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Muscarella and Seay: Identifying and Developing USAF High Potentials
IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING USAF HIGH POTENTIALS

A Flexible Design Case Study: Leveraging Traits to Identify, Develop and Retain High-Potential
Officers in the United States Air Force

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Abstract

This article details a single case study on the topic of identifying, developing, and retaining high-potential (HiPo) United States Air Force (USAF) officers. A model is proposed for organizations to better identify, develop and monitor, and retain HiPos. The case study conducted included 23 active or retired (less than 10 years) USAF colonels and general officers in the financial management career field as participants. Each participant was given a 20-question survey, a Big Five personality test, and an 11-question, hour-long interview. From the collected data, a total of six themes related to USAF HiPo management were discovered. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis that was conducted on the Big Five Personality Test result findings showed that statistically significant results were achieved. Specifically, the research found that the results for Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism were statistically significant, while Extraversion was not. This article focuses on the findings regarding HiPo identification, the benefits of the practice, and how traits and trait theory can be related to leadership potential. The article also provides a Christian perspective on the business problem and the study's findings.

Key words: high potentials, trait theory, military leadership, Big Five personality traits

Introduction

A fundamental aspect of leadership is the selection and development of those individuals who will eventually take on the roles current senior leaders are filling within an organization. While a great deal of research has been done on various topics surrounding senior leader selection and succession planning, the research that was conducted through this study sought to put forth a solution to a current leadership problem. The specific leadership problem this research project aimed to solve is the lack of a formal High Potential (HiPo) selection and development plan within the United States Air Force (USAF). By conducting a study to evaluate the link between traits and the leadership potential of officers within the USAF, this study provides insights into the validity of trait-based leadership theory, the high potential trait inventory, and other factors surrounding the selection, development, and retention of those individuals that have the greatest potential to rise to the highest echelons within an organization.

Background of the Problem

Since its inception in 1947, the USAF has sought to identify, develop, retain, and promote to senior leadership only the most qualified leaders to defend the United States (Currie et al., 2012). Although the USAF has had an unofficial and informal HiPo selection and development process, it has never taken the steps necessary to create a formal program (Nolan & Overstreet, 2018). In the 21st century, the shortage of leadership talent across organizations is a problem that the USAF will also be required to address (Kotlyar, 2018). This doctoral research project evaluated the need for the USAF to create a formal HiPo program to ensure that the United States Air Force's bench of senior leaders will be deliberately constructed and the most promising individuals are retained. Such a process needs to be fair and balanced to mitigate bias and ensure adequate levels of diversity.

Many organizations, including General Electric, International Business Machines, and Proctor & Gamble, use a process to identify individuals as HiPo at some point early on in their career development and then provide those individuals with specialized development opportunities (Finkelstein et al., 2018; Gupta, 2017). The HiPo designation is not unique to businesses and is used across many domains, including education, the arts, sports, among many others (Finkelstein et al., 2018). However, the results from the processes used to identify and grow HiPo individuals have been mixed, and a more methodical process to find and develop these individuals was created.

Furthermore, multiple studies suggest that there is a possible correlation between personality and intelligence that can also be associated with HiPo. According to Furnham and Treglown (2018), conscientiousness, risk approach, ambiguity acceptance, and competitiveness were related to IQ, each a part of the High Potential Traits Inventory. This includes personality traits that coincide with the Big Five Personality Test. A review of personality traits, intelligence, and workplace behaviors provided additional insight into finding HiPo individuals with an increased likelihood of leadership success.

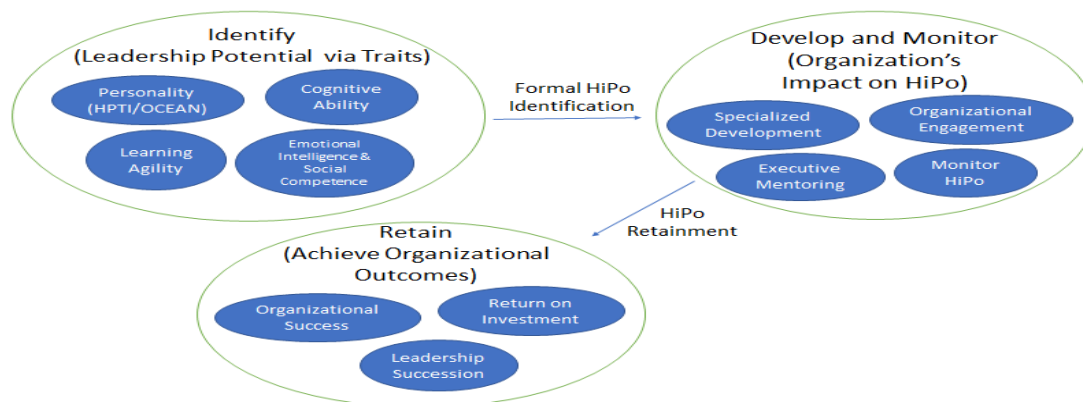
Business Problem

The general business problem studied was the inability of large enterprises to adequately identify, develop, and retain HiPo individuals at all possible stages of an individual's career, resulting in the failure of these organizations in building the strongest possible bench of future senior leaders. According to Katiyar (2018), a shortage of leadership talent is one of the more significant organizational concerns, and to address this issue, many companies have launched HiPo programs. Despite the use of HiPo programs by large enterprises, research shows that upwards of 40% of individuals in HiPo programs may not belong there, as they may be less

effective or toxic leaders (Zenger & Folkman, 2017). An enterprise that has struggled with HiPo program implementation is the USAF, which had an informal HiPo program for many years with no formal definition for HiPo officers or a model in place to evaluate potential (Nolan & Overstreet, 2018). HiPo identification has been of critical interest to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, as the USAF has sought to develop a strong “bench” of senior officers from which to select the USAF’s most senior positions (Currie et al., 2012). The specific business problem studied was the inability of the USAF to adequately identify, develop and retain HiPo individuals at all possible stages of an individual’s career, resulting in the USAF’s failure to build the strongest possible bench of future senior leaders.

Figure 1

Relationships between Concepts



Methodology

In conducting the research for this qualitative single case study, a total of 30 active duty and retired USAF officers that have served or were serving within the financial management career field as a colonel or general officer were asked to participate in the research and complete a survey, big five personality test, and an interview. The questions posed to the interviewees were directly related to the proposed research questions. A total of 23 officers- seven generals and 16 colonels agreed to participate, a 76.7% participation rate. More than 30 hours of semi-

structured interviews consisting of 11 questions were primarily conducted over Zoom and Webex to record every word for automated transcription using Otter.ai. In certain circumstances, the interviewees could not use Zoom or Webex for the interview, so the interview was conducted over the phone. In those cases where the interview took place over the phone, the researcher took typewritten notes that captured the thematic nature of the responses and copied down quotes verbatim when possible. Additionally, the survey of 20 statements was conducted over email using a Word document template. A total of 21 survey responses were received, with each respondent providing a score using the Likert Scale between 1 and 5, with 5s strongly agreeing with the statement and 1s strongly disagreeing. Finally, the Big Five Personality test was performed using a freely available test available through Truity. Participants were asked to rate how well each of the 60 statements describes them. A total of 22 responses were received, providing Big Five Personality Trait Test results that ranged from 0-100%.

Data Analysis

According to Yin (2017), data analysis provides a thorough examination and categorization of data to produce evidence-based findings, with an objective to provide answers to the overarching research questions. For this case study, the data that required analysis included the quantitative results from the conducted survey and standardized testing and the qualitative results from the interviews and research on the topic of HiPo as it relates to the problem attempting to be resolved through the research questions. It was necessary to work competently with both the quantitative and qualitative data, as this research used a flexible design that leverages quantitative data for triangulation. The researcher put the quantitative data into several tables for analysis and to draw further insight. The qualitative data were coded using qualitative

data analysis software into different themes, whereby the researcher was able to support the various themes with the quantitative data obtained.

Findings

In this section, the findings from the original research that was conducted for this doctoral case study are presented. Figure 2 illustrates the results of the survey questions. Those that scored 4 or 5 on the Likert scale were considered in agreement with the statements presented, while those that scored 1 or 2 disagreed, and 3s were neutral. The average Likert Scale score given by respondents is also shown for each question. Figure 3 below illustrates the Big Five Personality test results administered to the research participants. Figure 4 provides an overview of the themes that were discovered as a result of the qualitative analysis. After the presentation of these results, a detailed discussion of how the findings relate to critical areas from the research proposal is provided.

Figure 2

Survey Questions and Analysis

Survey Question Analysis
Responses N= 21

		Average	% Agree	% Disagree	Neutral
Question 1	High Potentials have technical and professional expertise	4.2	90.5%	9.5%	0.0%
Question 2	High Potentials can be correctly identified within the first ten years of an officer's career	3.2	42.9%	23.8%	33.3%
Question 3	High potentials are driven to excel and take the initiative	4.7	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Question 4	High Potentials perform at a higher level than their peers	4.2	81.0%	0.0%	19.0%
Question 5	High Potentials seek out challenging opportunities	4.2	85.7%	4.8%	9.5%
Question 6	High Potentials fit into the culture of the organization	3.6	61.9%	9.5%	28.6%
Question 7	High potentials have a catalytic learning capability	3.7	61.9%	4.8%	33.3%
Question 8	High Potentials have dynamic sensors and high emotional intelligence	3.8	71.4%	4.8%	23.8%
Question 9	An officer's future leadership potential can be correctly identified through the evaluation of senior leaders.	3.6	61.9%	14.3%	23.8%
Question 10	The Air Force should formally identify High Potentials	3.3	38.1%	23.8%	38.1%
Question 11	High potential individuals make more effective senior leaders than non- High potentials	3.2	38.1%	23.8%	38.1%
Question 12	Successful senior leaders in the Air Force often share many similar traits and behaviors	3.8	81.0%	9.5%	9.5%
Question 13	USAF Officers with the most significant potential should be tracked and placed differently than officers with lower potential	3.4	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%
Question 14	USAF Officers with the most significant potential should receive significantly more executive exposure and mentoring in their development	3.0	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%
Question 15	USAF Officers with the most significant potential should receive specialized development tracks and opportunities that align with senior leader required experiences	3.4	61.9%	19.0%	19.0%
Question 16	The USAF's current personnel management strategy is successful at retaining most officers that would be considered High Potential	3.0	38.1%	38.1%	23.8%
Question 17	Formal identification of an individual as possessing High Potential as a future senior leader would increase the likelihood of their retainment	3.3	47.6%	23.8%	28.6%
Question 18	High Potential identification would fit within the current USAF culture	3.0	42.9%	47.6%	9.5%
Question 19	There exist significant barriers to the creation of a formal USAF High Potential Program	3.3	52.4%	23.8%	23.8%
Question 20	The USAF should have a formal High Potential program	3.0	42.9%	38.1%	19.0%

Figure 3*Table of Big Five Personality Trait Test Results***Big Five Personality Trait Test Results**

Responses: N=22

	Average	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Openness to Experience	72.3	0.0%	4.5%	54.5%	40.9%
Conscientiousness	75.6	0.0%	0.0%	40.9%	59.1%
Extraversion	54.2	9.1%	27.3%	50.0%	13.6%
Agreeableness	74.0	0.0%	4.5%	50.0%	45.5%
Neuroticism	29.4	45.5%	45.5%	9.1%	0.0%

Ranges

Low	0-25
Medium	26-50
High	51-75
Very High	76-100

Figure 4*Research Themes***Themes Identified in the Research**

- Theme 1:** USAF HiPo retainment would increase through formal identification under a formal HPO program, but non-HiPo retainment would likely decrease, depending on how an identification program was implemented.
- Theme 2:** USAF HiPos can be correctly identified in the four-six year range of time commissioned, but the process must be transparent and allow for the continual evaluation of potential with on and off ramps at all stages of a career.
- Theme 3:** Air Force financial management senior leaders generally possess personalities with high openness to experience, conscientious and agreeableness with low levels of neuroticism.
- Theme 4:** USAF HiPos should possess or receive more development of their "soft skills", as successful senior Air Force leaders share many similar traits and behaviors that are "soft skill" centric.
- Theme 5:** Executive mentoring of HiPos by senior leaders is vital to their development and long-term success.
- Theme 6:** An increased use of 360-degree feedback at various points of an officer's career would aid in the identification, monitoring and development of USAF HiPos.

High Potential Identification

Zenger and Folkman (2017) found that HiPos possessed common characteristics that could be used to identify them, including technical and professional expertise, taking the initiative and delivering results, and fitting into the organization's culture. The findings from the survey directly support the common HiPo characteristics found by Zenger and Folkman. For question 1, 90.5% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "High Potentials have technical and professional expertise." Additionally, 100% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "High potentials are driven to excel and take the initiative." Lastly, only 9.5% of

survey respondents disagreed with the statement, “High Potentials fit into the culture of the organization.” Alternatively, research by Furnham and Treglown (2018) suggested that HiPo traits may be more closely correlated to the “Big Five” personality traits and that there is a significant positive relationship between conscientiousness, curiosity, and IQ. A Big Five Personality Test was given to research participants to examine whether such a correlation exists. Results from four of the Big Five Personality Traits tested were shown to be statistically significant: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

The literature review and study also examined the timing of HiPo identification. While some organizations are shifting HiPo identification to earlier in a career (e.g., directly from college), many organizations are waiting until after the first 2 to 3 years after an employee is hired before they will identify them as HiPo (Dries et al., 2012; Kotlyar, 2018). The findings from the survey and interview provided a different perspective on when USAF officers should be identified as HiPo. For example, 42.9% agreed with the statement, “High Potentials can be correctly identified within the first 10 years of an officer’s career.” However, many interviewees stated that some HPOs could be identified as early as 4-6 years and sometimes earlier. They noted that it took at least 6-8 years or more to evaluate an officer’s leadership potential. Alternatively, rather than giving a specific number of years to identify someone as HiPo, research by King (2016) suggests they should be identified through career anchoring events dependent on the employee’s lifecycle phase. Additionally, the organization should make a talent deal with an employee, which leads the employee to either accept the assignments and opportunities for development or not (King, 2016). Many interviewees supported such a proposal and alternative timeline for the identification of HiPo.

Benefits of Formally Identifying High Potentials

Through the research findings, several benefits related to formally identifying HiPos were found. The foremost benefit of formally identifying HiPos is the higher likelihood of their retainment. During the interviews, formal identification and the development that comes with such a distinction were the most often mentioned way the USAF can retain HiPos. Interviewees often made statements regarding the positive impact formally identifying HPOs has on the Air Force due to the validation it provided to the individual they were on the right track for senior leadership. These interview responses are in line with Kotlyar and Karakowsky's (2014) findings that informing HiPos of their status not only increases their retention but also increases their motivation and engagement.

Interviewees noted the importance of transparency in formally identifying individuals and the potential benefits it can achieve if done correctly. Interviewees stated that the feedback process needs to be done correctly to ensure HPOs maintained top levels of performance and stayed committed to the organization. Ultimately, the interviewees believed that HPO identification increased their retention. However, based on other statements made by interviewees, due to not having off-ramps for ineffective or toxic leaders, the surveyed financial management senior leaders have had mixed experiences with the effectiveness of HiPos being more effective as senior leaders than non-HiPos. For example, 23.8% of survey respondents disagreed, and 38.1% agreed with the statement, "High potential individuals make more effective senior leaders than non-high potentials."

Traits are Related to Leadership Potential

Ready et al. (2010) found that HiPos possessed the following four "X-Factors" that drove differentiation from regular employees: (a) a drive to excel, (b) a catalytic learning capability, (c)

an enterprising spirit, and (d) dynamic sensors. The findings from the survey directly support the common HiPo characteristics found by Ready et al. (2010). For question 3, 100% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, “High potentials are driven to excel and take the initiative.” Additionally, only 4.8% of survey respondents disagreed with the statement, “High potentials have a catalytic learning capability.” Lastly, 71.4% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, “High Potentials have dynamic sensors and high emotional intelligence.” Additionally, Wang et al. (2016) found that extravertive behavior by CEOs is a strong predictor of other leadership behaviors and overall effectiveness. The research found that the results for extraversion showed it was the one Big Five Personality trait that was not statistically significant and aligned with research expectations, as the senior leaders who took the test scored 52.2 on average when a mean of 65 or above was predicted.

Emotional intelligence allows leaders to manage feelings so they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling the team to work together to achieve a common goal (Mfikwe & Pelser, 2017). Since leaders must have the capability to navigate the political nature of organizations and their external environments, it becomes vital that leaders' social competence and emotional intelligence be measured and utilized to find HiPos (Finkelstein et al., 2018). In line with the literature on the importance of emotional intelligence for HiPos, the research survey found that only 4.8% of respondents disagreed with the statement, “High Potentials have dynamic sensors and high emotional intelligence.” Mfikwe and Pelser (2017) also found that emotional intelligence enabled leadership potential by directly affecting leadership decisions by establishing a more positive and healthy work environment. The interviewees also detailed how important emotional intelligence was in realizing leadership potential and possessing strong social competence to create an effective environment for everyone. Interviewees made

statements that high emotional intelligence was vital for effective senior leaders and the more authoritative they were, the less effective their leadership was.

Summary of the Findings

The research for the studied business problem found that it may be possible for organizations to more accurately identify, develop, and retain HiPos by following the model seen in Figure 1. By utilizing the elements and sub-elements found in the research framework, large organizations will be able to identify HiPos with greater accuracy through the use of traits. Once formally identified, the enterprises will be able to better develop and monitor HiPos through increased executive mentoring, specialized development, and organizational engagement. HiPo retainment by these organizations would then be achieved, which would ultimately lead to better organizational outcomes. The research also found that like other large enterprises, the USAF can utilize the framework provided by the study to achieve more remarkable organizational outcomes through more accurately and more effectively identifying, developing, and retaining those with the most significant potential.

The purpose of this doctoral research project was to understand why the USAF has not created a formal HiPo program and to explain the impact of the USAF's actions on HiPo identification, development, and retainment, leading to the failure to create the strongest possible bench of future senior leaders. The research found that the USAF had not created a formal HiPo program due to several cultural and logistical barriers that must eventually be overcome. Additionally, the research found that past methods of HiPo identification and development have led to numerous instances of toxic leadership that could have been avoided through better identification and development processes. Improved identification and development processes that the USAF could have used include greater use of 360-degree assessments, examination and

use of personality trait testing, and more significant ‘soft-skills’ development and training of HiPos.

Christian Perspective on the Business Problem and Findings

The Scripture has several examples where HiPo followers of Christ are selected to be senior leaders in the Christian church. One such instance is Jesus’ selection of his disciples through the Great Commission. According to Scripture, “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Then Jesus came to them and said,

All authority in heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:16-20, NIV)

The Lord specially selected those individuals who would be most effective at spreading the Gospel of Christ and performing as HiPos. Organizations must consciously prepare succession plans that pass the torch of leadership, similar to the type of training Jesus did with His disciples or Paul did with Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 (Merida, 2015, location 326). Succession planning is more than the simple identification of the next leader but involves grooming individual successors who have the right personal and professional development (Ritchie, 2020). Similar to how Jesus selected and groomed his disciples, senior organizational leaders must also officially designate and develop their HiPo replacements.

Furthermore, HiPos must possess sufficient wisdom and knowledge that enables their performance within the top percentiles of their organization. It is only through Christ that true wisdom and knowledge can be achieved (Merida, 2015). Additionally, such biblical wisdom has

six interrelated dimensions. The six dimensions of wisdom are worship, insight, discernment, moral, justice, and skill (Merida, 2015, location 590-614). According to Scripture, “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30, NIV). Similarly, the impact of an individual’s human capital on their leadership potential can be based on the cognitive and non-cognitive abilities they possess (Tong et al., 2019). USAF officers require certain institutional competencies consisting of the observable knowledge, skills, and abilities they possess to perform in their occupational specialty and leadership roles (Nolan & Overstreet, 2018). However, it is only through Christ that followers and believers can find the wisdom and salvation that became obtainable through Christ's sacrifice for humankind's sins. Therefore, the most effective and wise HiPos should follow Christ and fulfill His will in all they set out to do.

Conclusion

In summary, this doctoral research project provided an exhaustive literature review on the topics surrounding HiPo and a single case study on the topic of identifying, developing, and retaining HiPo USAF officers. The diagram in Figure 1 provides organizations with a concise and simplified way to identify, develop, monitor, and retain HiPos supported by the literature review and data found through the case study. From the data that were collected through this study, a total of six themes related to USAF HiPo management were discovered. Additionally, the quantitative analysis that was conducted on the Big Five Personality Test result findings showed that statistically significant results were achieved. Specifically, the research found that the results for Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism were statistically significant, while Extraversion was not. Based on the data and research presented, it would greatly benefit the USAF and other organizations to consider implementing some of the

ideas brought forward through this doctoral research project. Doing so would likely solve many of the long-standing issues that have faced the USAF in maintaining a deep enough bench of talented individuals from which to draw.

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