Redesigning Microsoft's High Potential Development Experience

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Introduction

At Microsoft, high potential development goes beyond traditional management or leadership development. Instead, it focuses on *accelerating* the development of high potential employees who have the potential for, and a strong interest in, taking on more senior, critical roles as individual contributors or managers. The remainder of this chapter will present Microsoft's eighteen-month journey to integrate thirteen separate high potential leadership development programs across the company.

Several factors influenced Microsoft's desire to create a new high potential development experience within the company. In 2009, Microsoft had thirteen high potential programs across the company. The individual programs demonstrated varying levels of alignment to Microsoft's Leadership Career Model and were not easily scalable globally. Given the various objectives of the programs, the experience of high potentials was inconsistent across Microsoft. Investment ranged significantly without sound rationale for the difference. This impacted the larger talent management system and made movement among programs difficult

when employees changed businesses, areas, segments, sectors, or functions. To improve its ability to build a consistent pipeline of future leaders, Microsoft recognized that alignment of high potential development within the organization was critical.

Also, 2009 marked two successful years of the integrated Exceptional Potential (ExPo) high potential program within Microsoft's Sales Marketing and Services Group (SMSG). At the time, SMSG was a 45,000 employee organization responsible for Microsoft's sales, marketing, and service initiatives; customer and partner programs; and product support and consulting services worldwide. It represented approximately half of the employee and high potential populations. Operating within thirteen geographic "Areas" with more than ten vertical segments, sectors, and functions, SMSG had its own nineteen high potential and leadership development programs as late as 2006. However, between July 2006 and June 2007, SMSG underwent its own change initiative in which it closed the legacy programs and launched one integrated ExPo program. By 2008, ExPo was receiving industry recognition and best practice citations. The successful introduction of ExPo provided the vision and proof that integration across diverse organizations and cultures was indeed possible.

As the project leader of the ExPo change initiative reached out to other business groups within Microsoft to identify best practices, she developed an aspiration for one day integrating all of the high potential programs within the company. A grassroots effort among the owners of high potential programs lent itself to sharing best practices internally over time, and several of the other program owners began to send their high potentials to the ExPo program once it was successfully established.

Finally, between 2007 and 2008, Microsoft's corporate HR organization underwent a change in leadership. The roles of corporate vice president of talent and organization capability (CVP T&OC) and general manager (GM) of executive recruiting and development assumed new leadership. The new leaders recognized the need for greater alignment and were willing to dedicate the resources to support a change project. They also observed the growing grassroots effort within the organization and the trend of business groups participating in the ExPo program. It appeared to be the right time to make a change and integrate the

various programs, and the new leaders were ready to take advantage of the momentum and opportunity.

Project Life Cycle

Establishing Milestones

The project was officially kicked off in March 2009 after the CVP of T&OC invited the director of high potential talent and the global director, SMSG leadership development, and project leader for the ExPo integration initiative to lead the project. The project directors quickly established the launch date for the new Microsoft high potential experience, July 2010. The timing accounted for several factors: Microsoft's fiscal year began in July and development programs typically started in October; development activities for larger parts of the organization such as SMSG were typically scheduled and contracted nine to twelve months in advance, so the activities starting in October 2009 had already been contracted prior to the project launch; and the number of stakeholders involved with the thirteen existing programs who would need to be prepared for the change was substantial. Business leaders, managers, HR professionals, trainers, vendors, and high potential participants exceeded 5,000. The participants themselves accounted for approximately 3,600 employees, or Microsoft's top 4 percent, globally.

Although the project was initiated in March 2009, the majority of the design work took place between May 2009 and February 2010 and was primarily completed by the internal leadership development consultants who were located around the globe. It is important to highlight this, as it demonstrates that a change of this magnitude can be completed internally and virtually when the right resources are applied. The remainder of this chapter will revisit the project management steps that took place during this timeframe.

Once the launch date was established, the project directors established key milestones to ensure the launch date would be met. The project followed a classic change management approach and was divided into four phases: Project Scoping and Set Up; Current State Analysis; Future State Envisioning; and

Implementation. Running contiguously to all of these phases were Transition Management activities. A brief description of each phase follows.

> An important aspect of working with an "army of volunteers" is to meet their unique needs; otherwise, it becomes difficult to maintain their interest, commitment, and energy over the long term.

Project Scoping and Set Up

With the program launch established, the project directors spent the month of April 2009 inviting key members of Microsoft's HiPo Alignment Network, those responsible for the various programs at Microsoft, to become members of the core project team. Initially, the project team included fifteen members. Although smaller project teams are often advised, the benefits of the larger project team included: distributing work among a larger group of individuals; creating greater stakeholder buy-in; and greater creativity in solution generation. None of the project team members, including both project directors, worked exclusively on the project. Each project team member had a regular, full-time day job and volunteered beyond the regular work week for the project. Thus, it was important to leverage the talent appropriately. Members were grouped into subteams based on their particular areas of interest. In some cases, an individual's interest represented his expertise, while others chose areas that would help build skills in a development area. An important aspect of working with an "army of volunteers" is to meet their unique needs; otherwise, it becomes difficult to maintain their interest, commitment, and energy over the long term. Team members became "champions" for the change within their own organizations. They were able to surface potential barriers to implementation early in the project lifecycle, and the team was able to address them before the issues jeopardized the change. In addition, the team members brought forth a diversity of thinking and experience and were able to adopt and adapt both internal and external best practices in creating the new experience.

> Leveraging internal change management and project management expertise improves the project's chance of successful implementation.

Conversely, a larger project team also introduced more complexity, and project management became even more critical. The project director who had led the successful SMSG ExPo integration initiative was responsible for creating the project management plan. Prior to this project, she had several years of experience as an organizational change consultant at a global consulting firm and later as an internal consultant at a major corporation. She was experienced in organizational change methodologies and the challenges presented with real-world application inside organizations. In addition, she was familiar with creating start-up initiatives within several organizations and was specifically knowledgeable about the unique challenges present at Microsoft.

A high-level view of the project plan activities and milestone schedule is presented in Table 2.1.

Current State Analysis

In May 2009, the team was assembled and the project formally launched. At that time, the team revisited the purpose of the project, reviewed the current state of the existing thirteen high potential programs and became familiar with the Microsoft Leadership Career Model that would be the foundation of the integrated high potential development experience. In addition, the high-level project plan was reviewed at the meeting to gain buy-in.

The team agreed to complete more research prior to meeting again in July. The work included a more detailed review of the development activities that were used within each program from the 70/20/10 learning and development model established by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger (1996) for the Center for Creative Leadership. The 70/20/10 model indicates that development that blends different learning approaches can provide powerful learning. Lombardo and Eichinger asserted that development generally comes from experience. Specifically on-the

Table 2.1. Overview of the Project Plan

Phase	Activities	Due Date
Project Scoping and Set Up	Create project management plan with critical milestones and deliverable dates Select team members Kick off project with team	March–April 2009

Current State Analysis	Review Microsoft's Leadership Career Model
	    Review and understand current program design of thirteen programs
	    Development elements
	Primary activities
	    What works, what does not work
	    Scale: number and level of participants and number of delivery locations
	Resources
	    Current FTEs involved
	    Budget per participant
	    External vendor involvement
	Study existing best practices internally and externally
	Review research related to high potential development
		May–July 2009

Future State Envisioning	Select design principles
	Create high-level vision of program design
	Consider both internal and external best practices
	    Adopting or adapting best practices
	    Create new practices
	Write detailed design guides for each program element
	Establish resource requirements
	    FTEs and organization structure
	    Budget per participant
		August 2009– February 2010

Table 2.1. Continued

Phase	Activities	Due Date
Implementation	Begin acting "as if" Begin event management (schedule space, catering, instructors) Transfer decentralized business unit budgets for thirteen programs to centralized corporate leadership development budget	February–October 2010
Transition Management	Identify, group, and sort key stakeholders Build stakeholder management plan Surface concerns Craft communication plan Establish management routines and meetings with all key stakeholders	Throughout

job experiences account for about 70 percent of development, whereas learning from others accounts for 20 percent, and courses and reading account for 10 percent.

In addition, the team planned to review the scale of current programs regarding the number and hierarchical level of the employees involved; number of delivery locations globally; the number of FTEs and consultants/vendors involved in developing and delivering the programs; and the budget per participant. Furthermore, they completed a comprehensive review of internal and external best practices to be considered. Prior to the SMSG ExPo launch, a large review of research was conducted between 2006 and 2007 and was updated annually. In addition, the other programs had conducted similar research. The team used all that was available to inform its future approach to the new program.

Current state analysis includes a comprehensive review of all activities and supporting infrastructure, as well as internal and external best practices.

Microsoft began by asking the question, "How is the development of a high potential accelerated?" The team was guided to the Corporate Leadership Council's 2005 empirical study, "Realizing the Full Potential of Rising Talent," which provided a strong basis for the rationale and drivers underlying the SMSG ExPo program. After analyzing that research and drawing conclusions appropriate for Microsoft's environment, the team looked at additional research by McCall and Hollenbeck (2002) and McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1998). In addition, it reviewed the current literature and research for best practices in leadership development following a process as indicated in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2. Conducting Best Practice Research

Phase	Activities
Select Topics for Research	Determine areas of focus for the research
	Determine questions you want answered
Conduct Literature Review	Identify journals and studies that focus on your topic area
	Assign topics to team members
	Complete the research
	Create a report of your findings
Best Practice Interviews	Identify companies considered to exhibit best practices
	Contact the companies and identify the owner of the best practices
	Use your network to contact the owner and request a best practice interview
	If no direct contact is available, "cold call" the owner through the company headquarters and request a best practice interview (you will be surprised by how many return your call)
	Conduct interview and record findings
	Create a report of your interview findings
Review Findings	Share reports of research findings with team at appropriate time
	Discuss research results and implications for your project
	Select best practices to "adopt and adapt" for your project and environment

When the team met again in July 2009, it was able to review its research and complete the Current State Analysis.

> For any change to occur, three factors must be at play: dissatisfaction with the current state, a vision for the future, and a clear understanding of the first steps to achieve the vision $(D \times V \times F > R)$.

Future State Envisioning

The conceptual framework for this project assumed that for any change to occur, three factors must be at play: dissatisfaction with the current state, a vision for the future, and a clear understanding of the first steps to achieve the vision $(D \times V \times F > R)$. In Beckhard's framework (Beckhard, 1969; Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992), $D \times V \times F$ is the formula to overcome R, resistance to change. Specifically, the formula is a *product*. So if any of elements (D, V, or F) are zero, the product is zero and resistance to change is nearly impossible to overcome. As with Newton's first law of motion, a body at rest remains at rest, while a body in motion remains in motion unless there's an externally applied force that changes it. Similarly, human beings and organizations do not change unless external forces propel them in a new direction. Those forces come in the shape of dissatisfaction, vision, and first steps. To change, a force must oppose the inertia, but the inertia will try to resist that force. The DVFR change formula is highlighted because, at its heart, Microsoft's HiPo Alignment project was a change management project that utilized project management techniques to ensure its success. Although the majority of this chapter is devoted to the steps utilized to ensure the change was adopted and implemented, the project directors thought it was worthwhile to consider this as they embarked on making the change happen.

As indicated previously, leadership was dissatisfied with the thirteen separate high potential development programs because they impacted the larger talent management system and made movement among programs difficult. First steps were evident in

the project management plan, but the project directors recognized a need for creating a compelling shared vision.

Future state envisioning began at the same two-day meeting in July 2009. The team first spent time learning some of the basic principles of creating a shared vision, as described in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Bryan, 1994).

One of the project directors, who had been trained in these specific techniques, felt it was important to ground the team in these principles to develop a shared understanding and create a shared vision. The team became familiar with the path of least resistance, creative orientation, and creative tension. Using these principles, the team crafted a high-level vision of the future that included the expected results for the program.

> Take the time to understand the principles of creating a great shared vision before actually creating one. The process creates intimacy in the group and a stronger commitment to achieving the vision itself.

Once the high-level vision was established, design principles were created to form the foundation of the future program model. For example, the best practice research surfaced five drivers of accelerated development for high potential leaders. Imbedding the drivers in the development experience was a design principle. Another principle established that all high potentials would participate in a similar experience that was delivered by audience. An "audience" was a group of leaders who were in a similar career stage and facing similar leadership challenges. Four audiences were established vertically within the high potential experience. Another principle required that 80 percent of the development experience was the same across Microsoft, meaning that 20 percent of the development experience could be unique to a business unit.

The 80/20 principle, as it came to be known, was an important departure from the current state, which had led to wide variability among the thirteen programs. The 80 percent principle

ensured that the new development experience would provide much greater consistency across the business, while the 20 percent in-business principle addressed three concerns: (1) it enabled the business units to directly address leadership needs that were unique to each business; (2) it provided the opportunity for the high potential participants from different audiences to meet vertically within a business and learn from each other; and (3) it increased stakeholder buy-in by providing the business unit program managers the opportunity to add their unique "stamp" to HiPo development, which was important in Microsoft's culture. Program managers had a strong need to be able to create in their own space.

> Understanding and leveraging the cultural drivers in an organization leads to greater stakeholder buy-in and higher probability of success.

After the design principles were selected, the team was able to decide on core development "components" or activities that would drive the experience. Components included coaching, mentoring, classroom workshops, action learning projects, and other developmental experiences. The components were integrated in such a way that they intentionally built on each other and were not standalone activities. In fact, integrating the components became an important focus of the ongoing work to ensure that each layer would accelerate the high potential's development.

In the same July meeting after the initial experience was designed, the team reflected on potential barriers to successful implementation. They focused on two areas. First, they began the process of capturing the multitude of implied changes from each business unit's current program to surface potential systemic and change management issues that could become barriers to successful implementation. Next, they completed a Stakeholder Assessment Map to determine where transition management focus was most needed. Explanation of and instructions for completing a

stakeholder assessment are provided in the Transition Management Activities section.

After the team agreed on the overall architecture of the integrated development experience, it was ready to move from a high level to a more detailed vision. Several months were dedicated to crystallizing the detailed vision and writing design guides that would enable HR professionals to comprehensively understand the program so that they could effectively communicate it to business leaders and implement it in their business units. Subteams further developed detailed designs for each development component and supporting structure so that the new program could be easily implemented in an integrated fashion across the organization. Subteams acted in a matrixed approach in which they were responsible for not only a specific development component, such as coaching, across the four audiences, but also were responsible for one audience's end-to-end integrated experience, known as a "learning roadmap." Learning roadmaps were integrated horizontally as well as vertically. For example, coaching was a development component in each audience. For the most senior audience, external executive coaching was offered to each participant, whereas group coaching was offered to the most junior audience. Learning roadmaps were finalized with the large project team in a December meeting.

When the learning roadmaps were completed, the subteams began working on a curriculum that would be launched in orientation workshops for each audience in October through December 2010. The team was able to leverage much of the curriculum that currently existed within the organization. However, some new content was needed, and scaling the existing curriculum was a new challenge. Launching a program that would cover approximately 3,600 high potential leaders within an eight-week window in a consistent manner globally was a project in and of itself. Fortunately, the team was able to leverage many lessons learned from the SMSG experience, which had had to scale globally for a high potential population of 1,600.

Transition Management Activities
A change of this magnitude and complexity required dedication to communication that verged on obsession! The project direc-

tors established these guidelines to drive their transition management strategy and activities:

- Human beings are by nature resistant to change and may not understand why they should make the change.
- If stakeholders aren't dissatisfied with the status quo, if they don't see a compelling vision of the future that, by virtue of its existence, suggests that the current way is no longer good enough, if they don't see the plan that will enable them to achieve the vision, they will not implement the change.
- Never underestimate the need to communicate. In fact, assume that most people aren't paying attention the first time, the second time, or the third time.
- Welcome your stakeholders' questions with grace, even when they ask you the question right after you have delivered the answer. Acknowledge early on that the reason they weren't paying attention was because the information wasn't important enough to prioritize it at the time it was received.
- Ask yourself, "What can I do to help them see the importance?" It doesn't matter when the light bulb finally pops on and they "get it." The important thing is that they get it before you begin implementation, because all hands are required on deck when implementation begins!

Projects fail when communication fails. If your team has done all of the right things, but the project isn't implemented, look first to your communication strategy.

Although much of the team's work had a creative element to it, most of the project required a fairly logical step-by-step approach. On the other hand, transition management required a strategic approach. Many transition management activities occurred during this change project, but most centered on communication. Significant time was dedicated to making the communication meaningful in order to achieve success. For that to occur, it was important for the team to identify, sort, and

understand its stakeholders in order to craft and deliver messages that would influence their thinking. Stakeholder mapping is explained further in the Appendix.

Chains of influence were considered among the critical stakeholders. Champions, stakeholders who enthusiastically embraced the change, were used to bring blockers, stakeholders who did not embrace the change, on board. However, blockers were intentionally used to surface all barriers to success to ensure that those potentials barriers were addressed and overcome to make the program better and more likely to achieve success.

> Know your stakeholders, and use chains of influence to help bring blockers on board.

As seen in Figure 2.1, the team was most interested in understanding stakeholders in the upper right quadrant, those who had a high interest in the change and also held a high degree of power

Figure 2.1. Power/Interest Stakeholder and Prioritization Map
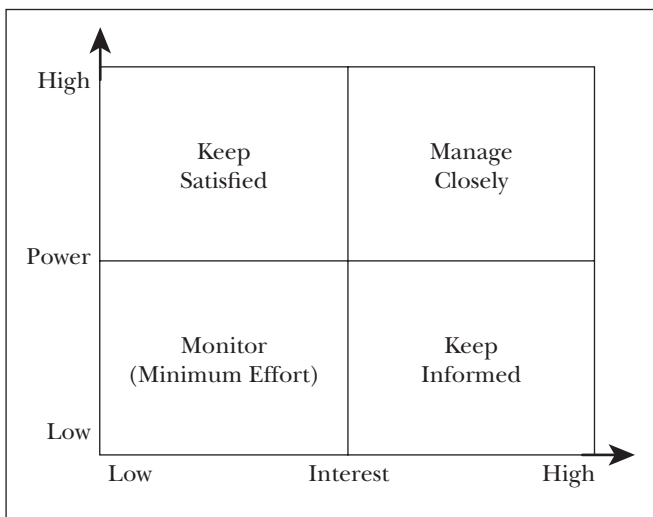
Adapted from **www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_07 .htm**, and Project Management Institute, 2013, p. 397.

within the organization. Whether they were champions or blockers, they required close management. It was important to leverage champions and ensure that they delivered the *right* messages. The project directors knew that if their champions were vocal about the change but shared incorrect information, they could do more harm than good. Moreover, it was important to surface all of the blockers' concerns in order to mitigate them and figure out ways to bring them on board so that they would not block the implementation. The project directors planned appropriate communication strategies to surface the potential barriers as well as ways to leverage the champions to deliver appropriate messages internally.

> Surface potential barriers as soon as possible in order to address and eliminate them with impacted stakeholders before they become widely known. One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.

Stakeholders were strategically grouped by category and plans made to address their concerns. The project director guided the team in a stewardship approach to communication that ensured that all members of critical categories were pre-sold on key concepts prior to presenting them to the category as a whole. Although pre-selling prior to each milestone meeting required planning, the benefits far exceeded the time expended. Each stakeholder's position was acknowledged and understood prior to each meeting, and steps were taken to mitigate and address concerns in advance.

> Selling 101: Never go into an important meeting with the intention of persuading people to adopt your recommendations without knowing what everyone in the room already thinks about them.

Critical to making the change was the HiPo integration team representing all of the business units that built the detailed vision and implementation plan and continually sought ways to improve both. Energized by the possibility of change, the team contributed

many hours to taking the thinking to all potential HR and business leader populations in order to increase their engagement and the probability of implementation success.

In addition to the high potentials, their managers, and the business leaders who expected better results from the development experience, the majority of communication was targeted to a few HR communities. The larger HR community was expected to act as the primary change agents within Microsoft and communicate the change to business leaders at time of implementation. Most of the communication that was directed to them was intentionally scheduled to occur shortly before implementation began so that it would be fresh for them as they prepared their own presentations.

Three groups were addressed more frequently and directly. The extended HiPo community included individuals beyond the project team who were directly involved in HiPo efforts within the organization. The People and Organization Capability Leadership Team (POCLT) represented the senior HR leaders most directly responsible for the high potential development programs and managed many members of the project, and Lisa Brummel, the senior vice president of human resources, who with the HR general managers comprised the Senior Human Resource Leadership Team (HRLT).

While the extended HiPo community participated in monthly virtual group conference calls to receive updates on the project, the project directors and members of the project team spent one-on-one time with members of the POCLT and the HRLT. Ten days prior to each "Milestone Meeting" with the POCLT, the project directors held one-on-one stewardship meetings to update the leaders regarding key changes or points to be addressed in the presentation and to surface any concerns. Milestone Meetings occurred in August, October, December, February, and April. In addition, the project directors met with the general manager of executive development and recruiting project champion at least monthly to keep him updated on the project's status, and he, in turn, met with the CVP T&OC executive sponsor monthly to keep him informed. The project directors met with the CVP T&OC as needed. Although the project directors met with the HRLT only once to seek approval to implement the new project, the GM of

executive development and recruiting and the CVP T&OC met with them on a monthly basis and provided brief updates. However, the regular one-on-one stewardship calls with the HRGMs and their project team members were important for filling in the blanks that could not be addressed during a quick briefing at an HRLT meeting. In April 2010, the project directors met with the HRLT to seek formal approval to proceed with the proposed changes starting July 1, 2010.

Implementation

Approval was granted and the project team began the process of formally preparing the larger HR community to communicate the new Microsoft Bench, the name given to the integrated high potential development program experience to develop high potential leaders to business leaders. Taking advantage of Microsoft's HR Learning Days, a week annually dedicated to educating and developing HR professionals in Microsoft, the team was able to reach several of the HR business partners quickly around the globe one week in May. Most business units also chose to supplement Learning Days with other supplemental meetings and the team prepared presentations and a FAQ document to help with consistent communication.

> For significant changes, consider phasing in the change over a period of time.

As July 1 approached, preparations were made to transfer FTE headcount and budget to the center to support the change. A new team responsible for high potential development was formed in the executive development and recruiting organization, and the project director who had led SMSG's leadership development accepted the role of global director of high potential leadership development for Microsoft. As the new full-time team was assembled, they assumed more and more of the responsibilities once held by the volunteers. However, allocating the ongoing responsibilities of the project team and understanding the primary team roles that were required enabled the team to divide and conquer

as the change was phased in over a two-year period. In the first year of the MS Bench experience, high potentials in the sales and engineering groups participated together everywhere in the world except in the Americas, where sales and engineering high potentials experienced the same development components, but separately. Prior to this launch, engineers had participated in very separate and different high potential development experiences based on their lines of business. The organization thought that bringing the engineers together and also including the sales professionals would be too great of a change to be accepted at one time. Thus, separating them was determined to be the best approach in the first year. This provided two benefits. First, testing the full integration of the sales and engineering professions was possible with smaller audiences internationally, which enabled the team to work out kinks. Second, it provided the opportunity to integrate the engineering professions from differing business units prior to delivering a more fully integrated experience.

In order to deliver MS Bench on the global scale required, partnership with external organizations was critical. As the design and implementation plans were finalized, Microsoft began a search for partners who could lend additional subject matter expertise for some of the key components. Vendor management became a critical aspect of ensuring a globally consistent experience.

Establishing Resources

Be prepared for the difficult political conversations when introducing a large change, and know why the current situation exists and what purpose it serves.

As the detailed designs were crafted, the project directors planned/designed the infrastructure and budget required to support the experience globally. The 80/20 design principle led to a structure that was largely centralized, allowing for only 20 percent of development activities to happen in a decentralized

manner within the business units themselves. The centralized portions would be owned and delivered by a centralized team of full-time staff dedicated to high potential development, whereas the remaining activities would be owned inside the business units. This was a significant change from the prior structure in which only one FTE, the director of high potential talent, was dedicated to high potential talent at a corporate level. Other corporate FTEs were responsible for high potential development, but none worked exclusively on it. In contrast, some business units such as SMSG had dedicated FTEs who worked exclusively for their business units. The proposed structure meant that a reallocation of headcount would be required across the organization and that business units would be encouraged to transfer headcount to the corporate organization, also known as "The Center." In most change management initiatives, headcount transfer is a political "hot potato," since transferring headcount can be seen as a loss of resources and associated power, and Microsoft was not an exception.

In addition to headcount transfer, the project directors were tasked with not increasing the overall headcount or budget for the organization. They were required to work with the resources that currently existed. Thus, adding headcount or budget to pay for the experience were not options. The current environment saw a wide range of funding for high potential development activities, ranging from $832 to $10,385 per participant. A "core and common" experience required a shared understanding of and agreement for funding by audience. The project directors had to develop a new model in which each organization paid its fair share to The Center for each high potential in the program.

While increasing overall resources was not an option, moving resources was. Persuading business units to transfer headcount and budgets to fund the experience was time-consuming. None of the thirteen programs was resourced in quite the same way, and it was important to understand the rationale for their differences. Compelling arguments were made to demonstrate the need for the transfers, and understanding the details of each of the thirteen program budgets was important to establishing credibility and eventually parity. Some organizations did not have to transfer all of their resources because their prior resources

exceeded the needs of the newly integrated program; while others transferred their entire budgets for high potential development and more to achieve parity with the rest of the organization.

Project Outcomes

The new program was officially launched in July 2010, but was not overly apparent to participants until October 2010, when orientation workshops began. In the preceding months, high potential leaders were identified and selected to participate in the experience, received formal invitations to participate, and participated in briefing meetings to prepare for the new experience. The project team received several internal awards for Excellence in Collaboration, Excellence in Teamwork, and Excellence in Management. Officially in its third year, the program has been recognized as a best practice by professional associations.

Challenges Inherent in Each Phase of the Project

Managing to Milestones

> Establish milestones and stick to them. If you can't, know how much cushion you have to ensure that you don't impact the final deliverable date.

A complex project of this nature requires thoughtful attention to detail and a way to ensure that all of the pieces come together appropriately. To ensure a successful launch, milestones had to be met (refer to Table 2.1 for high-level milestones). In fact, for a short period of time, the team operated without formal approval for the program, organization structure, and budget, simply because they could not delay critical pieces of the implementation. Between February and April 2010, the project team chose to act "as if" they had received approval in order to keep the project on track and meet the milestones. They moved forward with building communication materials for business leaders, writing

content for learning materials, securing venues, and contracting facilitators and coaches for fall 2010 delivery. Although it was risky, the project team felt the potential benefits of keeping the project on track for implementing the change outweighed the risks. Furthermore, the additional two months provided the project directors needed time to bring key stakeholders on board. Being able to fully articulate the new HiPo experience structure and the benefits it provided to the organization was important in securing commitment.

In addition to building commitment, the project directors were ultimately responsible for meeting milestones and keeping the project on track. The project directors created management routines and structures that enabled them to minimize risks and keep the project on track. For example, they met weekly at a minimum, and daily as the project progressed. Located in Fairfax, Virginia, and Redmond, Washington, the directors demonstrated flexibility in working within each other's timeframes and leveraged the best of Microsoft's technology to support virtual work. The ability to "whiteboard" ideas online by "sharing" their desktops virtually was fundamental to their daily partnership. In real time, they could review each other's ideas, collaborate on meeting agendas, and build communication approaches and PowerPoint presentations together! They could quickly "touch base" to update each other on stakeholder meetings, which they routinely held separately in order to cover more ground.

Also, they met with the subteams on a regular basis. Understanding the deliverable dates associated with each milestone, each subteam set its own schedule for completing its work virtually. They were responsible for communicating their independent schedules to the project directors, who held regular meetings with each one and arranged deliverable reviews prior to the key milestone dates to ensure that each team stayed on task and could meet the dates.

Project subteams weren't the only organizing bodies associated with the project. Central to designing and implementing the Microsoft Bench experience was a diverse group of professionals who enabled the change to take place. The team structures evolved over time. The initial structure included a group of individuals from across the business who could represent their

business units' high potential development needs, but it quickly evolved to include other groups with different purposes.

HiPo Alignment Project Team

Initially, the project team consisted of fifteen organization development, leadership development, and business professionals who shared a passion for high potential development and contributed to the overall design and development of the HiPo experience. However, by December 2009, it expanded to more than twenty members, who represented different segments, sectors, functions, and geographies. In addition to face-to-face meetings aligned with key deliverable dates, the team met at least monthly on a virtual basis. To ensure that everyone could participate globally, meetings were held at 6 a.m. Pacific time, which ensured that those participating in Tokyo could also be on the call at 10 p.m. during the same business day. Working with the time zone differences was important to ensure consistent understanding and promote collaboration. The project team had many tasks to complete prior to implementation, and "reinventing the wheel" or redundant work wasted precious time. Making sure that everyone had a shared understanding of the project status was critical for moving the project along at a rapid pace.

Extended HiPo Team

By implementation, this group was close to fifty professionals who were directly involved in executing the new Microsoft Bench globally. In fact, it was so large that the new global director of high potential leadership development held two calls on the same day once per month to accommodate the multiple time zones and to manage the discussion. Again, the monthly calls were beneficial in ensuring consistent communication in a timely manner on a global basis.

Microsoft Bench Program Management Team

A group of six full-time leadership development consultants responsible for the global Microsoft HiPo strategy and experience acted as the primary thought leaders for the development components. The team met once per year face-to-face in early

February and virtually as needed ongoing. Individual members of the team met with the global director on a weekly basis.

> Establish management routines and structures that ensure your ability to successfully meet your milestone dates and address contingencies in the event that problems arise. Bottom line, if you meet your milestone dates, you meet your final deliverable date!

Microsoft Bench Execution Excellence Team

A group of six international program managers and the six Microsoft bench program management team members ensured consistent execution of Microsoft Bench in the thirteen areas worldwide. They met once monthly at a minimum via conference call and once annually face-to-face in June (location to rotate). They met virtually and frequently during the pre-launch period (August through September).

Working with Volunteers

As indicated earlier, the project directors relied heavily on a small "army of volunteers," individuals who volunteered their time to the project beyond their regular, full-time day jobs. The project directors understood that they had to engage not only their minds and time, but also their hearts. The project directors understood that it was important to meet the unique needs of each volunteer; otherwise, it would become difficult to maintain their interest, commitment, and energy over the long term.

Because of the grassroots nature of the integration project, it was initially easy to identify individuals who had a vested interest in making the integration work within their business groups. However, some volunteers were recruited because of their specific areas of expertise, even though they had not been part of the grassroots effort. In all cases, it was important for the project directors to personally get to know the volunteers. Understanding their career aspirations, core strengths and expertise, and skills that they hoped to develop through the project was important to

maintaining their interest. Beyond that, it was important to help the volunteers feel that they were a part of something bigger than themselves that would be benefit the company long term. They had the opportunity to be a part of building a new legacy for how Microsoft would develop leaders over time. Finally, the project directors were conscious of rewarding hard work by sponsoring team members for organizational recognition programs and monetary benefits, as well as providing symbolic rewards, such as the "red baton" that recognized excellence in collaboration within the team. The project directors also sponsored team morale events at locations that appealed to the team to lift their spirits and maintain momentum. Ultimately, the project directors had to be flexible with the volunteers, respect their day jobs, learn what motivated them, and figure out ways that the project met their individual needs. In addition, they worked continually to eliminate barriers for the volunteers as much as possible. After all, they were volunteering!

Virtual Management

The HiPo Alignment project was unique in that the entire team was managed virtually. Although several members of the project team were based in Redmond, Washington, many were not. No one reported to one of the project directors, and only a few reported to the other one. This created additional complexity because it was impossible to walk down the hall and "pop in" on a team member to see how things were going and know whether other projects were taking priority. In fact, only one of the project directors was based in corporate headquarters in Redmond! The other project director, who later accepted the global director position, managed the project from her virtual home office in Fairfax, Virginia.

Virtual management does require more attention to detail and better communication, and it shouldn't prevent anyone from embarking on a project of this scale and complexity. Leveraging the best technologies enables team members to work together virtually in real time and in a meaningful way. Thinking of creative ways to include everyone in meetings, such as scheduling conference calls outside of normal work hours so that all team members

can be present, goes a long way in building collaboration among team members. As long as such calls are not overused to the point of abuse, most team members will appreciate the opportunity to participate with everyone involved.

Global Considerations

Global diversity led to greater creativity among the team as it worked to solve problems. Special accommodation of time zone differences was required, but team members enjoyed the opportunity to be a part of something that impacted the larger organization. It was rare for them to have that type of opportunity within their own business units. The project directors leveraged the fact that global work, although adding complexity, is often viewed as a benefit by professionals who are interested in career advancement.

Global diversity also enabled the team to surface cultural differences that had to be accommodated in many different countries. While the team always did their best to make the development experience work for all, it was anticipated that approximately 5 to 10 percent of the program might vary slightly by country, based on cultural differences. When differences surfaced, they were brought to the attention of the project directors, and later the global director, and special accommodation was made when it seemed necessary.

Outsourcing

It's important to define what is most important to the project. Hold onto the pieces that provide a strategic competitive advantage and outsource, when possible, aspects that are not as critical. Design and development of the program, the development components, and much of the workshop content were considered the most strategic aspects of the projects and were managed internally. However, as the project moved to the implementation phase, it was clear that much of the delivery would need to be outsourced. A team of fifty volunteer resources would not be adequate to deliver a complex development program consistently around the world to more than 3,600 high potentials.

The team worked carefully to identify the best resources to deliver coaching, learning circles, action learning projects, and workshop content globally. Once identified, both in-person and virtual meetings were held with the more than 250 vendors to educate them about Microsoft, its culture, the purpose of the high potential development experience, and how the development component was expected to be executed. As the program was launched and feedback was received, it was shared with the vendors, through email and virtual meetings, and adjustments were made to continually improve the program experience.

Points to Remember

- An important aspect of working with an "army of volunteers" is to meet their unique needs; otherwise it becomes difficult to maintain their interest, commitment, and energy over the long term.
- Leveraging internal change management and project management expertise improves the project's chance of successful implementation.
- Current state analysis includes a comprehensive review of all activities and supporting infrastructure, as well as internal and external best practices.
- For any change to occur, three factors must be at play: dissatisfaction with the current state, a vision for the future, and a clear understanding of the first steps to achieve the vision ($D \times V \times F > R$).
- Take the time to understand the principles of creating a great shared vision before actually creating one. The process creates intimacy in the group and a stronger commitment to achieving the vision itself.
- Understanding and leveraging the cultural drivers in an organization leads to greater stakeholder buy-in and high probability of success.
- Projects fail when communication fails. If your team has done all of the right things, but the project isn't implemented, look first to your communication strategy.
- Know your stakeholders and use chains of influence to help bring blockers on board.

- Surface potential barriers as soon as possible in order to address and eliminate them with impacted stakeholders before they become widely known. One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.
- Selling 101: Never go into an important meeting with the intention of persuading people to adopt your recommendations without knowing what everyone in the room already thinks about them.
- For significant changes, consider phasing in the change over a period of time.
- Be prepared for the difficult political conversations when introducing a large change, and know why the current situation exists and what purpose it serves.
- Establish milestones and manage to them. If you can't, know how much cushion you have to ensure that you don't impact the final deliverable date.
- Establish management routines and structures that ensure your ability to successfully meet your milestone dates and address contingencies in the event that problems arise. Bottom line: if you meet your milestone dates, you meet your final deliverable date!

Conclusion

Project management for large-scale projects is often related to change projects. Microsoft's eighteen-month journey to integrate thirteen separate high potential leadership development programs across the company was complex but feasible, as most large projects are. Paying special attention to transition management activities such as stakeholder assessment and communication, in addition to more traditional project management approaches, ensures success.

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Appendix: Stakeholder Map Instructions

Purpose: To map stakeholders according to estimated power and influence and likely interest in change.

You may have a long list of people and organizations that are affected by your work. Some of these may have the power either to block or advance it. Some may be interested in what you are doing, others may not care. Map out your stakeholders on a Power/Interest Grid as shown in Figure 2.1, and classify them by their power over your work and by their interest in your work.

Instructions

1. *Identify stakeholders:* Stakeholders include anyone in a decision-making or management role who is impacted by the project outcome. Label each stakeholder with a short name or number.
2. *Plot location of stakeholder:* Locate each stakeholder on the map according to degree of power and influence and interest in change.
3. *Indicate stakeholder perspective:* Draw one of the following symbols around each stakeholder to indicate the perspective the stakeholder holds with respect to the change:
   - Green Rectangle = Champions, stakeholders who enthusiastically embrace the change and can act as advocates
   - Blue Rectangle = Followers, stakeholders who are relatively neutral about the change
   - Red Oval = Blockers, stakeholders who do not embrace the change and may actively work to block the change
4. *Indicate necessity of stakeholder support:*
   - Triple the line around each stakeholder whose support is necessary.
   - Double the line around each stakeholder whose support is desirable.
   - Leave single the line around each stakeholder whose support is unnecessary.

Someone's position on the grid indicates the potential actions you should consider:

- *High Power, High Interest:* stakeholders you must fully engage with and make the greatest efforts to satisfy. Think about how to best leverage the Champions to work with the Blockers.
- *High Power, Low Interest:* put enough work in with these stakeholders to keep them satisfied, but not so much that they become bored with your message. Regular status updates may be sufficient.
- *Low Power, High Interest:* keep these stakeholders adequately informed, and talk to them to ensure that no major issues are arising. They can often be very helpful with the details of your project and thinking through strategies to engage employees as you bring implementation.
- *Low Power, Low Interest:* again, monitor these stakeholders, but do not bore them with excessive communication.

You now need to understand your key stakeholders. You need to know how they are likely to feel about and react to your project, how best to engage them in your project, and how best to communicate with them.

Questions to Ask to Understand Your Stakeholders

Reaction to Change
1. What financial or emotional interest do they have in the outcome of your work? Is it positive or negative?
2. What is their current opinion of your work? Is it based on good information?
3. If they are not likely to be positive, what will win them around to support your project?
4. Who else might be influenced by their opinions? Do these people become stakeholders in their own right?

Engagement
1. What motivates your stakeholders most of all?
2. Who influences their opinions generally, and who influences their opinions of you? Do some of these influencers therefore become important stakeholders in their own right?
3. How can you leverage influencers who are Champions to overcome the obstacles surfaced by the Blockers?

4. If you don't think you will be able to win them over, how will you manage their opposition?

Communication
1. What information do they want from you?
2. How often do they require information from you?
3. How do they want to receive information from you? What is the best way of communicating your message to them?

Litigation-Driven Human Resource Management Changes

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Background

Large-scale, high-stakes human capital projects that are developed under the purview of the judicial system present several unique project management challenges. Typically, these scenarios involve several additional interested parties (e.g., the court, plaintiffs, and defendants) and can be riddled with feelings of resentment, distrust, and apprehension. In addition, given the catalyst for these types of efforts, the project is often held to exceptionally

Note: The authors were involved first-hand in this initiative in the following capacities. Michelle Davis King, Esq., was the agency's legal representative while the case was in litigation and during the negotiation of the settlement agreement. She then oversaw the agency's implementation of the agreement and ultimately ran the agency's promotion assessment center for a number of years. Dr. Suzanne Tsacoumis served as the project manager overseeing this initiative for the contractor. She supervised all contractor employees working on the project, and she served as the contractor liaison to the oversight committee.