

What “Leadership Potential” Really Means

The term “leadership potential,” at first glance, can seem too subjective to be useful. But the [Corporate Leadership Council](#) has developed a detailed model of high potential that we have modified for use in the nonprofit sector. (Our main modification was to deemphasize the motivating power of purely financial rewards, since people in the nonprofit sector tend to be more strongly driven to do good than to do well.) This model can help organizations identify the most promising internal candidates to fill their leadership pipelines. High potential, according to the Corporate Leadership Council, has three components: **aspiration**, **ability**, and **engagement**. The individuals who score high on all three dimensions are your organization’s high-potential leadership candidates.

Aspiration is a term that captures the intensity of an individual’s desire for:

- Results and recognition
- Advancement and influence
- Intrinsic (and, to a less extent, financial) rewards
- Work-life balance
- Overall job enjoyment

Employees with a strong desire for things like results, recognition, advancement, and influence – and willingness to make necessary trade-offs in other areas to get them – have the high aspirations that mark high-potential leadership candidates.

Ability. Of course, there’s more to leadership potential than aspiration alone. High-potential individuals also display strong ability, that is, the combination of innate characteristics and learned skills needed to carry out their day-to-day work.

- Innate characteristics include cognitive abilities and emotional intelligence; and
- Learned skills including technical, functional, and interpersonal skills acquired through classroom or on-the-job learning.

Engagement completes the high-potential triad. It consists of four elements:

- Emotional commitment: The extent to which employees value, believe in, and enjoy the organization where they work
- Rational commitment: The extent to which employees believe that staying with the organization is in their best interest

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- [Chapter 2: Understanding Your Future Needs](#)
- [Three Steps to Understanding Your Nonprofit's Future Leadership Needs](#)

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- Discretionary effort: The willingness of employees to “go the extra mile” for the organization
- Intent to stay: An employee’s willingness to remain with the organization

Employees who score high on one or two dimensions of leadership potential can be valuable contributors to your organization. But it’s the **employees who can put together the total package – aspiration, ability, and engagement** – who have the highest potential to rise to your organization’s key leadership roles and succeed in them.