

## **TELL ME WHO YOU WANT ME TO BE: THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE ENDORSEMENTS IN LEADER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

“My own belief is that there is nothing that makes a ‘High Potential’ [HIPO] a better leader than a non-HIPO. In fact, I have bosses who are non-HIPOs who are much better than some of the HIPO bosses that I’ve had. It really boils down to the person’s outlook about leadership and what his/her priorities are: is it the work or is it people? ...The irony is that ultimately, if you ask a HIPO boss, it is all about work achievements.” HIPO #59<sup>2</sup>

Leaders play a number of critical roles in modern organizations, contributing to the achievement of performance objectives (e.g. providing workflow direction), as well as aiding in the development of others in the organization (e.g. mentoring subordinates; Yukl, 2009). Determining what makes certain individuals more adept at filling these important leader roles has long been of interest to organizational scholars (e.g. Fleishman, 1953; Stogdill, 1948), and recent work has posited an individual’s *identity* as a leader in the organization as an important catalyst of these leading behaviors (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Yet, we still know little about how people come to construct identities as leaders, and how certain elements of this identity construction process, such as having their identity recognized or endorsed by the organization, can influence the nature of individuals’ resulting leader identity. As the quote above suggests, leaders can vary significantly in their approach to the “leader” identity – differing, for example, in their view of the purpose of a leader (as delivering work results or developing people) – and understanding how these different *types* of leader identities are affected by aspects of the identity construction process can bring new insight, clarity and nuance to our understanding of how individuals come to see themselves as leaders.

Utilizing an interview study of leaders in the Singapore public service, I demonstrate how organizational endorsement (a key element of the identity construction process; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) affects the nature of the leader identities constructed by individuals in the organization, by exploring the impact of a particular organizational endorsement – being selected (or not) for a ‘High Potential’ (HIPO) program – on individuals’ construction of a leader identity.

### **Endorsing a Leader Identity**

Given that a strong identity as a leader is a key component of leadership-related thoughts and actions, scholars have begun to examine how individuals come to see themselves as a leader and how this self-view is recognized and endorsed by others. DeRue and Ashford (2010) broke significant ground in the study of this construction process, positing a theoretical model which asserts that leadership identity construction occurs as individuals claim and grant reciprocal identities (as leaders and followers) through a social interaction process that involves not only an individual’s own internalization of an identity and the recognition of other’s reciprocal identities, but also broader collective endorsement of a particular identity from the organization. However,

research on leader identity construction is still quite limited, and there are several critical issues this prior work has yet to address. For example, in addition to differing in strength (the focus of existing research), leader identities can also differ in terms of their meaning and content (e.g. focusing on producing results or on managing interpersonal dynamics), and identity construction processes may play a role in shaping this more qualitative nature of the leader identity as well.

Moreover, because organizational practices can shape individuals' behavior, direct goals and expectations, and alter the "fabric of work relationships" (Kanter, 1977:11), bestowing a particular endorsement of leadership on an individual (as an organizational practice) likely influences the way the individual sees his/her role identity as a leader and helps determine the type of leadership the individual enacts. In other words, the nature of the leader identity construction process likely influences not only *whether* individuals see themselves as leaders, but also *how* they see themselves as leaders, in terms of the type of leadership they seek to enact.

### **The Context of a 'High Potential' Program**

One form of endorsement that provides a useful context for examining these effects is selection for a 'High Potential' (HIPO) program. Many organizations employ strategies of labeling individuals as HIPOs, identifying those who are viewed as possessing the talents for "ascending the corporate ladder" in the organization (Iles, 1997, p. 347). Though these HIPO programs are only one way of endorsing an organization's leaders, there are several aspects of HIPO identification that make it particularly suitable for examining the influence of collective endorsements on leader identity construction. For instance, identification as a HIPO carries a set of performance expectations that can strongly influence how an individual sees him/herself in the situation. Indeed, long lines of research have examined both the beneficial and detrimental effects of telling individuals they have high potential for performing a task. While early work focused on the actual achievement of performance benefits by individuals identified as having potential (e.g. the Pygmalion effect; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), later work began to unpack some of the psychological effects of these high expectations, finding that labeling individuals as 'high potential' increased their felt pressure to perform (Baumeister, 1984) and had significant repercussions for their cognitions, motivations and behaviors (e.g. Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Additionally, beyond just creating performance pressures and expectations for individuals selected as HIPOs, the process of selecting leaders for these programs has the potential to also affect those individuals who are *not* selected, although this effect has received scant attention in prior research (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009). While prior theory suggests that not receiving endorsements simply results in a weaker leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), to the extent that an individual is aware of the possibility of receiving a given endorsement (such as being selected for a HIPO program) and does not receive it, the non-selection itself may be a form of endorsement that can influence the nature of a leader's identity. As HIPO identification is a form of endorsement "above and beyond" standard cues of leadership, it is possible for an individual to still see him or herself as a leader (and have this self-view endorsed by the organization through other means, such as promotion to a leadership role) without being selected as a HIPO. Not being selected for a HIPO program thus acts as a strong endorsement of the *type* of leader the individual may be in the organization (i.e. the individual is still seen as a leader, but not the type of leader who will ascend to the top of the organization). This 'non-endorsement' likely also affects the identity construction process, allowing for a comparison of how these differing endorsements (HIPO and non-HIPO) influence the nature of individuals' leader identities.

## METHOD

To explore the effects of these differing endorsements on identity construction, I conducted in-depth interviews with leaders from various organizations within the Singapore public service, which uses a uniform system of HIPO identification as a core component of its leadership structure. The HIPO track constitutes individuals selected very early on in their careers as the future high-level leaders of the public service, and these individuals are given a number of opportunities that are unavailable to others (e.g. more rapid promotions and access to rotational job programs). Individuals in the non-HIPO track also take on important leadership roles in the public service, but are significantly less likely to advance beyond a certain level in the organization – typically stopping at the transition between a senior manager and an executive-level position. Up until this transition however, individuals across both HIPO and non-HIPO tracks occupy very similar positions (i.e. hold the same titles and responsibilities), and it is possible to have two leaders in the same role who are from different tracks. The difference is just in the overall career trajectory: only HIPOs will ascend to the very top of the public service.

### Data Analysis

Data for this study come from 45 to 60 minute semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of 77 leaders from across different organizations within the public service. Interviewees were early and mid-level leaders (i.e. those below the transition point described above), and were selected based on their track, to provide a balanced sample of HIPO and non-HIPO leaders. The interviewees included 36 women and 41 men (relatively evenly distributed across tracks), were balanced across levels of seniority, and were distributed across the various ministries and statutory boards that make up the public service. Each interview was audio recorded and later professionally transcribed verbatim. Each interview transcript was then content-analyzed by the author and a team of interview coders who were familiar with the general constructs underlying the study. In line with accepted qualitative research practices (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994), broad constructs of interest were provided by the theoretical background described earlier, while more specific themes exemplifying different facets of these broader, theory-based constructs were derived from an initial reading of the participant's responses, discussed among coders and (if agreed upon) used to filter and code all of the transcripts.

### HIPO ENDORSEMENTS AND DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEADERS

Examining the results of the coding analysis, what emerged from the data was a consistent, systematic difference in the nature of interviewees' identities as leaders, in terms of the level at which the identity is primarily oriented, based on their endorsement as HIPOs or non-HIPOs. Leader identities can be engaged at both relational and collective levels (Day & Harrison, 2007), emphasizing the performance of the organization (collective) or the development of others in the local team/unit context (relational). Brickson (2000) termed this difference in how individuals situate their identity relative to others *identity orientation*, and theorized that a given identity is oriented at one of several levels, with a corresponding form of self-definition and motivation. A relational identity orientation motivates individuals to produce benefit for others in their relationships and to conceive of themselves primarily in terms of their

role relationships, while a collective identity orientation motivates individuals to pursue the good of the collective and characterize their identities in terms of group prototypes (Brickson, 2000).

When HIPOs and non-HIPOs' conceptions of their leader identity are compared, they differ significantly in this regard, with HIPOs tending to conceive of their leadership at the collective level, aimed at benefitting the organization, while non-HIPOs enact their leadership at a more relational level, emphasizing the need to benefit others in their local relationships (e.g. staff/followers). Moreover, the coding of these interviewees' responses revealed that this difference in leaders' identity orientations is consistent with their characterizations of the endorsements they received. Selection as a HIPO makes salient a leader's membership in this exclusive social group, and emphasizes the need to act in a manner consistent with the performance expectations of the group, thus prompting a leader identity oriented towards fulfilling group prototypes and maintaining the welfare of the collective. Correspondingly, most HIPOs mention high performance expectations as integral to the HIPO track, and highlight the pressures of "living up" to the reputation that comes with being part of the HIPO group.

A significant challenge for these HIPO individuals, however, comes in reconciling these high performance expectations with the demands of the leader role. Those selected for the HIPO program see their primary responsibility as performing, particularly in the early stages of their career, and this tendency can carry over when they move into a leadership role. As the respondents below note, this transition can be difficult to manage, as these HIPOs try to integrate their new roles and responsibilities as leaders while continuing to meet the pressures for performance and innovation they feel are placed upon them.

"I find that [leader] job really difficult because as a young [HIPO] like me, your core competency is really doing the work really well, and then you get promoted to being a leader, but it's a different skill set and some people find it hard to adjust to that role. It's not easy - it's always much easier doing it yourself because you can control the product. I think that's the key challenge." HIPO #15

"At the end of the day what it means is that the [HIPOs] focus on really the high impact, short-term kind of work... We are primarily seen as change agents, for good or for bad, and we do not necessarily build strong teams, rather we just focus on getting the work done...[For the non-HIPOs], the priority is building a team and a strong organization and not so much on just getting the work done." HIPO #59

### **'Delivering' vs. 'developing' styles of leadership**

As the second quote above captures, the expectations of HIPO endorsement lead individuals to enact a collectively oriented style of leadership that focuses on *delivering* performance outcomes, while non-HIPOs, who do not have these high performance expectations and thus do not experience the same tension, tend to engage in a relational style of leadership more focused on *developing* others. HIPOs' focus on leadership as delivering results is consistent with a collective identity orientation, as performing well helps them meet the prototype of a HIPO and benefits the organization, while non-HIPOs derive their leader identity more from their local relationships, and thus engage in more relational leadership, such as developing their team. Indeed, as shown in the quotes below, HIPO leaders' focus on collectively oriented 'delivering' yields a set of more task-oriented leader behaviors and emphasizes the leader role as

a co-performer (i.e. leading by example or leading by doing), while non-HIPO leaders' focus is notably more relational. Though HIPO leaders often acknowledge that engaging in more relational leadership (e.g. motivating and developing their staff) is important as well, they seem to face a tension in attempting to meet both of these leadership goals simultaneously.

“So people see me more as, ‘She’s so willing to do [this work], maybe I should be just as willing to do it too;’ more [of] that role model part of leading. I think what I do less is the part about helping a person develop based on their desired path for further development. So as a leader, I don’t make as much of an effort to find out what exactly you want to achieve in your career...there’s a lot less focus on developing a person.” HIPO #19

“For example, if I give a piece of work to my staff and it doesn’t come back the way I want it to be, I will make it a point to explain why it is the case and what I am looking for. I want to coach them...[because] it is also about the development of individual. I get a sense of satisfaction especially when I see a person growing.” Non-HIPO #64

“There’s always this conflict I guess: time spent developing staff is not always going to fit into career progression. But I guess in any organization, [for] the people that you pick to be in leadership positions, you might not necessarily require them to be good leaders; you just need them to get the job done.” HIPO #22

Yet, these differences do not arise because a non-HIPO sees himself or herself as any less of a leader than a HIPO. In fact, when interviewees' responses to the question “To what extent do you see yourself as a leader?” were analyzed and rated by coders (on a 10 point scale, blind to the HIPO or non-HIPO track of each response), HIPO leaders were rated only slightly higher than non-HIPO leaders (5.02 for HIPO leaders and 4.65 for non-HIPO leaders; a non-significant difference,  $F=0.49$ , *n.s.*). This suggests that observed differences in leadership behaviors for each group reflect these more qualitative difference in the nature of their leader identities, rather than simply differences in identity strength resulting from the endorsement.

### **Gauging progress and leader identity development**

A further consequence of the expectations placed on HIPOs is that they serve as a readily accessible gauge of the development and growth of an individual’s leader identity. HIPO leaders can measure their progress and development as a leader by whether or not they are meeting the expectations given to them by virtue of being endorsed as part of the HIPO track. This seems to cause HIPO leaders to take more of a performance orientation to their work, as opposed to a more learning/mastery orientation (Dweck, 1986). For instance, when asked by the interviewer to describe how they know they are developing as leaders, HIPOs tended to use performance and fulfilling role expectations as the key indicators that would signal growth or improvement as a leader, as evidenced below. Yet for non-HIPOs, these performance expectations are much weaker (and thus less useful as a gauge of leadership development), which serves to lessen the performance pressures and scrutiny these leaders feel, guiding them to approach their progress and development as a leader with more of a learning orientation.

“At each stage, when one progresses to a larger scope of responsibilities, over time...one gets more at ease with it and more effective in overcoming the hurdles and in achieving what you need to do. That’s a clearer self-indication to the person about whether he or she is performing well as a leader or not. It’s all outcome-based I suppose.” HIPO #45

“I constantly remind myself about the lessons I’ve learned and not to repeat them. So hopefully it’s more subconscious than conscious, so when I’m faced with a similar situation I remember. ... It’s about internalizing the lessons learned.” Non-HIPO #51

To more broadly validate these differences in how HIPOs and non-HIPOs view the development of their leader identities, interviewees’ responses were compared to examine the relative frequency of responses coded as gauging progress through “successful performance.” While about 35.5% of HIPO leaders explicitly mentioned successful performance as a way in which they gauged their development as leaders, it was brought up by only 12.5% of non-HIPO leaders as a means of assessing progress (a significant difference,  $F=3.291$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Exploring the impact of collective endorsements on the nature of leaders’ identities advances our understanding of leader identity construction processes in several key ways. Extending nascent research on how individuals come to identify as leaders, this study provides a demonstration of the effects of one aspect of the identity construction process (endorsement), and goes beyond the focus on strength and magnitude of identities to reveal the effects these endorsements can have on the nature (e.g. the orientation) of a leader’s identity. Moreover, this study challenges an assumption implied in prior theories of identity construction (i.e. DeRue & Ashford, 2010) that “more is better” when it comes to collective endorsements. To the extent that particular endorsements may cue different types of leader identities, receiving multiple different endorsements may have complex effects on a leader’s identity, introducing potentially conflicting pressures (rather than simply “summing” to a stronger identity).

From a managerial perspective, this study highlights an interesting irony for the practical application of HIPO programs. Specifically, endorsing individuals as “future leaders” of the organization can lead them to engage in behaviors that are more performance oriented, to the detriment of more developmentally oriented behaviors (that are a key part of leading organizations; Judge et al., 2004). Thus, organizations must carefully consider the nature of the endorsement and the expectations that it communicates, not just for HIPO programs, but when implementing any form of organizational endorsement – the characteristics of the endorsement will critically shape the way individuals come to see themselves as leaders in the organization.

## ENDNOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge the Civil Service College, Singapore for their support and funding of this research endeavor.
2. To preserve anonymity, only an individual’s status as a ‘High Potential’ (HIPO) or not a ‘High Potential’ (non-HIPO) is noted with each quote, along with the interview number.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR