



BY JOHN HENDRICKSON

Exceptional Talent

A different type of high potential

Executive Summary

Exceptional Talent are individuals who are capable of making game changing, order of magnitude contributions yet most organizations fail to differentiate them from the typical “high performer.” Though they make up less than 1% of the workforce, they deserve a disproportionate investment in time and resources.

This paper explores some of the unique characteristics and what organizations should be doing to develop them and take better advantage of their talents.

- Who are they? What makes exceptional talent different?
- How to develop them in strategic and individualized ways?
- How to groom exceptional talent for what they often do: transform a business or industry in unique and powerful ways?

Poised to make exceptional contributions, these individuals are worth a disproportionate investment in time and money.

Who are they?

In every profession, there are individuals who stand out as exceptional even when compared to other high performing peers. Jonathan Larsen (“Rent”) and Lin Manuel Miranda (“Hamilton”) churned out award winning musicals before they were 30. Elon Musk (Tesla/Space X) developed computer code for a video game at age 12, and at 24 turned over his first company to Compaq for \$300 million. Evan Williams (Twitter) “invented” blogging while in his 20’s.

Whether it is in the arts or in business, there is considerable debate about what makes exceptional talent different. Adam Grant (“The Originals”) focuses on their creativity and “integrative thinking.” Malcolm Gladwell (“Outliers”) emphasizes the impact of family, culture and idiosyncratic experiences — like hockey player birthdates! In either case, it’s clear that exceptional talent are a unique category of talent.

Contemporary organizations put exceptional talent in the same buckets as what we call high potentials, whether they are future leaders or trusted professionals. However, the succession planning tool (9 Box) that is widely used across industries to categorize talent may be able to differentiate the leader from the technical expert but routinely fails to distinguish the “A+” from the “A” or “B” player within those categories.

There are practical reasons why we speak in broad terms about high potentials. High potentials typically represent 5-10% of our workforce — exceptional talent less than 1%. Given the “war on talent” and ambitious growth goals of fast companies, distinguishing between high performers and exceptional talent may seem like splitting hairs.

Yet, we know that exceptional talent are poised to make exceptional contributions. Like the high profile free agent who helps a sports franchise make the leap from second best to world champion or the “10X” programmer whose architecture disrupts an entire industry, these individuals are worth a disproportionate investment in time and money.

What makes them different?

The truly exceptional are different from the average or high performer because 1) their ambition is extraordinary; 2) their technical or leadership competency exceeds those of the most capable members of their peer group; and 3) they tend to be versatile in ways that the gifted but narrowly focused are not.

Extraordinary Ambition

There is a great story about Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington’s pianist and collaborator that tells us something about the achievement drive of those who are truly exceptional. Strayhorn met Duke in 1938 at age of 23 following one of Ellington’s concerts in Pittsburgh. Having been alerted to Billy’s artistry by a member of the band, Duke sat him down at the piano and challenged him to do his thing. Strayhorn mimicked Ellington’s style and then showed off his improvisational skills. Duke was clearly impressed but already had a piano player. He invited Billy to visit him in Harlem, even giving directions on how to take the A train to get to his

Extraordinary Ambition

“What made the job attractive was that it was a ‘File Open,’ ‘New’ opportunity. I got to write the book and tell the story and that made it all very exciting. It was the impossible nature of that situation that made me just lust after it.”

Exceptional Competency

“It’s not just liking your job and being good at it. What you really need to like are the problems the job provides; the problems that keep you up at night. The tactical things on the job are easy. You need to enjoy and address the difficult and strategic problems and opportunities.”

apartment. You can guess the result. He turned the subway directions into “Take the A Train” which became the band’s signature and a permanent fixture in the American Songbook.

Extraordinary ambition is not just what separates the best from the rest but also the factor that drives high profile talent to leave one seemingly satisfying job for another. Money may make the world go round but the stories you hear of top talent leaving for salary increases are dwarfed by instances of them leaving for huge challenges — opportunities to leave a legacy, run something bigger, bring a new idea to market or make a contribution that redefines an industry.

The software industry entrepreneur Ray Ozzie is a classic example. In the course of his career, Ray moved from Data General, to IBM/Lotus to Microsoft to the startup Talko — each time for a bigger challenge. Exceptional talent in the millennial generation are even more impatient than the tech icons of Ray’s era — so much so that among Inc. Magazine’s “30 under 30” coolest entrepreneurs, none began their careers at big companies. That doesn’t mean that exceptional talent shun big companies, but it does mean that you are unlikely to hear about them until they leave for a start-up — a situation that companies like Google are trying to fix with their Intrapreneurship Institute.

Exceptional Competency

Competency is a word we use to describe the capabilities that are characteristic of high performing job incumbents. They include the unique knowledge or technical skills associated with a particular profession as well personal attributes or behaviors that contribute to success in work or social situations. Many companies have competency “models” for leadership positions and key functional roles — which we would expect exceptional talent to epitomize.

However, what we know about the competencies of exceptional talent is a little confusing. On the one hand, they may have the most highly evolved functional/technical skills of anyone in their profession, yet in some cases missing other competencies — EQ for example — that are essential to high performance in a role. Or, vice versa. Take the obvious example of Steve Jobs and his partner Steve Wozniak, both visionaries yet each lacking competencies that would have made one a more well-rounded leader and the other a more influential technical contributor. Or, consider the title of Andy Grove’s (Intel) book “Only the Paranoid Survive” which is as revealing of a personal foible as it is suggestive of his intellect and leadership skills.

We can conclude that Exceptional Talent are not necessarily “renaissance” men or women who model the entire spectrum of competencies associated with a role. They may have one or more of the competencies in the extreme but still miss others. That is why exceptional talent are not necessarily locked in candidates for the C Suite or even functional leadership. The more typical “high potential” may indeed be a better bet. However, with early identification, coaching and a little love exceptional talent can transform a business or organization.

Versatility

Exceptional talent are versatile in ways that many high potentials are not. They may not always work seamlessly with others but they quickly pick up the language, culture and key “wants” of their stakeholders. And, they are typically “dilettantes” of other functions, surprising their peers with their knowledge across multiple domains.

Versatility

“I could spend half the day with CEOs and CIOs and be perfectly comfortable in that setting and then spend the second half of the day going deep with PhD’s and be equally engaged.”

In a recent study of exceptional talent at a large technology company, the CEO remarked that one of her top technology leaders could segue from deep technical conversations with R&D fellows to strategic decisions with LOB leaders without missing a beat — adding value in each instance. He told us that his comfort and simpatico with people across technical and business disciplines helps him to make things happen — for example, flipping a business model on its head to fix a failing enterprise — that he could not imagine doing without that perspective.

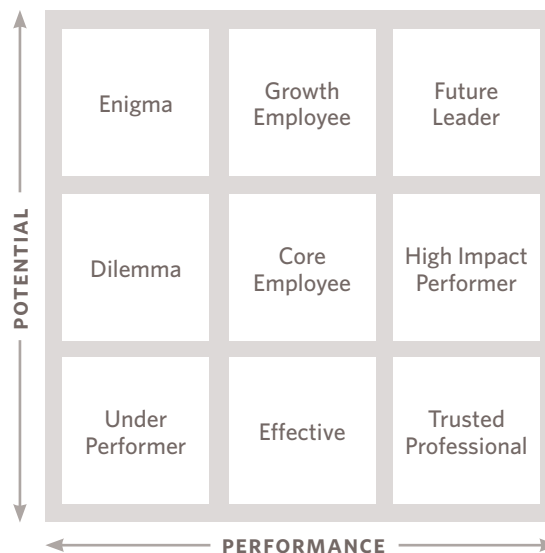
Similarly, we came across an exceptional talent inside a major clothing retailer, who had the “eye” of a designer, customer sensibility of a merchandizer and business acumen of a financial analyst — all rolled into one amazing personality. She told us about intuiting a broader market for an “indie” styled product, working with designers to expand its appeal outside of a niche and then influencing finance to make a bigger bet on the “make to buy” — resulting in a windfall profit for the retailer.

Being essentially “multi-lingual” across business disciplines helps exceptional talent drive their ideas to success. Because they understand the adjacencies to their businesses at a deeper level, they incorporate that perspective into whatever they are developing, selling or servicing.

In Summary

Ambition, competence and versatility may seem like a plausible yet “easy reach” menu of capabilities to define exceptional talent — until you consider the extreme level with which they are demonstrated. Many people are ambitious but few are willing to risk everything or be as single-minded in the pursuit of a goal as an exceptional talent. A majority of incumbents may demonstrate the competencies associated with their roles but only one or two will become the industry benchmark. All leaders are taught to reach out across the organization to sell their vision but only a small number can contextualize their message for individual functions. That’s exceptional talent!

Where do exceptional talent fit in the 9 box?



Exceptional talent resides in multiple segments of the **9 Box Talent Matrix**, shown at left. Some may be *Future Leaders*, while others are content to push the state-of-the-art or explore entrepreneurial opportunities. Still, others may be *Enigmas* whose potential is never realized. In all cases, they are part of a broader population of high potentials.

What do you do about them?

Money may make the world go round but the stories you hear of top talent leaving for salary increases are dwarfed by instances of them leaving for huge challenges.

The truth is that nothing is typically done with exceptional talent. Those who have leadership ambitions may be included in high potential programs but as a category of talent they are largely left to themselves. We anxiously wait for them to delight us with their insight and ideas, even if we don't know who they are or how much sooner an innovation could be brought to market if their development had been addressed more proactively.

At the minimum, we recommend: 1) early identification of talent; 2) active management of their careers; and 3) a talent incubation program that borrows on the lessons learned from innovation incubators.

Early identification

Organizations have assembled lists of high potentials for generations. What's different about exceptional talent is that the very word "exceptional" compounds the problem of giving special attention to one category of employees versus others. Many organizations are reluctant to even tell their high potentials or succession candidates that they are on the "list" for fear of creating undue expectations or alienating their peers. Consider the impact of adding the words "exceptional talent" to the organizational lexicon!

So, a little creative positioning and branding of exceptional talent programs is a must. To be effective at "early identification" ...

- Tap into a diverse network of internal talent scouts — not just HR or organization leaders
- Don't rely on performance/succession data; look at other internal or external indicators
- Open up the process for talent identification, including self-nomination
- Give talent scouts criteria to help them filter the ET candidate pool

Active Career Management

The career trajectory of exceptional talent is hardly linear. If this group has any developmental maxim it is "learn everything you can as fast you can." That means stepping backwards or sideways into roles that have less promotional status but more educational value. Or, leaving the organization altogether to pick up a key experience.

Complicating matters, exceptional talent do not always have the "drive to the top" that characterizes the high potential. Some have that particular ambition and are indeed quite successful in the C Suite but there are perhaps as many who are motivated to make a different type of contribution. Companies that miss that point are likely to lose exceptional talent to start ups, ventures, NGO's and other organizations who are more tolerant of differences and career ambitions.

If you were to graph the career trajectory of exceptional talent it would look more like a scatter diagram (than step by step progression) where unexpected correlations appear amongst a highly diversified population. For example, we have discovered: 1) a desire for personal own-

Look broadly for talent beyond the succession and performance data bases and recognize that great ideas and great people come from a diverse set of backgrounds.

ership of a product, service or portfolio at a very early career stage; 2) the need to validate expertise through patents, publishing or some form of external recognition; 3) a strong appetite for turnaround or “fix it” type of assignments; and 4) the opportunity to live “on the edge” outside one’s natural area of competence.

So, it is important to actively manage the career trajectory of the exceptional talent but do so in a way that appreciates the different types of paths that make sense, given their unique interests. Like all good career planning in this generation, the emphasis should be on the journey — and opportunity for enrichment and contribution along the way — not the ultimate role destination.

Coaching

One way to manage or even accelerate the careers of exceptional talent is through coaching. These individuals will not want to be groomed over time for key roles. They won’t have the patience. So, put them in a stretch assignment or role well before they are ready and pair them with a coach who can help them assimilate. The coach will “round out the rough edges” but perhaps more importantly prompt the reflection that is necessary for exceptional talent to take on an assignment where they have the native intelligence and capability but missing some key ingredients.

The Talent Incubator

A more scalable way of coaching exceptional talent could be done with “Talent Incubators.” Having studied innovation “incubators” in technology companies, we see a compelling analogy between developing ideas and developing exceptional people. Incubators accelerate innovation and make the process more systematic and predictable.

They follow a venture model, beginning with ideation and proceeding through refinement, seeding and release. They cast a wide net for innovation ideas at the outset rather than simply bet on a few obvious opportunities. And, then they coach the idea through production.

Imagine a similar process with exceptional talent. Look broadly for talent beyond the succession and performance data bases and recognize that great ideas and great people come from a diverse set of backgrounds. Then, incubate the most promising talent with a “test and learn” strategy that parses out roles and assignments to help gauge interest and fit for strategic roles across the company — not just the executive team. Add coaching and assessment to promote reflection, and training that is specialized to individual need. Then, give them opportunities ahead of the normal curve and take the long view of their potential.

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Talent Incubators are similar in concept to Innovation Incubators. They make the process of talent identification and development more systematic. And, the result is the accelerated deployment of exceptional technical and leadership talent into the organization.

Talent Incubator Process:

- 1 Cast a Wide Net for Talent
- 2 Test and Learn Through Assignments
- 3 Incubate and Coach
- 4 Challenge and Release Into Larger Roles

Summary

Hemingway famously responded to Fitzgerald's quote that "the rich are different than you and me" by saying, "Yes, they have more money." Simplifying the distinction between classes — or talent categories — sparks conversations and sells books. However, while it's possible to praise, stereotype or even castigate them, it is crazy to believe that what makes exceptional talent different is as simple as IQ.

To really profit from exceptional talent, you have to understand the source of their genius and take a more strategic and individualized approach to their development. Putting them in the same category as other "high potentials" may be a convenient and cost efficient solution but it is unlikely to produce a windfall ROI or give visibility to the next "home grown" genius.



About the Author

John Hendrickson is a partner at Cambria Consulting, Inc. He is a consultant and executive coach with significant experience designing and implementing leadership and talent management programs inside Fortune 500 companies. He has worked with Cisco, Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, and other prominent companies to develop role profiles in a variety of functions to better align employees with their organization's strategies.

John is known for delivering results for the business and measurable professional development for employees. He is a quick study of the uniqueness of a given industry or culture and adapts best talent management practices to fit the situation and business challenge. He has executive coaching experience at the CEO, C-suite, and senior leadership levels and is a passionate believer in the potential of business professionals to accelerate their careers with practical yet inventive developmental plans.

About Cambria Consulting, Inc.

Cambria Consulting has been a pioneer in the field of talent management. Founded in 1985, Cambria has helped organizations match the requirements of a role and strategy with individual and organizational competencies. This has made their approach to HR systems like recruiting, succession, and development more strategic and contextualized to the client business environment.