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**IMPACT OF SENIOR LEADER TOUCH POINTS ON HIGH POTENTIAL
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION**

**A Research Project
Presented to the Faculty of
The George L. Graziadio
School of Business and Management
Pepperdine University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in
Organization Development**

**by
Louise Keefe
August 2014**

This research project, completed by

LOUISE KEEFE

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2014

Faculty Committee

Committee Chair, Julie Chesley, PhD

Committee Member, Kent Rhodes, EdD

Linda Livingstone, Ph. D., Dean
The George L. Graziadio School of Business and
Management

Abstract

Engaging and retaining high potential employees play a key role in enhancing an organization's competitive advantage. Although multiple factors affect engagement and retention, senior leaders play an important role. This study examined senior leaders' use of touch points (intentional interactions) with high potentials as a retention and engagement strategy within one organization. This mixed-method study gathered survey and interview data from high potentials and senior leaders. Study findings revealed that touch points yielded a range of benefits for the company, for leaders, for high potentials, and for talent management within the organization. The benefits appeared to be associated with the frequency and recency of touch points. Based on these findings, senior and executive leaders are advised to engage with high potentials at least quarterly. Organizations are advised to create processes to advocate for, facilitate, and monitor senior leaders' use of touch points to optimize organizational outcomes.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The war for talent is evident and shows no signs of reprieve (Fernandez-Araoz, Groysberg, & Nohria, 2011). Research by Fernandez-Araoz et al. found that only 15% of companies in North American and Asia indicate that they have enough qualified successors in key positions. With the retirement of the baby boomers looming, a focus on talent retention, particularly high potential talent, is critical to organizational success. Ready, Conger, Hill, and Stecker (2010) went further to state that retaining and engaging high potentials can make the whole organization stronger and ultimately become a competitive advantage.

Without making a cognizant effort to retain high potentials, organizations leave a door open to predatory hiring practices, such as competitive intelligence, where market competitors gather information on an organization's high-potential employees over an extended period of time for the purpose of luring the employees' away at key points in their careers (Barnar, 2000). In short, if organizations are not intentional, deliberate, and proactive about engaging and retaining their high potentials, someone *will* lure them away. Companies often are too reactive and wait until the talent has one foot out the door with an offer from another company (Kepner-Tregoe Business Issues Research Group, 1999). At this point, it is usually too late. The courting from another organization has already begun and employees are walking down the aisle into the arms of their new employer. All too often, it is this trigger that initiates the former manager to show the employee some love, but it often is simply too late to reverse the exodus.

Organizations with leaders who are proactive in engaging and retaining talent may have an advantage over those who are reactive to or unclear about these dynamics

(Herman, 2004). Research has suggested that organizations need to focus on people as a strategic business issue and start with a focus on high potentials (Kepner-Tregoe Business Issues Research Group, 1999). However, it takes time and a concerted effort to be intentional about retaining these valuable resources. Simply put, engaging and retaining high potential talent is a strategic imperative and one in which senior leaders must play a critical role (Herman, 2004).

One way leaders can make an impact is by conducting regular *touch points* with the talent in their organization. Touch Points are connections senior leaders make with individuals throughout the organization for gathering candid feedback and information (Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013). Specific to human resources and talent management, touch points are designed to help senior leaders get to know, develop, and retain talent (Eber & Sherwood, 2014). The simple act of reaching out has been shown to have an impact (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2011).

Moreover, while the direct manager plays a very important role in engaging and retaining talent, an individual's second- or third-level manager (senior manager, defined as individuals in director roles or above in the organization) can play a unique role based on their position in the organization (Harris & Barnes, 2006). The mere fact that the individual is receiving one-on-one time with the senior leader has a unique impact on the employee. Harris and Barnes explained, "The commitment of a significant amount of time to [an employee's] development by respected senior leaders is a powerful message and model to [employees.] The ability to interact in a deeply personal way with senior leaders is highly motivating" (p. 196). Thus, although employee engagement and retention is complex and needs to be tackled from multiple angles, the present study

focused on the impact that senior leaders can have on the engagement and retention of high potentials by initiating touch points.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine senior leaders' use of touch points with high potential employees as a retention and engagement tool. Three research questions were examined:

1. What are the characteristics of the touch point process?
2. What are the benefits of the touch point process for the study organization, its leaders, and its high potentials?
3. What are the impacts of the touch point process on talent management?

Definitions

Three definitions were central to this research:

1. High potential: individuals who are perceived to have the potential to progress in the organization at least two levels above their current role (McGrath, 2008).
2. Touch point: as defined by the study organization, touch points are an intentional connection made to get to know, develop, engage, and retain talent. They include but are not limited to career coaching discussions, review and enhancement of employee development plans, stay interviews (as opposed to exit interviews) invitations to special events such as leadership summits or 'by invitation only' training events. Touch points do not include required annual performance reviews or other general employee activities. The purpose is to make the individual (most often a high potential employee) feel special and cared for by the leader and valued by the organization.
3. Senior leaders: directors in the organization, typically at the second tier of the organization and who report to the vice presidents. These individuals are managers of managers and possess substantial position power.
4. Executives: vice-presidents in the organization who report to president of the organization (Watts, 2012).
5. Talent management: implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the

required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs (Lockwood, 2006).

Setting

This study was conducted in a \$2 billion global aerospace organization headquartered in the United States. The high potential employees worked in a variety of functions, including finance, human resources, engineering, program management, sales and marketing, supply chain management, and manufacturing with varying levels of responsibility. The study organization created and implemented a Touch Point Program in 2011 that was used with high potential employees (approximately 5% of the population). As part of this program, senior leaders were provided a toolkit with talking points on 12 different areas for interaction including career discussions, stay interviews, development plans, business strategy sharing, special invites to high level meetings, and training, among others. These guidelines aided leaders in conducting these touch points with high potentials.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduced the importance of senior leadership involvement in engaging and retaining top talent, provided the importance of this topic in an environment where talent is critical, described the purpose and significance of this study and the general methodology for the study. Chapter 2 focuses on a review of existing literature and research relevant to the engagement and retention of talent. Chapter 3 describes the design and methodology used to gather data from high potential talent, sample selection, and the data collection and analysis process. Chapter 4 describes the findings of the study and draws conclusions based on the data. Chapter 5 summarizes conclusions of the study

and provides a description of the impact of intentional touch points in engaging and retaining talent along with the impact on the organization and the individuals.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine senior leaders' use of touch points with high potential employees as a retention and engagement tool. This chapter provides a review of relevant literature to provide a foundation for the present study. The role of senior leaders is examined first, including a definition of senior leadership, a review of their roles and responsibilities, and their contribution to employee development. Literature on high potential employees is presented next, including consideration of their role in organizations and their typical interactions with senior leaders. The final body of literature examined in this chapter addresses retention. Specifically, the cost of turnover is outlined and practices for promoting retention are discussed. Senior leaders' roles in promoting retention and specific practices for retaining high potentials also are reviewed.

Senior Leaders

For this study, the term *senior leader* refers to those individuals in the organization who are at the top one or two tiers of the organization, such as managers of managers and those with substantial position power. This section describes the roles and responsibilities of these leaders and their contribution to employee development, specifically.

Roles and responsibilities. Senior leaders play critical roles in organizations and this is particularly evident in today's business world of ever-increasing globalization, complexity, and speed of change (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2007). Senior leaders serve an important supportive role to the chief executive officer who is responsible for the entire enterprise while also effectively managing their own divisions

and organizations—which may include complex reporting hierarchies and hundreds of employees.

Effectiveness in the senior leader role typically requires both managerial and leadership competencies (Bunker, Hall, & Kram, 2010). Needed managerial competencies include activities such as planning, budgeting, evaluating, and facilitating the work of those they manage. Needed leadership competencies include selecting, motivating, and coaching talent as well as building trust with their people. These roles, in turn, require a dual focus on short-term aims of organization, coordination, and control of resources balanced with consideration of long-term aims such as relationships, commitment, and entrepreneurial vision. Furthermore, these various actions need to achieve and enhance alignment with the overall organization. These various competencies could be summarized as exercising intellect, strategic and financial acumen, and interpersonal competence as well as adeptly applying all of these to lead others to produce solid business performance. “More than ever before, successful leadership hinges on learning agility and the experience necessary to lead others through complex situations” (p. 1). Bunker et al. stressed that the challenges facing 21st century organizations require senior leaders who are highly attuned to their people and who have highly developed skills in dealing effectively with them. However, senior leaders appear to be lacking interpersonal focus and adeptness, which was one of the inspirations for Bunker et al.’s edited volume entitled *Extraordinary Leadership: Addressing the Gaps in Senior Executive Development*. The next section more closely examines senior leaders’ contributions to employee development.

Contribution to employee development. Several researchers have noted that few senior leaders are able or willing to commit the time and energy required to interact with

others in the organization for the purpose of cultivating talent (Harris & Barnes, 2006; Thatcher, 2005). For example, a 2005 study on leadership communication cited by Thatcher and conducted by Melcrum, a communications consulting firm, found that nearly half of all organizational communications professionals listed convincing senior leaders to devote time to communicating with employees as one of their top three challenges. This is supported by later research which found senior leadership as the single most important factor for building a committed and loyal workforce (Hathi, 2007).

These findings are consistent with other studies about talent development and succession planning. Herman (2004) estimates that only about 20% of corporate leaders are concerned about a labor shortage and doing something about it. He added that an even smaller percentage of leaders (5%) are being proactive about looking for and hiring top talent for their team and recognize the competitive advantage that it gives them. Harris and Barnes (2006) speculated that developing the talent pipeline was important to most senior leaders and reported that they most often identify it as a priority. They added that, in reality, few senior leaders are willing and able to dedicate the time to this type of activity. However, when leaders make the commitment, it sends a powerful message to employees which is highly motivating.

Brundage and Koziel (2010) added that senior leaders must communicate that people are a priority and that this has real implications for retaining talent. However, for the full beneficial effects to take hold and become ingrained in the culture, the policies and practices in the organization also need to align with this philosophy. Leaders need to demonstrate their commitment to the people, for example, by developing and promoting leaders. Furthermore, leaders need to recognize that employees don't show up for work

only for the paycheck. They want opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and to be respected by the leaders.

Satter and Russ (2007) pointed out that many senior leaders still argue that they do not have enough time to mentor talent in their organization. In their study of 31 successful senior leaders from across the United States, it was noteworthy that all of them had mentoring relationships and some had several over their career. Moreover, each leader reported that their mentors and mentoring relationships substantially contributed to their professional and personal development. Thus, these leaders saw mentoring as an integral part of their role and found tangible benefits themselves. Additionally, mentees in this study said the mentoring had a significant impact on their productivity and development and helped them learn how to navigate the organization. These findings suggest that mentoring can be mutually beneficial.

Summary. The literature reviewed in this section emphasized that senior leaders play key roles in the organization (Wageman et al., 2007). Their time is very limited and they dedicate their time to helping the organization achieve excellence. At the same time, they can play powerful roles in employee development and retention (Bunker et al., 2010). However, this type of senior leader contribution often is overlooked and neglected in the drive for organizational excellence (Herman, 2004; Satter & Russ, 2007). When they neglect to play roles in retention, other key players in the organization such as high potential employees may be lost. This unique population and their contributions to the organization are examined in the next section.

High Potential Employees

High potentials are those employees who are the organization's top performers in their current jobs and who have the potential to move to higher positions and carry out

more challenging responsibilities (Juhdi, 2012). High potentials have been cited as the most critical employee population to develop because building bench strength related to high potentials sets up the organization for future business success (Lamoureux, 2006). Lamoureux added that talent is one of an organization's greatest competitive advantages.

Juhdi (2012) identified three key competencies of a high potential: drive for high performance, learning agility, and leadership spirit. Learning agility, defined as engaging in continuous learning, is a strong predictor of becoming high potential and has been found to be more predictive than job performance (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Bersin & Associates found in their study of U.S. companies that 84% of responding companies use some type of assessment (e.g., 360-degree assessments, leadership style assessments, personality assessments, potential assessments) to identify and develop high potentials (Lamoureux, 2006). The following sections more closely examine the role of high potentials in organizations and their typical interactions with senior leaders.

Role in organizations. High potential talent is a key differentiator and presents an opportunity for companies to create competitive advantage, especially as businesses become increasingly global (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). In particular, companies need employees to be increasingly more agile and to manage international teams in the global, borderless workplace. One important talent population is that of high potentials, sometimes referred to as "A players." These individuals generate more profits, sales revenue, and operational productivity than the general employee population (Pekala, 2001). High potentials also bring with them substantial skills and the promise of strong future leadership to their organizations. Identifying and developing high potentials helps build the company's talent pipeline for future leadership roles (Lamoureux, 2006). For

example, determining who the organization's high potential employees are enables the firm to allocate its human resource investments to what will generate the biggest return (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011).

However, it is not enough to identify high potentials and give them training. High potential employees need to be managed and coached well so that they can unleash and develop their full talents and mature in their qualities (Juhdi, 2012). As a result, companies are focusing on high potentials and investing in the development of this audience, because it is critical that they build their bench strength of leaders to meet the business needs of the future. Based on research by Bersin & Associates, 70% of companies take the time to identify high potentials and 40% target specific programs to these "rising stars" (Lamoureux, 2006). This statistic indicates that there may be a substantial known talent within organizations that is not being sufficiently or deliberately developed. The next section examines how organizations leverage senior leaders to help develop and train high potential employees.

Interactions with senior leaders. Because high potentials are believed to possess the competencies needed in the organization, it is important to retain and develop these individuals. For this reason, Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) stressed the importance of allowing high potentials the opportunities to interact with senior leaders to help them learn the business and to observe executives' behaviors.

However, as mentioned earlier, senior leaders vary widely in terms of their interest and ability in managing talent. The Corporate Executive Board conducted a study examining leaders' skills, knowledge, and portion of time they dedicated to talent management. Based on this study, they identified four distinct types of managers (Ellehuus, 2012):

1. Talent Champions: managers who are committed to and effective at talent management. These managers have teams of employees whose effort level was 25% greater than the average, with higher profits and revenues than the average business leader. Talent champions comprise 19% of managers.
2. Strivers: managers who believe in the importance of talent management, but who lack the competencies to manage high potentials. These individuals comprise 42% of managers.
3. Half-hearted: managers who have not bought into the concept that talent management can solve business challenges, but who are actually capable of high potential management activities. These individuals comprise 8% of managers.
4. Talent rejecters: managers who are neither committed to or effective at talent management. Teams of talent rejecters produce 20% less effort than the average employee and 32% of their employees are at risk of leaving the organization. Business profits and revenues for these managers are 6% and 7% lower than the average business group. These managers comprise a staggering 31% of managers.

The first two types (comprising 61% of leaders) are interested in talent management. They understand its importance. However, fewer than 1 in 5 managers have the interest and capability to cultivate talent in others. This underscores the importance of, first, sensitizing leaders to the need for cultivating talent and, second, giving leaders training and tools for cultivating talent (Harris & Barnes, 2006).

Harris and Barnes (2006) recommended that senior leaders be presented with the business case for getting involved in leadership development. Specifically, the researchers advised (a) bringing data to the table to support the argument for why they should be involved, (b) providing benchmarks that describe how other companies have used senior leaders in these roles with good results, and (c) being persuasive and persistent in emphasizing the value to both the individual leader and to the organization.

Summary. A particular population that organizations want to retain are their high potentials, who have the ability to substantially benefit the organization both now and in the future (Juhdi, 2012). Building relationships between senior leaders and the organization's high potentials can result in tremendous benefit to the high potentials, who

want to be developed; the senior leaders, who want to achieve operational excellence; and the organization, which needs to retain its best and brightest employees (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). However, past research suggests that fewer than 1 in 5 senior leaders are willing and able to build relationships with and invest in high potentials. The next section more closely examines employee retention, how it affects organizations, and what organizations can do to improve retention—particularly among high potential employees.

Retention

Employee retention is the ability of an organization to retain its employees in a given period. Turnover, on the other hand, is the number of people who leave the organization within a period of time. Both are typically expressed in terms of percentage rate. In addition to actual turnover, wherein people actually leave the organization, others leave psychologically, meaning that although they are still working for the organization, they are disengaged and have checked out mentally. Both types of disengagement (physical and mental) cost the organization (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000).

Costs of turnover. According to research by Pekala (2001), U.S. companies are paying more than \$140 billion in recruiting, training, and administrative costs due to turnover in the organization. Most organizational leaders understand there is a cost associated with turnover; however, most underestimate the potential risk to their financial stability (Herman, 2004). These bottom-line costs are often unexpected in organizations (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Herman, 2004). Such costs include the cost of overtime, temporary help, recruiting costs, employee training and assimilation, team building, loss of productivity, and even the extra time and stress it costs supervisors personally (Herman, 2004). Additionally, if an organization has difficulty retaining its talent, the

word gets out to investors, financiers, suppliers, and—perhaps worst of all—to customers. These also can have substantial negative impacts on the business (Herman, 2004).

Although employee retention has always been important to organizations, the fact that the U.S. economy is largely comprised of service businesses means that retention is more vital to organizational competitiveness and sustainability now than ever before (Barney, 1991; Hall, 1993; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 1994). This need for retention is heightened given shortages in skilled labor despite economic downturns (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Herman, 2004, 2005). Due to the shortage of skilled labor plus the direct and indirect costs of turnover, companies have been dedicating attention to how retention may be promoted. Retention practices are examined in the next section.

Promoting retention. Understanding how to achieve retention begins with an understanding of how retention differs from turnover and how strategies to decrease turnover differ from strategies to increase retention. Whereas efforts to minimize turnover are heavily focused on reducing or minimizing costs (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011), efforts to retain employees focus on concern for employees with a goal to keep them.

It is important to note that the factors that lead to employee retention can be different than those that influence the employee to be engaged and committed to the organization (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). For example, although fair pay plays a role in retention, it is not the number one factor influencing retention according to Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2011).

Herzberg 's (1974) motivation-hygiene theory, often referred to as the satisfier-dissatisfier theory, suggests that there are factors that lead to job satisfaction and other factors that lead to job dissatisfaction. The types of things that make employees satisfied

at work are related to the content of their work, such as growth opportunities, advancement, and increased responsibility. These are referred to as *motivators*. In contrast, those factors that influence how happy employees are at work are called *hygiene factors* and are linked to how they are treated, including such things as pay, company policies, working conditions, relationships with peers and manager, and status. According to the theory, motivators inspire satisfaction, motivation, and commitment to the organization, whereas optimizing hygiene factors can, at best, only bring employees to a neutral state. Even at their best, they do not inspire the motivation and engagement companies desire from their employees.

Similarly, Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2011) concluded based on their research that when employees believe their pay is not fair or competitive, they will be dissatisfied and open to being recruited away from the firm. Moreover, even if pay is adequate, if the other retention factors (motivation factors, according to Herzberg) are absent, retention will still be a problem. Kaye and Jordan-Evans concluded that the top ten factors influencing retention, listed in order, are:

Exciting work and challenge; career growth, learning and development; working with great people; fair pay; supportive management/good boss; being recognized, valued and respected; benefits; meaningful work and making a difference; pride in the organization, its mission and its product and great work environment and culture. (p. 10)

They added that these factors were evident across different industries and there were only minor differences between levels, genders, and ages. Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) also cited culture, development opportunities, and quality of supervision amongst other factors playing a role in employee retention. In earlier research, Herman (2004) similarly identified quality of leadership, flexibility, challenging work, and learning opportunities as key retention factors.

Despite these general principles, it is important to keep in mind that retaining employees requires understanding what is important to them and what key features will keep them from leaving the organization. The best way to know what employees want is to ask them (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2011; Porter, 2011). Asking is necessary because when it comes to retaining employees, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work (Pekala, 2001). Thus, Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2011) encourage managers to conduct stay interviews to discover what employees want, despite managers' fears about what they might learn in the process. Asking a few questions can reveal information that allows companies to customize retention strategies to the mindset or situation of specific employees. For example, when executives at a European industrial company looked beyond the standard retention package and looked more to the individual needs, they discovered situations that they did not anticipate. Some employees were focused and concerned about the impact on their family when relocating, whereas the other group was very career-minded and more change agile. This company found great success with retaining employees once they took different approaches during their one-on-one stay discussions. Additionally, engaging in these dialogues with employees help employees to feel cared about and valued by the organization, which can lead to loyalty and commitment to the organization (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002).

Additionally, Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2011) emphasized that promoting employee retention is an ongoing process rather than a one-time, "check-the-box" event. Asking employees what they want not only enables organizations to meet their needs; it also demonstrates the organization's interest and dedication to the employees. When

asked, employees reported feeling valued and cared about by their leader, and also by the organization.

Research also suggests that everyone in the organization plays roles in promoting retention (Herman, 2005). Human resources professionals offer processes, best practices, and support for promoting retention. Immediate managers also play a primary role in building positive relationships with their employees through regular interaction. The next section examines senior leaders' specific roles in promoting retention.

Senior leaders' role in retention. In the retention equation, senior leaders play a unique role due to their position in the organization. Their time is very limited and their focus is on strategic and high-level operational objectives. How they apply their time has strategic and symbolic importance. Thus, when a senior leader chooses to spend time with a lower-level but high-potential employee, the significance of such an event is notable (Harris & Barnes, 2006). "The commitment of a significant amount of time to [an employee's] development by respected senior leaders is a powerful message and model to [employees.] The ability to interact in a deeply personal way with senior leaders is highly motivating" (p. 196).

For example, Hathi (2007) reported that 56% of highly engaged employees receive communication from their senior leaders at least once per month. In contrast, 42% of employees with low engagement stated they receive only annual communication (if any at all) from their senior leaders. Although the aforementioned study was on engagement and no studies were found that examined the impact of senior leader communication on retention, the findings are notable and may have some transferability to the concept of retention.

McDonald (2008) stressed the importance of executives stepping up their efforts and creating a strategy for succession planning, building the talent pipeline, and attracting more high potential employees, particularly as Baby Boomers continue to retire. Herman (2005), moreover, asserted that employee retention is the responsibility of managers, not the human resources department. Based on a study by Eisenberger et al. (2002), when employees believe that their “supervisor valued their contribution and cared about their well-being” they also believed that the organization valued and supported them and this, in turn, led to increased job retention (p. 572). The effect of perceived supervisor support on retention was even stronger when the employee believed the supervisor was highly regarded by the organization.

Communication from senior leaders to employees also plays a critical role in the retention equation. A survey of employee opinions carried out by CHA, a Britain-based workplace communications consultancy, highlights the power of frequent, clear, and timely communication. The findings suggested that employees who believe their boss keeps them properly informed are much more likely to stay, whereas 68% of those with bosses who are poor communicators say they plan to leave within 2 years. When bosses keep staff informed, that figure falls to around 30% (Hill, 2005).

Three communication guidelines are offered based on a synthesis of CHA’s findings (Hill, 2005):

1. Leaders at every level must engage in regular communication and not leave it to human resources or internal communication professionals. Importantly, *regular* does not mean *constant*: 90% of the employees interviewed by CHA indicated that monthly contact is sufficient, whereas 62% believed quarterly contact would suffice.
2. Although a range of communication tactics may be used, face-to-face communication should be used whenever possible to allow for healthy exchange

and the cultivation of camaraderie. High-tech communication solutions (whether synchronous or asynchronous) should be used sparingly.

3. Messages should be customized for the recipient. Once employees know what their organization's plans are, they are, for the most part, interested in two things: understanding their role in achieving those plans and knowing how they will personally benefit from it.

The literature discussed in the section emphasizes the main point that senior leaders play a critical role in promoting employee retention. This phenomenon is particularly relevant for high potential employees. The next section more closely examines retention practices for this special population of workers.

Retaining high potential employees and the senior leadership role. Although organizations sustain costs any time employees leave, employers need to be most concerned about the turnover of high potential employees (Biron & Boon, 2013) because these employees are the ones that will most likely get recruited away and, when they leave, will likely leave the greatest knowledge and skill gaps in the organization (Herman, 2004; Porter, 2011). These high potential employees also are the most expensive to replace (Herman, 2004). Due to the superior value and skills high potential employees offer, Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) referred to high potentials as *platinum customers* who should be treated specially—different from the general employee population. Making extra effort to retain high potentials makes good business sense on many levels: first, organizations typically have invested more in valued employees and, second, these employees yield a sustainable competitive advantage and affect how smoothly and efficiently an organization runs. However, a study by Towers Watson indicated that 60% of companies worldwide are having difficulty attracting high potential employees and 55% are experiencing retention problems.

Part of the issue is that high potentials like to be constantly challenged. Thus, they are looking at advancement and the next best thing that is going to hone their skills and develop their experience. It can be challenging for organizations to keep the pace with their drive to excel and develop. Typically, when high potential employees believe they are not growing fast enough or are not offered higher level positions, they start looking elsewhere and ultimately leave the organization (Juhdi, 2012). Thus, how organizations engage their high potentials will impact their ability to attract and retain them (Lamoureux, 2006).

One technique for engaging and retaining high potential employees is succession planning, which refers to developing the next generation of leaders and is identified a key task for every senior executive (Fulmer, Stumpf, & Bleak, 2009). Fulmer et al. added that senior leaders need to ensure that the talent pipeline aligns to the overall company strategy, and high potentials should be shaped to support the emerging needs of the organization for future success. Succession planning activities, such as mentoring, special assignments, job rotations and cross-training, and other development activities can have particularly beneficial effects on the motivation and retention of high potentials. Not only does this satisfy high potentials' desires for learning and growth; but they may also come to understand through these activities that they are in line to fill one or more critical roles in the company, that they are part of its future, and that the company is committed to their development (McDonald, 2008). This awareness can be incredibly motivating and loyalty inspiring. For example, at Whirlpool, senior leaders conducted one-on-one discussions with high potentials as part of their talent review process (Frigo, Rapp, & Templin, 2011). Executives at Whirlpool have realized the impact high potentials on their

corporate competitiveness and have begun investing more in high potentials (Lamoureux, 2006). However, these leaders still seem to be in the minority (Satter & Russ, 2007).

Proactively reaching out to the talent has been shown to build stronger teams, increase retention of these key employees, and help build a stronger organization overall (Porter, 2011). Biron and Boon (2013) concluded based on their survey study of 225 employees in an elderly care organization that high performers may be particularly sensitive to relationships with their supervisors. They concluded that to retain high performers, firms should promote high-quality relationships between leaders and subordinates. These findings were consistent with earlier research by Satter and Russ (2007), wherein they argued that a cost-effective, tried-and-true method for engagement and leadership development and retention is interaction between senior leaders and high potential employees. “According to the authors’ study with senior American business leaders across 20 different industries, mentoring engages high potentials, helps develop essential ‘soft’ skills . . . and sends the message that they are valued” (p. 382).

Summary. This section focused on the topic of retention, which refers to the ability of an organization to retain its employees in a given period. Retention is important for organizational competitiveness and sustainability (Herman, 2004). Enhancing retention requires understanding employees and designing the organization to give employees more of what they want (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2011). Commonly desired features that promote retention include exciting work and challenge; career growth, learning and development; working with great people; fair pay; and among others. Special consideration should be given when considering the retention of high potential employees, who play particularly important roles in the organization’s present and future.

Conclusion

Retention refers to the ability of an organization to retain its employees in a given period. Retention is important to the often staggering costs of turnover and loss of organizational knowledge, skill, and memory that accompany each departure (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Herman, 2004; Pekala, 2001). Enhancing retention requires understanding what employees want and designing approaches that increase what they want (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2011). Often, one-on-one conversations are needed to understand what they want. Exciting work and challenge, career growth, learning and development, working with great people, fair pay, and other factors are common work features that promote retention.

Questions about retention strategies become even more urgent when discussing how an organization may retain high potentials, who comprise its best, its brightest, and its future leaders. It can be difficult to retain high potential employees because they are the most likely to leave and the current and future costs of turnover are greatest for these individuals (Biron & Boon, 2013; Herman, 2004; Porter, 2011). These factors make it even more important to understand how to retain these employees. Senior leaders can play a unique and powerful role in retaining these employees due to their position in the organization. Research suggests it is critical for senior leaders to make time to meet one-on-one with high potential employees where they let the high potentials know their value to the organization and the fact that they play a critical role in the future of the business (Biron & Boon, 2013; Porter, 2011). Despite the urgings in the literature about the need to retain high potential employees, the need for senior leader involvement, and the lack of involvement by senior leaders in this effort, little research was found that illuminated the specific ways senior leaders could be engaged in this effort, what their openness was to

this involvement, and what the effects of their involvement have been relative to high potential retention. This represents a direction for continued research and is the focus of the present study. The next chapter describes the methods that will be used in this study.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine senior leaders' use of touch points with high potential employees as a retention tool. Three research questions were examined:

1. What are the characteristics of the touch point process?
2. What are the benefits of the touch point process for the study organization, its leaders, and its high potentials?
3. What are the impacts of the touch point process on talent management?

This chapter describes the methods that were used in the study. The following sections describe the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design. The purpose of mixed methods research is to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze data. This approach allows the researcher to benefit from the complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses of each approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mixed methods research also allows the researcher to corroborate the results from both parts of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Mixed methods research also blends both deductive and inductive reasoning when collecting and analyzing data, leading to richer results. Furthermore, whereas typical quantitative research objectives include description, explanation, and prediction and qualitative research focuses on description, exploration and discovery; mixed research uses multiple objectives that are both quantifiable and qualitative (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Because mixed method allows researchers to collect multiple forms

of data using different methods and combines the results, mixed methods research is more expansive and less limiting. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) asserted, as a result, that mixed methods approaches are superior to mono-method forms.

The mixed methods approach can be done in one of two ways (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004): mixed-model or mixed-methods. The mixed-model “mixes both quantitative and qualitative approaches within or across the stages of the research process,” whereas the mixed-method approach is the “inclusion of a quantitative *phase* and qualitative *phase* in an overall research study” (p. 20, italics in original).

Additionally, in mixed-method approaches, data can be collected sequentially (qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase or vice versa) or concurrently.

In this study, a sequential mixed-method approach was used. First, the researcher collected data from high potentials using a primarily quantitative survey. After these data were collected and analyzed, the researcher designed and administered interview questions to both high potentials and senior leaders. This approach enabled the researcher to probe into any initial findings from the survey during the interviews. Once the interview data were collected and analyzed, the data from both the survey and interviews were analyzed together.

Participants

In quantitative studies, the sample size should be a representative of the population to adequately generalize to the population (Marshall, 1996). For qualitative studies, sample sizes typically are smaller but sufficient to adequately measure the research question. Sufficiency is influenced to some degree by the length and depth of the interview: studies that use longer, more in-depth interviews typically rely upon fewer participants, whereas studies that use brief, straightforward interviews typically draw

more participants. Marshall offered the suggestion of less than 10 participants for in-depth interviews. Considerations of schedule and budget also play a role in sample size decisions in qualitative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Given the relatively small population of high potential employees and the ease of use of electronic surveys, the entire population of 36 employees received a survey. For the interview phase, eight high potentials and six senior leaders were selected to complete an interview. This sample was believed to be sufficient because the interviews were in-depth.

To begin the participant selection process for the high potentials, the researcher contacted the organization development manager to obtain the list of high potentials for the organization participating in research along with the touch point tracking sheet which lists if and when each high potential received a touch point from a senior leader. The criteria for a high potential employee to participate in this study was the following:

1. The individual was identified as a high potential in the organization with the perceived capability to be promoted to a vice president role in the company.
2. The individual has a length of service with the company of more than 1 year at the time of the study.
3. The individual has received at least one touch point within 6 months before the interview.

Once the list was obtained and qualifying study candidates were identified, the researcher sent an email to all potential participants in the study to describe the purpose of the survey, provide them with a link to the electronic survey, and explain how the data would be used. Reminder emails were sent to participants while the survey was open to encourage participation.

The benefit of engaging the whole population enabled the researcher to gather a sufficient amount of data to analyze for this study. The risk of this sampling approach was that the high potential employees were very busy at work and might not have taken the time to answer the survey, as surveys comprise an impersonal approach to gathering data.

Based on the size of this group and the in-depth nature of the interviews, the sample size was eight high potentials. The researcher selected and invited eight survey respondents to complete an interview based on her knowledge of them. Individuals were contacted and invited to participate by email. This sampling approach is called a judgment sample, a common technique used by researchers to select the “most productive sample to answer the research question” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). The benefit of selecting individuals in this manner was that the researcher could select participants she believed would be open, honest, and direct about their feedback to get the most robust data for the study. The drawbacks were the inherent biases in this selection method. The researcher continued inviting and interviewing participants until the desired sample size of eight was reached.

The high potentials involved in this study ranged in tenure with the study organization from 5.5 to 15 years ($M = 13.25$ years). They were all relatively new to their roles, ranging from 2 months to 2.5 years ($M = 15.13$ months). Six participants reported having their last one-on-one discussion with a senior leader in the organization as occurring within the previous 3 months, while another reported having had one 6 months earlier, and the remaining participant reporting that it had was “a couple of years ago.” Upon later cross-checking, the researcher discovered that a senior leader had contacted

this participant within the previous 6 months but that the participant hadn't recognized this as a touch point.

A judgment sampling approach also was used to draw the senior leader sample. The benefit of this approach is that it allowed the researcher to select individuals that she believed would share their experiences openly and directly, including both the positives and negatives to get a well-rounded view of the process. As stated previously, the drawbacks to this selection method is potential bias. The researcher is knowledgeable of the individuals on the senior leadership team of this organization. The selection criteria for the senior leaders was the following:

1. The individual is currently a member of the senior leadership team and holds the position of vice president or above.
2. The individual has a length of service with the company greater than 6 months.
3. The individual has conducted at least five touch points within the last 6 months.

The researcher contacted all eight senior leaders by phone or in person to ask them to participate in an interview for this study. Leaders were invited and interviewed until the desired sample size of six participants was reached.

Data Collection

Three instruments were used to gather data for this study: a high potential survey, a high potential interview, and a senior leader interview.

High potential survey. The survey instrument was administered to the high potential employees. First, the survey gathered the employee's title. Next, the survey asked if the participant had at least one touch point within the previous 6 months. For those who responded that they had had a touch point within the previous 6 months, the

survey gathered information about the timing of the most recent discussion and the number of touch points they had within the previous 6 months. Next, respondents were asked to indicate the topics covered and the impact of the topics on them, ranging from “not beneficial” to “extremely beneficial.”

The next five questions assessed the impact of these touch points, including asking what makes the one-on-one discussions most impactful, why they think the senior leader met with them one-on-one, and the effect of the touch points on their feelings about their career at the company and their intent to stay with the organization.

Seven questions from the annual company engagement survey administered by Kenexa (Wiley, 2012) were used to gauge the effect of the touch points on respondents’ perceptions about their careers at the company. Four of these items were from the Kenexa Employee Engagement Index, which was found to have a high internal consistency estimate of reliability of .91 (Wiley, 2010). A final question solicited their general comments about the opportunity to meet with senior leaders in the organization on a one-on-one basis.

High potential interview. The high potential interview began with an introduction that described the purpose and nature of the study and how the data would be handled. Permission also was requested to audio record the interview. Three warm-up questions were asked, including the length of time with the company, tenure in their current position, and what they like about working for the company. Next, they were asked five questions about touch points, including the timing and nature of their touch point discussions. Four questions then were posed regarding the impact and their perceptions of the touch points. Participants were asked to describe the benefits, meaning, and impact of the touch points on them and their desire to stay with the company. Finally,

participants were asked an open-ended catch-all question to gather any additional information about the topic.

Senior leader interview. The senior leader interview began with an introduction that described the purpose and nature of the study and how the data would be handled. Permission was requested to audio record the interview. Two warm-up questions first were asked to gather their general perceptions of the touch point program. Next, three questions were asked about the benefits of conducting touch points for the leaders, the organization, and the employees. Four additional questions were asked about the impact of touch points on talent management and succession planning, employees, and retention. Two open-ended catch-all questions were asked to gather additional information about the topic and what they would tell other leaders about conducting touch points.

Data Analysis

Statistical and content analyses were performed on the data. Frequency analyses were performed on the survey data for the number of touch points conducted and topics covered. Mean and standard deviation statistics were calculated for impact of touch points on employees' view of leadership and intent to stay with the organization. Analysis of variance was conducted for these variables based on number of touch points conducted.

Content analysis was performed on qualitative survey and interview data using the following steps:

1. A transcript or set of notes were created for each participant. All participants' responses were incorporated into a master transcript that listed all responses for each question. Each response was coded with a unique participant identifier.

2. Initial coding commenced, wherein descriptive codes were identified ad hoc to reflect the main idea(s) reflected in each participant's responses. Data were reorganized by code.
3. Secondary coding commenced, wherein the initial codes that emerged were reviewed to consider how they might be grouped into categories to promote better understanding. Initial codes (and their associated data) were reorganized accordingly. This step was repeated until coding was complete.
4. The final analysis was reviewed by a second rater to confirm its validity.

Summary

This study used a mixed-methods design of survey and interview methods to gather data about the impact of senior leader touch points on the retention of high potential employees. A total of 36 high potentials were surveyed in this study. Eight high potentials and six senior leaders also were interviewed. Collected data were examined using statistical and content analyses.

Chapter 4

Results

This study examined senior leaders' use of touch points with high potential employees as a retention tool. Three research questions were examined:

1. What are the characteristics of the touch point process?
2. What are the benefits of the touch point process for the study organization, its leaders, and its high potentials?
3. What are the impacts of the touch point process on talent management?

This chapter reports the findings of the study. Findings related to the characteristics of the touch point process are reported first, including touch point meeting logistics, perceived reasons for touch points, and topics covered. The second section addresses the benefits of the touch point process for the study organization, leaders, and high potentials. The final section reports the findings related to the impacts of the touch point process on talent management in the organization.

Characteristics of the Touch Point Process

Survey and interview data were gathered regarding the touch point meeting logistics, perceived reasons for touch points, and topics covered. These findings are reported in the sections below.

Touch point meeting logistics. Survey respondents were asked to provide basic logistical information about the touch point meetings they had experienced in the previous 6 months (see Table 1). Just less than half (47%) the participants met with an executive leader, whereas 53% met with directors. Nearly all (94%) of the respondents reported having had at least one one-on-one touch point meeting in the previous 6 months. Just more than half (56%) had had a touch point meeting in the previous 2 to 3

months and 28% had had one within the previous month. Nearly two thirds (64%) had had only one or two touch point meetings in the previous 6 months and 25% reported having had three or four.

Table 1

Touch Point Meeting Logistics

Item	Yes
Touch point leader	Executive leader: 17 (47%) Director: 19 (53%)
Have you had one-on-one touch point meeting(s) with a senior leader in last 6 months	Yes: 34 (94%) No: 2 (6%)
How long ago was the most recent discussion?	Within the last month: 10 (28%) Last 2-3 months: 20 (56%) Last 4-6 months: 4 (11%) None: 2 (6%)
How many discussions in the last six months?	One to two: 23 (64%) Three to four: 9 (25%) Five or more: 2 (6%) None: 2 (6%)

N = 36

The high potentials who were interviewed were asked to share the frequency with which they had met with senior leaders and how these meetings were scheduled (see Table 2). Five of the eight interviewees had met with senior leaders one or two times a year. Three reported meeting more than twice a year, typically because they were in a new stretch role. One participant explained, “But now that I’m in this role, I am talking with Joe once a month. Some of that’s specific because of the role that I’m in. But Joe does a nice job of listening if I have development concerns as well.” Regarding scheduling, five participants reported that human resources or leader’s administrative assistant schedules the meeting, whereas two participants’ meetings were automatically scheduled as part of the career planning process.

Table 2***Touch Point Meeting Logistics: High Potential Interview Findings***

	n
Frequency	
One to Two times a year	5
More than twice a year	3
Every few years	1
Scheduling	
Human resources or leader's administrative assistant	5
Autoscheduled by career planning process	2

$N = 8$

Perceived reason for touch point meetings. Respondents were asked to indicate the reasons they believed they were invited to a touch point within the previous 6 months (see Table 3). Three reasons were identified by roughly half the sample: they value my contribution to the organization (58%), they believe I have a lot of potential (58%), and they want to help me with my career (53%). The least common reasons identified were: they wanted to share the vision and focus of the future of the business (22%) and they want me to help with a project (17%).

Table 3***Perceived Reasons for Touch Points***

Reason	n (%)
They value my contribution to the organization	21 (58%)
They believe I have a lot of potential	21 (58%)
They want to help me with my career	19 (53%)
They want to help with my development	16 (44%)
They want me to stay with the company	16 (44%)
They want to get to know me better	14 (39%)
They want to provide feedback to me	11 (31%)
They wanted to share the vision and focus of the future of the business	8 (22%)
They want me to help with a project	6 (17%)

$N = 8$

These data were examined for differences based on the touch point leader level, meeting recency, and meeting frequency. Three significant differences were found based

on touch point leader level (see Table 4). Eighty-two percent of respondents who met with executives believed that the reason for the touch point was because “they value my contribution to the organization,” compared to only 37% of respondents who met with directors, $t(33.548) = -3.068$, $p < .01$. Other key differences concerned the leaders believing the respondents have a lot of potential and the leaders wanting to get to know the respondents better.

Table 4

Perceived Reasons based on Level of Touch Point Leader

	Executives* N = 17	Directors N = 19	t	df	p
They value my contribution to the organization	82%	37%	-3.068	33.548	.004**
They believe I have a lot of potential	76%	42%	-2.183	33.961	.036*
They want to get to know me better	59%	21%	-2.419	31.165	.022*

* significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level

Three significant differences also were found based on touch point frequency (see Table 5). Ninety-one percent of respondents who had three or more touch points thought the meetings were convened because the leader believed they had a lot of potential, compared to only 43% of respondents who had only one or two touch points, $t(30.213) = 3.402$, $p < .01$. Other key differences concerned the leaders valuing the respondents' contribution and the leaders wanting to get to know the respondents better.

The high potentials who were interviewed also were asked to identify the reason they believed touch points were conducted (see Table 6). Five of the eight interviewees believed that leaders are expected to know and leverage the talent within the organization. One high potential participant explained,

The majority of [our] leaders place value on developing top talent. I think that's something we do fairly well. I don't know if we do it well *below* the top talent

line, but I know if you're in that top talent identified circle, they make time for it because it's an expectation of the organization

Table 5

Perceived Reasons based on Touch Point Frequency

	One to two N = 23	Three or more N = 11	t	df	p
They believe I have a lot of potential	43%	91%	3.402	30.213	.002**
They value my contribution to the organization	48%	82%	2.099	24.570	.046*
They want to get to know me better	26%	64%	2.193	32	.036*

* significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level

Table 6

Reason for Touch Points: High Potential Interview Findings

	n
Leaders are expected to know and leverage talent	5
I am recognized as a high potential in the organization	5
Interest in engaging and retaining me	3

N = 8

Another explained, "I think part of it is a requirement. [The company] has done a good job of laying out organizational capabilities and organizational health, to make sure that if people move on there's people that can fill in those gaps."

Five interviewees also believed they were specifically selected for touch points because they had been recognized as a high potential within the organization. One participant shared, "I'm assuming a lot of it has to do with performance evaluation and then their recognition of my growth in competencies or the results I've been able to achieve in the last 2 years." Another expressed, "Importantly, the organization sees what I've done in the past, and I've had good reviews in the past and completed some good projects. I think they view me as someone who can help the organization achieve their goals."

A final reason, identified by three interviewees, was that the leader was interested in engaging and retaining them. One participant explained, “They have an interest in me being very happy to work for [the company] so I perform better.” Another shared, “Being able to have exposure to these leaders helps drive the desire to stay with the company because it shows the company has a vested interest in your success.”

Topics covered. Respondents were asked to report the topics that were covered in the touch points that had occurred within the previous 6 months (see Table 7). Four topics were reported by the majority of participants: career discussion (92%), organizational strategy (89%), suggested development actions (86%), and feedback (81%).

Table 7

Topics Covered: Survey Data

Topic	n (%)
Career discussion	33 (92%)
Sharing of organizational strategy	32 (89%)
Suggested development actions	31 (86%)
Feedback	29 (81%)
Coaching	25 (69%)
Invite to special event or meeting	21 (58%)

Figures represent the number and percent of respondents who discussed the given topic in their touch points

Senior leaders and high potentials also were asked to identify the topics covered and the focus of the touch points they held (see Table 8). The topic cited most frequently by both senior leaders (n = 5) and high potentials (n = 7) was discussing the high potential’s current role and career interests. One senior leader explained,

We can have a discussion and spend time on their area of expertise. That enables us to, one, get their input about that and, two, helps them be engaged. I’ve found that to be very productive and worthwhile for them and for me.

Another high potential described the conversation she had, explaining “It was to talk about my career and where I wanted to go given my experience as well as the opportunities available in [the company].”

Table 8

Topics Covered: Interview Findings

Topics	Senior Leaders <i>N</i> = 6	High Potentials <i>N</i> = 8
Current role and career interests	5	7
Internal job opportunities		6
Career guidance	4	4
Development feedback	3	
Leader’s professional experiences and views		3

Six high potential interviews also shared that they discussed internal job opportunities during the touch point. One high potential shared,

The last few have been related to career growth. Going through a large reorganization in the business right now and there’s a number of opportunities that exist. So we talked about which opportunities would suit my skill set and career ambitions.

Another stated, “We discussed opportunities going forward, whether with this function or elsewhere. It’s about what I’m looking for going forward, what opportunities and so on.”

Four senior leaders and four high potentials shared that the leader offers career guidance during the touch point. One senior leader explained,

We talk about medium-term and long-term career goals. We cover their career flight plans so I’m clear the experiences they’ve had both inside and outside of [the company]. Then we identify where the opportunities might be for them to get to where they aspire to be. What opportunities do I think they need to experience to make them successful in those roles.

One high potential commented, “It was interesting, his opinion and thoughts on what he thought was most valuable for me in my current role.”

Benefits and Impacts of the Touch Point Process

Participants were asked to identify the benefits for the study organization, for leaders, and for high potentials. These findings are reported in the following sections.

Benefits for study organization. Interviewees were asked to identify the benefits of the touch points for the organization (see Table 9). All participants in both groups stated that retention was enhanced as a result of the touch points. One senior leader remarked, “Yes, definitely [they impact retention]. Knowing that people value you and are thinking of your career, not just on what you’re doing today, I think helps a lot with retention.” Another emphasized, “If we don’t touch all of our high potentials fairly regularly, I believe our retention would decrease. There are other things we do, but the touch point program has an impact. . . . touch points are one big one.” Another senior leader had the experience of being a high potential before he moved in leadership. He reflected, “If I think back on my past, I always thought it was pretty neat that somebody at a senior level would take the time to sit with you. Just making the touch point. It’s important. It means a lot.”

Table 9

Touch Point Benefits for the Organization: Interview Findings

Topics	Senior Leaders <i>N</i> = 6	High Potentials <i>N</i> = 8
Retention	6	8
Engagement	3	1
Job satisfaction		2

The high potentials in the study also emphasized the relationship between touch points and retention. One high potential commented,

It makes me very loyal to [the company]. . . . When I think about looking at other companies for employment, that really comes to mind. I ask myself whether these

companies will work really hard to retain talent and give me continuing opportunities to grow.

Another shared,

I have a higher degree of loyalty knowing there is this investment that they've placed in me by allocating these leaders' time. There's an interest by the company in helping me further my career. I'm going to stay with [the company] through thick and thin than I would otherwise. Without having these discussions if times got tough, the desire to look outside the organization would be greater. What is the company doing for me? The company is doing something, so that desire is greatly subdued.

Three senior leaders but only one high potential reported that engagement was enhanced as a result of the touch points. One senior leader commented, "I think that ultimately it will drive higher levels of engagement in building a relationship between leadership and the employees that we're doing the touch point with." The high potential added, "It's a very positive impact. When you . . . think about your senior leaders and reward and recognition, there's a lot of positive there. You don't mind working hard. You don't mind taking that extra step."

Two high potentials additionally stated that the touch points helped increase their job satisfaction. One high potential stated, "They improve my overall job satisfaction and confidence in the company."

Benefits for leaders. Senior leaders were asked to identify the benefits of the touch points for the leaders themselves (see Table 10). Two benefits were identified. Five leaders stated that touch points enable them to get to know the talent in the organization for future opportunities or projects. One leader commented, "It helps to understand the level of talent that we have in the organization." Another shared,

Some of the benefits I get is getting to know high potential employees and then as there's needs within our business I know people already. It gives me kind of a portfolio of people to go tap and say, "Hey, would you be interested in the next step in your career?"

Table 10***Touch Point Benefits for the Leaders: Senior Leader Interviews***

Benefits for Leaders	n
Get to know the talent for future opportunities or projects	5
Enjoyment	3

N = 6

Three leaders additionally stated that they enjoy having touch points. One leader explained,

It makes me feel good as a leader to help connect that person to their future. . . . How I feel after an hour of having a touch point discussion is that it's rewarding to me. I always learn something when I have these discussions. They offer unique, diverse perspectives. I've often found they're a generation or two behind me, as well as whatever diversity they bring to the table. That's valuable and refreshing, when you consider that I have 35 years experience. I have to admit that my own cabinet has four corners, so to speak, whereas theirs might have two. It seems I learn something every time, whether it's one thing or several things.

Benefits and impacts for high potentials. Examination of the survey and interview data revealed a range of benefits high potentials experience as a result of having touch points with senior leaders as well as other impacts of these meetings. The following sections describe the general benefits, benefits associated with the topics covered, and the impacts of the meetings on high potentials' views of leadership and perceptions of their careers at the company. Interview findings also are reported.

General benefits. Respondents were asked to indicate the impacts of the touch points for them (see Table 11). Two thirds or more of the sample identified three impacts; transparency about my career (75%), honest and direct feedback (75%), and opportunity to observe and learn from senior leaders (67%). The least commonly identified impact was having the opportunity to brainstorm ideas with senior leaders (31%).

Table 11***Impactful Features of Touch Points***

Benefit	n (%)
Transparency about my career	27 (75%)
Honest and direct feedback	27 (75%)
Opportunity to observe and learn from senior leaders	24 (67%)
Opportunity to express opinions to senior leaders	13 (36%)
Opportunity to brainstorm ideas with senior leaders	11 (31%)

N = 36

The impact data were examined for differences based on the touch point leader level, meeting recency, and meeting frequency (see Table 12). Only one significant difference emerged, and this was related to touch point frequency. Nearly all (91%) respondents who had three or more touch points in the prior 6 months identified the “opportunity to observe and learn from senior leaders” as a key impact of the meetings. In contrast, roughly only half (57%) the respondents who had one or two touch points reported this impact.

Table 12***General Impact based on Touch Point Frequency***

	One to two N = 23	Three or more N = 11	t	df	p
Opportunity to observe and learn from senior leaders	57%	91%	2.467	30.213	.020*

Percent reporting “Yes” for this impact; *significant at the .05 level

Benefits of topics covered. Respondents were then asked to indicate how much discussing these topics in the touch points benefited them (see Table 13). Scores ranged from 3.44 (SD = 1.16) for coaching, indicating a neutral to very beneficial impact, to 4.00 (SD = .71) for invite to special event or meeting, indicating a very beneficial impact.

Based on examination of standard deviation, the data indicated substantial variability across respondents' answers.

Table 13

Benefit of Topics Covered

Topic	n	Mean	SD
Career Discussion	33	3.88	0.99
Coaching	25	3.44	1.16
Feedback	29	3.59	1.27
Suggested development actions	31	3.45	1.06
Sharing of organizational strategy	32	3.75	0.95
Invite to special event or meeting	21	4.00	0.71

$N = 36$; 1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial

The benefits findings were examined for differences based on the touch point leader level, meeting recency, and meeting frequency. A significant difference was found for the benefit of feedback by level of touch point leader (see Table 14). Respondents who met with executive leaders reported very beneficial impacts ($N = 14$, $M = 4.07$, $SD = .92$), whereas respondents who met with directors reported a neutral impact of the feedback ($N = 15$, $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(27) = 2.110$, $p < .05$. It is notable, however, that the respondents who met with directors reported highly varied responses.

Table 14

Benefit of Feedback by Level of Touch Point Leader

	Executive Group $N = 14$	Directors Group $N = 15$	t	df	p
Mean	4.07	3.13	2.110	27	.04*
SD	.92	1.41			

1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial, 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial; *significant at .05 level

Another significant difference emerged based on meeting recency regarding the benefit of receiving an invitation to a special meeting or event. An ANOVA (see Table

15) and post hoc analysis (see Table 16) revealed that respondents who had a touch point within the last month reported a significantly higher, more positive impact of this invitation ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .52$), compared to respondents who had last participated in a touch point 4 to 6 months ago ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .96$), $F(2,18) = 4.585$, $p < .05$, Mean difference = 1.13, $p < .05$, 95% C.I. = .18, 2.07.

Table 15

Benefit of Special Invitation by Touch Point Recency

	n	Mean	SD	ANOVA
Within the last month	8	4.38	.52	F (2,18) = 4.585, p = .025*
Last 2-3 months	9	4.00	.50	
Last 4-6 months	4	3.25	.96	

1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial, 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial; *significant at the .05 level

Table 16

Benefit of Special Invitation by Touch Point Recency: Post hoc Analysis

(I) Meeting recency*	(J) Meeting recency*	Mean Diff. (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Within the last month	Last 2-3 months	.375	.295	.428	-.38	1.13
	Last 4-6 months	1.125*	.372	.019	.18	2.07

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Three significant differences emerged based on touch point frequency (see Table 17). Whereas respondents who had only one or two meetings within the previous 6 months reported a neutral impact for coaching ($N = 16$, $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.16$), respondents who had three or more meetings reported a very beneficial impact of the coaching they received ($N = 9$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = .67$), $t(23) = -2.899$, $p < .01$. Similarly, significant differences were found regarding the benefits of feedback and invitations to special meetings and events respondents received through the touch points.

Table 17

Difference in Benefits based on Touch Point Frequency

	One to Two Meetings Mean (SD)	Three or More Meetings Mean (SD)	t	df	p
Coaching	N = 16 3.00 (1.16)	N = 9 4.22 (.67)	-2.899	23	.008**
Feedback	N = 17 3.12 (1.27)	N = 11 4.18 (.98)	-2.357	26	.026*
Invite to special meeting	N = 11 3.64 (.67)	N = 10 4.40 (.52)	-2.891	19	.009**

1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial, 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial; *significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level

Impacts on views of leadership. Respondents reported that the touch points they had within the previous 6 months had a positive to substantially positive impact on their views of the leadership at the company (M = 4.40, SD = 0.74). However, participants varied in their perceptions of whether senior leaders demonstrate an active interest in their personal and career development. On average, the score was 3.72 (SD = 1.06), indicating near agreement with this statement (see Table 18). In comparison, high potentials who did not have a touch point in the previous 6 months disagreed or were neutral (N = 5, M = 2.60, SD = .55) regarding senior leaders' demonstrated interest in their personal and career development. The small sample size for this latter group made statistical comparison of these mean scores impractical.

Table 18***Respondents' Views of Leadership***

Topic	High potentials with Touch Points in previous 6 months			High potentials with no Touch Points in previous 6 months		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
How do these interactions impact your view of the leadership at the company? ^a	35	4.40	0.74			
My senior leader demonstrates an active interest in my personal/career development ^b	36	3.72	1.06	5	2.60	.55

^a 1—substantial negative impact, 5—substantial positive impact; ^b 1—strongly disagree, 5—strongly agree

Impacts on perceptions of career at organization. Respondents were asked to report the impact of the touch points on their views of their careers at the organization (see Table 19). The highest scores were reported for “I am part of [the company] future” (M = 3.94, SD = .94) and the lowest scores were reported for “I am more confident that I am in line to fill one or more critical roles” (M = 3.47, SD = 1.19). These findings suggest that the touch points had a rather beneficial impact on their views of their careers. It is important to note, however, that participants’ scores varied considerably for these items, with standard deviations ranging from 0.89 to 1.19.

Table 19***Impacts of Touch Points on Respondents' Views of their Career at the Organization***

Item	N	Mean	SD
More confident about my ability to be successful at [the company]	35	3.74	0.92
More confident about the company’s support for my career	35	3.86	1.03
More confident that I am in line to fill one or more critical roles	34	3.47	1.19
That I am part of [the company]’s future	35	3.94	0.94
That the company is committed to my development	35	3.74	0.89

1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial, 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial

These findings were examined to determine differences in perceived benefits of the impacts based on the touch point leader level, meeting recency, and meeting frequency. Only one significant difference was found, and it was based on touch point frequency (see Table 20). Respondents who had one or two touch points in the previous 6 months were rather neutral about the beneficial impacts of the company being “committed to my development” ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .90$). In contrast, respondents who had three or more touch points in the previous 6 months found this impact to be very beneficial ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .60$). The difference between these groups’ scores was significant, $t(32) = -2.348$, $p < .05$.

Table 20

Perceived Beneficial Impacts of Touch Points Based on Meeting Frequency

	One to two N = 23 Mean (SD)	Three or more N = 11 Mean (SD)	t	df	p
Benefit that the company is committed to my development	3.48 (.90)	4.18 (.60)	-2.348	32	.025*

1 = not beneficial, 2 = somewhat beneficial 3 = neutral, 4 = very beneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial; *significant at the .05 level

Interview findings. Interviewees were asked to identify the benefits of the touch points for high potential employees (see Table 21). The most frequently mentioned benefit by both senior leaders ($n = 5$) and high potentials themselves ($n = 6$) is gaining a sense of being valued and recognized. One leader shared, “I think they get that reward of feeling they are important. They are appreciated. They’re not hidden in a plant somewhere. Another commented,

I think the employees get to know that they’re valued. If no one ever tells you you’re doing good or bad, maybe you don’t have the same self-esteem as when someone tells you that. They know, “Hey these things I’m doing must be good

because people are talking about them.” . . . I think they appreciate the fact that we take the time and effort.

Table 21

Touch Point Benefits for High Potential Employees: Interview Findings

Benefits for High Potential Employee	Senior Leaders <i>N</i> = 6	High Potentials <i>N</i> = 8
Sense of being valued and recognized	5	6
Supports learning and development	5	3
Gives them exposure to senior leaders	3	4
Enables their talent to be known in advance of promotion opportunities	3	

One high potential expressed,

I felt like my contributions to the company were very respected and valued, so that encouraged me to work even harder and continue doing my best in the roles. It reaffirmed that [they] valued my contribution to the company. It was very motivational to me to continue doing a good job for the company.

Another elaborated,

It's rewarding. As an employee, when you get the note, you realize that somehow your name has floated up to a certain level and they want you to have this opportunity. That in itself is very rewarding. . . . You feel good. You feel like you're being recognized for the work that you've performed, but at the same time you recognize that there's a lot that you can still grow.

Five senior leaders and three high potentials added that touch points support the high potentials' learning development. Many senior leaders commented on the value of the high potentials having exposure to different perspectives. One leader explained,

I think they get to hear a lot of different perspectives, because if they get to meet three different leaders, they're going to get three different perspectives about careers. So, one thing I say to people I talk to is, "There are people who tell you that you need to map out your career and go through these three steps to get to this position." I say, "Personally I think there's more flexibility than that. You ought to be aware of those. It's OK to put a map out, but you've got to be aware that there's a lot of different ways to get to a point and not box yourself in and feel like you've got to be overly planned." But that's my opinion versus other people's. They're going to hear a lot of different perspectives.

One high potential explained how the conversations contributed to his development by enhancing his self-awareness about his weaknesses and needs for growth:

The most important [impact] is about self-awareness. I mean, really, truly understand where I'm strong and where I'm weak. That was not always a nice conversation! . . . It was very valuable. They made me think different about me. Your skills develop in four quadrants. For being a top leader, you have to be strategic. You have to be able to lead people. You've got to be able, somewhat, to be a subject matter expert. So, you've got to be able to deliver results. In [my leader's] world, I had three out of four. I was obviously strategic, I could lead a team very well, and I also knew a little bit about the subject. [But] he wasn't sure about my operations management. . . . He coached me a lot about what I needed to think about personally to fix that. Obviously he gave me the chance to show that I can do that. . . . It was not a nice conversation, really, because he was very, very direct. But he made an incredible impact. That's exactly how it felt. I've never had a conversation where I had feedback like this. . . . I was forced to think about weakness to a deeper extent than I've done before.

A final common theme across both groups was that the touch points give high potentials exposure to senior leaders. The senior leaders commented that this was valuable because the high potentials typically do not have exposure to top level leaders in organizations. One leader commented, "The process should begin to break down walls where it's not about titles. It's more about being on the same team. 'What can I do to help you' and vice versa." The high potentials discussed this benefit in terms of the senior leader getting to know them and their talents and interests. One high potential summarized,

I think [the benefits are], one, to develop your personal and professional network. Two, good or bad, that senior leader has now formed an opinion about you. You're always hoping the positive. They have an opinion and understand your interests. Hopefully they walk away thinking that this is a person they'd like to be in touch with more in the future.

Impacts of the Touch Point Process on Talent Management

Impacts of the touch point process on talent management were examined in terms of retention and engagement, as self-reported in the survey and interview data. These findings are reported below.

Self-reported retention and engagement. Respondents were asked to indicate their feelings and intentions related to staying with the organization and their engagement in the organization (see Table 22). The highest scores were reported for the impact of touch points on intention to stay with the organization ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .75$), suggesting that the touch points had a positive to substantial positive impact. For most of the remaining items, which assessed general respondent engagement, scores ranged from 4.06 ($SD = .98$) for “overall, I am extremely satisfied with [the company] as a place to work,” to 4.26 ($SD = .85$) for “[the company] provides me with the opportunity for learning and development,” meaning that respondents agreed with these statements. Participants widely varied in whether they thought about looking for a new job with another company, although the mean score fell into a neutral to agreement range that they “rarely think about looking” ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.18$).

In comparison, high potentials who did not have a touch point in the previous 6 months reported lower scores than the study sample for referring a friend or family member ($N = 5$, $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.14$), satisfaction ($N = 5$, $M = 3.20$, $SD = .84$), and thinking about looking for another job ($N = 5$, $M = 2.80$, $SD = .84$). The small sample size for this latter group made statistical comparison of these mean scores impractical. Scores for the entire Aerospace group were lower on all items as compared to those for the study sample; however, the statistical significance of these differences could not be determined due to the lack of availability of the raw data for the entire population.

Nonetheless, these findings indicate that touch points may have an important impact on employee attitudes about the company.

Table 22

Respondents' Retention and Engagement

Impact	High potentials with Touch Points in previous 6 months			High potentials with no Touch Points in previous 6 months			Entire Aerospace Group	
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean ^c
Impact of touch point meetings on intention to stay with the organization ^a	35	4.29	0.75	5				
[The company] provides me with the opportunity for learning and development ^b	35	4.26	0.85	5	4.40	0.55	5,947	3.84
I feel proud to work for [the company] ^b	36	4.25	0.73	5	4.40	0.55	5,977	3.95
I can see a clear link between my work and the company's objectives ^b	36	4.14	0.90	5	4.40	0.55	5,949	3.96
I would gladly refer a good friend or family member to [the company] for employment ^b	36	4.08	0.91	5	3.60	1.14	5,974	3.77
Overall, I am extremely satisfied with [the company] as a place to work ^b	36	4.06	0.98	5	3.20	.84	5,976	3.80
I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company ^b	36	3.53	1.18	5	2.80	.84	5,970	3.46

^a1—substantial negative impact, 5—substantial positive impact; ^b1—strongly disagree, 5—strongly agree; ^cStandard deviation figures were not available for the entire population

These findings were examined to determine differences based on the touch point leader level, meeting recency, and meeting frequency. Only one significant difference was found, and it was based on touch point frequency (see Table 23). Respondents who

had only one or two touch points in the previous 6 months were significantly more likely to think about looking for a new job with another company ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.17$), compared to respondents who had three or more touch points in the previous 6 months ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .79$), $t(32) = -2.846$, $p < .01$.

Table 23

Perceived Beneficial Impacts of Touch Points Based on Meeting Frequency

	One to two N = 23 Mean (SD)	Three or more N = 11 Mean (SD)	t	df	p
I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company	3.17 (1.15)	4.27 (.79)	-2.846	32	.008**

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; **significant at the .01 level

Interview findings. Senior leaders were asked to identify the impact of the touch point process on talent management (see Table 24). Three impacts were identified. All six leaders reported that the touch points allow identification of talent and their development needs across the organization. One leader simply stated, “From a talent management perspective, it certainly gives me an appreciation of someone’s skills and abilities.” Another leader emphasized his desire to develop talent for the entire organization:

I don’t care where the talent ends up [e.g., whether it stays in my site or function, or whether it goes elsewhere in the company]. It’s just so important that we [in the company as a whole] have more talent. We can do so much more if we have more talent in the organization.

Another leader elaborated that after a touch point,

You’ve got more feedback and more impact on development needs and weaknesses. . . . It is a good refresher to better understand where he or she wants to go with their career, so when an opportunity does come about, we’re better prepared. We can speak more intelligently, not anecdotally about what an employee wants to do. I think too often we assume that Sally or Joe wants to move into this role.

Table 24

Touch Point Impacts on Talent Management: Senior Leader Interviews

Impacts on Talent Management	n
Allows identification of talent and their development needs across the organization	6
Allows presearching in advance of positions opening up	3
Allows employees' career aspirations to be known	2

N = 6

Three leaders stated that touch points allow for presearching, meaning finding qualified candidates in advance of positions opening up. One leader explained,

With the touch points, there's a lot more managers getting to know a lot more talent. So as there's opportunities in the organization, we all have people in our mind. We remember that person. "Here's someone I'm going to consider I might not have considered." I'll use the example with [John Doe] earlier, and so right now we're considering putting him in a front line leader role in a function he's never been leader for. He doesn't know anything about operations, but enough people have touched him talent-wise through touch points or working with him directly that we say, "This is good! This is good for [the company]. He's not going to come in and hit a home run on Day 1, but it's going to be good for the site, and it's going to be good for him. Succession planning is really kind of the same thing. You just get to learn, it allows you to consider people outside of the function, the succession not/of the function.

Two leaders also stated that touch points allow employees' career aspirations to be known. One leader explained how touch points enable senior leaders and high potentials to discover what these aspiring individuals really want to do:

A lot of people want to be a general manager. The aspiration to be a general manager is what some people are programmed to say. What you find out is that really may not be what a person wants to be. She could really understand that her true passion may lie in, for example, being a group controller. People become programmed where they know they're going to meet a senior leader so they think they've got to let them know that they want to be a general manager. "How can I be a general manager?" It gives us the chance to spend some good quality one-on-one time and coach them on what their best opportunities are. What can they do with their career? Where can they give the most value? Where can they feel most fulfilled? What can we do to help them get there?

Summary

This chapter reported the survey and interview findings of the study. The majority of the high potentials surveyed had touch points within the last six months, with 83% within the last 3 months. Perceived reasons for the touch points included the idea that leaders are expected to know and leverage talent, believing one has been recognized as a high potential in the organization, and senior leaders' perceived interest in engaging and retaining the employee. The majority of the discussions focused on the high potential's career, company strategy, learning and development, feedback, and coaching.

Participants noted benefits of the touch points for the company, for leaders, for high potentials, and for talent management and these benefits appeared to increase with the frequency with which touch points occurred. Benefits for the organization include retention and engagement. Leaders reported benefits of getting to know the talent for future opportunities or projects and enjoying the discussions. Perceived benefits of the specific topics to high potentials varied. In general high potentials reported gaining transparency about careers, honest and direct feedback, opportunities to observe and learn, visibility of their talent, recognition, and exposure to senior leaders. Additionally, touch points created a favorable influence on high potentials' views of leadership, their career, and their company.

Impacts of the touch point process for talent management include identification of talent and their development needs across the organization, presearching in advance of positions opening up, increasing awareness about employees' career aspirations in the company, and enhanced intentions to stay and optimism about their career at the company. The next chapter provides a discussion of these results.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study examined senior leaders' use of touch points with high potential employees as a retention tool. Three research questions were examined:

1. What are the characteristics of the touch point process?
2. What are the benefits of the touch point process for the study organization, its leaders, and its high potentials?
3. What are the impacts of the touch point process on talent management?

This chapter provides a discussion of the study results. Conclusions are presented first, followed by recommendations. Limitations of the study are then acknowledged and suggestions for continued research are offered.

Conclusions

Conclusions were drawn for each research question. Conclusions related to the characteristics of the touch point process are presented first, followed by conclusions for their benefits and the impacts of touch points for talent management.

Characteristics of the touch point process. The majority of the high potentials surveyed had had touch points within the previous 6 months, with 83% having had one within the previous 3 months. Leaders stated it was challenging to find time in their schedules to meet with talent on a regular basis; however, they agreed that it was important to make time. Moreover, the study findings indicate that leaders have indeed made the time to meet with the talent. In some cases, the employees may not recognize the conversation or other activity as a touch point because of its informality. This was the case with one study participant who reported not having had a touch point, although a senior leader did reach out to her and had a conversation. This reveals a limitation of the

present study, in that there are times when leaders conduct a touch point but the high potential does not recognize it as such.

The present study's findings are encouraging, given reports in past literature that few leaders are willing to make the time and commitment to interact with talent to develop them (Harris & Barnes, 2006; Thatcher, 2005). Melcrum noted that one of the top three challenges in organizations regarding talent management is getting leaders to communicate with employees (Thatcher, 2005). In the present study, several leaders pointed out that interacting with talent is a critical role leaders need to play, and the high potentials themselves reported this need as a driving factor for touch points. As such, the present study's findings are consistent with Satter and Russ's (2007) study, who showed that leaders saw mentoring as a critical part of their role and there were benefits to themselves.

It follows that leaders in the study organization have made it a priority to meet with talent in the organization, despite the demands on leaders' time. However, it is important to note that although leaders met rather frequently with the organization's high potentials, the leaders admitted during the interviews that they may not be as diligent in conducting the touch points if someone wasn't managing the process and providing oversight and accountability.

Reasons for meeting. The high potentials in this study gave a variety of reasons why they believed the senior leader conducted touch points. Several believed it was a cultural expectation within their organizations for leaders to do so. In addition, they believed that leaders saw them as high potential who made a contribution to the organization, had an interest in their career, and wanted to engage and retain them. This message seemed particularly salient for individuals who met with executives or had three

or more touch points within 6 months, as these individuals indicated to a significantly greater degree that leaders believed they had a lot of potential. Moreover, high potentials who met with executives (versus those who met with directors) believed to a significantly greater degree that a reason for the meeting was because the leader valued his or her contribution to the organization. These findings are consistent with research by Harris and Barnes (2006), which indicated that when a senior leader spends time with a lower-level employee, it is notable and sends a powerful message to employees. It can also be very motivating to have this one-on-one time with senior leaders.

Based on the combined findings from past literature and the present study, it can be concluded that people feel valued when leaders set aside time to interact with them. Knowing this has implications for leaders and organizations. For example, leaders who invest in meeting with high potential employees may also be demonstrating that they are interested in their employees' careers and the desires for them to be engaged and stay at the organization. The fact that they believed there to be an expectation of leader to invest their time in talent, models the expectations for them as they progress to these senior level roles. Thus, they are being groomed to do the same thing when they are senior leaders.

While the organization in this study doesn't explicitly tell someone that they are high potential, the individuals in this study inferred their value to the organization and their potential due to the fact that an executive met with them or they had frequent meetings with senior leaders. One could argue that this sends a strong message to the individual about their value to the organization and does not require the organization to talk about being "on a high potential list or off a high potential list." However, it remains important for high potentials to know they are highly regarded.

Brundage and Koziel (2010) added that for the full beneficial effects of touch points to take hold and become ingrained in the culture, the policies and practices in the organization also need to align with this philosophy. The potentially negative implication of high potentials viewing the touch points as an organizational expectation or requirement is that high potentials may perceive a lack of genuineness of leaders' interest in their career or that it is a "check the box" exercise. In fact, one person in the study indicated that he experienced that with a leader, who he perceived was just going through the motions of the touch point, but did not demonstrate a genuine interest in him or his career. That same individual contrasted this experience with the positive other interactions he has had with senior leaders. In addition, one of the senior leaders also emphasized that employees need to know that touch points are not about simply "checking the box."

Topics covered. The touch point toolkit provided to leaders outlines 12 suggested types of touch points to conduct. Despite the range of possibilities suggested, the majority of the discussions focused on the high potential's career, including his or her career interests, development, future and stretch opportunities, and general career guidance. Other topics included sharing of the organization's vision, priorities, and strategies. High potentials are focused on advancing their careers; therefore, having senior leaders help them navigate their career steps can benefit employees by helping them meet their potential and benefit the organization by building the talent pipeline.

Benefits of the touch point process. Several benefits of the touch points were noted as they concerned the company, the senior leaders, the high potentials, and talent management and these benefits appeared to increase with the frequency with which touch points occurred. Benefits for the organization include retention and engagement. Leaders

reported benefits of getting to know the talent for future opportunities or projects and enjoying the discussions. The benefits appeared to vary somewhat, depending upon the topics covered in the touch point. All the topics were considered beneficial, with invitations to special meetings receiving the highest ratings. In general, high potentials reported gaining transparency about careers, honest and direct feedback, opportunities to observe and learn, visibility of their talent, recognition, and exposure to senior leaders. Additionally, touch points created a favorable influence on high potentials' views of leadership, their career, and their company. These findings are consistent with past literature, in that senior leader touch points appear to help satisfy high potentials' drive for constant challenge, advancement, and ways for developing their skills and experience, thus favorably influencing retention and engagement (Juhdi, 2012; Lamoureux, 2006).

Moreover, the reported benefits lead to helpful talking points in encouraging senior leaders to do touch points. Such talking points may highlight that they are enjoyable and that they help senior leaders identify qualified talent in advance of positions opening. This benefit of touch points also can help increase confidence when filling positions internally.

Impacts of touch points for talent management. Impacts of the touch point process for talent management include identification of talent and their development needs across the organization, pre-searching in advance of positions opening up, increasing awareness about employees' career aspirations in the company, and enhanced intentions to stay and optimism about careers at the company. Touch points also had very favorable influence on high potentials' views of leadership. The findings for this research question again have implications for publicizing and advocating for the touch point program in that the benefits for talent management could be used to educate and re-

educate leaders about how to do it, why to do it, and what the outcomes are. Educating leaders is critical because, although touch points comprise a central piece of talent management, leaders must own and spearhead the process.

Recommendations

The study data emphasized the value of frequent touch points. Therefore, the case organization is advised to assure that high potentials are receiving touch points on a regular basis, ideally once per quarter to keep the discussion fresh in the individual's mind and have an impact on engagement and retention. It is helpful to establish a process to ensure that the high potentials are getting frequent touch points from leaders. At least some of these touch points should be with members of the executive team. Leaders should be continually reminded of the importance of career discussions because they benefit the organization, the high potential, and even the leader.

Leaders also should be encouraged to look for other opportunities to invite high potential employees to special meetings, events, and training. For example, an easy way to do this is for leaders to tell their administrative assistants to invite two high potentials to their senior leader staff meetings and other events that high potentials would consider valuable. As a general principle, leaders are encouraged to build trust with the talent in the organization and to demonstrate their interest in high potentials' careers to facilitate the engagement of talent and mitigate circumstances that may influence the individual to leave the organization.

As emphasized in past literature and in the study findings, senior leaders play a crucial role in talent management. However, because they are very busy, the process needs to be as easy as possible for them. Organizations need to be prepared to offer

support for scheduling, monitoring, and reminding leaders about touch points that make these important contacts easy for them.

Creation of a program sponsor (ideally a fellow senior leader or executive) who advocates for, oversees, and assures compliance with the program is likely to enhance the program's implementation and success. Even with a smooth administrative process supporting it, the touch points may not happen if awareness and advocacy are missing. Advocacy for the program may be promoted by collecting leader testimonials about the benefits of touch points for the organization, leaders, and high potentials. These testimonials could be written statements or video clips.

Limitations

The study was based on a small sample of high potentials and senior leaders within one organization; therefore, the findings cannot be assumed to be representative of the entire population of high potentials across industries, organizations, or locations. Additional research would need to be conducted to produce more generalizable findings.

Several limitations pertained to the questionnaire. First, few participants had five or more touch points and the questionnaire had forced choice options that did not allow further discernment. Similarly, the survey offered forced choice options for the reasons for touch points as well as other questions. Although an option of "other" was offered when forced choice options were offered, most participants did not select this option. Thus, the full range of perceived reasons may not have been captured. Additionally, the possible topics covered in the touch points were not defined. Therefore, participants might not have been consistently rating and evaluating the impact of these topics. Finally, the benefit rating scale options were: not beneficial, somewhat beneficial, neutral, very beneficial, and extremely beneficial. The lack of an answer choice of "beneficial"

potentially confounded the data, as those who found something “beneficial” were forced to choose “neutral” or “very beneficial,” thus inflating, deflating, or merely confounding the results.

Bias also was a concern in this process, as the researcher created the touch point process and her dual role as program creator and researcher may have consciously or subconsciously influenced the senior leaders to give overly favorable answers, such as emphasizing the value of touch points or the benefits or enjoyment of the process. (The high potentials were not aware that the researcher created the process.) Future research could be conducted by a perceived neutral party to enhance validity of the data.

Suggestions for Continued Research

A leading suggestion for research is to conduct the study again, correcting for the limitations of the present study. This includes expanding the sample within the case organization and, if results generalizable across industries and organizations are desired, expanding the sample to include more organizations. An improved questionnaire should be used that defines a *touch point*, collects the exact number (versus a range) of touch points completed within a certain time period, gathers open-ended responses about the benefits and topics covered, and is conducted by a neutral third party.

Although 12 possible topics for touch points have been suggested to leaders, not all 12 topics were represented in the study data. It would be helpful to gain a deeper understanding about the impacts of each topic and, if certain topics are not being covered, why they are not.

Moreover, additional research could be conducted on particular aspects of the process, such as the impact of (a) employees being informed of their high potential status, (b) specific design elements responsible for beneficial effects and what tools or other aids

would assist in this discussion, (c) various media (e.g., in person, video chat, telephone) on touch point outcomes, (d) the use of tools such as touch point scorecards to raise awareness and drive accountability for program, and (e) the impact of touch points of high potentials from different generations.

Other factors indicated as important in this research should be further examined in future research, such as the differential impact of meeting with executives versus directors, the frequency of touch points, and employee awareness that it is a touch point (versus any other kind of meeting). Additional research should gather more in-depth data about the benefits of touch points for leaders.

Conclusion

Competition for high potential talent is heating up as baby boomers exit the workforce. Therefore, it is critical that senior leaders are engaged in retaining talent. While senior leaders have many competing demands for their time, it is important for them to make touch points with high potentials a top priority. These touch points provide many benefits for the company, for leaders, for high potentials, and for talent management within the organization.

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Appendix A: High Potential Survey

1. Title:

2. Have you had any one-on-one discussions with a senior leader in our organization within the last three months (NOT including regular business meetings)?

Yes No

3. How long ago was the most recent discussion?

- Within the last month
- Last 2-3 months
- Last 4-6 months
- N/A

4. If yes, how many times

1-2

3-4

5+

5. What type of topics were covered?

What impact did this have on you?

<input type="checkbox"/> Career Discussion	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Coaching	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Feedback	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Suggested development actions	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Sharing of organization strategy	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Invite to special event or meeting	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (write in)	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A

6. What makes these one-on-one discussions most impactful? (Check all that apply)

- Transparency about my career
- Honest and direct feedback
- Opportunity to express opinions to senior leaders
- Opportunity to brainstorm ideas with senior leaders
- Opportunity to observe and learn from senior leaders
- N/A
- Other (write in)

7. Why do you think the senior leader met with you one-on-one? (Check all that apply)

- They want to get to know me better
- They want to help me with my career
- They value my contribution to the organization
- They believe I have a lot of potential
- They want to help with my development
- They want to provide feedback to me
- They want me to stay with the company
- They want me to help with a project
- They wanted to share the vision and focus of the future of the business
- Other (write in)

8. What would best describe how you feel about your career with [the company] after these type of discussions? (choose all that apply and rate the items on their benefit to you.)

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------|-----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> More confident about my ability to be successful at [the company] | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| | Not beneficial | Somewhat Beneficial | Neutral | Very beneficial | Extremely beneficial | N/A |
- | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------|-----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> More confident about the company's support for my career | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| | Not beneficial | Somewhat Beneficial | Neutral | Very beneficial | Extremely beneficial | N/A |
- | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------|-----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> More confident that I am in line to fill one or more critical roles | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| | Not beneficial | Somewhat Beneficial | Neutral | Very beneficial | Extremely beneficial | N/A |
- | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------|-----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> That I am part of [the company]'s future | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| | Not beneficial | Somewhat Beneficial | Neutral | Very beneficial | Extremely beneficial | N/A |
- | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------|-----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> That the company is committed to my development | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| | Not beneficial | Somewhat Beneficial | Neutral | Very beneficial | Extremely beneficial | N/A |

- There are more questions and concerns about my career with [the company]

1	2	3	4	5	6
Not beneficial	Somewhat Beneficial	Neutral	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial	N/A

9. Comments:

10. What influence do these type of discussions have on your intent to stay with the organization?*

1	2	3	4	5
Substantial negative impact	Some negative impact	Neutral (no impact on how I feel)	Some positive impact	Substantial positive impact

11. Overall, I am extremely satisfied with [the company] as a place to work	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
12. I would gladly refer a good friend or family member to [the company] for employment	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
13. I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
14. I feel proud to work for [the company]	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
15. My senior leader demonstrates an active interest in my personal/career development	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
16. I can see a clear link between my work and the company's objectives	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
17. [the company] provides me with the opportunity for learning and development	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

18. What general comments do you have about the opportunity to meet with senior leaders in the organization on a one-on-one basis focused on you and your career with [the company]?

19. Name

Appendix B: High Potential Interview

Opening

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am conducting this interview as a part of my thesis in partial fulfillment of my master's degree in organization development at Pepperdine University. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any of my questions, at any time, for any reason.

All of your responses will be kept confidential and not associated with you or your name. I will be using the data for my study and will be aggregating the results. In addition, I will be providing a high level summary of my findings to the leadership of the organization - but with no reference to names or any other identifier that would break your confidentiality.

With your consent, I would like to audio record the conversation so that I can focus on your responses and not be distracted with note taking. If you are uncomfortable with this in any way, I would be happy not to record it. I would like your honest responses, and if the recording would hinder that please let me know and I will not audio record it, but will simply take notes.

Are you okay with the audio recording, or would you prefer that I just take notes?

Okay, let's get started!

Warm up

1. How long have you been with [the company]?
2. How long have you been in your current position?
3. What would you say you like best about working for [the company]?

Characteristics of Touch Points

4. When was the last time you had a one-on-one discussion with a senior leader in the organization?
5. What was the nature of the discussion?
6. How often do you have one-on-one discussions that are specifically about you, your career and future at [the company]?
7. Can you give me an example of one of these discussions?
8. How are these type of discussions initiated?
9. Why do you think senior leaders in the organization have these type of discussions with you?

Impacts of Touch Points

10. What are the benefits to you?
11. What impact do they have on you personally?
12. What influence do they have on your decision to stay at [the company]?

Closing

13. Is there anything else you believe is important to share on this topic that I haven't asked?

Appendix C: Senior Leader Interview

Opening

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am conducting this interview as a part of my thesis in partial fulfillment of my master's degree in organization development at Pepperdine University. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any of my questions, at any time, for any reason.

All of your responses will be kept confidential and not associated with you or your name. I will be using the data for my study and will be aggregating the results. In addition, I will be providing a high level summary of my findings to the leadership of the organization, but with no reference to names or any other identifier that would break your confidentiality.

With your consent, I would like to audio record the conversation so that I can focus on your responses and not be distracted with note taking. If you are uncomfortable with this in any way, I would be happy not to record it. I would like your honest responses, and if the recording would hinder that please let me know and I will not audio record it, but will simply take notes.

Are you okay with the audio recording, or would you prefer that I just take notes?

Okay, let's get started!

Characteristics of Touch Point Process

1. We have been asking senior leaders to conduct one-on-one touch points with our high potentials for quite a while now, what do you think about the process?
2. How would you describe the nature of the discussions?
3. How difficult is it for you to set time to conduct the touch points?
4. What makes it challenging? How do you overcome those challenges?

Organizational and Leader Benefits

5. What impact do you think the touch point meeting has?
6. What benefit do you get from conducting the touch points?
7. What benefit do you think the organization gets from the touch points?

Employee Benefits and Impacts

8. What impact do you think they have on employees?
9. What benefit do you think the employee gets from the touch points?

10. How would you describe the reaction of employees when you conduct the touch points?
11. What feedback if any have you received from high potentials with whom you've conducted one or more touch points?

Impacts on Talent Management

12. What concerns do you have about talent shortages and [the company]'s ability to attract talent?
13. What role do you see senior leaders having in engagement and retention of talent, in general?
14. What impact on talent management and succession planning do these discussions have?
15. Do you believe they have an impact on employee retention?

Closing

16. What do you think we should do differently with touch points if anything?
17. What else would you say about the use of touch points?
18. If you could tell other leaders about conducting touch points, what would you say?