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Accelerating Visibility for High Potential Managers: A New Take on Rotation Program

A conversation with Lori Goldberg, Cox Enterprises



Five years ago, the Corporate Leadership Council released a study that said 75 percent of companies worldwide weren't confident in their ability to staff leadership positions. It was one of many human resource studies that called out the gap in leadership competencies; and, companies admitted they were in a dilemma.

Statistics show that as baby boomers are exiting in droves, there won't be enough Gen Xers to replace them, so millennials will be thrust into leadership faster than any other generation. Companies are focused on the millennials and making sure they have the ability to acquire and retain them. But, the millennial generation issue can't be solved with a broad brush because it encompasses new employees who are just entering the workforce as well as those who have accumulated 10+ years of experience. While the young millennials are making a lot of noise about where they want to work and how they want to work, it's the more experienced group that is ready and impatient to step up to the plate.

And, that's where the leadership opportunities look more like a bottleneck. While boomers may be retiring, Gen X has waited patiently through a few recessions. As mobility begins again in companies, Gen X and Gen Y (millennials) have their eye on the same opportunities. And, Gen Y doesn't seem to have the same level of patience. As Gen X steps in front of them, Gen Y seems unwilling to be told, "your time will come." This is the most current pain point we hear from companies who are worried about losing that experience and the younger members of their bench for future leadership.

We have been a part of many leadership development programs that are aimed at either preparing Gen X for the last mile or identifying the Gen Y managers who deserve a seat in the lineup. And, we've had some first-hand experience with the challenges and successes of both. All leadership programs are designed with company benefits and employee takeaways in mind; but, it's easier said than done to get the right people, the right curriculum, and the right support lined up to pull it off.

One program we've been involved with that seems to deliver on all expectations is the FORGE program launched by Cox Enterprises of Atlanta in 2013. I asked Lori Goldberg, who developed and manages the program today, to share her thoughts on what the program was designed to do and how it enhances career progression for Cox managers.

"FORGE was first created within our Finance organization to give our high potential/high performing managers and senior managers exposure across all of our companies and to give finance leaders visibility to future leaders within the function across the entire enterprise," according to Lori.

While it is one of many well-run leadership initiatives at Cox, FORGE flips design on its head. It is 80-85 percent real work through four, six-month job rotations across the finance departments and 15-20 percent classroom or skill training. As Lori says, "it's learning through experiencing how leadership works at Cox rather than generic leadership development."

This isn't your traditional rotation program for new hires. It's intense and it's personal. Every FORGE participant is backed by four leaders who either host, mentor, support or manage the experience. The program literally pulls managers out of their current roles for 24 months. During each six-month rotation, they are running projects, joining new initiatives, or supporting existing teams. Some rotations require new skills, others leverage existing skills.

The FORGE participants are coached, managed, and measured by a different host in each rotation. Some tasks are difficult, others aren't. Many times, the participants feel challenged and outside their comfort zone; some days they feel confident and the tasks become routine. Eventually, they figure out it is all part of the experience which was designed with a simple, but broad, objective.

"FORGE is a high touch, on-the-job development opportunity that fast tracks broadening experiences and visibility for a small group of managers. Finance leaders would also say it's about extending learning across businesses, sharing best practices, collaborating, and adding value by contributing new ideas and different perspectives. A chief requirement that finance executives put on this experience was to give them insight into the potential of future leaders," Lori said.

And, that's the real value of FORGE. Each rotation ends with a report out to the most senior finance executives across the Cox companies in addition to the CEO and the EVP of Human Resources when schedules permit. While most of the FORGE participants know these leaders, they don't have much interaction with them and the employees find the idea of presenting to them to be a little daunting. That's where SW&A comes in. We follow each FORGE group step-by-step through the rotations and use some of their curriculum time to strengthen their communication skills and increase their confidence with the senior audience. Coaching becomes a staple of their FORGE experience so that their executive presence grows in sync with their executive exposure. We also help them think through those report outs to ensure each FORGE member puts their best foot forward.

Visibility is a key theme in FORGE as Lori encourages each participant to build relationships across all the businesses, at all levels, and expand their network. Each rotation provides the opportunity to be a "new employee." Participants can and should seek out the people, projects and experiences they want. There is no pass/fail in FORGE, but participants quickly learn that it would be a mistake to leave the FORGE experience without new relationships in each organization.

And, that's exactly what has happened. Two years into the program, past participants have become high-visibility players who are sought for advice and referrals by many of their peers. Some were immediately promoted, others leveraged the experience to explore new interests. All have earned their seat on the potential leader bench and are well-positioned to be called up in the future.

The participants say it's one of the most impactful experiences they've had across their career. I would say Cox had given them a unique opportunity to broaden their career path from one Cox company to the entire portfolio. And, Lori says it takes commitment across the entire finance organization to make the program a success.

"FORGE is disruptive to everyone involved from leaders who give up their best talent to leaders who create temporary assignments. But, they soon realize the benefits outweigh the challenges. Several leaders who released talent found opportunities to promote junior employees. Leaders who hosted participants have seen their projects infused with fresh ideas. All in all, our leaders realize they are working collaboratively to develop our future talent, and that's an endeavor we are all committed to."

And, it's paying off. In short order, FORGE has become recognized across the companies as a sought after opportunity and a key accelerator of mid-level careers. After the inaugural program in Finance, Lori has expanded the program for the Technology and HR organizations and now has close to 100 leaders involved in building bench strength.

The timetable for leadership readiness is real, and as in the FORGE experience, SW&A is teaming up with many companies to strengthen the communication and influence skills of high-potential managers. We would welcome the opportunity to learn more about your programs and share our best practices from other partners like Lori.

Call us when you need us!

Sally Williamson & Associates
3050 Peachtree Rd NW Suite 520
Atlanta, GA 30305
404-475-6550
www.sallywilliamson.com

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