Harvard Business Review

REPRINT R1703E
PUBLISHED IN HBR
MAY–JUNE 2017

ARTICLE
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The Talent Curse

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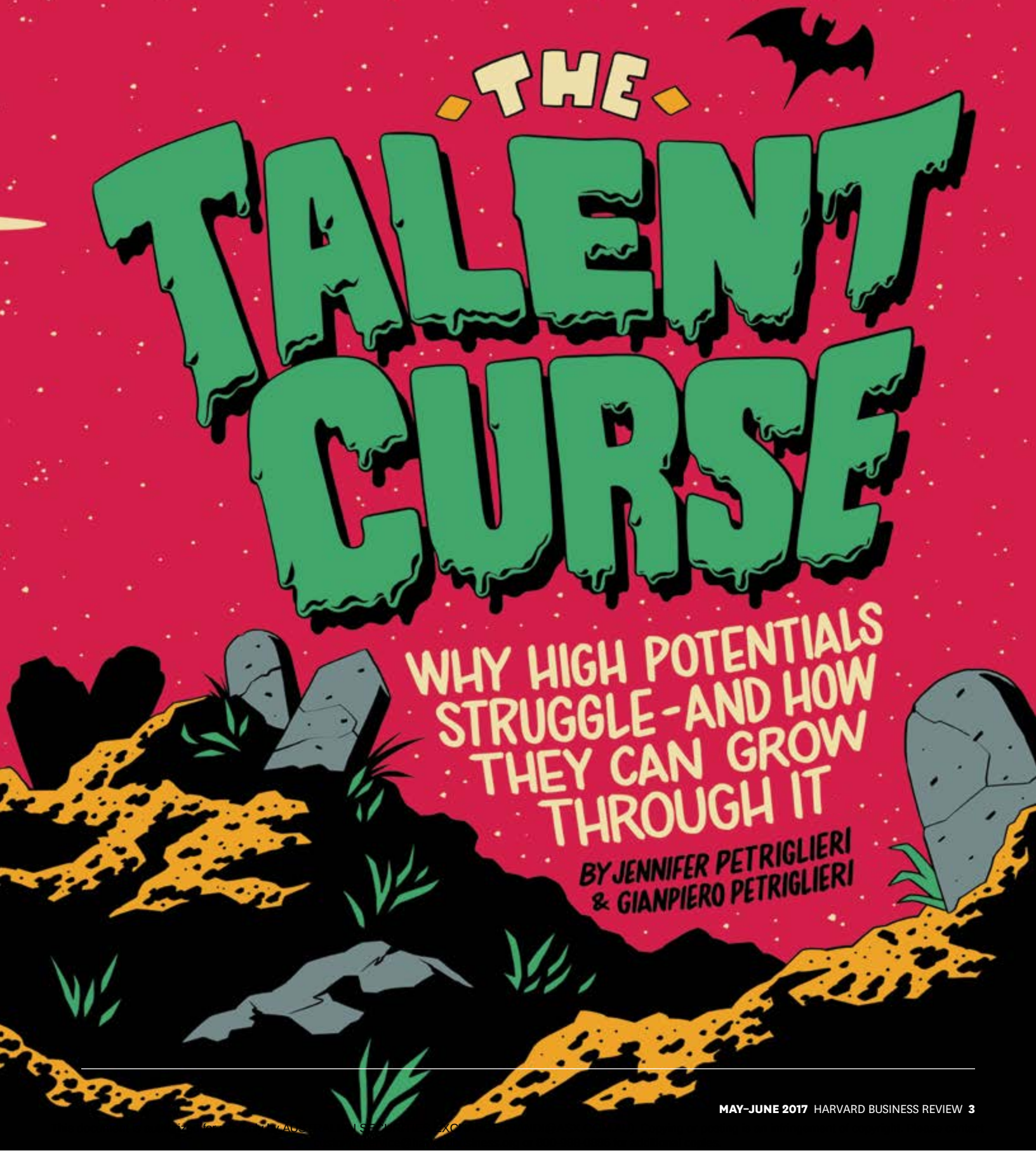

THE TALENT CURSE

WHY HIGH POTENTIALS STRUGGLE—AND HOW THEY CAN GROW THROUGH IT

BY JENNIFER PETRIGLIERI & GIANPIERO PETRIGLIERI

during Thomas's time at a private equity firm, but two of them really stand out. On the first, he was at a bar.

Earlier in the day, his boss had let him know that he was the top performer in his cohort. Over drinks that evening, he struck up a conversation with a partner at a rival firm. "You're the guy who closed two deals in six months, aren't you?" the man asked. It was a moment Thomas had dreamed of and worked for since leaving his small town for college, the first in his family, years before.

On the second, he was at his desk, working on a high-profile IPO. He was the only associate on the deal—the kind of assignment reserved for top talent on the firm's fast track to partnership. Dawn was breaking, and he had no memory of the past six hours, even though his e-mail and phone logs chronicled a busy all-nighter. A neurologist later ran some tests and warned him of the dangers of sleep deprivation. "I would go to bed at five, wake up at seven with palpitations, and go to work," Thomas recalled. "I never stopped to think that it was wrong. It's how it works, I told myself. Everyone does it."

Thomas slowed down briefly after the doctor's warning but soon came back full throttle. His talent and drive were intact, though somehow he'd lost his sense of purpose. He created an opportunity for the firm to do a $1.3 billion deal, and then surprised his bosses by suddenly quitting. His performance was strong and his prospects bright as ever, but as he put it when we spoke, he had fallen victim to a vicious cycle: "I did not want to step off the fast track, so I could not slow down." Thomas felt trapped by his firm's expectations, but his desire to prove deserving of his bosses' endorsement kept him from challenging the culture or asking for support. He felt both overwhelmed and underutilized, and concluded that this firm was not the right place to realize his leadership ambitions.

In our two decades of studying and working with "future leaders" like Thomas, we've met many people who struggle with what appears to be their good fortune. In most cases, these managers and professionals have been accurately identified as star performers and fast learners. But often, placement on a fast track doesn't speed up their growth as leaders in the organization, as it's meant to do. Instead, it either pushes them out the door or slows them down—thwarting their development, decreasing their engagement, and hurting their performance.

In an age when companies wage wars for talent, it is hard to acknowledge that for some people, being recognized as talented turns out to be a curse. But it does. Aspiring leaders work hard to live up to others' expectations, and so the qualities that made them special to begin with—those that helped them excel and feel engaged—tend to get buried. They behave more like everyone else, which saps their energy and ambition. They may start simply going through the motions at work—or, like Thomas, look for an escape hatch.

This curse strikes the talented even in companies that invest heavily in their development—places where executives are sincerely dedicated to helping people thrive. We began to notice it long ago, when one of us (Jennifer) worked in various multinationals and the other (Gianpiero) practiced as a psychotherapist in a global MBA program. Since then, we've studied hundreds of managers and professionals from various sectors and parts of the world—many of whom we have followed over time—and met thousands more in our teaching, consulting, and coaching engagements. Through that work with high potentials, we've examined talent development from their perspective and identified common psychological dynamics, signs of trouble, and ways of breaking the curse.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THE CURSE

Often, the curse begins when an organization gives an employee a platform to hone his or her skills in hopes of earning some reward, such as partnership, a senior leadership position, or just a broader range of career options. Although that person is flattered and grateful at first, a resentful angst eventually sets in—a feeling that's difficult to explain or justify. It's not garden-variety uncertainty, which you'd expect of anyone facing new challenges; the roots reach much deeper, into the self.

Two psychological mechanisms, idealization and identification, turn out to be a destructive combination for high potentials: Others idealize their talent as a defense against the company's uncertain future, and then the high potentials identify with that image, shouldering the uncertainty themselves. That's what happened to Thomas. After his early successes brokering deals, his bosses and colleagues began to see him as a rainmaker the firm could rely on in the volatile PE world. The combination of idealization and identification is evident in many workplaces where people praise the promise of the talented, and the talented feel the burden of their promise. If the future isn't as bright as everyone hoped, it will be they who have failed.

As their talent increasingly defines them, high potentials sense that their own future is at stake too. They fixate on what they should do to ensure their place in the organization. Though these expectations might be amplified in their minds, they aren't simply self-imposed. They're spelled out in lists of company values and competencies, which up-and-coming leaders are meant to model, and reinforced through performance feedback and informal interactions.

Lars, a rising star at a manufacturing company, explained it like this at a leadership workshop: "One day I'm told that those like me must transform the way we do business; the next day, that I must make sure that the executives whose business I must transform appreciate me."

We often hear this sort of thing. In companies whose executives want strong cultures and rapid change, talented managers feel pressured both to be revolutionaries and to win the establishment's approval. The inherent tension between those pursuits wears people down. Their sensitivity to cultural and political cues—part of the reason they've been flagged as future leaders—makes them especially vulnerable once they're on that track.

Every opportunity becomes an obligation; every challenge, a test. The high potential strives to be a perfect manager, now suppressing the very talents—the passions and idiosyncrasies—that made her stand out in the first place. And so the curse twists talent management against its intent. Rather than empowering those who deserve to lead, it increases their insecurity and pushes them to conform, like a protection racket of sorts—a company's costly demands in exchange for safety from the threats that working there presents. "Future leader" becomes a synonym for "exceptional follower."

IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

When people are groomed as future leaders, they often feel trapped by others' expectations and fixate on proving themselves worthy. Sometimes they end up blandly conforming to their organization's established leadership ideal and losing their edge. Sometimes they leave altogether, depriving themselves of an opportunity and the organization of their talent.

THE REMEDY

High potentials struggle with this "talent curse" again and again as they take on new roles and challenges. But they can grow from the experience by accepting the help they need to thrive, bringing all facets of themselves to the job (not just those that say "leadership material"), and treating the present like a final destination.

THREE SIGNS OF TROUBLE

You must have high standards for yourself and be ready for extra scrutiny—no aspiring leader can ignore others' expectations. But you can shine only so long under the spotlight of opportunity and the magnifying glass of expectations before burning out—unless you put some protections in place. That requires learning to spot and deal with three signs of trouble.

1 A shift from simply using your talent to proving it. After being placed in a high-potential pool, you may find that your excitement about the recognition soon fades, whereas the new expectations create ongoing pressure. That's what typically happens. Caught between the acknowledgment of their past achievements and the possibility of future opportunities, aspiring leaders often view the present as a time to prove that they deserve both. In an effort to ensure that they fulfill their promise, they become more calculating about where and how they apply themselves.

Companies with a formal high-potential track aren't the only places where this happens. In some organizations, senior executives just take an interest in certain employees, and things snowball from there. Take Laura, who left halfway through a PhD program in artificial intelligence to try her hand in the business world. Laura joined a consultancy and then moved on to a role in the strategy function of a consumer goods company. About a year into that new job, her boss's boss recognized her skills in data analytics. So he brokered an introduction that led Laura into a role managing digital marketing for one of the company's floundering products.

"It was as if everything came together in that moment," Laura told us. Her understanding of data analytics and her experience in business strategy made her a great fit for the job. All she had to do now was deliver. Succeeding in her new role, the hiring executive assured her, would "open every door in this industry." The pressure was on.

Laura then fell into a spiral of overwork, anxious to show others—and herself—that she could handle the challenge. Although sales grew, she felt that no one noticed her dedication and results. Perhaps, she thought, her work wasn't impressive enough. "I feared that people were nice to me," she said, "but didn't have the guts to tell me that maybe I had plateaued, that my time was up." This was hardly what others thought. Accustomed to her competent and composed demeanor, her bosses and colleagues assumed that she needed little help. And they were more than happy to let her carry on, praising her independence and initiative without realizing the struggle beneath both.

In her seminal research, Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has drawn a distinction between a performance orientation and a learning orientation. When children believe that their intelligence is a fixed quantity, she found, they tend to become easily discouraged by tough school assignments and give up quickly on the problems they cannot easily solve. Children who sense that their intelligence is malleable, conversely, stay on those problems longer, seeing them as a way to keep improving. Those with a performance orientation are embarrassed by failure, whereas those with a learning orientation are spurred on by it—they work harder. The same is true for adults at work, Dweck found.

The amplified expectations that high potentials internalize are a classic circumstance that, Dweck's research predicts, will elicit a performance orientation. Though Laura and many others we have studied didn't give up on hard challenges or stop striving to develop their skills, their learning itself became a performance of sorts—a way of affirming their talent. As a result, extra experiments and side projects—which could further expand their skills but also reveal their flaws—began to feel like risks they could not afford.

This is how special people become ordinary. After being placed on the partnership track at a global firm, one consultant recalled, "I knew I could succeed, so I focused on where I knew my talents shone. It was great in the short term, but over time I began to lose my edge."

The pressure is even stronger for minorities, who may also feel obligated to serve as role models and advocates for those whose talent often goes unseen. Consider how a female junior partner in a male-dominated elite law firm changed her mindset after finding out she was in the running to become an equity partner. "I have no doubt that I deserve a place at the table," she told us, "but I feel totally paralyzed. I am being very conservative because I feel that if I fail at anything, I will let everyone down." She knew she was a role model for other women, which raised the stakes even more. Rather than expand her expertise, she stuck to areas where she knew she would perform well and to clients with whom she had established relationships. When she was not able to bring in the number of new clients expected from an equity partner, her career progress slowed.

2 A preoccupation with image despite a yearning for authenticity. An investment banker who ended up leaving his firm told us, "I was always in the spotlight, always performing, always trying to be the leader they expected me to be." Though he had worked very hard to get to that visible position, once on the fast track, he felt strangely invisible. It was as if the firm had hijacked his identity along with his ambition. As he put it, "No one saw the real me."

The preoccupation with image is a natural consequence of the pressure to prove one's talent—and it's a common problem, our INSEAD colleague Herminia Ibarra has found in her research on leadership transitions. At most firms, the promise of future leadership is bestowed on those who conform to the desired organizational culture—the values and vision established by those at the top. So while many companies invite employees to "bring themselves" to work, people on a high-potential track often bring only those aspects that say "leadership material"—and this makes them feel inauthentic.

This isn't a problem just for those uncomfortable with "faking it" until they acquire new leadership skills—which, as Ibarra argues, can actually help people discover new facets of themselves. It can also happen to people who take on roles that seem like a natural fit. Laura, the data scientist, could easily put forward the problem-solving, data-driven self that her company valued. But there was more to her than that. No matter how fitting the role, when people continually display just one aspect of themselves, it flattens and limits them. That happened to Laura. By being true to just part of her identity—on demand—she lost her sense of ownership and spontaneity.

Like many others caught in this position, Laura considered leaving and fantasized about getting a job where she would be "free to be myself." In one study we conducted with CEIBS professor Jack Wood, in which we followed a cohort of MBAs for a year, nearly half the participants said that they sought a similar escape. They hoped business school would provide a retreat—a space where they could discover and recover who they really were.

In her classic research, psychologist Alice Miller examined what she provocatively labeled "the drama of the gifted child." She described how inquisitive and intelligent children often learn to hide their feelings and needs to meet their doting parents' expectations. They do this so well that over time they no longer know what they feel and need. The sense of

emptiness and alienation that Miller chronicled resembles what we have encountered among high-potential managers: Paradoxically, being recognized as talented robs them of their talents. Their talents still exist but are no longer their own; they belong to a distant and demanding organizational "parent."

3 Postponement of meaningful work. When people feel trapped by their organization's expectations and anticipate great rewards for enduring that captivity with dignity, the present loses meaning for them. They begin to locate their dreams for recovering and expressing themselves in the future—when they will finally, they hope, be free to say what they mean, relate to others openly, fulfill their true calling, and lead as they have wanted to all along.

Some just wait for the numbness to dissipate. Others harbor flourishing images of what they will do once they've quit the rat race—goals they share with only a few trusted friends for fear that those dreams, too, might be hijacked. This amounts to what Jungian analyst H.G. Baynes labeled, long ago, the "neurosis of the provisional life": While developing leaders view their current work as instrumental to future opportunities, they imagine that their future work will be much more meaningful. Who they will be becomes more important than who they are. The present loses value, so they stop giving their best.

By the time the engaged self escapes to the future, the talent curse has taken hold. While the high potential might appear immersed in her work, she is sealed off from it. And if she continues to view her present work as empty, not even leaving the organization will help. In the study we mentioned earlier, people who had begun an MBA program in search of a retreat found themselves caught in the same spiral of striving to meet expectations that they resented, and dreaming of other escapes. "Every day I woke up and wanted to leave," one participant recalled. "I wanted to go and tell no one."

Another explained how he began to second-guess his past choices. "When I finished my undergraduate degree," he recalled, "I got arguably the most enviable job in my class, and of course I took it. It was the prestigious thing to do. I never really sat back and thought, Do I really want to do this?" He was hoping to transition out—somehow. He didn't know where he'd go, but he imagined that almost any option must be better than where he was.

THE HIGH POTENTIAL STRIVES TO BE A PERFECT MANAGER, NOW SUPPRESSING THE VERY TALENTS THAT MADE HER STAND OUT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

When Laura told us her story, she talked about maybe returning to finish her PhD—immediately after wondering if she could be a COO one day. It was as if the thought of another step in her career progression demanded a counterthought of escape, a way out for the self from a job she excelled at and an organization that valued her work.

BREAKING THE TALENT CURSE

Though the curse can hamper the personal growth, engagement, and career progress of the most gifted high potentials, it can be broken. We recommend three steps:

1 Own your talent—don't be possessed by it. Once your talent becomes your identity, every challenge to it (there will be plenty if you are stretching to learn) feels like a challenge to the self. As Laura put it when one peer questioned her ability, "It struck me to my core." Slavishly bowing to everyone's expectations, including your own, is no solution; you'll just become a follower of what you believe others want. Nor is ignoring those expectations; at best, you will be seen as a rebel. Instead, remain mindful of what you need and what others want—without allowing either to consume you.

Striking that balance often involves learning how to accept help, even when you don't think you need it, rather than going it alone. This is something that Michael Sanson, an executive coach at INSEAD, emphasizes with his clients. "A key shift occurs," he says, "when a high potential realizes that his or her role is not to deliver more than others, but to deliver more *with* others." People sometimes resist feedback and coaching, he explains, because they view both as vehicles for more expectations. When they begin to see the input not as judgment but as a source of support, they become great listeners and fast learners—which helps them perform better and grow as leaders.

2 Bring your whole self, not just your best self, to work. It's tempting to show only the shiny, polished facets of ourselves—especially when we value them and others appreciate them. But our greatest talents often spring from wounds and quirks, from the rougher, less conformist sides of ourselves. Much resolve flows from restlessness, creativity from angst, and resilience from having faced challenges we'd rather not share. Managers who are empathetic (and thus great with people) sometimes get overwhelmed by emotions. Don't fight these darker sources of your talent. Learn to channel them.

The last time we spoke to Thomas, the former private equity associate, he was transitioning into the field of talent management. He brought his business acumen to it, but also a deep personal understanding

of how organizations can boost or hinder employees' growth, and vice versa. His firsthand struggle to develop and thrive at his old firm gave him insight that allowed him to help others develop and thrive. He was no longer just gifted. He was purposeful and revitalized.

3 Value the present. This is the most important step in breaking the curse. Ask yourself: What if this is it? What if my current work is not a stepping-stone, but a destination? You must invest in the work you're doing now—make it matter—in order to grow from the experience.

Look at the expectations, the pressures, and the doubts you face as challenges that all leaders face. They aren't tests for leadership; they are features of leading. They won't go away once you prove yourself worthy—they'll only intensify. So now is the time to muster the resources you'll need to manage them over the long run. And accept that even with plenty of resources, leading will always require courage. As Mette Stuhr, a former head of talent management at a multinational corporation who has taught and coached scores of high potentials all over the world, puts it: "If you wait for it to be safe to speak up, you never will."

A RITE OF PASSAGE

For all the pain it causes and the risks it entails, the talent curse is a rite of passage. Breaking the curse is an important part of learning how to lead. And it's an ongoing process—high potentials must do this again and again as they grow into new roles.

Let's return to Laura's example: During a team retreat, she finally took the plunge and confessed that she was thinking about leaving. In a well-rehearsed argument, she explained how the structure of her department was creating friction between her and two peers. Much to her surprise, what she thought might become a farewell speech was very well received. Voicing her concerns paid off. The structure changed. She stayed.

Soon after that, Laura was offered a bigger role leading a team of five managers, with 52 people below them. She felt energized at first, because she could have an impact on the whole company. But then new doubts started gnawing at her—and again, she asked for no support. Six months into the new role, she had not yet negotiated her package. "I got a great job," she said. "What would they think if I worried about the contract, the salary, and things like that?" Upholding her image as a passionate go-getter prevented her from making arrangements to succeed. "I have not yet proved myself," she said. "How can I ask for more? I should be grateful."

Once more, an opportunity turned into a burden, and Laura became sad and frustrated. Neither her boss nor her organization had intended any of this. They had been happy to give a stretch assignment to an ambitious and responsible young manager. They did not maliciously withdraw support, but they didn't encourage her to seek it, either. They never invited her to take it a little easier or told her that she shouldn't expect to get everything right. And so they reinforced her modus operandi.

That brings us to our final point: Organizations should do their part to break the curse too. They should stop referring to talented young managers as "future leaders," since it encourages bland conformity, risk-averse thinking, and stilted behavior. They should stop offering responsibility in the present with the promise of authority later on. And they should allow people room to deviate from the image of leadership that others have drawn. That will ease the pressure for managers to prove their talent, freeing them to simply use it—to engage with their work and grow into better leaders.

The best way to develop leaders, in the end, is to help them lead. The best way to learn to lead is to accept that help in the here and now. **HBR Reprint** R1703E

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