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Cupcakes and High Potentials

The Recipe for Developing New Leaders

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Kevin Wilde, Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness and Chief Learning Officer at General Mills, joins Dr. Joe Folkman in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series to talk about developing high potentials.

Under Kevin's leadership, *Fortune*, *Chief Executive*, and *Leadership Excellence* magazines have all recognized General Mills as one of the best companies in the world for its leadership development. A prolific author, Kevin is also an Executive Leadership Fellow at the Carlson School of Management, at the University of Minnesota.

This eBook is a brief part of that conversation. Listen to the full podcast at zengerfolkman.com.

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You recently wrote an article for *Talent Quarterly* entitled, “Cupcakes, Coffee and Challenge: A Conversation with a High Potential.” What advice would you give a high potential?

I would start with, “Don’t wear the label.” Some companies put that formal title on you—others are a little more informal—but you know how you are treated and the opportunities you are presented with. You need to lean into your skills, abilities, passions, and ambitions, but at the same time do some relationship building—build skills around collaborating and reaching out to others as well as accomplishing great work. I think getting that balance right is important.

I would also highlight the timing of assignments. I find that if you are ambitious and have a track record of getting things done, you are excited to get the “next” thing done. The delicate balance is that of understanding the meaning of the current assignment and avoiding the temptation of missing that meaning. The purposes of a current assignment might include getting exposure before quickly moving on or picking up a skill or ability.



There are also some wisdom assignments that go well beyond exposure, competency building, and accomplishing things. Picking up a level of judgment becomes important in critical moments. Oftentimes what high potentials miss by being eager to move ahead is the notion that every job is a chance to learn something, to build or prove skills, to make a contribution, but also to build your judgment.

In the article, you described an experience with your daughter baking cupcakes. I assume that this is a true story?

Absolutely. That has become my signature—I do Thanksgiving-turkey cupcakes, Easter cupcakes—you name it. We had thrown the box away and I was wondering how long we should keep the cupcakes in the oven. I remember thinking that a cupcake is a lot like a high potential in an assignment. The cupcake is staring out of the oven saying, “I’m ready. Pull me out.” If you pull that cupcake out too soon, it is doughy and undeveloped; if you wait too long, it’s toast.

Is there a right amount of time for a high potential’s assignment?

It depends on the situation. There is not a pat answer to how long you keep the cupcakes in the oven. To continue with the baking analogy, what is the heat of the oven? With a hotter assignment, you can learn a lot quickly. If the assignment is not that challenging, you might have to go find challenges.

Typically, in large organizations, I think that quick-exposure assignments tend to be about a year or 18 months. Assignments that require building or demonstrating competency and making a bigger contribution require about 18 months, but there comes a point when the assignment is not hot anymore and it’s time to move on. The length of assignments later in one’s career might even be a longer cycle.



That's not to say that within an assignment you are doing the same thing day after day, month after month. For those who feel like they are not being challenged or are not growing, rather than jumping to a new company or demanding a new role, they should talk to their managers and say, "I've got the core job covered. What else can we add that would be meaningful and exciting?"

Sometimes companies don't manage high potentials well. Sometimes managers hoard talent. The number one job of the manager is to get work done, and if you've got high potentials, they are probably getting amazing work done. The issue is getting that balance right. High potentials are there to make a contribution, they are there to learn, but they are also there to build. If they are ambitious, they want to do more and be more.

On the other side, high potentials need to own their careers and take the company resources and make the most out of everything, but not jump too quickly. They need to make those big contributions, but make sure the timing is right.

If a high potential tells you, "I love my job. I love my manager. I've been here 18 months, but I just love this thing and I'm having a great time." Would you tell that person to start looking or to enjoy it a little longer?

I would start with asking what they are trying to achieve. If they are looking for that perfect job and want to settle in, I'd say, "Congratulations!"

If they want something bigger over time, it is an interesting balance. A coaching question to ask about growth is, "Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night worrying about a part of your job?" If the answer is never, sometimes you can start backsliding and get too comfortable and you stop growing.



There are clearly some times when you deserve to get into a job you love and to stay there for a while. Maybe there are personal interests and family matters that require your attention that are more important in the big scheme of things.

If the organization is feeling as good about your contributions as you are about that job, you are in the sweet spot. But don't take that sweet spot for granted—keep yourself on the learning edge. Sometimes that learning edge is not at work. It might be community assignments or it might be things that go beyond the core job.

You also gave some advice about not saying yes too often. Could you elaborate on that?

This is a message as much to my fellow practitioners in talent development as it is to individual high potentials.

I recently participated on a panel, and the moderator asked fellow panel members to state their favorite high potential development techniques. Panelists mentioned things such as action/learning projects, coaching/mentoring assignments, executive programs, and community assignments.

I love all of that, but these things are not center-of-plate. Those are side dishes and desserts. Sometimes we confuse these things with the main meal. The main meal is the core assignment. Sometimes practitioners trying to get someone ready for bigger roles start throwing all these side dishes on the plate. We need to look at the core assignment. What are the one or two things that might enhance the assignment and will be meaningful for that person's career path?

A practitioner recently told me about a high potential who always said yes to new assignments so as not to be taken off the high-potential list. Feeling overwhelmed, this high potential reached out to a mentor and explained the situation. In this case, the manager understood the problem and worked with others to delay the additional assignments.



High potentials need to develop relationships and savvy so that they don't get frustrated, burned-out, and quit. They need to be able to reach out to their networks to help make sense of a challenge so that the network can guide them and support them.

You mention bridging skills in your article. What are bridging skills?

Bridging skills for a high potential are the two or three things that, over time, prepare them for that bigger executive role.

One of these skills is resiliency and that notion that when I have challenges—something is new, is uncomfortable, or is sucking the life out of me—that I have a set of practices that enable me to get through the challenges and overcome them as opposed to blowing up.

A lot of executives I work with have developed some very strong resiliency habits that get them through the unexpected: habits like exercise and eating right, having a social network that becomes a resource during challenges, and mental stimulation. Some high performers have wonderful hobbies. One of our senior executives is a woodworker. He makes cabinets. He makes chairs. This has nothing to do with his job, but when he shows up at work with all of these great ideas, I know it didn't come from the boardroom. It came from the woodshop.

You also have to ask yourself, “What kind of game am I playing?” Is it just about getting ahead? Do I have a personal mission? Do I have a spiritual compass? I find that those who really do well under pressure are doing well in all these dimensions.

A friend of mine gave me a quote I had never heard before: “If you want to take your leadership to a higher level, take your pain threshold to a higher level.”

Sometimes leadership is hard. Sometimes big jobs can be challenging. If you fade away at the first sign of resistance or difficulty, you're never going to be the leader that you could be.

In addition to the calls being tougher as you move ahead, what productivity looks like changes at different levels. Early on in the careers of high potentials, because of huge raw intelligence, huge ambition, and a great work ethic, they take it all upon themselves. Early on they are the stars because they can crank out the work. However, as they move ahead, it is not just what they can do, it's what their teams can do. And over time, it's not just what their teams can do, it's what their organizations can do.

You mention in your article that high potentials must be open to feedback. You also mention that the older we get, the tendency is to ask for feedback less often. In your experience, have the real high potentials been feedback sponges?

Generally, yes. As time moves ahead and you are successful, sometimes that success lulls you into the notion that you must be doing fine and you don't need to ask for feedback. Then you start to feel that if you ask for feedback, you are showing signs of weakness. As people get bigger jobs, the audience almost wants them to be perfect. But as people move ahead they develop blind spots.

If we were having coffee, one question I would ask is, "If you were to give me five people that work around you, and I were to ask them how coachable you are, what would they say?" I think that being coachable in the broader sense, responding to feedback, watching out for those blind spots, and checking in from time to time is the mark of somebody who can really fulfill their pot.



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