

9 Box: A Simple Strategic Method for Evaluating Employee Potential and Performance

It's Tuesday morning, and as you rush into the elevator to start to head to your quarterly staffing calibration, balancing a messenger bag in one hand and a hot beverage in the other, the door doesn't close all the way. Who should pop in at the last minute? Your boss.

"So glad I caught you," they say, "I'd love just a quick rundown of what you're going to present to the group before we head in there. I need you to take a client call during that time, so I'll speak for your team in the calibration."

What do you say? Do you start diving into data and measurements, or are you just giving a hopeful outlook on who's performing? Can you confidently say you have considered who has potential today versus who was the last manager's favorite up and comer? Have you even factored bias and diversity, equity, and inclusion into your response? Have you reflected on what your team's potential and performance says about you as a leader?

While leaders may recognize the importance of building and establishing a bench, supporting employee development for performance and continued leadership, and having difficult performance conversations, these cornerstones of management are more often theory than practice.

How do you sum this up in the span of an elevator ride so your employees ready for promotion are appropriately advocated for and you have support for employees you are concerned about? Introducing, or perhaps reintroducing for those who have seen it before but may not be leveraging its simplicity, the 9 box. While we don't recommend you limit performance reviews, calibration, and strategic succession planning to an elevator ride, the 9 box provides a shorthand for assessing employee potential and performance, mapping where your employees are currently, as well as showing you the playing field to plan for future development and succession planning.

Before we explain how to use the 9 box, we recommend you look inward and consider your own performance and potential:

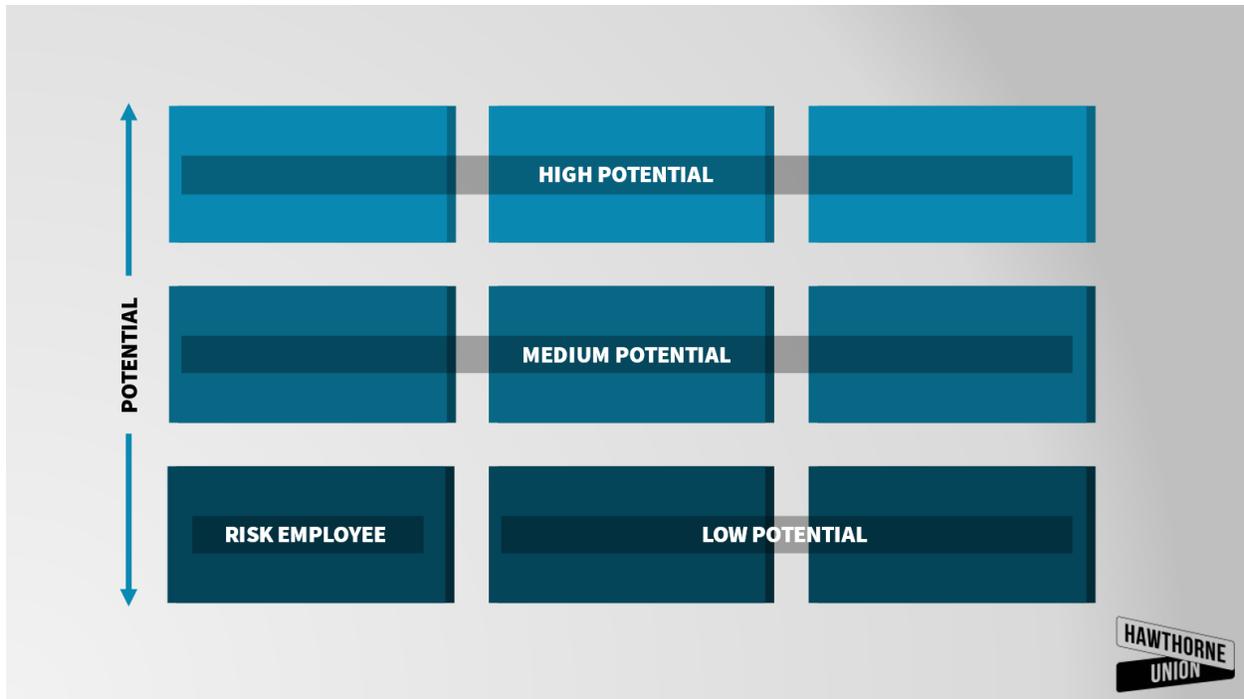
- Where were you 10 years ago?
- Were you performing at the capability you are today?
- What were the keys to your success?
- Who believed in you?
- Who supported you?
- Who discouraged you?
- What helped you start on the path to get to where you are today?
- Where are you headed now and what support do you need to get there?
- How do these answers affect how you assess and support your team?

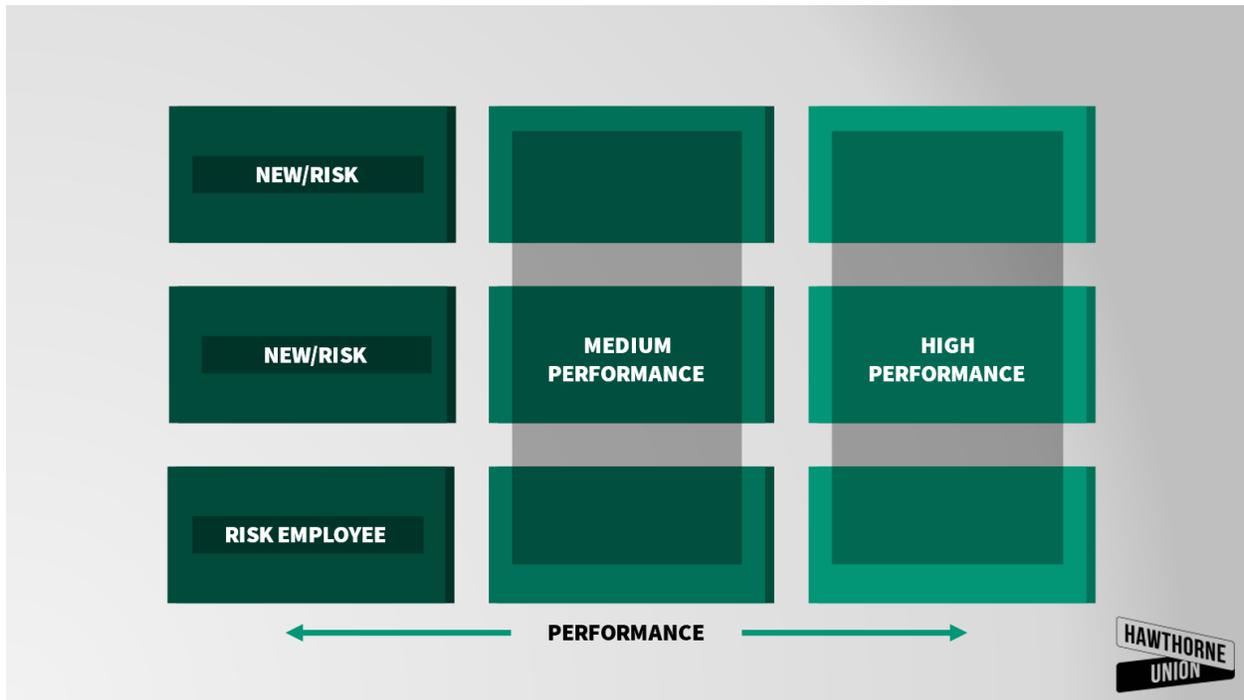
When you think about your team, examine your own potential bias to ensure that you are objectively evaluating your team:

- Do you tend to be especially positive or critical when evaluating performance?
- Are you placing particular emphasis on recent or past events?
- What judgments or assumptions have you made about someone's potential or interests?
- How diverse is your expectation of what defines performance and potential?

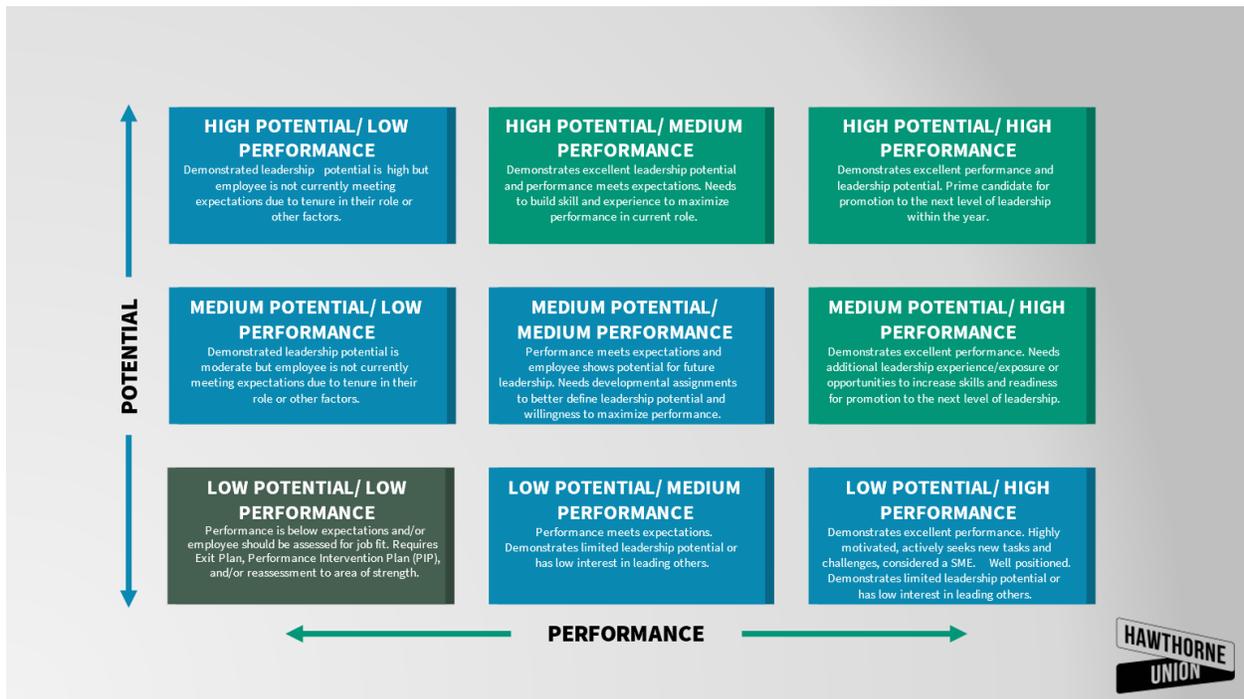
- What data or sources will you need to objectively assess your talent?

The 9 box measures employee's level of performance in their job duties (x-axis) and their potential for people management (y-axis). If your individual contributors have additional promotions available then calibrate with your manager or HR on how your company defines potential, as the 9 box can be used as a performance management tool even if you are not succession planning for future people leadership.





While 9 boxes vary in terminology, the example we recommend is structured with high performance and high potential in the top right corner.





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When using a 9 box, first and foremost, gut check. If you were in the elevator with your boss and that is all the time you had to update them before the calibration meeting, what would you say? You may want to write this in pencil, put employee names on post it notes, or use a whiteboard as your answers will likely change as you ensure that you have the data you need to substantiate your assessments.

After you have noted your initial instincts on a printed 9 box, gather supporting evidence but watch out for confirmation bias. The intent is to objectively determine where your employees fall in the 9 box, not to confirm your initial elevator hypothesis. Depending on how defined metrics and success measures are for your team and/or company, the process of evaluating your employees may reveal gaps set in expectations and performance tracking. Make note of these, as it is difficult for employees to win if the rules of the game are not defined, so circling back to establish, clarify, and reinforce expectations is essential. However, even if the process of attempting to evaluate your employees' potential and performance reveals that these aspects are not clear, the 9 box can still be a helpful process to complete as your natural inclinations of where your employees go can help you define your expectations.

Questions to consider:

- What is the difference between High Performance and Medium Performance on your team?
- What behaviors have you observed to indicate that someone is High Potential versus Medium Potential?
- What career development conversations have you already had that give you a sense of those who are Low Potential because they are satisfied at their current level versus those who have management aspirations?
- What expectations have you set and documented to ensure that your employees are set up for success, or are your performance ratings easier this round because those have not been established?

After you have analyzed your team look for trends:

- It is natural for those new to their roles to be High Potential Low Performance because they are appropriately placed. If those in High Potential Low Performance are not new to their role, this is potentially an area of concern.
- If the majority of your team is considered High Performance is it because they are exceeding expectations or because managers are not having difficult performance conversations?
- If everyone's performance is low what expectations have been set and what processes are in place to manage performance?
- How might bias play into who is considered High or Low Potential?
- What factor does Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion play in how employees are assessed for performance and potential?
- How have the ongoing effects of the pandemic or other life factors impacted employee potential and performance?
- Who are you unsure of and uncalibrated with, indicating you will need to discuss performance and/or potential in greater depth?

Take note of the corners of your 9 box to ensure that you are appropriately having development and performance discussions:



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- While people aspire to be High Potential High Performance in the top right corner, a team of High Highs is a risk because you can't promote them all and you run the risk of losing them to other employers who can. Leverage your resources and appropriate transparency to continue to engage this group.
- Your Low Potential High Performance are your appropriately placed subject matter experts. How will you ensure that they have opportunities for development and job satisfaction in their current roles? Career development discussions are important with this group to ensure that you are on the same page regarding their potential and career plans.
- High Potential Low Performance are employees new to their role or potentially disengaged Medium and High Potentials whose performance has started to slip. With the former it is important to set clear expectations and goals so they are able to perform more effectively and move to the right. With the latter, it is important to discuss performance and potential so you don't continue to see a downslide. An appropriate balance of support and accountability is important for this group as you want to see movement to the right.
- Low Potential Low Performance are performance concerns and likely at risk of or in the process of being managed out of their role or the company if their performance does not change. While employees may have periods of time where their performance is low, if an employee has consistently low performance and low potential, a performance intervention and/or additional support is needed.

After reviewing the corners, take a look at the Medium in the center and assess your 9 box overall:

- What do your Mediums need to get to the next level or ensure they don't fall into Low?
- Where as a leader is your attention focused and who may need more of it?
- How does your team's placement on the 9 box affect your strategic and/or succession planning?

After you have completed your initial assessment and gathered data to support and/or change employee placement, it is important to calibrate with others. While your company may organize Succession Planning and Talent Management calibrations, use of the 9 box can be done informally with your manager or a trusted peer.

Questions to consider when calibrating:

- How do your expectations match up with your peers, manager, or HR department?
- What additional supporting evidence or perspective can they provide that may change your rankings?
- What support can they provide in strategizing around expectations or having career development conversations?
- What cross functional development or projects can support continued development?

After you have assessed and calibrated using the 9 box, it is essential to have career development and performance management conversations with employees. While some managers balk at the idea of sharing the 9 box with their employees, we invite you to consider it. Ask your employees where they rate themselves and then share where you have rated them and why. Calibrate on the differences between your ratings and establish next steps. Many performance and potential issues are due to a lack of awareness, alignment, and calibration, which is what the 9 box addresses. If someone thinks they are



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a High Potential High Performance and they aren't, it is part of your role as a leader to have that conversation. Don't assume "they already know" or are on the same page as you, even if you feel that you have communicated this before. Potential and performance change over time, this needs to be an ongoing discussion. It is also possible that the person you are grooming to be your successor may not want or has never considered the role, so it is important to discuss career potential with employees to support their engagement and skill development.

If you manage managers, you may want to calibrate as a group so you have a better sense of your downline and can forecast your bench. While it is important to solicit feedback from other sources, watch out for positive or negative bias and group think. It is recommended that managers assess and prepare their feedback prior so the meeting can run efficiently. Consider HR or an external facilitator to keep the meeting on track. Questions to consider in your calibrations:

- If your company secured a contract tomorrow that doubled your business, who could you promote to ensure high quality leadership and service delivery?
- What trends are you seeing in scoring that may need to be addressed?
- What data are other managers using to evaluate their employees?
- What role does Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion play?
- What retention and incentive structures do you have in place for your High Highs or your High Lows?
- How can you collaborate cross departmentally or as a leadership team to ensure employees are effectively placed and supported?
- What development interventions or potential alternative roles may exist for Low Lows?
- How can you ensure you are recruiting and retaining top talent?
- What cross functional talent can you use to support succession planning and retain High Highs?

While some companies recommend that you categorize your employees on a curve so that you are only categorizing so many employees as High Potential and/or High Performance, don't be limited by this. If you have more than an average number of Highs or Lows then you will need different support and resources to support your team. Leverage calibration with your peers, leader, and HR to ensure these trends are accurate and then determine next steps.

The 9 box is not a set it and forget it, it's a living and breathing document. Potential and Performance change over time. Determine a cadence that you will revisit your ratings. Beyond calibration, leverage coaches and HR to continue to support you and your employees so that these are ongoing discussions where you and your employees are seeing the movement you want to see.