

What Is Leadership Potential—And How Do You Develop It to Accelerate Your Career and Grow Future Leaders?

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The word potential gets tossed around a lot in leadership conversations. It shows up in talent reviews, succession planning meetings, and executive off-sites where one critical question looms large:

Do we have the right leaders to take us into the future?

For companies, the answer isn't just about current performance—it's about **identifying and developing those with the capacity to grow into significantly broader, more complex roles. Investing in high-potential talent is one of the most powerful levers an organization can pull**—not only to retain top performers, but to build organizational resilience, unlock innovation, and ensure leadership continuity in times of change.

We have seen time and again that organizations that deliberately assess and develop their future leaders—especially at senior levels—outperform peers in both transformation readiness and long-term value creation.

But what exactly is leadership potential? How is it measured? And how can we cultivate it—both in ourselves and in others?

Let's unpack this essential concept for ambitious professionals and decision-makers alike.

Performance ≠ Potential

It's a common mistake: assuming that a high performer today will automatically make a great leader tomorrow. But performance is retrospective—it measures what someone has done in a known context. Potential is prospective—it gauges someone's capacity to succeed in unfamiliar and more complex roles.

As Korn Ferry defines it, **“High potential” refers to individuals who have the ability, aspiration, and engagement to rise to and succeed in more senior, critical roles in the future.**

Three keywords stand out in this definition:

- **Ability:** Cognitive capacity, learning agility, and people acumen.
- **Aspiration:** The motivation to take on bigger, riskier, or more complex roles.
- **Engagement:** The energy and commitment to grow within the organization.

Organizations that invest in identifying and nurturing these traits are more likely to have a strong leadership bench when the time comes to promote or pivot.



How Is Leadership Potential Assessed?

There's no one-size-fits-all approach. Depending on your company's resources and priorities, assessments may include:

- **Psychometric tools and leadership inventories**
- **360-degree feedback**
- **Observers' feedback and input during talent review calibration discussions**
- **Structured assessment and development centers**
- **Interviews focused on learning agility, ability, ambition, engagement and aspiration**

Some organizations use Korn Ferry's Seven Signposts of Leadership Potential—a validated model that includes traits like curiosity, insight, determination, and engagement—to guide their assessments.

Whether you're in a formal talent review process or simply reflecting on your own growth, it's worth asking:

- Am I energized by ambiguity?
- Do I like to lead change?
- Do I learn quickly from mistakes and seek feedback?
- Do I aspire to lead beyond my current function or comfort zone?

Can Leadership Potential Be Developed?

Our experiences backed by research has shown that **developmental experiences—particularly those that stretch and challenge—are the most effective accelerators of leadership potential**. These experiences often include:

- **Leading a turnaround or navigating a crisis**
- **Launching a new market, product, or team from scratch**
- **Influencing without authority across silos or geographies**
- **Taking on roles with a global or intercultural component**

These assignments push leaders into the “learning zone”—where competence is stretched, uncertainty is high, and meaningful growth occurs.

Yet experiences alone aren’t enough. Structured learning interventions act as the foundation, guide, and anchor that turn challenges into lasting capability:

- **Before:** Training, assessments, and development centers provide the frameworks, tools, and self-awareness leaders need to approach new challenges with confidence.
- **During:** Coaching, workshops, and peer learning create touchpoints for reflection and course correction in real time.
- **After:** Senior Leadership Programs, facilitated feedback, and structured reflection help leaders consolidate insights and embed new behaviors.

When strategically combined, these two engines—stretch experiences and structured learning—create a powerful cycle of preparation, application, and reflection. That cycle is what truly accelerates leadership potential.



For Individuals: How to Discover and Cultivate Your Potential

If you're an MBA-trained professional with your sights set on a bigger role, here are some practical steps:

1. **Seek feedback regularly and truly listen to it.** Use 360s, mentors, or peer coaching to gain clarity on how others see your leadership behaviors and gaps.
2. **Say yes to stretch.** Don't wait for the perfect job title—look for messy problems, ambiguous projects, or cross-functional initiatives where growth happens fast.
3. **Clarify your aspiration.** Leadership potential is not just about skills—it's about desire. What kind of roles or challenges energize you?
4. **Stay visible by letting others see the impact of your work.** Share stories that connect your contributions to the bigger picture, so people understand both what you do and why it matters.
5. **Invest in your learning agility.** Reflect, experiment, adapt. Practice learning from unfamiliar experiences—not just refining what you already know.

For People Leaders: How to Spot and Grow Future Leaders

If you're building a leadership pipeline—whether for a business unit, function, or region—your role is critical. Here's how you can do it better:

- **Use a shared definition of potential.** Align with frameworks like Korn Ferry's to ensure consistency and fairness.

- **Pair high-potentials with mission-critical work.** Don't wait for the next vacancy—give them real business challenges now.
- **Diversify development opportunities.** Combine structured learning with experiential growth. Classroom programs and formal training provide essential foundations and frameworks, while rotations and stretch assignments accelerate learning through real-world application. The key is using both strategically to maximize impact.
- **Challenge your assumptions.** High potentials don't always look like the last generation of leaders. Be willing to expand your lens on what leadership can look like in a changing world.

If these questions resonate with you, we invite you to join our upcoming **Swiss MBA Association Leadership Development Webinar** on Dec. 11 at noon-13 pm.

We'll dive deeper into these topics and share practical case studies. Whether you're a team leader, HR decision-maker, or an ambitious professional navigating your next move, this session will offer both clarity and inspiration.

About the Authors

Nina is a strategic HR and organizational development leader who helps businesses scale and transform through their people. With a track record spanning Fortune 100s to high-growth SaaS tech firms, she has led global initiatives in global expansion, leadership development, culture building, and org design that drive measurable business results. Backed by advanced credentials and a data-driven approach, Nina partners with executive teams to successfully implement strategies and accelerate change in complex, fast-moving environments.

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Dr. Evelina is a leadership and talent development expert with 20+ years of experience across academia, corporate roles, and boutique consulting. As founder of ATI GmbH, she creates transformative learning experiences that help leaders navigate change, grow through challenge, and lead with clarity and impact. With a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology and a background in psychometrics, she brings deep expertise in executive coaching, assessment and development centers, 360° feedback, and leadership development across industries like finance, pharma, and engineering. A global citizen and adventure enthusiast, she helps individuals unlock their unique leadership style and full potential.

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