



Growing a High-Potential Leader

Assertive and organizationally savvy are not terms that would have been used to describe this new Unit Director at a top-five research institution. With executive coaching from Career Directions, she steadily developed these skills, was able to rise through the ranks, and has become a top achiever in spite of numerous challenges that existed in her organization. The coaching she received took various forms.

- ➔ Understanding herself and needed competencies
- ➔ Performance and “tough conversation” management
- ➔ Priority and time management...life balance
- ➔ Relationship management; managing up and down the organization
- ➔ Succession planning and mentoring

Know Thyself – First and Foremost

When Coach David Gruner began working with this high-potential leader, he used two forms of assessment – to help them both understand her Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Competencies. Using data gleaned from the assessments, combined with information about the specific challenges within the organization, she and David together determined priorities for her to focus on. One thing they observed was that she had always been a very accommodating person. This trait makes her quite likeable, but it can also be a major obstacle for high-potential individuals when more directness is required. David helped her see the limitations of her accommodating style and helped her learn to be more direct. Together, they developed creative approaches to several challenging situations.

Getting Tough on Performance

Some people who reported to this leader had learned to take advantage of her accommodating nature. About that, she says, “David gave me a perspective on reality that kept me from being overwhelmed. He told me, ‘You’re telling them to do it – they *have to* do it.’” He gave her the confidence to try it, and it worked. “It’s much easier today for me to say ‘Look, this is the choice – you do this, you keep your job; you don’t do this, you don’t keep your job.’” Once she set the boundaries, some people who had been the worst offenders chose to leave, taking with them a negative attitude that had been dragging other good people down.

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It Becomes a Matter of Priorities

The more people a leader manages, the more likely it is that long conversations can occupy their entire day. This leaves the leader to deal with the same issues over and over, and it leaves no time to provide *strategic* leadership. “I was putting up with long conversations that weren’t productive. David helped me get to the point that I have shorter, carefully focused meetings. My direct reports now come to meetings well prepared.” Besides delegating more, she now finds it easier to say “no” to unreasonable requests, which saves her time for the real priorities. He helped her to determine priorities – to make hard choices and stand up for them. She learned to let people down gently when she had to tell them “no” because something wasn’t a priority. This same skill – setting priorities – also enabled her to restore a work/life balance that allowed her to once again enjoy time with her family.

Managing Up, Down, and All Around

Relatively new leaders often get so focused on managing their direct reports that they limit their achievements in the broader organization. How did this high-potential individual learn to be more effective with peers and upper management? David met with her peers, senior leaders, and direct reports – first garnering their trust that they could speak the truth about his coachee and not have it be directly attributed to its source. They told him things they had never said to her, and David shared this feedback with her in a way she could bear hearing it. “David strikes a good balance by not being so aggressive that I want to jump out the window after I hear what he has to say, but at the same time telling me the hard truths in a very appropriate way.” As the coaching progressed, she not only improved her interaction with direct reports, but also intentionally reached out more to peers and senior leaders. All have come to appreciate her directness and now experience her as a valued partner.

Building Tomorrow’s Leaders Today

Strong leaders demonstrate their commitment to an institution by participating in succession planning and mentoring. Leaders at this top-five institution are pleased with their investment in coaching for this high-potential leader. Today, she is involved in mentoring and coaching leaders who report to her. As a result of her strong commitment to improvement and coaching from Career Directions, the organization has seen significant growth in her leadership achievements in spite of obstacles that existed within the broader organization. This next-generation leader is now clearly positioned to move up in the organization.