
Two Sides to the Story: An Interactionist Perspective on Identifying Potential

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Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.

—*Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe*

Silzer and Church (2009) rightly point out that the identification of potential must begin with a clear and contextually relevant definition of the construct. As they note, across varying fields of practice and research, one will find a wide array of variables emphasized as critical to that definition. Their article makes a significant contribution toward the integration and synthesis of those divergent perspectives. Yet, in today's global workplace where the competition for a qualified workforce is ever increasing (e.g., Farrell et al., 2005; Gandossy & Efron, 2003), perhaps the more pressing challenges organizations face center on what they can do not just to *identify* high potential but also to *optimize* and, perhaps in some cases, *create* potential among the workforce they possess.

In this commentary, we explore what might be gained by defining potential as a more emergent and interactive entity as opposed to understanding it as something that only resides within a person. Not unlike the proverbial question about the sound a falling tree makes if no one is around to hear it, one might also ask, "What is potential that goes unrecognized or unacknowledged?" In other words, potential exists not just because of what an individual (an actor) does or does not do, but often (although not exclusively) because of someone else's (an observer's) capacity to perceive their actions as indicative of potential and their power to help nurture it into performance.

In presenting this more interactionist perspective, our intention is not to contradict Silzer and Church's conceptualizations of a high-potential individual. Rather, we want to encourage scholars and practitioners to fully consider how the dynamic nature of potential informs what it means to develop not just those with high potential but all organizational members. Specifically, we examine the ways in which one's potential is perceived and shaped by others (especially those in managerial positions) in conjunction with the role one's environment plays in creating and bringing forth potential.

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Do We Ever Create Potential in Others?

Classic social psychology works such as McClelland's (1966) *Achieving Society*, Seligman and Maier's (1967) experiments on learned helplessness, and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory all demonstrate the role others' expectations and examples play in shaping individuals' interests, drives, and beliefs about their own abilities. Therefore, any practical discussion of how to identify potential has to take into account the powerful ways in which social influence processes factor into not just its manifestation but also its creation.

Although Silzer and Church do acknowledge that self-fulfilling prophecies can play a role in the identification of potential, we argue that such processes are profoundly important to the overall practice of identifying potential. For instance, others have the ability to influence a person's potential through merely labeling that person as having potential. This label is likely to have an even stronger effect when it comes from an authority figure or organizational leader (e.g., Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

The Pygmalion effect further demonstrates that others' perceptions and judgments also influence third-party perceptions of an individual's potential. As Eden (1984) explained, "the conventional Pygmalion paradigm involves duping supervisors on the basis of partially false information into believing that certain subordinates have high potential" (p. 69). In depicting this, Eden and Shani (1982) manipulated trainer expectations for a sample of adult soldiers and found that the trainees who were labeled prior as having a great expectancy for high performance during a simulated training session did, in fact, learn more than their peers who did not receive a similar label.

Presumably, there are limits to the transformational effects of one individual's labels and beliefs on another's ability. Regardless, a more complete understanding of what it means to accurately identify potential

needs to take into account the dynamic ways in which expectations and judgments shape what is manifested and discernable as potential. Those dynamics should be a cause for optimism and also caution. We express optimism in that with the right kind of social support, many employees would be capable of more than what might be immediately apparent. This is not to imply that organizations and their leaders need not distinguish between others' levels of abilities. Rather, the potency of social influence only magnifies the importance of ensuring the information utilized to form judgments about others is credible, verified, and complete. After all, there is an element of perception in the process of identifying potential. Consequently, the process is as subject to attribution error as much as any other.

Further, careful consideration must be given to the consequences for those not labeled as high potential. As Silzer and Church have noted, some organizations do keep those labels confidential, but in our experience and as per the Pygmalion effect, the message still comes across. For example, Martinko and Gardner (1982), in their theoretical overview of learned helplessness in the workplace, characterized the ways in which organizational practices can unintentionally increase passive and maladaptive behavior. One ought to be mindful of the fact that not being labeled as high potential might have similar unintended consequences. Therefore, in our efforts to separate the "wheat from the chaff," care must also be taken to ensure that we do not actually create more chaff than was there in the first place. Doing so likely includes helping managers better discern situational factors that contribute to a person's performance and/or their opportunity to demonstrate talent. It should also include helping people capitalize on the relevant strengths they do possess (e.g., Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) and providing them with regular feedback about the reasons for their success and failures. Moreover, it helps to keep in mind that individuals' growth needs and trajectories are often dynamic.

As a result, a label designating someone as having (or not having) high potential may be more relevant at one point in time than it is at another.

Ultimately, from both a humanistic and performance perspective, organizations have the most to gain by putting more emphasis on what they do to nurture overall talent. For instance, to the extent that growth components related to potential include social cognitive variables, we also need to understand more about how promoting a learning culture and related practices encourage their expression (e.g., Kraiger, 2003). Cultivating talent also includes appreciating the role played by leaders in modeling what it means to be effective. Arguably, the most important kind of leadership potential for organizations to develop is the capacity to help others realize their potential. However, embracing this view requires somewhat of a paradigm shift. No longer would an individual in a management position be asking, "How do I identify who has the most potential?" Rather, in this framework the more important question becomes "How do I help others become the best people I need them to be?"

Servant leadership (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002) and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) are two current models that strike us as putting more emphasis on this latter question. As Avolio and Gardner (2005) stress with respect to authentic leadership, "environments that provide open access to information, resources, support, and equal opportunity for everyone to learn and develop will empower and enable leaders and their associates to accomplish their work more effectively" (p. 326).

What Shapes Our Capacity to Recognize Potential?

Even with talent review boards, well-articulated competency models, and other mechanisms for screening and monitoring, ensuring consistency in the talent identification process is a challenging endeavor. In meeting that challenge, we must acknowledge that the concept of

potential resides, at least in part, in the eye of the beholder. This fact draws attention to interesting questions that have less to do with what someone is capable of and more to do with the nuances of recognizing it. Consider, for instance, this observation by a *Fortune* 500 executive, commenting on global talent identification in his organization: "We don't modify the process. Instead, it is the content that changes between the various regions" (Ryan & Dominick, 2008, p. 4). What's more, even if there is a conceptual agreement about what to look for, cognitive biases and other individual difference factors will continue to influence a person's capacity to recognize potential and/or how potential is defined for a given position (e.g., Aguinis, Mazurkiewicz, & Heggstad, 2009).

Building upon earlier work by Dweck (1999), Heslin, Latham, and VandeWalle (2005) demonstrated that managers' degree of growth (as opposed to fixed) mindset made them better able to discern between good and bad employee performance. Their findings highlight the important role individual differences play in detecting potential and we direct readers to Heslin's thoughtful commentary in this issue.

It is also worth considering whether other individual difference factors derived from the social cognitive tradition shape a person's capacity to recognize potential and develop talent. For example, Silzer and Church point out that a person's potential is closely related to important social cognitive factors such as locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and mastery orientation. How might those same factors influence a person's capacity to recognize potential in others? Might, for example, individuals with a stronger mastery orientation be more inclined to look for and support others' efforts to develop?

We should also examine how self-awareness relates to one's capacity to recognize potential in others. Presumably, more self-aware individuals are better at regulating the extent to which certain perceptual biases influence their judgments of others' potential, and they might be better

able to recognize that high potential means something different than what they themselves are like. Self-awareness might also help individuals better discern potential even when viewing it through other filters that can include, for example, cultural, ethnic, gender, and generational differences.

Conclusion

Silzer and Church have aptly noted that the identification of potential is an area toward which the field of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology has already contributed and can continue to do so. We agree, but have further stressed that it is not enough to just focus on what we should be looking for in others. A more complete understanding of how to identify potential comes from viewing it as an interactive experience shaped by social influence, context, and personal biases.

In closing, we want to stress one more “potential” benefit that can come from advancing our understanding and experience of potential. Recently, others have argued that I–O psychologists should look to expand their image by doing more to incorporate humanistic models into their scientist–practitioner paradigm (Gillespie, 2009; Lefkowitz, 2008). We too would agree, and it is hard to imagine any topic better suited to the objective than the study of talent and potential. It clearly represents one area in which attempts to advance organizational performance can clearly intersect with efforts to help individuals lead fuller lives.

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