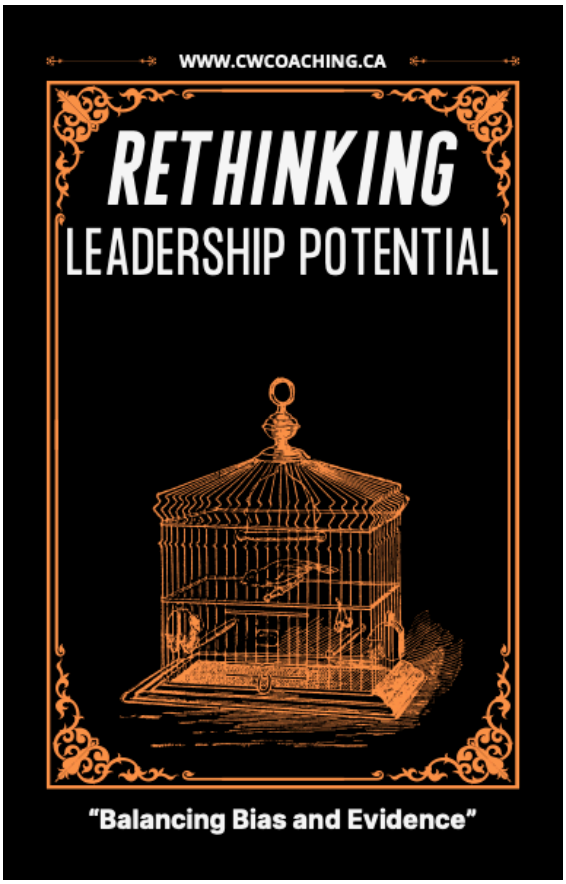
Rethinking Leadership Potential: Balancing Bias and Evidence in Succession Planning



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Date: September 15, 2025
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Introduction

Identifying and developing leadership potential remains one of the most pressing challenges for organizations today. Two recent studies shed light on different but interconnected dimensions of this challenge. **Hines et al. (2024)** question the effectiveness of universal high-potential models, while **Ecker et al. (2025)** expose hidden biases in leadership preferences that shape selection decisions. Together, these findings reveal that the **success of succession planning depends not only on robust assessment frameworks but also on addressing unconscious biases in how leaders are chosen.**

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Insights from Hines et al. (2024): Rethinking High-Potential Models
In 2024, **Hines, O'Neal, Huynh, and Golden** challenged prevailing "one-size-fits-all" models of high-potential talent by proposing a more **behavioral, context-specific framework** for identifying readiness and growth. They argue that widely used models of high-potential talent often lack empirical grounding and rely too heavily on vertical advancement as the primary indicator of leadership potential. Such models overlook lateral moves and other development opportunities that can be equally valuable for building leadership capacity.

Their research suggests:

- A **behavioral framework** that integrates multiple constructs to measure potential.
- The use of **behavioral ratings** to predict readiness more effectively.
- Recognition that **future-focused, role-specific criteria** are essential for aligning talent pipelines with organizational needs.

Insights from Ecker et al. (2025): The Bias Toward Progress-Oriented Leaders
In 2025, **Ecker, Weitzel, and Lammers** revealed a different but related challenge: the **systematic bias people hold toward progress-oriented leaders**, even when situational demands call for maintenance or stability. Through six experiments involving over 3,300 participants, they found that progress leaders are consistently preferred—even when situational demands clearly call for maintenance-oriented leadership.

Their findings suggest:

- This bias persists despite identical policy positions, undermining rational decision-making.
- Preferences are not explained by perceived effort but can be reversed when leaders are framed with **broader goal scopes**.
- Bias toward progress may cause organizations to overlook leaders who excel at maintaining systems, stability, and continuity—qualities critical in times of operational or structural stability.

Integrating the Insights

When viewed together, these studies reveal a twofold challenge:

1. **Framework Gaps:** Traditional models of high potential are too rigid, often failing to capture the diverse pathways (vertical and lateral) through which leadership talent emerges.
2. **Selection Biases:** Even robust, evidence-based models may be undermined by ingrained biases toward progress-oriented leadership, skewing decision-making and weakening succession pipelines.

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The implication is clear: **effective succession planning requires not just better tools, but also strategies to mitigate unconscious biases in leadership selection**.

Possible Research-Base Opportunities

Taken together, these findings highlight a **critical intersection**: while Hines et al. demonstrate the importance of designing flexible, evidence-based models to identify high-potential talent, Ecker et al. show that **biases in preference may override those models in practice**. Organizations may design robust frameworks for assessing leadership potential, but if decision-makers unconsciously privilege “progress leaders” over “maintenance leaders,” the pipeline may still fail to deliver the right leaders for the right situations.

Recommendations for Organizations

- **Redesign High-Potential Models:** Move beyond universal, promotion-focused frameworks to context-specific, behavioral models.
- **Balance Progress and Maintenance:** Assess leaders not only for their capacity to drive change but also for their ability to sustain and stabilize.
- **Embed Bias Safeguards:** Use structured decision processes, diverse panels, and data-driven assessments to counteract unconscious preferences.
- **Expand Development Pathways:** Recognize lateral moves and role diversification as key indicators of leadership readiness.

Call to Action: As you revisit your succession strategies, ask: are your high-potential models not only evidence-based but also resilient against bias? Embedding structures that balance both progress- and maintenance-oriented leadership potential can ensure your organization selects leaders who match situational demands—and drive sustainable success? Are your frameworks flexible enough to capture diverse forms of leadership potential, and are your selection processes resilient enough to overcome unconscious bias?

Conclusion

The research from Hines et al. (2024) and Ecker et al. (2025) underscores that organizations face a dual challenge: designing evidence-based high-potential frameworks while ensuring leadership selection is not distorted by bias. Addressing both dimensions will be essential to building a leadership pipeline that is truly future-ready and able to leverage a broader diversity of career development paths. The future of succession planning lies in building models that are **both empirically sound and bias-aware**.

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References

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