

High-Potential Talent

A View from Inside the Leadership Pipeline



Center for
Creative
Leadership

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CONTENTS

- 2 Executive Summary
- 4 Background
- 6 Who is a High Potential?
- 11 The Impact of High Potential Identification
- 17 Engaging High Potentials
- 20 Shifting Roles – High Potentials as Talent Developers
- 23 Leveraging the View from the Pipe – Recommendations and Next Steps
- 26 Conclusion
- 27 Resources and References on Organizational Leadership
- 28 Authors and Contributors
- 29 About the Research



executive summary

Talent management represents an organization's efforts to attract, develop, and retain skilled and valuable employees. Its goal is to have people with the capabilities and commitment needed for current and future organizational success. An organization's talent pool, particularly its managerial talent, is often referred to as the leadership pipeline¹.

The leadership pipeline is managed through various systems and processes to help the organization source, reward, evaluate, develop, and move employees into various functions and roles. The pipeline bends, turns, and sometimes breaks as organizations identify who is "ready now" and who is "on track" for larger leadership roles. From this perspective, talent management is something done *to* and *for* an organization's high-potential employees, in service of the organization's needs.

But talent management has another, overlooked perspective: *The view from the pipe.*

The employees and managers who are inside the leadership pipeline do not operate solely as a stream of talent to be funneled and directed by the organization. They bring their perspectives and experiences to the process, too. CCL's research team decided to factor in the views of high-potential managers to deepen our talent management knowledge and that of executives and talent professionals.

To examine talent management through the eyes of high-potential managers, we surveyed 199 leaders attending CCL's development programs. The findings have implications for how organizations identify, invest in, and leverage their high-potential talent. Major findings from this research include:

Respondents say formal identification as a high potential is important. Most survey respondents (77 percent) place a high degree of importance on being formally identified as a high potential in their organization. The study showed several clear differences between high potentials who have been formally named and those who are perceived to be high potentials. Notably, only 14 percent of *formally identified* high potentials are seeking other employment. That number more than doubles (33 percent) for employees who are *informally identified* as high potentials.

High potentials expect more development, support, and investment – and they get it. High potentials receive more development opportunities – such as special assignments and training as well as mentoring and coaching from senior leaders – than other employees. This is as it should be, according to the respondents: 84 percent of high potentials agree that organizations *should* invest more in them and other valuable talent. The extra investment is one reason why being formally recognized as a high potential is considered important.

High potentials feel good about their status – but it has its downside. Survey respondents generally expressed positive feelings about being identified as a high potential by their organization. At the same time, the designation isn't exclusively a win for those in the pipeline. For some, there is a feeling of increased pressure or anxiety around high expectations or performance; others experience frustration around the organization's unclear intentions.

High potentials are more committed and engaged when they have a clear career path. The most frequently mentioned way to increase commitment and engagement among all high potentials is to help them identify a career path. High potentials want to have a picture of where they are going and to understand next steps in terms of development, experience, and movement. In addition, as high potentials receive greater responsibility, they are also looking for greater authority to make decisions that have a significant impact on the organization.

High potentials help develop others. While high potentials are the recipients of increased opportunities and investment, they are also talent developers in the organization. Many (84 percent) are actively identifying and developing potential in others. They have insight and experience that is needed for developing the next layer of high potentials, as well as the larger talent pool.



background

CCL's leadership development programs are often attended by leaders who have been identified as high potentials within their organizations. With access to a population of high-potential leaders from different organizations, we wanted to know, [what is the view from inside the leadership pipeline?](#)

Through our study, we sought to learn more about how organizations designate their high potentials and what impact does that status have on the talent? How important is high-potential status? What does being labeled a high potential feel like? How does it affect a leader's behavior? How committed and engaged are high potentials? How do they influence the development of others?

By exploring these questions, we hoped to [better understand high potentials and use our insights to help organizations address concerns, leverage strengths, and proactively meet the needs of top talent.](#)

Exploring the View from the Pipe

1

Who is a High Potential?

Understanding how high potentials perceive the organization's talent management efforts, and how high potentials personally experience those efforts.

2

The Impact of High Potential Identification

Exploring the differences in perceptions and beliefs of formally and informally identified high potentials.

3

Engaging High Potentials

How to increase commitment to the organization and engagement to the work.

4

Shifting Roles - High Potentials as Talent Developers

Maximizing investments in talent through high potentials and their ability to identify and develop talent in others.



who is a high potential?



Broadly speaking, high potentials are the pool of future organizational leaders.

For our study, we defined high-potential talent as an employee who is assessed as having the ability, organizational commitment, and motivation to rise to and succeed in more senior positions in the organization². Different organizations will have their own definitions of high-potential talent, but the essence remains the same. More important than the exact definition of high-potential talent is understanding how talent experiences being a high potential in their organization.

An Organizational Perspective

To understand how organizations are seen from the view from the pipe we asked the study participants:

- Does your organization have a formal process for identifying high-potential employees?
- How are high potentials treated differently than other employees in your organization?
- Have you been formally identified as a high-potential employee?

Identifying High Potentials

Many organizations put considerable effort into identifying high-potential employees. Sometimes the process is formal and transparent, with high potentials being officially named and notified. **Over half of the participants in this study (56 percent) indicated that their organization has a formal process for identifying high-potential employees** (see Figure 1).

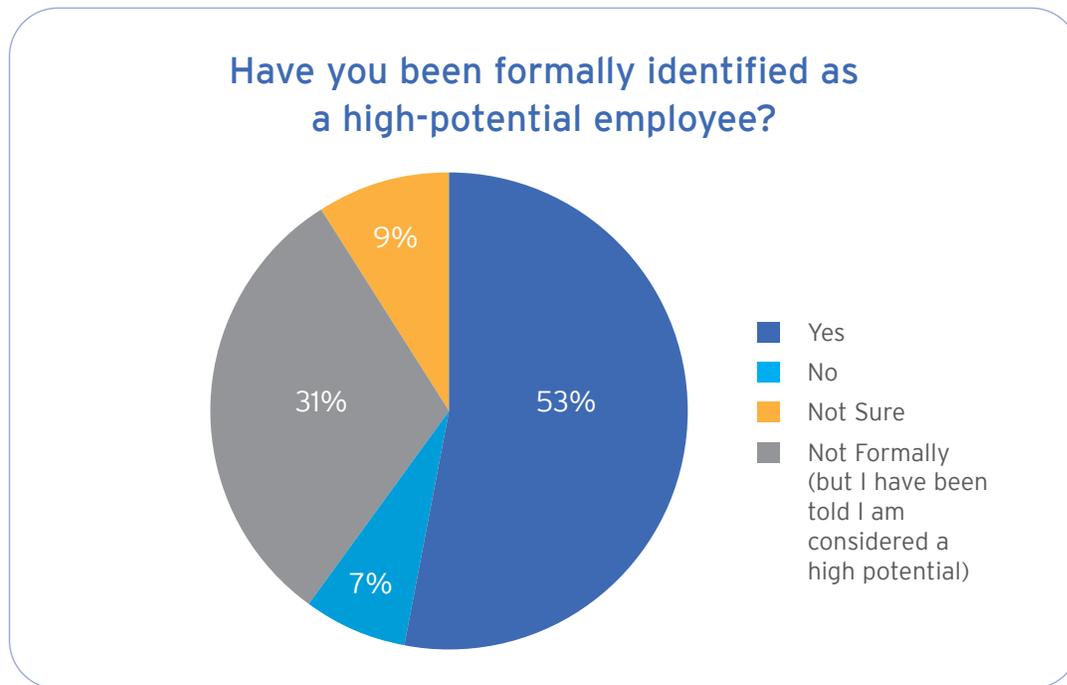
Even with 37 percent of organizations using an informal process of identifying high-potential talent, most people are aware of their status. In the CCL study, 91 percent of participants know if they are high potential or not.

As would be expected from a group of participants attending a leadership development program, 84 percent of the participants have in some way been informed that they are considered high potentials (see Figure 2).

Figure 1



Figure 2



Different Treatment for High Potentials

While it's generally recognized that organizations differentially invest in high potentials using development opportunities³, it is less understood how high potentials view these investments.

The view from the pipe recognizes that organizations treat high potentials differently in the following ways (see also Figure 3):

Visibility & Access. High potentials are given more visibility to senior managers and the organization. That visibility translates into increased opportunities to be coached or mentored, as well as being recognized by others in the organization. High potentials are also included more often in senior meetings and have their opinions sought after more frequently.

Special Assignments & Training. Special assignments are described as high-profile work, participation on a task force team, as well as role rotations. High potentials also receive differentiated training that often includes additional options for "higher dollar" training.

Greater Responsibility. When a high potential is provided a special assignment, it likely means their level of responsibility has increased. While it may seem that high potentials are rewarded with 'more work,' the assignments are often viewed as opportunities not burdens.



Figure 3

Give an example of how high potentials are treated differently than other employees in your organization.



An Individual Perspective

When high potentials are identified in the organization, what happens? To understand how study participants view the investments their organizations make in them and the expectations they experience as high potentials, we asked a number of questions, including:

- To what degree do you receive development and support from your organization?
- Should high potentials receive more investment than others in the organization?
- How important is it to you to be formally recognized as a high potential?

The Personal Experiences of High Potentials

The personal experience of high potentials bears out their impression of what is going on in the organization. Most study participants (77 percent) said that they are provided greater developmental opportunities than others in the organization. Specifically they said they were given:

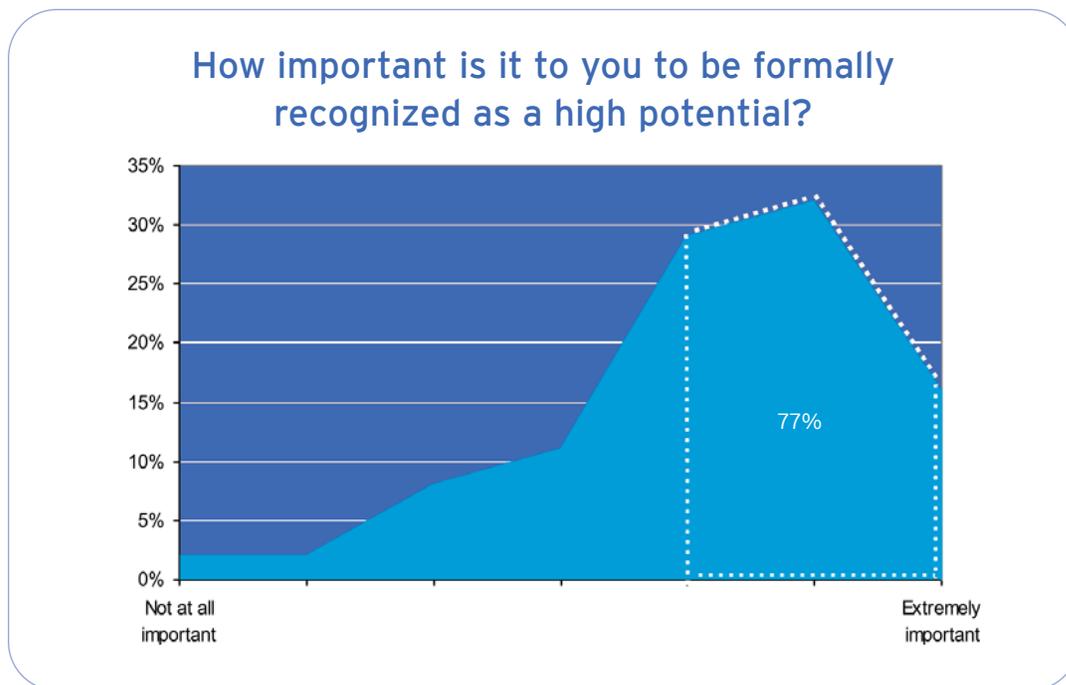
- Access to, and mentoring from, more senior organizational leaders (73 percent).
- Coaching support from their boss (72 percent).
- Special developmental assignments (71 percent).

Study participants also believe that high potentials should receive more investment than other employees in the organization (84 percent). High potentials are telling their organizations that they want – and deserve – greater opportunities and investment in their development.

The Importance Placed on High-Potential Status

From the individual's perspective, high-potential recognition matters. Formal recognition as a high potential is important to 77 percent of study participants (see Figure 4). This high degree of importance suggests that the degree of transparency and formality an organization uses in its high-potential identification process does have a significant impact on the talent pool.

Figure 4



the impact of high-potential identification*



The degree of transparency and formality of notifying employees of their status as a high potential impacts how employees see themselves and how they see the organization.

Study participants who are *formally identified* (F1) are more likely to consider themselves high potentials than those who were *informally identified* (I1) (see Figure 5). Official recognition, it seems, fosters the leaders' identity as a high potential. Without that recognition, leaders may doubt or second guess their skill level or importance to the organization. This implies that positive feedback, a good track record, or informal acknowledgement of one's value is not equivalent to official status as a high potential, as recognized by the organization.

*Any analysis that compares formal to informal only includes those survey participants who indicated they were either formally or informally identified as high potentials, n=161 high potential leaders.

Figure 5



The difference in perception between F1 and I1 talent has implications for organizations expecting to retain a large percentage of their high potentials. **If employees are not formally recognized by the organization as a high potential, they may be less likely to see themselves as a future leader in the organization.** Informal recognition alone may not be enough to convince employees that they are part of the organization’s long-term plans.

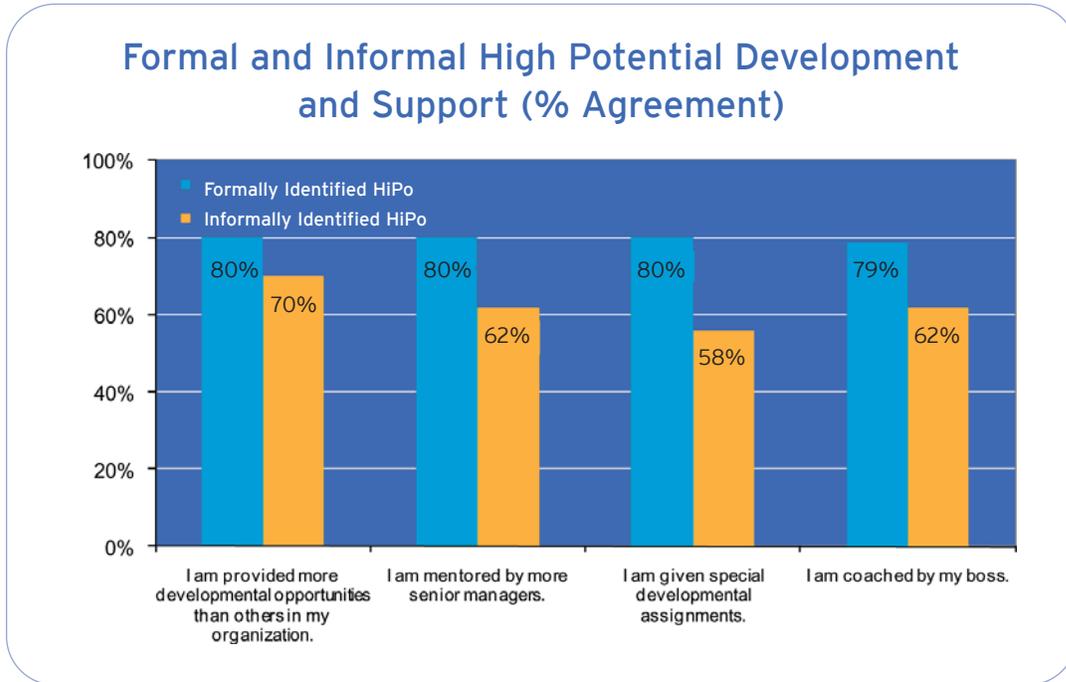
Formal vs. Informal – Differences in Developmental Experiences

High potentials experience increased opportunities and expect differential investment in their development. Whether they are *formally* or *informally* identified, **high potentials in general have positive feelings about the recognition and opportunities they receive from their organization.**

Even so, F1 high potentials experience a greater degree of development and support as compared to I1 high potentials. Study participants who are F1 high potentials express greater agreement about receiving more: developmental opportunities, mentoring opportunities with senior staff, special assignments, and coaching from their boss.

VIEW FROM THE PIPE:
Process Transparency Matters
 Given the value that high potentials place on access and opportunity, organizations need to consider how clear and direct they’re being with their talent about the degree of investment high potentials can expect.

Figure 6



Formal vs. Informal – A Mixed Reaction



For managers, being considered a high potential leader is a compliment, reinforcement that their work is good and their career is on the right track. Organizations, too, operate from this positive stance: being a high potential is a good thing.

But the view from the pipe is a bit more complicated. Individuals can have reservations, frustration or anxiety alongside the positive reaction. To better understand what it feels like to be a high potential, we asked high potentials one of two questions:

- How does it feel to be formally identified as a high potential?
- How does it feel *not* to be formally identified as a high potential?

The responses from these F1 formally identified high potentials also reveal another important perspective: the thin line between excitement and fear. **While they feel good about their recognition, F1 high potentials also feel more pressure to perform.** Some are unclear of what is expected of them once they are officially labeled. Others are very clear on the expectations, but express a degree of apprehension to living up to those expectations. Comments that reflect this mixed reaction include:

- *"I appreciate the recognition, am a bit concerned about my ability to prove myself."*
- *"Extremely complimentary, yet stressful at times because you tend to have to think very quickly on your feet about every decision and the impacts of it."*
- *"At first it made me proud that someone noticed my potential. Then, quite frankly, it made me a little scared. Now what is expected of me! So on one hand it was nice to be noticed, but now the spotlight is on."*

The combination of excitement and fear is to be expected and may not let up even as the manager succeeds and grows as a leader. High potentials are expected to have experiences in multiple functions and multiple geographic regions as they continue on the path to greater responsibility. Managing the emotional response, including the downside, of being a high potential represents an opportunity for organizations and leaders to offer greater support to their high-potential talent.

Talent managers and organizations should recognize that along with high praise, they are putting additional pressure on high potentials. While high potentials may be up for the challenge, they will have very human responses, too.

I1 – Informally Identified High Potentials

I1 formal identification as a high potential feels "good," then informal recognition feels "good enough."

Most responses from (I1) informally identified high potentials convey the feeling that informal recognition is still positive recognition. Even without formal status, this group feels they are receiving opportunities for development and recognition for their work.



(I1) Informally identified high potentials who believe informal recognition is good enough describe their experience:

- *“Informally and based on my track record, I have been identified [and] told I am a high potential and long-term important team member.”*
- *“The current structure over me knows who I am and my capabilities. I’m sure they have spread my good name to others.”*
- *“My boss’s opinion is the one that matters right now.”*

Alongside feeling “good enough” about their reputation and potential in the organization, some of the (I1) informally identified high potentials admit, “It can be frustrating.”

Frustration with the organization is tied to the lack of clarity or inconsistency of the role. Not being formally identified as a high potential keeps the door open for doubt, explained one survey participant:

- *“The fact that I have been told that I am considered a high-potential team member but not recognized formally makes me question if what I am told is accurate or just an underhanded way to keep me striving for something unattainable. I also feel that I am missing development and assignment opportunities that would help me grow and develop.”*

For these respondents, the informal recognition has not coalesced into a clear plan for future development or a sense that the organization is truly investing in them. This uncertainty is a clear source of frustration.

High potentials, bosses, and talent managers need to understand that mixed reactions are to be expected, and those reactions may depend on the degree of transparency and formality of the identification process. Organizations with informal processes or a dual process (informal and formal) will need to consider whether “good enough” outweighs frustration or other negatives.

VIEW FROM THE PIPE: Hi-Po's are Human

Don't forget the “human” side of your human capital assets. High potentials, regardless of their success, will have challenges and may not feel comfortable sharing their true concerns about their ability to perform at the next level. It will benefit the organization to give the support your high potentials need in order to be successful.

engaging high potentials



Commitment to the organization and engagement in the work are two of the most important talent measures for organizations. Greater levels of commitment means talent is more likely to stay with the organization and greater engagement means talent is more likely to be energized, satisfied, and productive in their work⁴.

The logic is that when the organization invests in talent, it will tie high potentials more tightly to the organization and the work – whether out of loyalty, gratitude, or intrinsic feelings of connection.

High-potential survey participants overwhelmingly agree that they are committed to their organizations (95 percent) and motivated by their jobs (96 percent). These are important findings for organizations because they suggest that investment in the development and support of high potentials does build commitment and engagement.

Even so, some high potentials will still leave the organization for other opportunities – 21 percent of survey participants reported that they are actively seeking other employment.

Figure 8



Formal vs. Informal – Differences in Commitment and Engagement

Both groups of high potentials express a high degree of agreement on being motivated by their jobs and being committed to their organization. But the interpretation of that commitment appears to be quite different between those who are formally named high potentials and those who are not. **Without the organizational commitment of formal identification, high potentials appear to have looser ties to the organization.**

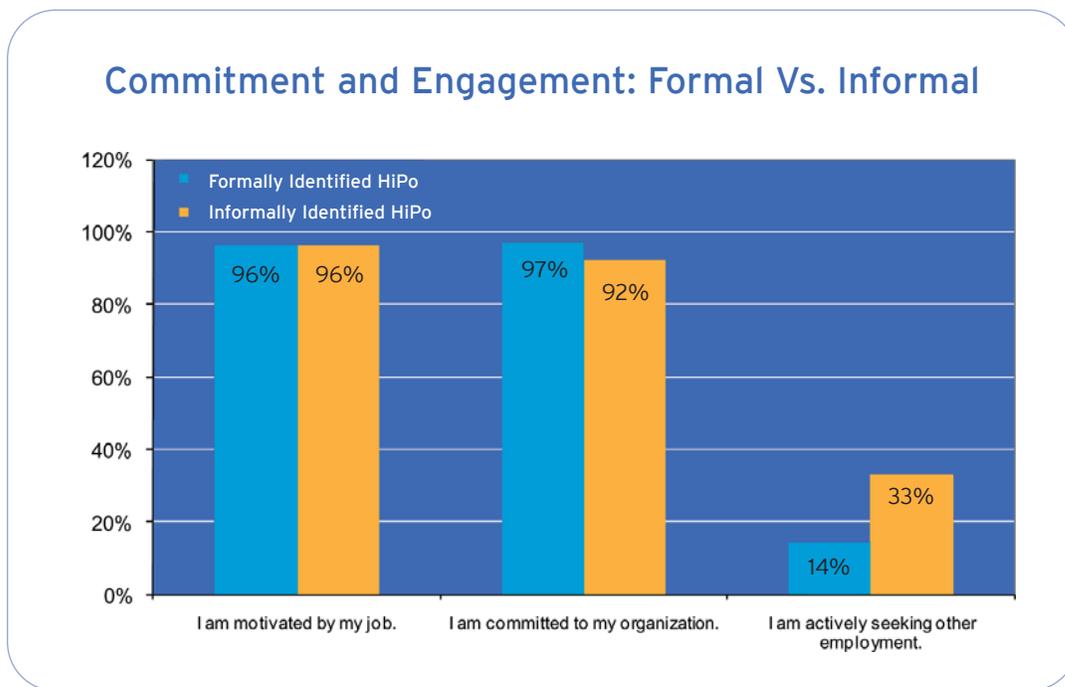
(I1) *Informally identified* high potentials are more likely to be actively seeking other employment (33 percent) than are (F1) *formally identified* high potentials (14 percent). In spite of being important to the organization, the (I1) informally identified group is not only willing to leave for the right opportunity – but more likely to be proactively seeking out that opportunity.

This may be the most important finding for organizations that have a significant pool of (I1) informally identified high potentials. **The level of transparency and formality in identifying high-potential talent has a direct impact on retention.**

VIEW FROM THE PIPE: Why High Potentials Seek Other Employment

High potentials know they must deliver on expectations. But, is the organization delivering on the implied promise of what it means to be a high potential? Be assured, it isn't all about the money (even though money is often the default excuse to explain why a high potential leaves).

Figure 9



Increasing High Potential Commitment and Engagement

To better understand the investment-commitment dynamic between organizations and high potentials, we asked survey participants to identify the ways in which their organization could increase their commitment and engagement.

Some responses are typical and to be expected:

- Developmental opportunities such as special assignments and training.
- Rewards and incentives.
- Non-developmental support such as increased work/life balance and additional resources.

Yet, the **three most frequently mentioned ways organizations could increase commitment and engagement** are far more interesting:

- Career pathing.
- Greater authority.
- Increased feedback and communication.

Figure 10



Career Pathing & Support. Most respondents (27 percent) believe their organization could increase their engagement and commitment by providing a clear career path that identifies the next steps in terms of development, experience, and movement. A yearly development plan may not be enough to increase the engagement and commitment of your high potentials without a clear career path and progression.

Greater Authority. With the increased responsibility given to high potentials, it is important to consider what level of decision-making authority comes with that greater responsibility. Interestingly, when it comes to increasing engagement and commitment, survey respondents also want greater authority (16 percent). Specifically, high potentials are looking for the authority to make meaningful decisions.

Feedback & Communication. High potentials would also have increased engagement and commitment to their organizations if they received more feedback on their performance and greater communication about the high-potential process (13 percent). It appears that organizations are succeeding in challenging their high potentials with developmental assignments and providing support in the form of training, but where organizations could do more is in providing high potentials with an honest assessment of where they stand and direct communication about the next steps.

**VIEW FROM THE PIPE:
Talent Conversations Count**

Leaders play a critical role in the high-potential development process. Leaders need to have the right conversations at the right times and in the right places. HR/Talent professionals need to be positioned to coach leaders on how to have more effective talent conversations.



shifting roles high potentials as talent developers

High-potential talent is only one segment of an organization's employee base. Organizations know that they must leverage their entire talent pool in order to succeed in the long term. As key players in the business, high-potential leaders can be key players in the organization's approach to talent management.

To gauge how high potentials viewed the issue of developing others we asked:

- What role do high potentials play in identifying and developing other high potentials?
- What insight do they have about developing talent throughout the organization?

Most high potentials do see that they have a role in developing other talent throughout the organization. Eighty-six percent of survey participants agree that in their current roles they actively identify and develop other high potentials in the organization.

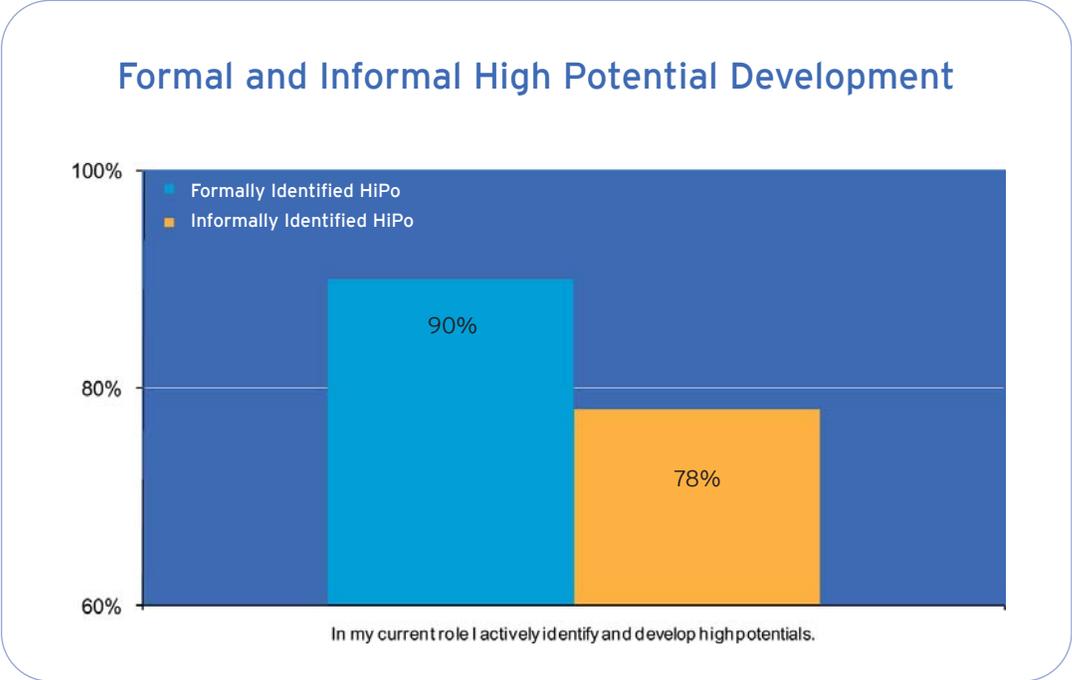
High potentials receive differentiated opportunities for development and growth and, it seems, are likely to reciprocate those efforts by actively developing talent in the organization. The organizational implication of this finding is that development investment in high-potential leaders doesn't stop with them – it cascades throughout the organization. **High potentials become developers of talent in the organization.**

Formal vs. Informal – Differences in Developing Others

Again, formality matters. Ninety percent of (F1) formally identified high potentials are likely to actively identify and develop talent compared to 78 percent of (I1) informally identified high potentials. The uncertainty of their status may result in (I1) informally identified high potentials taking a more tentative or short-term approach to developing others.

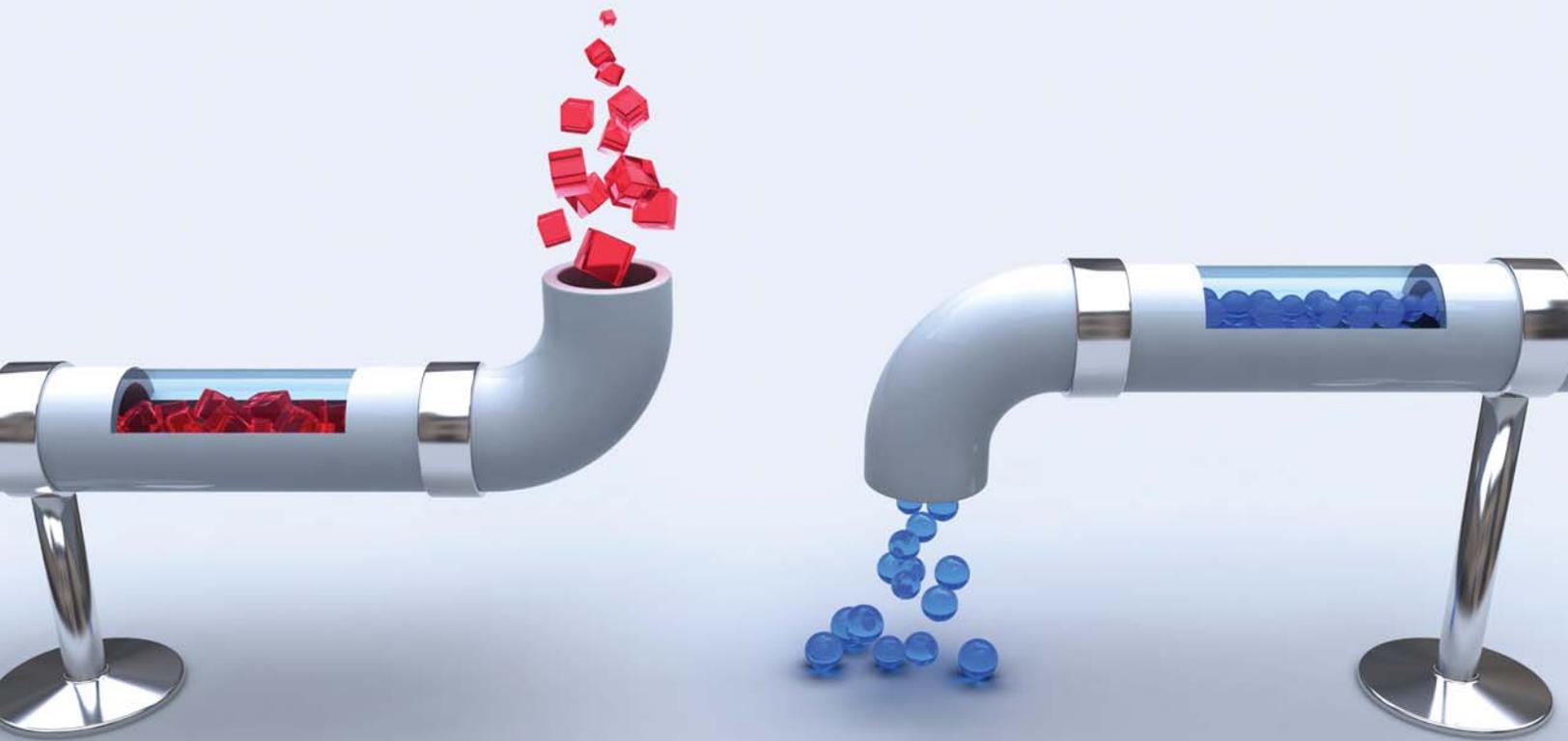
Organizations that have a significant pool of (I1) informally identified high potentials are **limiting the benefit of “cascading development.”** They are at greater risk of losing needed talent and having them walk out the door without having passed down knowledge or shared their expertise.

Figure 11



VIEW FROM THE PIPE: Promote Cascading Development

The organization's investment in a high potential's development shouldn't stop with that individual. Make it clear to high potentials that 'moving up' means developing others. Help high potentials learn how to use challenging assignments and coaching to develop the talent around them.



leveraging the view from the pipe recommendations and next steps

Organizations that actively manage their leadership pipeline know that they need to identify and invest in high potentials. What they may be less clear on is the impact these efforts are having on the organization's talent. CCL's View from the Pipe research has provided some clarity on how employees experience the high-potential process, what they currently receive from their organizations, and what they want from their organizations.

Examining talent management from the perspective of those in the pipeline suggests three key strategies for organizations to consider:

1

Be deliberate about process transparency. The degree of transparency and formality to the high-potential identification process does impact how employees see themselves and the organization. Organizations should understand the implications of their approach and weigh the tradeoffs.

2

Create a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and the talent.

Mutuality addresses the benefits individuals receive as employees of the organization, but also takes into account and makes explicit the benefits the organization receives from its employees. A mutually beneficial relationship means that high potentials receive the investment in development they want from their organization, and organizations receive not only a more committed and engaged group of leaders but also stronger performance and bottom-line results.

3

Leverage high potentials as developers of talent.

Because of the influence that high potentials possess, organizations should consider the ways in which high potentials may play a role in identifying and developing the organization's next cadre of future leaders. Hold high potentials responsible for developing potential in others – and hold their bosses accountable, too.

To implement the three recommendations and align your talent management efforts with the view from the pipe, use the following questions to conduct a talent diagnostic for your organization. Your responses will help you make explicit the policies and processes that affect high potentials in your organization. From there, you can identify what is most effective and what changes could be made.

Topic: High-Potential Identification

- What degree of formality and transparency is appropriate for the culture and context of your organization?
- How much formality and transparency is required at different levels (manager, middle-manager, director, executive) in your organization?
- How much formality and transparency do your high potentials want in the talent-identification process?

Topic: Investments in High Potentials

- How much more investment do high potentials expect from the organization over the average performer?
- How much more investment do they require?
- Do high potentials recognize and appreciate the higher level of support and opportunities they receive?

Topic: Understanding How It Feels to Be a High Potential

- What efforts do you make to ensure your high potentials feel recognized and valued?
- What is the impact of organizational inactivity after a person becomes aware of their high-potential status?
- Have you put any rigor into how you communicate to people their high-potential status, or do you leave it to chance?

Topic: Retaining High-Potential Talent

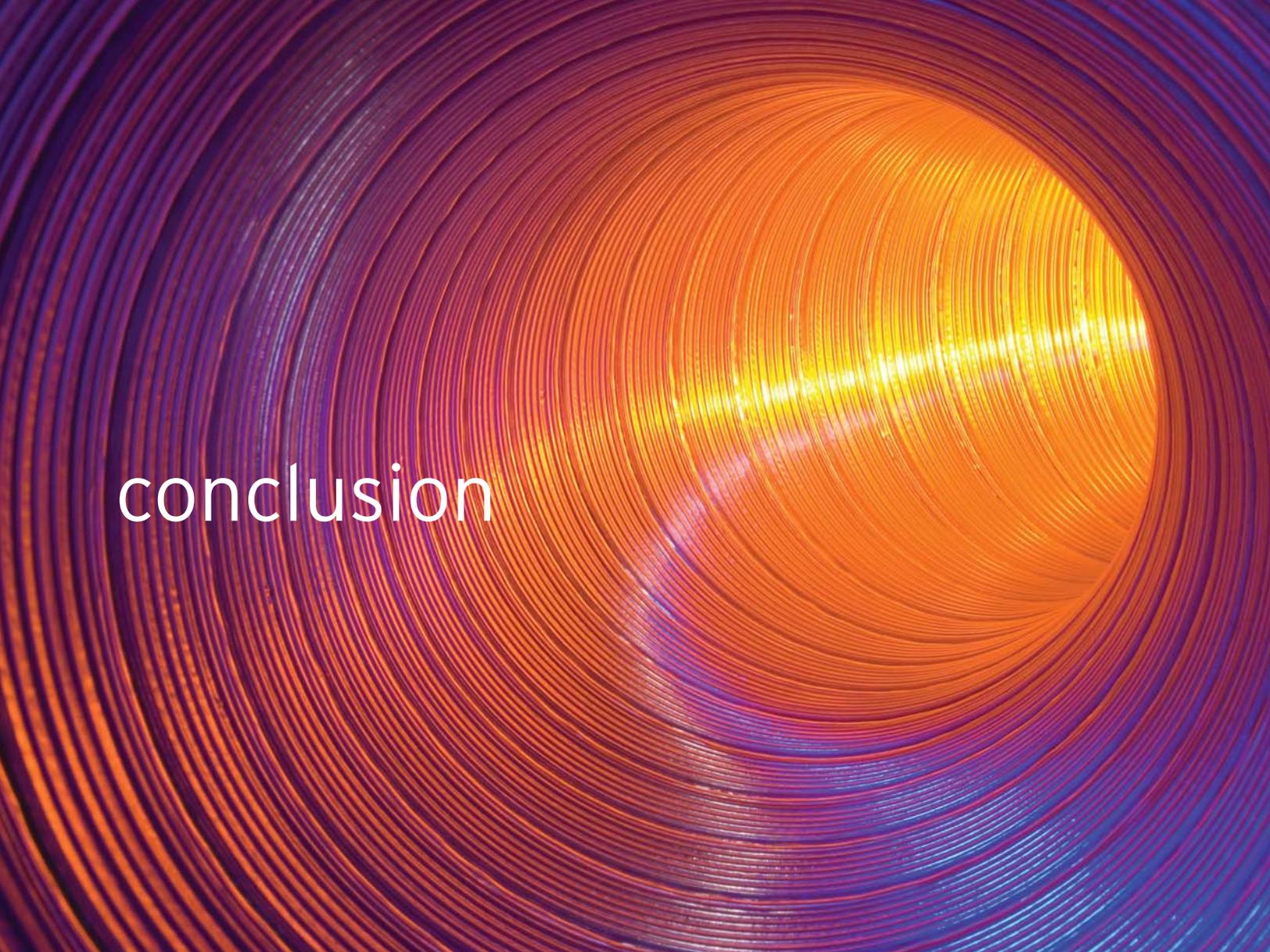
- How many high potentials did you lose over something that could have been prevented?
- Do you understand the contributing factors that led to why a high potential has left your organization?
- Do you know the point in time when a high potential began to actively seek other employment opportunities?
- What implied promises are perceived by those you identify as high potentials?
- To what degree do your high potentials truly expect the organization to keep its promises?

Topic: Increasing High Potentials' Commitment and Engagement

- Are there multiple, appealing, and clear paths within your organization for high potentials?
- Are leaders in your organization able to guide high potentials along their careers?
- How effective are your leaders at having development conversations versus performance conversations?

Topic: Leveraging High Potentials as Developers of Talent

- How do you recognize and catalyze the ability of a high potential to be a developer of talent?
- In what ways are leaders at all levels held accountable for developing talent?



conclusion

The findings from the View from the Pipe study serve as a reminder that effective talent management is not a one-sided effort. Looking at the leadership pipeline through an organizational lens has important implications for how to identify, develop, and engage high potentials. **By also incorporating the perspective of the people who make up the pipeline, organizations have the opportunity to maximize the return on their talent investment and accelerate the development of their leaders.**

Resources and References on Organizational Leadership

Resources

CCL's research and client experience has shown that deep and sustained organizational change requires developing both an organization's talent and its culture in ways that are aligned with its strategy. To learn more about how to drive change through integrated approaches focusing on leadership culture and leadership strategy, look to these resources from CCL's Organizational Leadership White Paper Series:

"Transforming Your Organization": <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/solutions/TYO.pdf>

"Developing a Leadership Strategy": <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/LeadershipStrategy.pdf>

"Boundary Spanning Leadership":
<http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/BoundarySpanningLeadership.pdf>

To learn more about CCL's research on best practices in succession management, read this recent report on "High-Impact Succession Management" by CCL and research firm Bersin & Associates:

"High-Impact Succession Management: Best Practices, Models, and Case Studies in Organizational Talent Mobility": <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/HighImpactSuccessionManagement.pdf>

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³ See for example: APQC. (2004). *Talent Management: From Competencies to Organizational Performance*. Houston, TX: Authors. Benchmarking study of five organizations with reputations for effective talent management practices and who also passed a screening survey: Capital One, Celanese, Coca-Cola HBC, IRS, Johnson & Johnson.

⁴ See for example: Bakker, A., Schaufeli, W., Leiter, M., & Taris, T. (2008, July). Work engagement: An emerging concept in occupational health psychology. *Work & Stress*, 22(3), 187-200. A position paper that summarizes and reviews the concept of work engagement.

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Michael Campbell is a Senior Research Analyst at the Center for Creative Leadership. Michael's work focuses on understanding the behaviors and challenges of senior executive leaders including such topics as selection, sustaining tenure, and talent management. He currently manages CCL's assessment database which contains leadership data on close to 100,000 individual leaders.

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Roland Smith is a Senior Research Faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership. Roland is CCL's lead researcher in the areas of talent management and senior executive leadership. In addition to his role as a researcher, he also teaches CCL's Leadership at the Peak program as well as works with individual client organizations to develop and deliver customized solutions.

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About the Research

How was the research conducted?

During an eight-month period from October 2007 through May 2008, data were collected from participants attending a CCL open-enrollment program via two complementary research methods. The first asked participants to complete a short survey on computer kiosks during their weeklong participation in a CCL program. These data were returned to them by the end of their program week.

The second method was an Internet survey that participants volunteered to take part in approximately two weeks following their CCL experience. This survey was more in-depth and allowed the research team to better understand the high-level trends that emerged from the in-class survey.

Who participated in the research?

In-Class Survey

The initial survey focused on high-level trends and was completed by 199 participants attending a leadership development program at CCL's Colorado Springs, CO USA campus. The typical participant was a male (73 percent), between the ages of 36 and 50 years old (67 percent), representing upper-middle management or the executive level (74 percent).

Post-Program Survey

Approximately two weeks following the CCL program, 51 participants who volunteered responded to an Internet survey that posed qualitative questions about their perspectives on being a high potential. The typical participant was male (84 percent), between the ages of 36 and 50 (69 percent), at the upper-middle management level (41 percent).



About CCL

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that unlocks individual and organizational potential through its exclusive focus on leadership development and research. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit, educational institution, CCL helps clients worldwide cultivate creative leadership – the capacity to achieve more than imagined by thinking and acting beyond boundaries – through an array of programs, products and other services. Ranked among the world’s top providers of executive education by *BusinessWeek* and the *Financial Times*, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, NC, with campuses in Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Moscow, Russia; and Singapore. Its work is supported by more than 450 faculty members and staff.

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