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## DEVELOPING THE GLOBAL LEADERS OF TOMORROW

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**Jill Conner**

*To achieve aggressive growth goals, many global companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of developing leadership talent—those individuals who demonstrate the ability to become the company's future senior executives. This article focuses on the efforts of one \$8 billion consumer products company that has proven itself a leader in global leadership development. It describes how the company is developing its leaders around the world. In-depth observations were made over a period of several years, during which time the author served as both an inside participant in the decision making process and an outside observer of the company's progress.*

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### **The Need to Develop Future Global Leaders**

In the early 1990s, the senior leadership team of a *Fortune* 200 global consumer products company began to question whether the management pipeline that had always delivered the company's new executives would have the breadth to support the planned global expansion. While the company's current general manager (GM) population was about 60 people, estimates predicted that 30 to 35 new general managers would be needed between 1996 and 2000 to run operating units around the world. A key operating position, the general manager is responsible for all aspects of a geographic unit including such functions as marketing, sales, finance, human resources, and manufacturing. Each GM, together with a team of functional executives, is responsible for a specific business unit.

Although the number of people required to fill these positions may not have seemed too high, there was serious concern that the company might face a shortage of people who had the required skills and capabilities and who were willing to move to accept these important operating positions. If this shortage were to happen, it could put the company at a disadvantage in the global marketplace.

Driving the need for new global leaders were a number of factors. In the last five years, the company opened 25 new locations in developing markets such as Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. The current pool of general managers was aging, and almost a third were close to retirement age. Promotions and transfers had also created several vacancies.

Additionally, there were some current realities that the company needed to face in attracting and keeping its talent. First, there was the issue of dual career families. Increasingly,

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managers were not greeting the prospect of international assignments with as much enthusiasm. More and more, a manager's reluctance to relocate was related to the needs of a dual career family.

Second, it was increasingly difficult to find people willing to move to high growth markets. Generally, these assignments were in less attractive locations such as Nigeria, Ukraine, and Vietnam. While in the past, few managers declined the opportunity to move to new assignments in other countries, high potential managers were increasingly reluctant to move to less developed areas. If this were not enough, the managers who were willing to relocate were increasingly sought out by competitors who lacked their own pools of experienced international leadership talent.

Finally, the skills and knowledge needed were changing. Accelerating globalization, emerging technology, and intense competition were requiring global leaders with skills and knowledge that were not required or developed in even the recent past. Consequently, many of the potential people for these new assignments did not have the required skills and experience.

These internal and external pressures convinced the senior leadership team to rethink how the company was going to continue growing its pool of global leaders. In early 1995, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) challenged the head of human resources to address the company's future leadership development needs.

### **Developing the Leadership Development Strategy**

Preliminary groundwork had to be laid before developing a strategy to identify and develop the next generation of global leaders. Specifically, the senior executives needed to identify and understand the leadership development issues that might potentially enhance or be barriers to the company's growth. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 senior managers to better understand the global leadership development challenges facing the company. The interviewees included the presidents of the operating divisions, the heads of the corpo-

rate functions, and key general managers located around the world. The interviews were structured around three important questions:

- (1) What are the experiences that will best prepare people for senior management positions?
- (2) What skills and behaviors are needed to be successful in a global company?
- (3) Is the current practice of leadership development working well, and how can it be changed to make it more effective?

The interviews revealed that there was broad agreement that the process of developing talented people had become increasingly complex and that the company needed a more structured approach. Those interviewed believed that the company had to develop a systematic way of identifying high potential managers and proactively planning career moves early on. They agreed that significant responsibilities early in a manager's career and a variety of assignments in different geographic locations were the best preparation for senior global leadership positions. The senior executives also agreed that they themselves must be more willing to take risks when they select people for positions. This meant identifying talented people earlier in their careers and planning "stretch" assignments for them.

Finally, those interviewed indicated a need to broaden the company's external sources for hiring. The executives thought that there was an over-reliance on the marketing department and expatriates as sources of future leaders. They did not want to overlook other sources of internal talent in other areas such as finance, manufacturing, and sales. They also agreed that for key positions outside the United States the company should be willing to recruit local high potential people and develop them for future assignments in other countries.

The one-on-one interviews with the senior executives not only provide practical information and insights on leadership development practice and philosophy, but also gave the interviewees the opportunity to describe a profile of the skills and capabilities needed by leaders working in a global company. Thus,

from the interviews, here are the skills and capabilities of global leaders.

#### *Global Leaders Have Business Savvy*

Global leaders are results driven, and they achieve outstanding business results. Because business problems have become complex, global leaders have a broader view of the business and the world. They have an extensive knowledge of the business including sales, marketing, finance, manufacturing, and other areas. This knowledge supports their decision making. Given that a major challenge is dealing with constant change, global leaders adapt well to new situations, new cultures, and new bosses.

#### *Global Leaders Know How to Use Their Personal Influence*

They know how to tap into and leverage corporate resources including formal and informal networks. Given the need to work together to solve business problems, they know how to use teams. Global leaders know how to work well with others, and they have strong influencing skills. Their communication skills are excellent, extending upward, downward, and laterally. As a result, they use these skills to ensure that people understand and support where the business is headed.

#### *Global Leaders Bring a Global Perspective*

Technology has made the world smaller for large companies so global leaders have a global perspective and understand the global marketplace. They have a high degree of cultural sensitivity. For instance, when they move to a new country, they make a serious effort to fit in and respect the culture. They are eager to learn the language.

#### *Global Leaders Have Strong Character*

They talk about vision, purpose, and values with clarity. They can be counted on to do what is right. Should they be pushed to do something they oppose, they aren't reluctant to resist. They understand that there are changing employee expectations. They inspire trust in

others, and they value and respect the differences each person brings to the workplace. Global leaders with strong character meet commitments, act consistent with their words, and are interested in the well being of others. They use their power and influence to benefit the organization rather than for personal gain.

#### *Global Leaders Know How to Motivate People*

They understand that employees want direction from above, and they want opportunities for growth and development. Global leaders lead in a way that inspires and motivates. They have vision, and they communicate a clear sense of direction. They are role models for others. They know how to build and lead their teams. They are comfortable with conflict and they know how to constructively deal with conflict among their people.

#### *Global Leaders Act Like Entrepreneurs*

They understand that international competition is challenging companies to act faster and smarter. Because customers and consumers are demanding quality, lower prices, and speed, global leaders put greater emphasis on new product development, standardization of business processes, and speed to market. They are creative individuals who encourage others to be innovators. They challenge the status quo, and they take risks. Because they seek results, they have become skilled at overcoming obstacles. They also have a sense of urgency that inspires them to take initiative and to do things fast. Most important, they are self-starters committed to their work.

Based on the findings of the interviews, the next step was to design a leadership development strategy that would address the concerns raised by the senior executives. This strategy is described in the next section.

### **The Global Leadership Development Strategy**

The global leadership development strategy had to be a strategy that would fit the company's culture and would require the involvement and commitment of senior manage-

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ment (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Beer, 1991; Nadler & Tushman, 1983). Several authors emphasize the importance of developing people through work experience (Baird, Briscoe, Tuden, & Rosansky, 1991; McCall, 1992; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Research also shows that people strengthen their leadership skills by being exposed to different bosses with different styles (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Finally, research shows that as much as 50 percent of learning takes place through work experience; 30 percent through interpersonal relationships with bosses, peers, subordinates, and professional contacts; and 20 percent through formal education and training (Dodge, 1993). Steve Kerr, the Director of General Electric's Crotonville School, confirms this in his own research where he notes that the majority of significant learning experiences occurs on the job and not from formal training (Sherman, 1995).

Given the research and the findings from the interviews, it became apparent that the overall goal must be to have a more proactive approach to developing global leaders. As a result, the global leadership development strategy focused on two areas. These areas were the most urgent major thrusts where the company would focus its energy and resources over the next several years.

The first area of focus was to identify potential global leaders earlier in their careers and to give them significant responsibilities. Given the importance of developing people through work experience, the senior executives agreed to focus initially on developing future global leaders through work experience. While many companies shape their leadership development strategy around strong education initiatives, these executives shared a tacit assumption that to be successful, managers needed to understand how the company really operated.

The second area of focus was to use multiple approaches for developing global leadership skills and capabilities. These approaches included such activities as executive coaching, 360 feedback, and internal and external education. It also meant exposure to the business and senior executives by participating in senior level meetings.

To achieve results in these two areas, an integrated action plan that supported the broader global leadership development strategy was recommended by human resources and accepted by the presidents of the operating divisions, the heads of the corporate functions, the Chief Operating Officer (COO), and the CEO. The recommendations put focus and resources on five priorities: (1) global high potential program, (2) executive staffing, (3) succession planning, (4) education and feedback, and (5) line management ownership. The next five sections explain each of these initiatives in greater detail.

### *Global High Potential Program*

One of the most important initiatives put in place was a structured approach for identifying and developing high potentials around the world. There were four important factors to this approach:

- Identify people who show the potential to advance
- Plan and implement career moves early on
- Communicate openly with people about their careers
- Support competitive pay practices

For all executives, identifying people with potential to advance early in the individuals' careers became a top priority. In addition, executives were committed to bringing high potential people to the attention of senior management. Operating units around the world were asked to conduct an annual people review to identify those with the potential to move into general manager positions or senior functional roles in an operating unit (e.g., head of subsidiary marketing, finance, manufacturing, or division staff) within the next five years. A process for selecting individuals to be part of a global pool for high potential people was also established. This was done by the corporate staff who sent a request to each operating division and asked for the names of the individuals who had the potential to be general managers, marketing directors, or sales directors in the next five years. Because the manufacturing and finance organizations con-

ducted their own identification processes, those individuals were not part of this corporate process. In order to identify people early in their careers, a minimum number of junior people were included in the global talent pools.

Since the idea of proactively developing global leaders was a new one, the criteria for selection to the global talent pool were broad. First, the individual was viewed as having potential to be promoted to a general manager or senior functional role within five years. Second, s/he was willing to accept either a two to three year rotational assignment outside his/her geographic division, or preferably, a permanent international career outside the home country. Third, the individual achieved exceptional results during the last two to five years. Finally, s/he demonstrated the ability to learn and develop the skills and capabilities necessary to excel in a senior global leadership position.

Although the senior executives had identified the skills and capabilities of a global leader, they were not used as part of the selection process when the global high potential program rolled out. They decided that the leadership profile was most useful as a blueprint for the skills and capabilities the company wanted to develop in global leaders. Although there was a temptation to use the leadership profile as criteria for selecting the pool of global high potentials, research and discussion persuaded the senior executives that the most critical qualification is the ability to learn from work experience. If learners are given the right experiences, they will develop the capabilities valued by the company's senior executives (McCall, 1992). Eventually, the leadership profile was used to determine development decisions for the global high potential pool. This was accomplished by integrating the skills and capabilities into the succession planning system and a newly developed 360 feedback process. These initiatives are explained further later in this section.

The second factor important to the global high potential program was planning and implementing career moves early on. It was believed that this would give the organization the opportunity to provide the broad-based business experiences individuals needed later in their careers. The focus was on planning

the next two work experiences that would best prepare an individual to move ahead in the business. The presidents and the heads of the corporate functions were asked to expand their monthly meeting by adding a leadership development discussion focused solely on identifying the next two assignments for future general managers. Since the positive impact of this work was apparent, a forum of senior marketing executives was established the following year to monitor the careers of future marketing directors and recommend next assignments for these high potential people.

A greater focus was put on risk taking. Occasionally, general managers resisted moving high potential people or accepting them into opened positions. The COO and the vice president of human resources played an active and visible role in making sure that "stretch" assignments were available for the global pool.

Efforts were also made to include a cross-functional approach in the global high potential program. Since marketing was the primary source of future general managers, the objective was to identify one to two global high potentials in areas other than marketing and move them to product management assignments. While a few placements were made, much more work needed to be done to get the "buy-in" of the senior executives.

The third factor important to the high potential program was communicating openly with people about their career. As the leadership development initiative was put in place, another corporate effort was underway to put in place a global approach to development planning. Each individual in the global high potential program was expected to prepare an annual development plan with his/her manager. The individual development plan (IDP) had five sections:

1. Your strongest competencies
2. Competencies you need to develop
3. Personal development actions planned and completed
4. Short-term and long-term career options
5. Your willingness to relocate

Supervisors of people in the global talent pools were requested to use the IDP for an

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annual discussion. Also, the division human resource directors conducted individual career discussions with the global high potentials in their various countries. It was very important for the human resource directors to get to know these people, their personal situations, and their aspirations so that staffing decisions would be aligned with their interests and needs. Finally, the vice president of human resources periodically met with selected high potentials as he visited operating units around the world.

Finally, the company supported competitive pay practices as part of the global high potential program. Based on research that showed that having competitive compensation packages was one of few human resource practices associated with higher company performance (Martell & Carroll, 1995), base salaries for people in the global talent pools were targeted at the industry's 75<sup>th</sup> percentile. This was higher than the company standard of 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for base compensation. Also, a retention bonus was used to encourage high potentials to take assignments in less developed areas and to make sure that individuals were not attracted to competitive offers. This retention bonus was a percentage of base salary paid out after a specified period of time in the assignment location.

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#### *Executive Staffing*

Pucik (1997) points out that the critical building block for the development of global leadership skills is to move internationally. The executive staffing process made it common to move people around the world. Each month, the top senior executives met to discuss key operating jobs opened around the world. They used this meeting to discuss key individuals and potential moves and to actually reach agreement and implement decisions. When a general management or senior functional position became open, human resource personnel prepared a candidate list for review by the senior executives. We were able to make sure high potentials were considered for openings that matched their recommended next assignment.

Generally, 80% of the executive openings were filled with people moving from one country to another country. Between 1996 and 1998, over 235 people changed countries and moved to new executive assignments. All international moves totaled about 500 for the same period, and executive moves represented 55 percent of these assignments. Considerable progress was made to meet the need for 30 to 35 new general managers between 1996 and 2000. Between 1996 and 1998, 28 people moved internationally to become new general managers.

#### *Succession Planning*

Another important initiative that supported the proactive approach to developing global leaders was succession planning. In the past, succession planning was an annual review with the CEO of the top 150 to 200 senior managers. The CEO would conduct discussions as part of his monthly staff meeting. Specifically, the focus was on identifying the strengths and development needs, making staffing decisions, and determining feedback and education activities to improve an individual's leadership skills. Generally, an individual was assigned an executive coach or sent to the Center for Creative Leadership if leadership skills needed attention.

With the increased focus on identifying people early in their careers, changes were made in the succession planning process so that greater attention was given to the high potentials during the CEO's monthly staff meeting. Instead of reviewing all senior executives, each operating unit president talked about only new senior executives, individuals needing a transfer, individuals with a performance problem, or senior executives having the potential to advance further. These changes left time for discussion of select individuals that were part of the global high potential program.

To assist in succession planning, a global database for the top 2,500 jobs was designed and implemented around the world. To establish and manage the database, human resource professionals in 50 operating units were trained by the succession planning specialist in corporate human resources. Each op-

erating unit had the responsibility of entering the data concerning its top three to four levels of management. The succession planning system was used to produce a consistent, one page individual profile for discussion purposes. The profile was used in the monthly succession planning discussion with the CEO, the high potential discussions with senior executives, and an annual board presentation on high potential general managers.

Data on the profile included such things as age, time with company, nationality, languages, willingness to relocate, strengths, development needs, work history, education, next two assignments, personal development actions planned, and potential successors. The individual's strengths and development needs were determined using a standard list of skills and capabilities. These were the ones identified by the senior executives, and they were incorporated into the succession planning system.

#### *Education and Feedback*

Although initially a priority was put on giving people the work experience they needed to prepare them for senior global leadership assignments, over time a greater emphasis was given to using other tools such as education and feedback to develop leadership skills of the future global leaders. A goal alignment work session and formal feedback on leadership effectiveness were two approaches used.

*Goal Alignment.* First, a goal alignment work session was created to give people currently in senior leadership roles the opportunity to improve their leadership skills. The education and training department created the goal alignment work session to help each general manager pull his/her operating team together and align departmental and functional goals and resources. The purpose of the work session was to help general managers bring focus and structure to the operating team's business planning. This work on business planning helped to strengthen general managers' skills in building and leading their teams and enabled them to provide direction more effectively.

Facilitated by a senior executive from the training department, the general manager worked with his/her senior managers to identify strategic goals and priorities during a one day work session. Teamwork and alignment were achieved by working together to agree upon and align the most important areas of focus and priorities for the organization. Roles and responsibilities as well as specific deliverables were agreed upon, and a plan was created to monitor progress and to communicate what was important to the rest of the organization.

*Formal Feedback.* Second, a greater effort was made to use formal feedback tools more effectively. There were two concerns. High potential individuals needed and wanted more specific feedback for their continued development. Also, more input was needed from multiple sources on strengths and development needs. As a result, a customized survey, *The Leadership Profile*, was created by the human resource corporate staff and an external consulting company to provide feedback on strengths and development needs from the supervisor, peers, and direct reports. Areas covered in the survey were leadership and management skills and behaviors, functional/technical expertise, and company values. The leadership and management skills and capabilities were based on the key characteristics of future global leaders identified by the senior executives during their one-on-one interviews.

The survey helped in four ways. First, it provided information to improve the quality of development. Second, it gave better feedback about strengths and development needs. Third, it enabled supervisors to focus on specific and objective feedback. Finally, it gave the company a more objective view of the individual.

Human resource professionals around the world were certified by the consulting company to use the survey and conduct feedback review and coaching sessions with participants. A priority was made by the head of human resources for the company to have all global high potentials use *The Leadership Profile*.

#### *Line Management Ownership*

The final area of work important to a more proactive approach to developing global leaders was making sure that every senior execu-

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tive and general manager around the world personally accepted responsibility for developing global leaders. The preparation of future leaders is a responsibility that must be shared between line managers and human resources. The line managers are in the best position to identify future leaders, get them ready, and move them up in the business. As a result, there were three important steps taken to make sure that senior executives and general managers understood their role and that they committed to investing their personal time and energy.

First, a booklet was created to help provide a consistent understanding of the strategic importance of managing high potentials and developing global leaders. It also communicated the importance of the line managers' role in developing their people by supporting their career goals and exposing them to experiences and opportunities that prepare them for increased responsibility. It provided many practical ways to show high potentials that they are valued and that opportunities lie ahead for them (see Table I).

Second, openings for key operating positions were communicated around the world. Each month a list of open positions was sent by electronic mail to general managers in every operating unit. As a result, general managers were informed as to what positions were open and where the open positions were, and therefore, they were better able to talk about careers with their potential global leaders.

Finally, important large subsidiaries were visited so senior management could talk to human resources senior management about the challenges involved in identifying and managing the global high potentials. The discussions were structured around four key questions:

- What are effective ways to get people known by senior management?
- How do you make sure people get the right assignments and move when they need to?
- What are the biggest barriers to retaining people?
- What would you improve regarding the ability to move people ahead?

### Lessons for Developing Global Leaders

Based on the first two years of efforts of this company, the following observations should be considered regarding the implementation of a global leadership development strategy.

- Put a priority on work experience. Consistent with the research that individuals develop best through work experience, this was an effective approach to getting the attention and buy-in of the senior executives when the global high potential program was first rolled out.
- Align leadership development practices. The leadership development strategy is most effective when it is aligned with other human resource practices. For example, the leadership profile—a summary of the skills and capabilities of a global leader valued by the senior executives—was used in succession planning and 360 feedback. Also, it was very effective to group executive staffing and the high potential program in the same organization. Staffing decisions could be made consistent with agreements for next assignments for the global high potentials.
- Mechanisms must be designed for following up on development plans. While emphasis was made on getting people to prepare and discuss development plans, more work is needed to put in place mechanisms to track decisions, career moves, and other development activities.
- The full value of the leadership development strategy will be realized when senior executives and general managers take ownership of the global high potential program. Initially, there was some resistance by the top senior executives to work together to monitor the careers of the prospective general managers. Fortunately they soon began to see the value of talking about people and planning next assignments for high potentials. Also, every opportunity was seized to



**TABLE I** Practical Actions Managers Can Take in Developing Leaders.

Area of Responsibility	Practical Actions
<b>Get personally involved</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get to know talent on a personal level so better matches can be made to critical job openings</li> <li>• Learn about individuals' personal situations and what it will take for them to move</li> <li>• Through programs such as stock options and special bonus programs, it is important to let people know their contributions are recognized and appreciated</li> <li>• Ensure that talented people are provided challenging, well paid jobs that compete with those in the market</li> </ul>
<b>Provide career planning support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have frequent informal conversations as well as formal career planning discussions to better understand people's aspirations</li> <li>• Work together with human resources to recommend the next two moves planned for the individual so that he/she can picture his/her career path</li> <li>• Talk to executives and HR about the people who need to move and are retention risks</li> <li>• Make sure that high potentials meet with executives during visits or arrange for people to visit corporate headquarters</li> </ul>
<b>Communicate with your most promising talent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell people on a regular basis that they can expect a promising and rewarding future at the company</li> <li>• Provide a big picture perspective about opportunities and the skills needed by the business</li> <li>• Give specific feedback to people on what they need to do to be more effective</li> </ul>
<b>Use a variety of learning experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer people with potential more exposure than normal—include them in senior level meetings and presentations</li> <li>• Challenge people with job opportunities that really stretch their skills</li> <li>• Set up a mentor program that puts people with potential in contact with senior executives who they can look to for guidance and support</li> <li>• Provide people with broad-based business experience by selecting them for temporary project teams or task forces, and providing short-term assignments</li> <li>• Provide special executive training opportunities such as professional conferences or seminars at top business schools</li> <li>• Support relevant internal leadership and functional training</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for formal feedback on leadership skills</li> </ul>

build visible support for developing global leaders. For example, steps were taken to add a presentation on leadership development at meetings of general managers or other senior managers. Also, the succession planning system was demonstrated to the senior executives to show the type of data and reports they could get from the system. While early efforts zeroed in on gaining the support of the company's most senior executives, the program's long-term effectiveness will require the support and active participation of general managers around the world. Although steps have been taken to educate and involve this important group, more efforts are needed.

- Make sure senior managers understand how development information is used. Human resource personnel made numerous requests to the operating units around the world for individual development plans and succession planning profiles. It was clear that senior managers did not always understand how the information was used in succession planning and in the high potential discussions. This lack of understanding seemed to diminish their lack of support for preparing development plans and their willingness to provide timely and accurate information.
- People need to understand how they are viewed and what and when is their next assignment. To keep high potential people, it is important that they know the senior managers are paying attention to them. Feedback from high potential people leaving the company indicated that people were unaware of how they were valued or what their planned next assignments were. People need this information so that they can manage their professional growth and development and avoid thinking they do not have a bright future in the company when they do.

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## Conclusion

Clearly, attracting, developing, and retaining leadership talent is a priority for many companies. To remain competitive, companies must continually develop their people by identifying their very best and preparing them for tomorrow's global challenges. In fact, a 1998 Conference Board study of 516 senior managers and HR executives from 33 countries identified developing leaders as the most important HR goal for global business success (Csoka & Hackett, 1998).

This article has described how one global consumer products company put in place a comprehensive approach to accelerating the development of global leaders. While only two years old, initial indications of success are strong. If the leadership development successes continue, the company will have plenty of people to support its continued global expansion. One indicator of success will be how fast and how accurately human resource personnel can identify high potentials who are the right matches for important openings. Another sign of success will be when managers take the risk of selecting recommended high potentials instead of selecting people with whom they are more familiar. Most important, the progress of the strategy will be measured by monitoring the careers of the high potentials and watching how quickly they move up in the company. Another key metric will be the feedback from the people themselves. If they are satisfied with their careers and if their retention rates remain high, the global leadership development strategy will succeed in meeting its objectives.

The real-world measure of success of course will be the performance of the company in the global marketplace. The challenging test of this development strategy will be if the company can keep expanding, can keep satisfying its customers, and can keep leading its competitors.

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