Employees are promoted for a number of reasons – to motivate them, to build skills and facilitate learning, and often, because someone is needed to fill a vacant position. No matter the reason, it works out best for all involved if the promotion goes successfully, if the person transitions seamlessly into the new role. Especially for senior and executive level promotions, failure is costly in terms of time, energy, and money (Peterson, 2015), and when really disastrous, may damage an organization’s reputation and financial vitality.

When making such important decision to promote (or fail to promote) talent, you better get it right. Best practices suggest utilizing RELIABLE and VALID assessments to facilitate promotion decisions (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2003). In particular, live simulation assessments are among the best-supported for evaluating employee performance, potential, and readiness for future roles (Arthur, Day, McNelly, & Edens, 2003; Meriac, Hoffman, Woehr, & Fleisher, 2008). However, your company may not be in a position, either due to the budget or time, to use live simulation assessments as part of your next promotion decision.

If you aren’t able to run live simulation assessments as part of your promotion process, how can you tell whether employees are ready for the transition? Based on research and industry best practices, this guide provides the tell-tale signs for identifying who among your talent is ready for a promotion.

The Process:
Define Specific Business Strategies

Choosing the best person for a promotion requires that you first identify what you’re promoting them for. The best way to determine this is by asking: What business strategy (i.e., strategic initiatives/goals/pillars) will the leader need to execute? To be ready for a promotion, a person must be able to achieve a particular strategy (Aon Hewitt, 2012). If not readily available, you can pinpoint key strategies for the target role by following these three steps:

1. Review the organizational context for the role, including size of team/department, its structure, industry, financial performance, how it fits in with the larger vision of the organization, its culture, and lifecycle phase (start-up/development, growth, maturity, or saturation/decline).

2. Interview key executives.

3. Analyze all collected information and settle on the 2-3 most relevant and important strategies. See the table below for examples of key business strategies.

Questions for Executive Interviews

- What are the current and/or future strategic business objectives that the leader will need to support in the first 12 months?
- What external conditions (e.g., customer demand, industry, market, competitors) are driving these business objectives?
- What internal challenges inside the organization are relevant to this leadership position?
- What leadership priorities should be addressed to successfully solve the problem or need?
- What situations will the leader most likely encounter in the next 12 months?
- How will you know that the leader has successfully executed against the strategic business objectives in 6 months? In 12 months?
- What are the potential consequences of leaders not executing against these strategic business objectives?
Encourage advancements in products/services or operations. Propose new ideas, celebrate experimentation, create a sense of urgency, and develop and empower employees.

Boost Innovation

Enhance customer value proposition by improving products/services

Increase retention and engagement of team members

Implement new systems and processes

Increase the benefits customers receive from purchasing the products/services. Understand customers’ needs, clearly and passionately communicate benefits of products/services, identify priorities, and update work plans.

Create a positive connection employees feel toward the company and increase their desire to remain. Demonstrate genuine caring for employees’ well-being, delegate well, and empower and develop them.

Design and realize new workflow systems and processes. Conduct a thorough analysis, identify problems and opportunities, and influence and coach employees to embrace the new systems and processes.

Identify Skills Needed to Drive the Strategies

Once you determine the key strategies that will guide promotion decisions, how can you tell if employees are able to achieve these strategies? All strategies require a certain set of skills to drive them. For example, creating urgency and empowering others are critical skills needed to boost innovation (Pinsight, 2015). Conversely, coaching and mentoring are critical skills to increase retention and engagement of team members.

Start by interviewing leaders in your organization with a strong track-record of achieving those strategies. Ask them which skills they use most often and see as most important to drive each strategy. Those skills indicate employees’ potential for successfully achieving the strategies (McKinsey & Company, 2013). We provide a handy mapping of skills to strategies at the end of this e-book. We have validated this skill-to-strategy mapping with subject matter experts (Pinsight, 2015).
Observing Critical Skills

Once you identify the critical skills, the next step is finding ways to observe, assess, and evaluate them on the job. You must ask yourself: How can I observe these skills in employees’ current positions? The critical skills may be exhibited in project work, during employee-coworker interactions, when emergencies or unexpected stress arise, or even in employee email communications. Take some time to brainstorm all the ways you can observe these critical skills.

Rather than using intuition to make promotion decisions, you will have greater success if you systematically assess employees based on your observations (Deloitte, 2013; Highhouse, 2008). One approach is to rate the skills as (0) completely absent, (1) developmental need, (2) proficient, or (3) strength. Come up with examples to define the range of each skill (what is a strength versus developmental need). This will help you be consistent in your ratings across promotion candidates.

Once you make observations and assess employees, use the ratings to derive a score for each employee up for the promotion. Based on the scores, you should be able to decide who is ready for the promotion (READINESS) and who is most likely to achieve the desired strategies (i.e., POTENTIAL).
An Example:

You are a senior manager at an accounting firm and you are looking to promote one of the accountants to a team leader position. Based on this role, you might outline the following criteria to help make your promotion decision.

For Bob Smith, Candidate #1: Total score = 10
## Appendix: Mapping Skills to Strategies for Team Leader Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Skills</th>
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<tr>
<td>Align the team with organizational strategy</td>
<td>Bring the team’s activities into line with planned organizational objectives. Sell the organizational vision to the team, influence employees to embrace it, identify priorities, and update work plans.</td>
<td>Sell the Vision, Influence Others, Overcome Individual Resistance, Manage Priorities, Plan and Organize Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boost innovation on the team strategy</td>
<td>Encourage advancements in products/services or operations. Propose new ideas, celebrate experimentation, create a sense of urgency, and develop and empower employees.</td>
<td>Innovate, Create Urgency, Develop Capable Teams, Mentor and Coach, Empower Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhance customer value proposition by improving products/services</td>
<td>Increase the benefits customers receive from purchasing the products/services. Understand customers’ needs, clearly and passionately communicate benefits of products/services, identify priorities, and update work plans.</td>
<td>Focus on Customers, Manage Priorities, Plan and Organize Work, Communicate Clearly, Speak with Charisma</td>
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<td>Increase customer satisfaction by improving customer service</td>
<td>Improve all interactions with customers at the time of sale and thereafter to exceed customers’ expectations. Understand the customer, set high standards for customer service, and influence and develop employees to embrace it.</td>
<td>Focus on Customers, Influence Others, Overcome Individual Resistance, Develop Capable Teams, Mentor and Coach</td>
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<td>Increase retention and engagement of team members</td>
<td>Create a positive connection employees feel toward the company and increase their desire to remain. Demonstrate genuine caring for employees’ well-being, delegate well, and empower and develop them.</td>
<td>Develop Capable Teams, Mentor and Coach, Delegate Well, Empower Others, Show Caring, Listen Actively</td>
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<td>Turnaround team performance by creating accountability</td>
<td>Increase productivity on the team by instilling a sense of personal responsibility in each employee. Analyze workflow, identify problem areas, update work plans, track progress, and create a sense of urgency</td>
<td>Create Urgency, Manage Priorities, Plan and Organize Work, Analyze Information, Think Through Solutions, Make Good Decisions</td>
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<td>Implement new systems and processes</td>
<td>Design and realize new workflow systems and processes. Conduct a thorough analysis, identify problems and opportunities, and influence and coach employees to embrace the new systems and processes.</td>
<td>Influence Others, Overcome Individual Resistance, Coach and Mentor, Analyze Information, Think Through Solutions, Make Good Decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build a high-performing team</td>
<td>Develop a team focused on achieving superior business results. Sell the organizational vision to the team, develop team members’ capabilities, and instill a sense of urgency.</td>
<td>Sell the Vision, Create Urgency, Develop Capable Teams, Delegate Well, Empower Others</td>
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References


