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Getting Ahead as a 'High-Potential' Manager

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When Audrey Kane joined TGI Friday's U.S. division in 2005, the middle manager learned she might gain a vice presidency someday.

She became a regional VP of the restaurant chain in August 2009 - a year sooner than she expected. Ms. Kane believes her participation in an outside training program hastened her promotion because she improved her internal negotiation and networking skills.

TGI Friday's put Ms. Kane through the year-long program because it considered her a "high potential" manager and wanted to further develop her skills. The Leadership Lab for Women, run by ELI Group, featured quarterly two-day group sessions and individual counseling. It "challenged her to think differently," says John Neitzel, president of TGI Friday's U.S. division.

Many companies are grooming high potential executives as they try to retain rising stars during the recovery, according to leadership consultants, business schools and management coaches. The Center for Creative Leadership has seen enrollment in its high-potential programs climb about 25% from the recessionary low point in fall 2008, reports Roland Smith, a global talent researcher for the Greensboro, N.C., nonprofit.

"HiPos" like Ms. Kane typically get extra training, powerful mentors, "stretch" assignments and faster promotions. But beware: Simply winning this special status doesn't guarantee you'll achieve your lofty corporate ambitions.

In fact, a significant number of high potentials derail their careers because they act like anointed royalty. "They feel so entitled and fully baked that they don't need to grow anymore," says Christina Williams, managing director of ELI Group, a Dallas consultancy, which charges employers \$15,000 per participant for the program that Ms. Kane went through. "They're usually asked to exit the organization within a year."

You might avoid that sad fate by being keenly aware of your gaps and developmental needs, Dr. Williams suggests. To increase your self-awareness, seek regular rigorous assessments and help crafting a personal development plan.

But "you can overdo it and be totally career obsessed," warns Lucien Alziari, senior vice president of global human resources at Avon Products Inc. "We have all seen the high potential who wants to know, 'What can you do for me?' rather than 'What can I do for the company?'"

Ms. Kane says the Leadership Lab made her more aggressive about seeking frank feedback from her bosses. As a result, she adds, "the rules of the advancement game were very, very clear."

If your employer encourages leadership training, select the type that successful high potentials embraced, advises Rochelle Weichman, an associate dean at M.I.T.'s Sloan School of Management. You may have to forget about pursuing a part-time M.B.A. degree.

High potentials in Avon's Accelerated Development Program can't substitute executive-education courses for its customized approach. But they do meet several external career coaches "before choosing the coach that they feel most comfortable with," Mr. Alziari explains. About 35 potential senior executives have completed the 18-month corporate program since its 2006 debut.

You also need influential mentors who can enhance your visibility among the big brass. International Business Machines Corp. launched a program this summer that matched each of 49 emerging female technical leaders worldwide with a technical coach and an executive sponsor for years.

The sponsors, mostly vice presidents, introduce the women to top-level colleagues and assist them in finding attractive short-term rotations outside their area. "It's definitely an advocacy

program," says Lisa Gale, IBM global manager of women's initiatives.

But don't accept a temporary assignment willy-nilly. "Make sure it is something that matters to the company," recommends Inder Sidhu, a senior vice president of Cisco Systems Inc. "Make sure it is something you can learn from."

Marc Surplus, a high-potential Cisco executive, knew both were true before he joined its Executive Action Learning Forum in August 2009. Competitive teams spend weeks devising solutions for a crucial problem that will generate \$1 billion in revenue or cost savings. Certain winning plans have become business units.

Team members must still handle their ordinary duties, however. "It led to longer days and shorter nights of sleep during those four months," Mr. Surplus says.

Cross-functional experiences and peer feedback that Mr. Surplus acquired through that program "helped him do his regular job better," recalls Mr. Sidhu, his boss's boss. "This accelerated his promotion to senior director." Mr. Surplus moved up last spring.

In grooming high potentials, most businesses expect them to take different full-time spots every few years. That's the case at Wolters Kluwer NV. "The more limitations you place on internal job switches, the harder it is for the corporation to meet the needs of the individual high potential," notes Nancy McKinstry, the American-born chief executive of the global information-services concern.

Raimundo Díaz, head of its transport-services unit since 2002, often appears on her short list of prospects for important appointments. But so far, the Brussels-based executive is staying put. He says he spurned a U.S. opportunity due to family health issues and a functional European role because he prefers profit-and-loss responsibilities.

Now, Mr. Díaz fears his rising star may fall. "Do you still consider me high

potential?" he asked Ms. McKinstry during a June breakfast, both executives recollect. She replied that she does. She says she thinks the right fit counts more than the number of times he refuses a transfer.

Mr. Díaz vows to soon find a challenging fresh opportunity within Wolters Kluwer. "It's not that I am going to leave the company."

Some high-potential executives do jump ship, however. Facing compressed management layers, they feel frustrated over not winning bigger titles and pay faster, says Rosemarie Fiorilli, a New York executive coach who mainly counsels high potentials.

"Really high-performing executives will have no trouble landing elsewhere."

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