



Hidden Gems: Mining Your Organization for Unseen Future Talent

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This is the one of two talent development articles about what I'm calling *hidden gems* – the remarkably talented people who are often hiding in plain sight. This article focuses on hidden gems within organizations – how to identify them and what to do once you find them. The second piece in this series looks at how to recruit a greater diversity of people whose broader range of experiences and perspectives increase the vitality of the organizations that hire them.

Organizations of every stripe need to hire and grow people with the potential to progress and take on greater levels of responsibility and leadership. That's truer today than perhaps ever – especially in a labor market that continues to tighten and likely will do for years to come. The increasingly diverse nature of prospective employees requires us to take a fresh look at how we define "talent" if we are to widen the pool of good hires and identify and promote the most promising ones.

Too often, however, organizations put too much stock in resumes or test scores when making a first cut, leaving out a lot of people who could do the job as well if not better than those who look good on paper. Also, outwardly confident, articulate, and attention-

seeking individuals tend to be unfairly favored over those who are less visible and “quietly competent”.

The point is that few organizations really know the depth of talent and capabilities they have. What’s more, most are filled with *hidden gems* – people who are less obvious and whose personalities are different from the leadership norm. But how do you identify them in your organization, and what do you do with them once you find them?

Spot the ones that raise their hands.

When a new project comes along, instead of assigning it to the person who you think is most capable, ask for a volunteer and see what happens. And when something needs to be done but no one has done it, look for people who take the initiative to do it without being asked. These “hand-raisers” are motivated to take care of business that may not be part of their job description and see new projects as good opportunities to learn something.

Explore underappreciated abilities.

In our experience, the vast majority of employees have way more skills and abilities than they can use in their jobs. To learn more, try asking people to describe activities that give them enjoyment outside of work and the skills they acquired to do them. Things like being active in a club, hobbies and pastimes like music or photography, and volunteering or charity work tell a richer story than what you see applied in daily work life and can open the gateway to a broader set of opportunities than the ones on the immediate horizon.

Look for “practical intelligence”.

Practical intelligence is the ability to solve problems and get things done using experience and intuition. You may also know this as “street smarts”. People who have this are resourceful, good at applying ideas and figuring out solutions on their own, and persuading others to go along with things they want to do. Although they may not be as skilled at analysis or coming up with their own ideas, the practically intelligent person draws on the knowledge gained through life rather than their formal education and can survive in situations where others have difficulty coping.

Recognize the naturally collaborative.

Many organizations view assertive and competitive individuals among their highest potential employees. However, with today’s emphasis on working in teams, the highest-potential employees may indeed be the most collaborative. Naturally

collaborative people are eager to pitch in and help out others without being asked, tend to be better listeners, understand and empathize with different points of view, and find workable solutions amid disagreement. They believe that two heads are better than one, and accordingly are more naturally suited to working in ensemble than as soloists.

Ask about your people's aspirations.

When it's performance review time, or better yet, when you check in with your team (which you should be doing regularly anyway), ask them what they would like to be doing two to three years from now. Is there a particular job opportunity that they would want access to or an assignment that they would want to try out? Just as important, ask them why these are things that draw their interest. Look for whether they would be good as learning experiences, not just as activities that point to a promotion or a pay increase.

Once you have identified some of these hidden gems, it makes sense to give them the same opportunities and support you give to those whose talents are not so hidden. Here are four things that are available to every organization and don't require any extra expense to make happen.

Give them "out of the box" assignments.

I've heard said that the "reward" for people who are good at something is giving them even more of the same thing to do. How about giving them something new and completely different to try – and most important, make learning the objective and less than perfect performance an option. Creating meaningful special projects that take them out of their comfort zones and into areas where they have to learn new skills provides variety and stretch to accelerate their growth.

Move them to a different team.

Try assigning them to a different group or department as a temporary or part-time exercise. This will give them exposure to new people and their work and also give the receiving team the benefits of their contributions. Examples could involve a temporary relocation, moving them into a team in a related function, or with much work done virtually these days, an assignment to a task force working on a problem requiring cross-functional collaboration to get the best outcome.

Post internal job openings.

Create an online bulletin board that announces new job openings with the key experiences and skills needed to qualify. Note, too, which of these skills are must-have and which can be learned on the job. Make it open season for employees to articulate their interest and apply if they believe they have a chance and give them tips on how to make their applications most appealing. But take care to institute policies that discourage supervisors from hoarding their top talent – now that the hidden gems have been identified as such!

Provide access to mentors.

I once proposed posting a list of upper-level managers eager and willing to mentor promising junior employees, and this might be a good place to start. While a person's direct manager is usually the best source of day-to-day coaching and advice, someone other than the direct manager who can take a longer-term interest in their career development gives a broader and ideally a nonjudgmental perspective.

To conclude: If you and your organization are serious about redefining what it means to become a member of the top talent team, let people know your intentions and be ready to make good on your promise. Most importantly, don't keep what you are looking for a secret! Let your people know what you are looking for as a way to encourage them to step out of the shadows on their own and decide for themselves if they want to play this game and become emerging talent in their own right.

About the author

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