Simplifying the 9-Box: Enhancing Performance and Identifying Potential for Effective Talent Management
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Many organizations use a 9-box model as part of their employee assessment process. A typical 9-box assessment is a three-by-three grid plotted along an x- and y-axis. The x-axis indicates performance: the further to the right, the better the performance of the employee. The y-axis is used to plot the employee’s future potential: the higher, the better. Both dimensions (performance and potential) on the grid are divided into three rankings (low, mid, high), hence the resulting nine boxes.

Not only does a 9-box serve a diagnostic function of plotting current performance and future potential, it can be used as a prescriptive tool as well. Based on the box where an employee is plotted, a specific type of developmental action can be taken. Leaders identified as having high potential should be developed and given stretch assignments to tap into their potential and prepare for greater future responsibilities. Employees identified as having both low performance and low potential may benefit from moving into a position better aligned to their capabilities. With nine possible boxes, pinpointing exactly where a leader really is and then creating the best developmental plan can be a significant aid to talent management. When the 9-box approach is boiled down to its core basic components, there are two essential aspects of an effective talent management system: leaders have to perform on the job, and HR must know which leaders have potential to move up to higher Role Levels.

Performance
High Performing Systems, Inc. (HPS), defines performance as a function of motivation, competencies and resources. For a team member to perform well on a task, he/she must be motivated to perform the task, have the proper competencies/skills for the task and have the resources needed to complete the task.

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Competencies can be improved through training and development. Training should be targeted to the critical competencies and skills needed at each Role Level. Front-line supervisors need basic leader competencies for working directly with a team to accomplish goals. Leaders at this Level need skills such as communication, conflict resolution and problem solving, to name a few. If leaders have the motivation and resources to accomplish the task and they receive training to develop competencies, they can increase their overall performance.

Potential

One of the biggest difficulties of using a 9-box is that most organizations do not have an objective, validated process to determine a leader’s potential. Most managers have anecdotal evidence to suggest that performance in the current job does not necessarily predict success in the future. Yet many organizations still promote leaders without validating whether they can truly succeed at the next Level.

To address the concerns about the rating of potential on the 9-box model, organizations must have an objective measurement of what potential really means. Each Role Level in an organization requires its own specific combination of abilities and competencies. Once an analysis has been completed to determine the Role Level requirements, each leader should be assessed and compared to the requirements. This process will ensure an accurate and objective assessment of a leader’s true future potential.

Putting It All Together—Two Keys to Success

While using a 9-box model can seem difficult, an organization can simplify the process by focusing on its basic components of performance and potential using a two-pronged approach that centers on training and assessment. Step One (Performance) requires adding training and competency development to raise the performance level of all employees. HPS clients use the High Performance Leadership System™—the only completely integrated and sequential leader development training system available. Building from front-line leader competencies in the Level I training in a sequential process all the way to the CEO Role Level, the HPS training system provides the competency development that team members need to perform effectively on the job.

Step Two (Potential) involves using a scientifically-validated assessment like the Leadership Potential Equation™ (LPE™) to clearly identify high potentials and align their talents to an organization over time. HPS clients use the LPE to assess employees and candidates from individual contributors through CEO; identify current ability and future potential; identify training and development needs specific to each leader and more.

Appropriate use of training and assessment as part of your 9-box model will ensure that your organization raises the leadership bar with every hire and every promotion.

About the Author

Debra Cannarella is the Director of Operations at High Performing Systems, Inc. (HPS), a consulting company that provides assessments, consulting and training solutions to help organizations excel. HPS conducts assessments of leadership potential and provides individual, leader and executive coaching to clients.

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