The Menu can be customized for your agency by adding in-house training/coaching programs.

What are the Downsides to Becoming a Hi-Po?

Becoming a recognized hi-potential employee offers opportunities to learn a lot, stay engaged and energized, and make an even bigger contribution.

However, anything overdone has downsides.

Most importantly, you don't want to become consumed by your efforts to become a hi-po. You obviously need to have a personal or family life to balance your work, refresh yourself, enhance your overall well-being, and have a good life. It is important to seek high-leverage stretch assignments yet be able to say "no" to some assignments that don't foster your growth. (Early- and mid-career professionals need to learn how to negotiate with their managers when their plates are full.) Setting boundaries and taking care of yourself are important as you pursue growth. It takes maturity and self-regulation to ensure that you are not overwhelmed or consumed by work. (It should be emphasized that top management also has a responsibility to eliminate low-value work in order to free up staff time and energy. See Career Compass #115 "Combatting Chronic Organizational Distress.")

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In terms of down-sides, high-potential employees tend to be more visible because they are actively contributing to new projects and endeavors. Consequently, their mistakes tend to be more noticeable. Of course, mistakes are part of the learning and growth process.

Finally, some peers may perceive favoritism when hi-po's get attention and choice assignments. (See Career Compass #109 "Succession Planning—Nine Classic Mistakes to Avoid.")

Leadership Has its Rewards

Developing your potential leads to making a big difference in the organization and community and typically over time to formal leadership positions and even bigger contributions.

I personally have been blessed to have earned the opportunity to lead and contribute. My life has been enriched many fold. However, becoming a hi-po takes much reflection, determination, ambition, learning, energy and passion. It is not enough to work hard and get results.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.

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