

## DITCH YOUR 9 BOX & SIMPLIFY SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

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To the shock of some and the delight of others, I always advise clients and HR colleagues to ditch their 9 Box tool if they want to engage in successful succession planning.

For those unfamiliar with the tool, the 9 Box is essentially a grid commonly used to examine talent within the organization and to make succession planning decisions. Placement of potential succession planning candidates in the 9 Box is determined by ratings of performance and potential – both based upon a three point scale (low, moderate, high). Each of the 9 boxes or categories derived from the ratings are labeled. For example, the high performer/high potential category may be labeled “Consistent Star.”



### Damaging Consequences of the 9 Box Approach

The 9 Box is touted as a simple way to assess talent and plan for the succession of key roles, but nothing can be farther from the truth. The tool is overly complex and requires a problematic focus on administration, facilitation and documentation. While I applaud the intention, the process has unintended and damaging consequences. For example:

- **Executives Disengage** – Executives must own and participate in conversations about talent in order for succession planning efforts to work. When the 9 Box is used, executives tune out, not because they do not understand the tool, but because they are extremely busy and have no patience for anything that is not simple, clear, and straightforward.
- **HR Loses Credibility** – Due to the complexity of the tool and the time it takes to assess and place candidates into categories, the 9 Box contributes to the perception that HR creates unnecessary busy work and does not think strategically.
- **Managers Game the System** – If the 9 Box is misunderstood, managers will game the system and use the tool inappropriately. For example, one executive I met thought that any employee placed in a lower left hand box (that is, people categorized as low-moderate potential and performance) had to be fired. As a result, managers went out of their way to avoid placing their people in certain boxes of the grid.
- **HR Is Burdened with Extra Work** – Managing, documenting and updating the 9 box is tedious, and not something most managers willingly do. This means that the work of maintaining the tool, chasing managers for updates and translating the outcomes into performance management and career development practices falls on the shoulders of HR.
- **Participants Lose Sight of the Purpose** – Effective succession planning practices happen when executives and managers get in a room together and identify and discuss, in a meaningful way, talent for the leadership roles that matter most to the company in the future. Engaging in the lengthy 9 Box process of trying to fit people into assigned boxes distracts everyone from the strategic conversation on talent and the needs of the organization.

### Alternatives for Success

Succession planning is one of the more nuanced aspects of human capital management. It is not something that you can codify or get done in one sitting. Successful succession planning is a series of ongoing, strategic conversations about talent that take place at the executive level. These conversations require skilled facilitators and clear frameworks to guide dialogue about potential leaders for key roles. If you do not have someone internal who can objectively facilitate and who has credibility with the executive team, it is worth getting outside help. If you do not have clear parameters for evaluating potential talent against meaningful metrics, it is important to develop a straightforward method that will work for your unique industry, leaders, culture and business goals. The simpler the method, the more likely your leaders will be to adopt its practice and stay engaged, accountable participants in the process.