

INTERNAL MOBILITY IS CRUCIAL IN MOTIVATING AND RETAINING TALENT. HOWEVER, NOT ALL TOP-MANAGERS ARE EQUALLY SKILLED IN SPOTTING AND ASSESSING POTENTIAL. THIS ARTICLE IS AN ACCOUNT OF A PROCESS AT A UNIT OF THE NETHERLANDS RAILWAYS THAT SHAPED THE WAY MANAGEMENT VIEWS AND DEALS WITH POTENTIAL IN THE ORGANISATION. THE PROCESS STARTED WITH THE BELIEF OF ONE PERSON, THE NEWLY APPOINTED DIRECTOR PAMELA BOUMEESTER, THAT EVERY MANAGER HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP THE POTENTIAL OF HIS OR HER EMPLOYEES FOR THE ORGANISATION. THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES A PERSPECTIVE OF HOW AN ORGANISATION CAN COME TO TERMS WITH RECOGNISING POTENTIAL, ALONG WITH TEN 'TRY THIS AT HOME' STEPS.

# Talent is made in the management team

**ROBERT VAN NOORT, HEIKE WABELS**

Imagine what happens if one of the first questions posed by a newly appointed managing director in her team meeting is the delicate one of succession planning: "Who will follow you up in your position?" After the initial surprise, one will probably look at the lists with names of potentials that HR has prepared and choose one or two. But what if all members of the management team come up with exactly the same two names? At this point it becomes clear that one is either working in an organisation with either virtually no talent, or experiencing serious problems with regard to recognising and developing talent.

The above scenario took place at the Netherlands Railways (NS) in 2001, just after Pamela Boumeester had become head of a new unit, NS Reizigers, the organisational unit that is concerned with the core business: the carrying of passengers. Having one or two high-potentials among 12.000 employees was not what Boumeester needed in an organisation dealing with an extremely complex core-process. It was therefore an

inevitable necessity to take a closer look at the organisation's potential, and most of all, at the mechanisms and patterns that the company had in place to discover and foster talent. Boumeester's question had two aspects. One was the practical concern about succession planning: there were simply not enough names on the succession-list to fill all job vacancies with internal candidates. But the principal reason for her question was her belief that management should focus on people, creating vital connections, and development. She holds the strong belief that managers are not only responsible for their financial targets, but also for the development of the potential of their employees. Hence she carries out in practice what Jim Collins had observed in his research for Good To Great as a crucial factor among companies with lasting financial success: as a common feature successful organisations have leaders that succeed in 'setting up their successors for even greater success' (Collins, 2001). This belief formed the vantage point for the novel experiment at the Netherlands Railways that led to a fascinating insight: the quality of the talent pool in an organisation is directly related to the ability of the management to identify and appreciate it.



Drawing by Maarten Wolterink

In this article we describe an experiment that has increased managers' awareness of the importance of spotting and developing potential in the organisation using profound inquiry and a number of other novel interventions that will be introduced. The process that was designed does not focus on excel sheets, succession lists, short-term thinking. Rather, its' main ingredients are dialogue, relationships, and gut feeling- all forming a dynamic method instead of a product. In addition to mapping this experiment, the reader will get information about the crucial elements, in order to support you to 'try this at home'.

#### **DEVELOPING POTENTIAL IN-HOUSE VERSUS RECRUITING EXTERNALLY**

Before describing the NS approach, we will discuss the relevance of investing into succession planning and talent. Theoretically, there should be enough potential in large pyramid-structured organisations to fill all relevant top positions. However, in practice, many large organisations rely on hiring new employees from outside, rather than investing into developing in-house potential. Granted, this influx of employees that have been skilled elsewhere can bring new ideas and a fresh spirit into an organisation. But there are some limits to this procedure, such as:

- High costs in recruiting and a high risk of the person leaving within the first two years (The Ashridge Journal, 2007).

- Seeking to fill a vacancy with outside potential may put the internal process on hold; after all everyone is waiting for the new visionary and holds back with own ideas.
- A practice of recruiting from outside the organisation as a common approach could create unnecessary glass-ceilings and frustration among equally skilled current members of the organisation who are not being promoted.
- If new persons are hired with the intention to be a 'change agent', research into organisational behaviour shows that in most cases the new candidate is the one being effected, not the organisational culture (Boonstra, 2004).

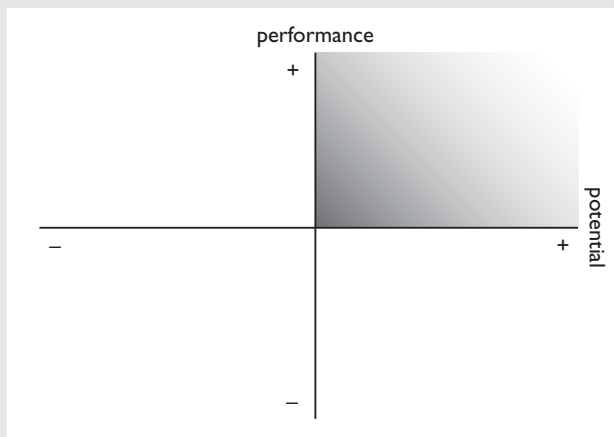
All in all, there is a case to be made for developing in-house potential. However, we found that this is not always easy. One explanation we discovered in the research is that an individual needs to be made aware of his talent first, before he can deliberately use and grow these strong traits. If this does not happen, the strength will most likely be used accidentally or unconsciously or may even remain unused at all. Buckingham argues that a mere 17% of the working population is able to use their talents at the workplace on a regular basis (Buckingham, 2001). An inherent aspect of talent is that it needs a chance to become visible and recognised first, before it can be applied consciously (see Textbox 1 for more information on the term 'talent'). This implies that those individuals who are in a position to promote a candidate have to be skilled in spotting potential and be willing to nurture it further.

## Textbox I: Talent = performance + potential

There is a great variety of definitions of talent in literature, ranging from nature (one is born with it, like Mozart) to nurture; a set of competencies that can be developed by intense practice. (McCall, 1998). Buckingham and Clifton define talents as strengths that can lead to “consistent near perfect performance in an activity” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). In business, the term talent often refers to the individuals constituting the human capital of an organisation. At the Netherlands Railways, the concept of talent is split into two aspects:

- Performance, i.e. looking at the past, the achievements and the skills of an individual and
- Potential, i.e. looking into the future, abilities that are suspected or predicted but not yet known.

This can be illustrated as a graph with performance and potential each being an axis. In the process of assessment, the performance axis was defined first: a well-defined, linear, past- and target-oriented assessment as used commonly for appraisal. But how to deal with potential without making the mistake of getting this non-objective concept mixed up with performance? Potential, on the contrary, is a complex mix of expectations, personal subjectivity, performance peaks, context, coincidence and, by nature, does not lend itself to a checklist-like approach and often only becomes visible in context, in relationship with other colleagues.



Other metaphors used in this process were the iceberg and drilling for oil:



The visible part above the waterline of the iceberg symbolizes performance: looking at past achievements, it is measurable, clear. The invisible part beneath the waves stands for potential: one does not know how deep it is, and can only base one's assumption on the visible part. Is that enough? How can one estimate the invisible part?

Another metaphor is drilling for oil. One may suspect that there is an untapped reservoir underneath, but there is no certainty. An oil-digger sometimes has to drill a number of holes to find out if there really is oil and what kind of quality it is. Again, these are the metaphors that apply to the situation at NS Reizigers. For where the creation of a shared metaphor was an important step in the process.



#### FROM OBJECTIVITY TOWARDS INTER-SUBJECTIVITY

In addition to the fact that the management team at NS Reizigers only regarded a very limited number of members of the organisation eligible as their successor, there existed a growing concern about the number of experienced employees pressing towards the end of their remuneration scale. The motivated ones were the loyal ‘golden oldies’. However, the increasing number of ‘rusty oldies’, as they were called, who felt stuck and undervalued, was becoming a growing concern. What had happened to their talent over the years?

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In regular retreats with external consultants, the management team of NS Reizigers started discussing HR- and leadership development issues. As a first step towards spotting potential, Boumeester set in a course of ‘development-oriented management’. Leaders within the organisation would not only be assessed on their financial results, but also in terms of their merit in developing talent in their department. This called for an assessment tool and a definition of the term talent. Consequently, the concept of ‘talent’ was divided into two aspects: performance (past, measurable) and potential (future, estimated, as described in textbox 1). While management embraced this idea of the performance axis, potential turned out to be difficult to describe, and the assessment showed a great divergence among the individual scores. The same person would be valued significantly different by different managers. The question arose: ‘what is objectivity’? In order to make this instrument work, management had to become more proficient in literally ‘seeing’ potential and developing a common language to put their (often intuitive) estimation into words - replacing ‘objectivity’ by ‘inter-subjectivity (see textbox 2).

In collaboration with the Dutch consultancy Kessels & Smit, *The Learning Company*, a series of bimonthly meetings took place. Instead of trying to aim for an objective measurement tool (as was done with performance), the group started to co-develop a common language, a shared lens through which they could view and describe talent. The method would later be called ‘profound dialogue’ (see Van Noort, Pillen & Nichtening in this issue). At that moment, it was created with ingredients from Socratic dialogue (Kessels, Boers, & Mosterd, 2002), and Appreciative Inquiry/AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). One objective measurement tool was replaced by an inter-subjective approach.

The vital ingredient in these HR meetings was to postpone judgment and get acquainted with the view of the colleagues. Taking turns, a manager would propose an employee he regarded as (high) potential while the other members of the same management team would assist this manager in examining the strengths of that employee, trying to place themselves in the position of the respective manager: “Would I draw the same conclusion?”. At first it was not easy to postpone one’s judgment. The tendency was to immediately search for quick solutions. Allowing to view the employee / candidate in an appreciative way was an eye opening experience to the group.

#### **Textbox 2: Objectivity vs. inter-subjectivity**

Traditional management training focuses on steering and controlling (= objectivity). In times where organisations differentiate themselves by the degree of knowledge-sharing and motivation of their employees (Harrison & Kessels, 2004) a new style of management is needed. An important competency of managers will have to be the ability to motivate and develop employees, as well as facilitating a culture of learning and collaboration. Today’s ‘autonomous professional’ requires a development- and learning-oriented environment (Methorst, 2004). In talent development this translates into a people-centered approach in which the personal (subjective) views of the management play a key role.

### Textbox 3: Beliefs and drivers of talents, interviewed at NS Reizigers

These is an excerpt of beliefs and drivers that became visible in the conversation relating to step 6 in the process (see textbox 5): discussing the film fragments. By using profound questioning, using the Logical Levels (Dilts, 1990) as a framework, talent was made aware of their drivers. The reason for this process step was to a) increase self-awareness of the candidate, b) test if the lenses that were deemed important by managers was shared by these (future) leaders. Some reflected these beliefs, while others were more about personal development and values.

- I am very ambitious and always have to have a goal.
- I want to be authentic: I want to be honest to other people. I am valued for my authenticity.
- I want to prove myself, it is not about appreciation of others.
- I need to be in control, then I know that I will book results.
- I have to book results, because then I will be reliable.
- I want to prove to my manager that I can do it: his appreciation helps.
- I always give 150%. Only when I have the feeling that I gave all I have I am happy.
- I 'dare' when I know that someone backs me.
- I have an added value.
- I am authentic, I am who I am.
- Being clear and transparent is important.
- I am not only here for myself, but I represent the whole of NS, not just my own business unit.
- I dare to take risks outside existing processes.
- Relationships are core. Getting things done as a team is vital to lasting success.

#### SHARPENING THE VIEW ON TALENT BY CREATING A PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK

Two years after introducing the potential/performance axis and development-oriented management, the working hypothesis 'talent is being made in the management team' was being formulated. In the following phase of the process, information was collected on what it meant to be a 'talent' and to have 'potential' in the context of NS Reizigers. A selected group of managers, who were known to have an above-average turn-over of high-potentials, were video-interviewed about their tacit skills in spotting talent. The results supported the process: virtually all talented talent-spotters used a personal metaphor or framework in order to pick the employees who they considered to be potentials. And for all it came as a surprise when they were made aware of their intuitive metaphor, as the process had been mostly unconscious. Malcom Gladwell argues in his bestseller *Blink*, in which he is trying to come to terms with the phenomenon of intuition:

'What would happen if we took our instincts seriously? What if we stopped scanning the horizon with our binoculars and began instead examining our own decision making

and behaviour through the most powerful of microscopes?...There can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis.' (Gladwell, 2005)

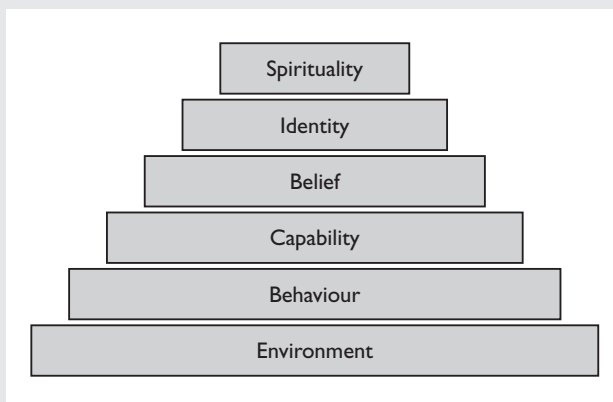
To mention but a few of the metaphors that were implicitly used by the managers:

- 'Talent always has time. This means that although they are busy, they don't seem overly stressed and are willing to help'.
- Another manager reported that she felt that talent added 'colour to the grey mass' and 'inspired and surprised' her.
- A third person, a field hockey coach, was reminded of successful players, 'they anticipate and don't run with the flock'.

In order to get a more balanced perspective, some candidates from the high-potentials list were interviewed on their strengths as well as on their outlook on work. Interestingly, these individuals fitted surprisingly well into the frameworks we had discovered earlier (see Textbox 3 for beliefs of promising potential). Based on the information collected in these

## Textbox 4: Questions thinking-aloud-protocol

In order to conduct a thinking-aloud-protocol a set of open questions and interventions were crafted based on the logical levels of Dilts & Bateson (Dilts, 1990). The logical levels provide a framework to get to the beliefs and drivers of people starting with a concrete situation. For this, we used the film fragment.



In addition, the interviews were conducted in an appreciative way. The goal was not to expose weak spots, but to spot and explore the strong, viable beliefs of the candidate - what will drive them to success?

Thinking-aloud protocol questions:

- Why did you choose this very setting (question about the situational level)
- How can we see your talent in this part? (behavioural level, candidate describes his behaviour in own words)
- What would you have done if xy did not work?
- What was your intention? (capability level)
- What made you choose this alternative? (capability level, makes candidate aware of own choice)
- I would have acted in this situation in xy-way, what makes you act in that specific way (self-exposure, creates safety, capability level)
- Why was it important to act like this in this situation? (belief level)
- Am I correct in saying that you are a person who... (belief level)
- Would you finish my sentence: "It is very important for me to always..." (identity level)
- What are you proud of in yourself? (identity level)
- How could you use your talents to make the situation even more effective next time? (create awareness in using talents)

video-interviews, we extracted the following five themes that we formulated into preliminary categories: Ambition, Courage, Learning, Expertise, Relationship-building. These themes formed the lens through which managers viewed successful talent at NS Reizigers and were subjected to further research/investigation.

The next step was to refine these categories while starting the process of becoming more proficient in recognising talent at the same time. This process started with a kick-off meeting with all members of the management team and an equal number of high potentials. Each manager had been assigned the task of identifying one employee of their department whom they would like to see as their successor. A task that required guts and clarity from management as well as the candidates. At the conference all participants were informed

about the experiment that was about to take place. The three-tier process was being explained. Some candidates feared they would be given the stamp of 'crown prince' and were concerned that the exposure could work against them, but the majority was intrigued and looked forward to the experiment.

### CONDUCTING THE EXPERIMENT

At the kick-off meeting we introduced a method called 'thinking-aloud-protocol'. In this intervention we filmed every candidate in a work situation in which they think they could make their potential visible.

Consequently, the candidate and their manager would be asked to watch these short films independently and to select up to three scenes of no longer than one minute each, in which they thought the candidate's potential was visible.

Following this, the candidate, his manager, a direct colleague-manager, and a facilitator would meet to watch these fragments and discuss them. This is a succession of the profound dialogue in order to make the candidate aware of his beliefs and drivers that lie behind the successful intervention in that particular situation. The discussions would be facilitated in an appreciative way by focusing on the candidate's strengths and uncovering his underlying beliefs, based on the interaction on the video tape (see Textbox 4 for interview questions in these meetings). Interestingly, in the end it turned out that it did not matter what fragment was chosen, all of them led to the underlying belief that was core to their behaviour. We think that the fundamental drives are a relevant indicators for future success, much more than past achievements and by these interviews we could assess these drives.

These one-hour meetings were appealing for each participant:

- For the candidate to be able to expose himself and his beliefs to his manager through successful moments in his work and to receive appreciative feedback.
- For the managers to engage in an unusual in-depth dialogue with the candidate. They reported that next to the video fragments, the main points of interests were the way the candidate dealt with being the centre of attention, as well as the beliefs that became explicit during that dialogue. The manager was supported by a direct colleague, who was preferably somewhat more experienced in coaching and spotting talent. In doing this together, they sharpened their common 'talent lens' and created a common language with regard to talent.
- In some of the later meetings, a representative of the HR department joined the dialogue in order to learn how to conduct the interview. Additionally, this was an opportunity for the HR representative to observe an interaction process between three talented members (both experienced and unexperienced) who belong to his HR-portfolio.
- For the external facilitator (also researcher in the process), content information for the experiment was generated.

Often, this was the first time the younger and experienced managers connected on a personal level. Both sides reported that this was a unique experience of giving and receiving feedback and discussing one's strengths.

Finally, the process was concluded with a feedback meeting for all participants (managers and potentials) and a publication. One of the main messages from the participants of the experiment was that it was not a checklist or tool, but rather the process of experimenting that caused an increased focus on talent development in the organisation.

The results of these meetings formed the ingredients of the final report. This report was presented in the form of a comic strip (created by Maarten Wolterink), in order to capture the power of the story, and to prevent that the emphasis would lie on the realisation of a checklist. The final results were put

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*Personal drives are a relevant indicator for future success, even more than past achievements.*

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together into a shared talent lens that had been formed through the process of interacting and developing the present communication culture, and is based on inter-subjectivity. (See textbox 5 for a summary of the process steps.)

#### **WHAT TALENT DOES IT TAKE TO SUCCEED AT NS REIZIGERS**

The following list of talents is not a blue-print or how-to list, but – literally – an illustration of an experiment.

##### *Ability to learn / Capacity to learn*

Intellectual capacity is a prerequisite, but there are also other characteristics that lie behind the ability to learn: being quick on the uptake, able to adapt to a new context rapidly and getting the hang of things more quickly than others. Broadness of mind plays a crucial role there. Typically, talents are able to take a critical look at themselves and keep improving their effectiveness. Additionally, someone with a lot of potential sees how other colleagues act successfully, and he starts copying this behaviour.

# LEARNING CAPACITY



Talents have the skill to structure their own learning, will ask for training, work out what their colleagues are doing or go on work trips. The 'mental flexibility' of an individual with potential is obvious. At the Netherlands Railways this talent is the most important criterion that have been defined for 'potential'. Someone without the ability to learn, is not a talent.

## Ambition

Ambition can easily be confused with perfectionism. However, ambition is more about being determined to get the best

out of oneself. Someone with ambition appear to be eager, wants to know everything and be everywhere, and practice without end! Not necessarily to be the best in the class, but to make the most of what he has.

Someone who is highly ambitious is not afraid of high expectations and takes on the challenge of doing the task even better next time around. While being questioned about her ambition, one individual responded by saying, 'Noblesse oblige: if I'm lucky enough to have lots of talents, then it's my duty to make use of them.'

# AMBITION





Hier hoor lef maar daar zitten grijzen vlakken achter. Kun je een nieuwe opvragen bij de tekenaar?

### Guts

The theme of having 'guts' – strength of character – was the most difficult to pin down in a single picture, since what one person may see as requiring a lot of nerve is perfectly normal to someone else. Having guts can be expressed in many ways: for example taking risks, being proactive, contradicting someone, doing it your own way, sticking your neck out, going against the flow, daring to be oneself.

+1 regels

### Head and heart

A potential acts both from the head and the heart: he is skilled at connecting at the level of content and the level of process.

In other words, he is focussed on results and on people. He is able to approach situations from a content perspective while at the same time strengthening and sustaining relationships with the people involved.

+1 regels

## HEAD+HEART



# SURPRISE!



## Surprise

Resolving a problem quickly is only one facet of being surprising. Other aspects are the way in that potentials sometimes act just a little bit differently, in a less typical way - and achieve results.

These strong personalities look beyond their own familiar areas and apply their unique ways of dealing with a situation. It can be described as 'bringing colour to the grey masses' or 'thinking outside the box'.

## Talent always has time

This comment turned up a number of times during the discussions about potential. Someone with potential enjoys being busy. These persons have a quick mind and enjoy doing more than the job function requires and therefore look for extra challenges.

That does not necessarily mean that this person is working extra long hours, as he is usually good at structuring his work and setting priorities. He can easily distinguish key points

# THERE'S ALWAYS TIME



# CONNECTING



from the peripheral items and define priorities. Common features of a talent that always has time are doing a study next to their work and being busy with activities outside work on a responsible level. The jargon term is 'containment': someone can handle a lot. In short, a talent has lots of energy and can take on a great deal.

## *Connecting - wanting to collaborate*

This theme is the test case for the other categories. Someone can have guts, bring a touch of colour to the organisation, be ambitious... but would one really want to be this person's manager? The key concept for testing this is 'mutual attraction'. This is often based on a very strong feeling that 'I could really get things done in cooperating with that person'. It may sometimes be someone who reminds the manager of himself ('he is ambitious - just like me'). It could also be someone who the manager regards as complementary, 'he's much more analytical and reflective than I am, I can learn from him.'

## **WORKING INGREDIENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The process we described in this article took several years from the first question about the successor to the closing ceremony. For many managers it was a big step to participate in a process without hard measurements. However, after the

initial reluctance the involvement and participation was remarkable. Below we share a number of lessons we have learned: successful ingredients, and caveats in applying this process.

### *Appreciation and integrity*

Among the most important ingredients were the regular meetings of the management team that initiated the process. Without knowing AI yet, the last question at every meeting discussing talented persons was 'Did we do justice to the candidate?' Not focusing on competencies that needed to be developed, but enhancing the strong traits and potential made this process successful. Therefore, the film fragments only incorporated successful situations of the candidate. Consequently, the dialogue between the manager uses this success as a starting point to assess the beliefs and drivers (see textbox 4).

### *Method is the message*

The congruence between the goal and the process proved to be strong: we designed the process in a manner that reflected how the members of the organisation wanted to behave in the future. While gathering information, the very conversations that were designed to spot potential brought manager and talent together. Later, this would happen naturally. The cultural change had begun while the research was conducted.

### Textbox 5: Ten steps in becoming a talent-spotting organisation

1. Organise regular meetings with members of the management team to discuss candidates and develop a common language with regard to talent.
2. Managers choose a candidate they regard as having 'talent' and engage in a profound dialogue on what they base their decision on.
3. Conduct participative research in the organisation on talent categories (interview successful talent spotters)
4. Organize a kick-off meeting with managers and candidates to introduce the process.
5. Film typical work situation of the 'talent', choose two short moments in which 'talent' and manager think that potential is visible.
6. Arrange a meeting to discuss the fragments with the manager, a management team colleague, the candidate and a facilitator: an appreciative interview following the 'logical levels'.
7. Gather information from all interviews, define the 'lessons learned' and 'common talent lens' and prepare a creative way of presenting these (we chose a strip book).
8. Close the process with an evaluating 1:1 meeting between manager and candidate.
9. Organise an event that marks the end of the process and present the report (e.g. book or poster) and pass the process on (not the product!) to the next level in the organisation.
10. Monitor the progress of the candidates over time to test and learn from the process. Reflect on lessons learned.

#### *Make talent visible*

Some of the managers had chosen their candidate not because of performance in daily work, but because they were surprised by a person's behaviour in a simulation-game that was organized. This way, also candidates who not extremely extravert were included in the pool. Including simulations along this process are therefore a strong support mechanism.

#### *Performance, not potential*

In one case, a manager changed his mind along the process regarding the potential of the person he had chosen. He realized that he had assessed the candidate based on his performance. In the conversation following the video, it became very clear that the candidate lacked several aspects of the 'talent lens', which only became visible now. A hard lesson for both the talent and the manager. A one-on-one meeting could clarify this situation and the candidate eventually moved horizontally to another position.

#### *Talent has no age-limit*

An important insight was that talent does not necessarily have to develop vertically, but that a horizontal step can be just as desirable. This would increase the talent pool and

would open more career opportunities for, among others, the group of earlier mentioned 'rusty oldies'. (Eventually, this term was changed to the more appreciative 'experienced potential' in the course of the process.)

#### **CONCLUSION**

Whereas many succession planning systems need ever more mechanisms to prevent hidden agendas or favouritism to dilute the official succession systems, the process described above builds on the factors that are essential to any selection process: intuition and personal preference. Even stronger, the 'gut feeling' that is so often suppressed in favour of fitting a candidate into a system has become a legitimate part of the assessment.

This process presents a perspective for managers to become more proficient in discovering talent and subsequently assessing their potential. Probably the most important aspect of this approach is the perspective that focuses on relationships, instead of procedures and forms. It is an intervention that goes right to the core of what modern management is about: the conversations and relationships among members of the organisation.

The process supports managers to share their intuitive view of a candidate in an appreciative and safe way. In doing so, they develop a shared language and metaphors that enable the management team to assess potential in an inter-subjective way, instead of relying on performance-information alone.

If the success of this method can be measured by the number of potentials still affiliated with the organisation and their promotion in the company, it might be interesting to test this with to the initial question this process started with: 'who will be your successor?' Two years later, some of the candidates 'spotted' by the management team led by Pamela Boumeester have joined this very team and its conversation on talent.

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