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### Key Finding

Labelling someone as a high-potential can thwart their development.

### Business Application

When organisations focus on the promise of future leadership roles, rather than how talented people can lead in the present, they harm their talent pipeline.

High-potential, future leader and fast-track programmes abound in today's organisations, but often a place on the fast track doesn't speed up individuals' growth as leaders. Instead, it either pushes them out of the door or slows them down – thwarting their development, lowering their engagement and damaging their performance.

Two psychological mechanisms, idealisation and identification, are at play here.

Organisations idealise talented members as a defence against the company's uncertain future; high potentials then identify with that image, shouldering the uncertainty themselves. The combination of idealisation and identification is evident in many workplaces where people praise the promise of talented individuals, who feel the burden of their promise. If the future isn't as bright as everyone hopes, it will be they who have failed.

As their talent increasingly defines them, high potentials sense that their own future is also at stake. They fixate on what they should do to ensure their place in the organisation. Although these expectations might be amplified in their minds, they are not simply self-imposed. They are spelled out in lists of company values and competencies, which up-and-coming leaders are meant to model, and reinforced through performance feedback and informal interactions.

Every opportunity becomes an obligation; every challenge, a test. The high potential strives to be a perfect manager, suppressing the very talents – the passions and idiosyncrasies – that made her stand out in the first place. Rather than empowering those who deserve to lead, many talent management processes increase their insecurity and push them to conform. “Future leader” becomes a synonym for “exceptional follower”.

**Read more:** Petriglieri, J., & Petriglieri, G. (2017). “The talent curse: why high potentials struggle and how they can grow through it” *Harvard Business Review*, 95(3), 88–94.

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