

The Nature Of Potential

by Adrian Savage in HR.COM

More than a decade ago, Adrian Savage co-founded the forerunner of PNA, Inc with the goal of clarifying the way people view employee and organization potential. Mr. Savage drew on a background in senior management positions in diverse organizations, and used his experience with complex organizational structures to develop fresh ways of understanding what allows companies to achieve optimum performance.

Mr. Savage was quickly convinced that the primary blocks to optimum performance are lack of any clear future direction, and the habits we form from what has worked for us in the past. This visionary believed that employees can align themselves more successfully with their commitments and the opportunities available to them by exploring their unused talents and fundamental values. In understanding these principles, employees can start to realize their potential and make the kind of contribution that fully reflects their ability, helping themselves and their organization achieve new levels of business success.

As a result of his lifelong interest and research in individual development, Mr. Savage created The Potentia System (TPS), a qualitative diagnostic approach that produces a clear picture of potential in individuals, teams and organizations; and NetTPS, which uses the Internet to deliver the benefits of TPS through certified NetTPS Solutions Providers. Both PNA organizational development solutions are based on three key principles: examining unused options and possibilities, replacing automatic habitual actions with deliberate choice and using natural strengths to go beyond current comfort zones.

This is a competitive world. There are clear winners. Rewards for success are visible and well understood. One of the areas of greatest interest has been why winners win, and whether it is possible to identify potential winners before their accomplishments reveal them. After all, the organization that can find and utilize more than its share of winners will surely have a great advantage, just as the sports team with the most talented players win more games.

Potential is abundant

Historically people have suggested that there is a natural and unchangeable supply of talent, limited to the charmed circle of the gifted. You either have it or you do not. If you are in the latter category, there is nothing you can do about it. Our research shows that this observation is far too pessimistic. People change, grow and develop all the time. We all have abundant talents—far more than we use—and can develop still more. Potential is possibility and possibility is everywhere.

Three powerful misconceptions about the nature of potential and how it can be accessed hinder us from realizing to the fullest our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, at least in the sphere of work and careers. These misconceptions can easily prevent us from accomplishing what we want. Stepping around them and realizing more of our potential allows us to make a

contribution that is valuable and appreciated. It will also allow us to see that we can develop our potential for as long as we wish. The good news is that we can easily clear the negative concepts out of the way and put better ones in their place. To do so, we need a stronger, clearer and more rational grasp of the true nature and extent of potential, free from preconceptions and misconceptions.

This paper discusses how to replace the most common misconceptions about potential with an approach based on more than 15 years of work with high potential, high achieving people throughout the world.

Don't allow fixed expectations to limit your potential

The first misconception is that potential is a fixed point somewhere in the future. We often speak of someone having potential for senior positions. Perhaps—even more specifically—of someone having the potential to be, say, CEO. This implies that only by reaching that particular post will his or her potential be realized. People plan whole careers around expectations and opinions of this kind. Organizations establish complex succession plans, grooming people for desired future roles.

I have been working for several hours with a senior executive in a large healthcare organization. Yesterday she was told that she would not get the top role she had been expecting. She is so disappointed that she has been crying quietly for almost an hour.

We have been reviewing a report summarizing her values and the habits of thinking and action she has formed into a 'comfort zone' over the years. Our aim is to explore the range of possibilities that might allow her to achieve what is truly important to her. Slowly, as she tells me about the commitments to which she is most attracted, she becomes more animated and engaged.

I suggest that she replace her automatic expectations about the future with conscious choices, based around the challenges that excite her most. By the second session, she has a plan for her future that involves specific development geared to a radically different set of goals—goals based on a detailed exploration of where she is most likely to feel challenged and engaged.

Two months later, she applies for another role, to head a new teaching unit that will supply trained, specialist nurses to hospitals on a regional basis. After a week, she calls me to say she has been appointed. It is a far bigger role than the one that she was so sad to have missed. It is a far better match with her values and new plans for her future. She is elated. Six months later I hear that she is performing even better than everyone hoped.

Life is extremely uncertain. All attempts to forecast the future fail more often than they succeed. Setting our eyes on a single goal and achieving it through every obstacle is the stuff of heroic novels and films. It makes a great story, and it certainly happens sometimes. It is like betting your life savings on a single horse in a tough race. If the horse wins, that is fine; if it loses, you have just lost everything you own.

It makes little sense to fix our expectations and hopes on a single point in the future, maybe without truly understanding the situation we tell ourselves we desire. If it does not work out, the sense of failure can be very hard to live with. . Even if it does work out, what we so earnestly desire may not live up to our hopes. It is far better to review many options and be constantly alert to opportunities that may arise, sometimes unexpectedly. The waste of commitment, energy and ability from unmet expectations is sometimes enough to undermine the future of a whole corporation. The best people leave. Those who remain feel cheated of something they had come to see as a right. The result can be both lowered commitment and inferior performance. It is simply not necessary. By replacing fixed expectations with a constant exploration of what will allow us to make that next step forward and build an even stronger contribution, the future will always contain more hopeful options than we can utilize.

Once we are free from a fixed set of expectations, we have the flexibility to seize opportunities as they come. Knowing what we already do well and where we can still develop promotes self-confidence. If we align ourselves with the fundamental values that we hold most dear, the result is an alert, strongly motivated and powerfully optimistic viewpoint—whatever the future brings.

Potential is indefinable

The second misconception is based on believing that we can categorize and define potential. We want potential to be defined only as what we say it is, whether that is a result of research or based on our own opinions and experience.

I am sitting uneasily with the Head of Human Resources for a major insurance company. He is telling me that he is unhappy about the development of their high potential staff. The organization has followed exactly the instructions laid down by a respected authority on leadership potential, training people to take a strategic viewpoint and develop the skills needed to handle complex analyses. Now most of these people are performing poorly. Several have already left.

We have completed role profiles on the key positions these people are filling. As we look carefully at the reports, and discuss what he sees, it becomes clear that most of these roles have little or no strategic aspect. They are involved mostly with handling well-understood tasks. Their most demanding leadership challenges lie in building relationships and motivating others. It is going to take success in these roles to open the door to the relatively few roles where genuine strategic thinking is required.

He sits back, fascinated and slightly appalled. He says the organization has been grooming people for a future that is probably unrelated to what is actually required. He can now see that it has lots of good people who can handle the real demands of these roles, many more than the few who have been labeled high fliers. Instead of facing a continuing loss of rare talented individuals, he now believes the organization has an abundance of unrecognized people ready to step up to meet the demands of these key roles.

There are thousands of carefully crafted definitions of potential. Each definition limits our view only to what it contains. It is far better to explore and understand whatever may be there whether it fits our definitions or not. What we say about potential can be no more than the best understanding we have at present. In the future, we may have better knowledge, though it seems unlikely that we will ever have complete comprehension. 'Potential' is essentially undefinable. It is just a word that we use as a placeholder for something that would otherwise take a very long sentence to explain.

"What I judge, or believe, or expect, or hope, that I, or someone else, or a whole team, or an organization, might be able, or willing, or intending to do, think, say, create, achieve, deliver or bring into some kind of observable existence at some point in the future—and that is in some way different, extended, better, fuller, more useful or more valuable than the corresponding things I or they say, do, produce, achieve, deliver or otherwise bring into some kind of observable existence today."

The word 'potential' is certainly shorter and simpler!

Listen to others, but form your own view.

The third misconception is the belief that we can only learn about our potential from other people. In this view, each person's potential is defined by the views of other people – most typically his or her colleagues and superiors. Many senior staff members are charged with recognizing and development potential in their subordinates.

Most senior executives take this responsibility very seriously and do their utmost to achieve it. Yet it is a daunting task, since it seems to require the executive to know people better than they know themselves. It also encourages using the past to predict the future. This does not work in most cases. If it did, millions of people would make fortunes in the stock market and all the analysts on Wall Street would be unemployed.

All someone else can see of us is our past and present behavior. They cannot see whether this represents our true potential and commitment. Behavior is determined by many interrelated causes including motivation, beliefs about what is expected, opportunity and expectation. What we do may fall far short of what we could do—or would do, if we remembered to choose consciously. Sadly, so much of our daily behavior is automatic. Past successes and constant repetition of what worked before wear a kind of groove into our minds. We run on these railroads of habit, simply doing what we always do and rarely taking the time to explore anything else.

Sometimes the opinion of someone else we respect can have an effect on us that is probably far from what was intended.

I am talking with a successful female executive. Earlier, we looked at her values results, which showed how much she enjoys the idea of learning and finding new and exciting ways to make a contribution in her role. Now we are looking at the results on her habits of thinking. These seem

to be at variance with her values. In particular, I am puzzled by the chart suggesting only a very limited degree of comfort with any kind of creative thinking.

I point all this out and her response is immediate: "I am simply not a creative person. I am not good at coming up with fresh ideas." This is not consistent with what she has actually been doing for the past half-hour, so I persist and ask for evidence to back up what she says.

She tells me of a boss whom she respected greatly. He was a mentor to her in the early part of her career. In the course of a lengthy series of conversations about her future, he told her several times that she lacked creativity. Since that time, she says, she has carefully avoided any tasks demanding creative thinking. As we investigate further, she realizes she has no idea why he made that comment or on what it was based. Her own experience and interests now seem to point in the opposite direction. We explore how someone else's opinion, maybe not even a valid one, may have trapped her into the habit of avoiding opportunities to develop creativity. This single insight opens up a whole new range of options for her future development.

Potential exists in the present, not just the future

Our work strongly suggests that it is best to think of potential as a space: an area in which we can take our stand at various positions, each one suitable for making a particular contribution, now or in the future. Seeing potential as 'contribution space' allows us to understand that our potential is there today. It is already present. It is not something that will only exist at some time in the future. We have potential, we have it now and we can use it immediately.

Our personal contribution space also has a size and a shape. It does not extend evenly in all directions. We have developed more comfort in some areas than others. This currently active contribution space forms a comfort zone, where we feel confident and at home. We also have a 'stretch zone' where we can develop and grow.

Habits are the walls that hem us in

Each person's comfort zone has been produced by past success. We feel at ease with what we know we can do and what has worked for us in the past. It is natural to repeat what works. The more we repeat it, the greater our skill. We list such past successes on our resumes, remember and relive them, and constantly seek to replicate them.

Limits are placed on our comfort zone as repeated successful actions solidify into habits. What works becomes frequent; what is used frequently becomes habitual; what becomes habitual becomes automatic. The boundaries of today's contribution space—today's comfort zone—are formed of nothing more substantial than habit. They are neither fixed nor inevitable. It is only mistaken belief that says we cannot step over them and create new areas of contribution. All it takes is the recognition that we confine ourselves by the automatic habit of repeating whatever worked in the past.

As anyone knows who has tried to lose weight or give up smoking, habits can be tough to let go. It takes determination and effort, as well as time, to step away from some habit that no longer serves our best interests. The difficulty of change is real and substantial, but it is still possible and within our own capability to bring about.

Potential cannot be defined, but it can be explored

Potential cannot be simply defined. It is not automatically limited by some trick of inheritance. It is always present as a space from which we can make new contributions if we choose. The apparent limitations are illusory. We put them there, though we did so unconsciously. By exercising conscious choice, we can step over them and enlarge our potential to express ourselves. We can all become explorers of our own lives and careers, pushing past the assumed barriers of existing knowledge and comfort about ourselves, finding new lands, new possibilities. Nothing that is already in place need be lost. There is no choice to be made between proven success and unproven potential. It is all potential, to be realized and used just as we wish.

We can increase our potential any time we choose

Such an exploration is well worth our time and trouble. Like all living creatures, we are programmed to grow. We unwittingly produce many of the ills in our lives and careers by limiting our own growth. The good news is that we are held prisoner by nothing more than our own habits and beliefs.

Once individuals, teams and organizations recognize that potential is always present, usable and extendable in almost infinite directions, they are no longer held within habitual boundaries that shut out vast areas of success and enterprise. By learning how to access the techniques to explore current contribution space and extend it at will, they need not accept any fixed boundaries to their contribution space.

All of us can extend our contribution space and increase our usable potential. We can discover exactly how to extend our contribution space and add more positions from which to make successful contributions; more scope for stepping up to whatever challenges arise; more options and possibilities for doing things that will make us feel good about ourselves, and others feel good about us. It takes effort, but it lies within us to achieve. We can all increase our contribution space—our potential—if we set about it with courage and commitment.

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