



The Six-Week Career Makeover

Week 1: Gather Your Posse

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Half of High Potentials Aren't; Even More Are Never Identified

Before we begin, I want to clarify that when I refer to “my HiPos,” the advice and stories I share apply to any professional seeking to shift, advance, or effectively manage their career. This book is not about “high potential” talent. It’s about you. But getting from where you are to where you want to be is something I’ve helped a lot of professionals do, often within the context of a corporate “High Potential” program.

According to research by the New Talent Management Network and the Talent Strategy Group,¹ 72 percent of companies said they had an enterprise-wide definition of “potential,” yet according to CEB, 73 percent of HiPo programs do not demonstrate return on investment (ROI).² The NTMN survey of 138 companies revealed that the average success of predicting potential was only 52 percent. In other words, flipping a coin to identify high potential would have been as effective (and a lot less expensive). Moreover, current practices in identifying HiPos only consider potential for advancement into higher management levels. I’m starting here with these statistics because a lot of my stories and examples come from employees who were identified as “High Potential Talent.” Still, I want to be clear that most HiPo programs (a) don’t have a great track record of doing that and (b) formal programs rarely identify the hidden gems and “dark horses” that don’t fit within a pre-conceived notion of what “potential” really is. Marc Effron, author of *One Page Talent Management*, recommends leaders start by getting crystal clear by answering the simple question: “Potential for What?”³ Finally, formalized HiPo programs are primarily interested in developing one type of talent: those with the aspiration and ability to advance to executive-level positions. We’ll talk about alternative career paths in *Part 3: Fire!* and managing your career. In the 13 years I spent managing and developing identified HiPos, I am proud to say my track record is a bit better than average: More than two-thirds of over 200 professionals who have been in one of my programs have advanced to executive or vice president level roles either within the organization or after moving on to new opportunities.



You Need a Posse

“I need a mentor,” said pretty much every early-career employee or mid-career aspiring leader who has ever walked into my office.

“No,” I reply. “What you need is a posse.”

Before I go on, let me give credit where it’s due. Linda was one of my earliest HiPo “grads” when I first took ownership of my former employer’s high-potential program. Eventually, she rose to become a senior vice president at the company. I often had her speak to my HiPos about building their careers. She always advised young professionals—HiPo or not—to “build your posse.”

What’s a posse? It’s a very American colloquialism typically referring to the old Wild West, when a sheriff would gather a group of people to maintain peace or search for an outlaw. Think Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and the Earp brothers. The root of the word comes from the medieval Latin meaning “power” or “force.” It’s a group of friends, a band of brothers, a team, a gang, a crew, an army. It’s not a single sidekick or a single hero.

Linda was right, and I’ve shared her “posse philosophy” countless times over the years. Research supports Linda’s perspective and makes me cringe a little whenever a company starts thinking, “We need to launch a formal mentoring program.” According to research by Catalyst, men and women both report that they primarily find their most helpful mentors independently (67 percent, versus 17 percent through a formal program).⁴ More importantly, considering mentoring as a panacea for all career development needs is simply out of whack with reality.

Are mentors important? Of course they are, especially for women. The same Catalyst study revealed that women with a mentor increased their odds of being placed at a mid-manager level or above by 56 percent compared to women without a mentor. However, they also note that men reap higher rewards from mentorship than women, and they had a 93 percent promotion rate at the mid-manager level or above if they had a mentor. Moreover, while men and women are equally likely to have mentoring relationships, men’s mentors tend to be at a higher level with more



influence and clout than women's mentors (which means they also serve as advocates). They also discovered that the mentor's level, not their gender, affected career advancement (again, enabling the mentor also to be a career advocate). Both male and female mentors in senior executive positions were equally likely to facilitate the advancement of a high-potential candidate.⁵

A mentor is typically thought of as a more experienced individual who takes the mentee under their wing, advises, and guides them along the path toward career advancement. Often, they are also assumed to play the role of a career advocate, which may or may not be true. But other roles in the HiPo's network are equally important.

Linda suggests a posse should consist of the following:

1. A Mentor

In this context, we will refer to a mentor as anyone who guides and advises about career development in a more general way. It can be (and often is) a boss, another senior manager, even an outside friend or colleague with wisdom and advice to share.

2. Several Coaches

Coaches are those who teach and train, and these relationships can be either short-term or long-term, formal or informal. Think of a personal trainer or an athletic coach. Their sole purpose is to help you improve performance in a specific area. Unless you're trying to win the gold medal for presentation skills or developing client relationships, you may work with a coach only long enough to become proficient in a particular area. Yes, there are professional "development" and "life" coaches who may help you deal with interpersonal and other "soft" skills. Still, a good coach (again, formal or informal) will help you get clear about what it is you want their help to develop. You probably already have used a few informal coaches—even peers—to help you with the knowledge and skills you are trying to build.



Informal coaches are often your best source for longer-term mentors and advocates. If you want to build a relationship with a potential mentor or advocate, seek out a senior expert or leader and ask for their perspective, advice, or help on a specific matter. Ask them about their own career and how they dealt with their toughest challenges. Build the relationship and offer to help with their own pet projects.

3. A Sounding Board

This is the person you trust with some of your more challenging issues, whether they are part of your day-to-day work or about your longer-term career. Mentors and coaches often serve as sounding boards, but not always. Your sounding board helps you look at issues from new perspectives.

4. A Confidante

Similar to a sounding board (and possibly an overlap in roles again), this is the person you can trust implicitly to go vent to, with whom you can be free to scream and yell colorful expletives if necessary. They will sympathize with your frustration but also help you calm down and deal with a problem in a way that doesn't include yelling, screaming, and workplace-inappropriate profanity. Choose this person very carefully, and consider using a friend outside your workplace for this role (and be careful not to share any confidential information if you do).

5. A Devil's Advocate

This is the person who isn't afraid to challenge you or call you on your BS when it's warranted. Your mentor, coach, or sounding board may do this, but often your best Devil's Advocate is someone who knows you very well and has little stake in your outcomes, freeing them to push back or question your direction or decisions.

6. An Advocate. Or Three.

You might refer to this person or these people as your Angel Advocate(s). This should be a senior-level person who will advocate for you, pitch you, and "sell"



you within the organization for opportunities that will serve your growth. This advocate will need to be someone who believes passionately in your capabilities and potential. You need to first earn that respect, of course. When people say they “need a mentor,” typically, this is what they are hoping for. Mentors may be advocates, of course, but an “assigned” mentor through a formal program will rarely have enough knowledge of you to become an effective advocate. Treat these roles separately.

7. Cheerleaders

Yes, cheerleaders are an essential part of any posse. Doc Holliday was Wyatt Earp’s cheerleader. No matter what, Doc believed in and supported Earp and encouraged him in all his decisions. I know you are now envisioning a cowboy with a six-shooter in one hand and a pom-pom in the other. That was my intention.

Mentors can serve as coaches and advocates, and coaches can also act as mentors and sounding boards; logically, these roles overlap considerably in the real world. The big picture, of course, is to build a solid network of those who can support and develop you on your career journey. A formally “assigned” mentor is rarely enough to provide any HiPo with all the support they need to grow as a professional and a leader. So, whether you’re an aspiring leader or someone responsible for developing people with high potential, remember that it takes a whole posse, not just one mentor, to grow a career effectively.

If you are in a career transition, now is the time to gather this Posse. Write down their names, email addresses, and phone numbers. Identify one or two people for each of these roles and include them on your list. Reach out to each of them individually in the next week. Tell them you are in a career transition (or considering one), thank them for something specific they’ve helped you with in the past, then tell them you hope you can solicit their support as you’re looking for your next opportunity. Use the Six-Week Career Makeover Assignment Workbook to keep all your work together.



If you're concerned about identifying the best people for your Posse, consider these tips:

- Start with who has helped you before. Think back to colleagues, friends, mentors, or peers who have provided guidance, support, or encouragement in your career or life decisions.
- Look for diverse perspectives. Your posse should include people with different strengths—some who can provide career advice, others who can challenge your thinking, and those who motivate and cheer you on.
- Consider past managers or coworkers. If there are former bosses or colleagues you admire, reach out and rekindle professional connections—you don't need to work with them currently for them to be a valuable mentor or supporter.
- Find connectors. Some people naturally introduce others to opportunities—having networking-savvy professionals in your posse can open doors you never knew existed.

If you don't feel like you have strong professional connections because you're still early in your career, or because you've neglected networking because of job demands and time constraints, consider building these connections by doing some of the following:

- Tap into online communities. LinkedIn, professional forums, and industry-specific groups can be great places to connect with mentors and peers.
- Join professional associations. Many fields have networking events, conferences, or organizations designed to help professionals connect and support one another.
- Find accountability partners. If you're looking for career growth, consider forming a small group of people in a similar stage of transition—you don't need established connections to build a new support system.



- Volunteer or attend industry events. If networking feels daunting, volunteering for industry panels, mentorship programs, or association projects can help you meet people without the pressure of formal networking.

Finally, when asking someone to be part of your posse, keep it informal. Instead of officially asking someone to be your mentor or coach, start engaging with them—send an email, ask for advice, or invite them for a coffee chat. Be specific. If someone’s advice or experience aligns with your career goals, let them know why you’re reaching out. For example: “I admire your career path in project management, and I’d love to hear your perspective as I navigate my next steps. Could we schedule a short call sometime?”

Whenever possible, bring value to the relationship—whether it’s insights, introductions, or even a simple thank-you note after every conversation. And always express appreciation. Even if someone can’t commit to ongoing support, acknowledging their wisdom and thanking them can keep the connection alive.

Assignment 1: Gather Your Posse

My Posse

Mentor(s):

Coach(es)

Sounding Board(s)

Confidante(s)

Devil’s Advocate(s)

Angel’s Advocate(s)

Cheerleader(s)



Warning: You Aren't Networking. Yet.

Your posse is not your “network.” We’ll talk about networking later. Right now, all you need is your posse. Ask your posse to support you by holding you accountable. Identify one or two members of your posse whom you will hold responsible for the assignments in this workbook, and with whom you can report, share, and reflect on those assignments. They will be your Posse Career Coaches for the duration of your job search.

A note about your posse and “networking”: I’m sure you’ve probably heard that 85 percent of jobs are filled through networking as opposed to just sending online job applications.⁶ That’s true. I know you may be panicking because you’re “terrible” at networking (hello? hard core introvert right here!). Relax: The research also shows that the vast majority of hires come through second-degree networks, not immediate networks.⁷ (Don’t get me wrong: First-degree networks are still vital. I once recommended a former employee to the company I was with at the time, and she was hired quickly. It just doesn’t always happen that way.) “Weak ties”—the friends of your friends, coworkers, and your posse—are gold that you have, no matter how small your perceived “immediate network” may be.⁸ We’ll talk about that more when you’re ready to start your job search.



References & Endnotes

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