

Performance Can Become a Talent Ceiling

An executive standard for preventing today's strongest operators from becoming tomorrow's succession gaps

BOTTOM LINE

Most organizations make a perfectly rational choice with their best people: when the work gets difficult, give it to the person who has already proved they can handle it. The problem is what happens when that becomes the pattern. Over time, the organization builds an increasingly convincing record of one capability and very little evidence of anything beyond it. Then a larger role opens, succession planning starts, and the same high performer is described as “not yet proven” for broader responsibility.

Sometimes that judgment is right. Sometimes the organization helped create it. The answer is not another development program or a broader conversation about potential. It is a Capability Evidence Review for critical talent: establish what the organization has actually seen someone carry, identify what the next role requires that has not yet been demonstrated, and use real business work to create evidence before a succession decision forces the question.

Your allocation decisions are also talent judgments

Every consequential assignment does two jobs. It solves the problem in front of you, and it quietly adds another piece of evidence about what someone can be trusted to handle next.

That is why the same people tend to keep receiving the same categories of difficult work. The leader who can stabilize a troubled operation gets another unstable operation. The executive who saves important customers gets the next customer problem. The technical authority gets called when the technical risk becomes serious. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, under pressure it is often exactly what you should do.

The issue is repetition. If almost every important assignment reinforces the same capability, then the organization learns more and more about something it already knows while learning almost nothing about the questions that will matter at the next level.

Can this person set direction before the problem becomes urgent? Can they make tradeoffs across functions? Can they decide what should not be pursued? Can they allocate resources when every option has a constituency? Can they lead effectively through people whose expertise they do not personally possess?

If the organization has never seen those things, caution is appropriate. But the absence of evidence cannot automatically be treated as evidence of absence.

A succession system cannot demand proof the operating system has never created a serious opportunity to produce.

That is where talent management and operating management meet. The issue is whether the work you assign is generating enough evidence to make the succession judgments you will eventually need to make.

Distinguish performance depth from capability breadth

High performance gives you real information. It tells you that someone can deliver under the conditions in which you have observed them. It does not tell you everything.

A leader can be outstanding at execution and still be untested in enterprise tradeoffs. A functional expert can show sophisticated judgment inside a discipline without having demonstrated the same quality of judgment when objectives conflict across functions. A regional operator can know one operating model exceptionally well and still be unproven when the job becomes designing one across materially different markets.

Those are evidence boundaries, not criticisms.

Problems arise when executive teams draw conclusions beyond them. One mistake is premature confidence: they are exceptional here, so they are ready for anything larger. The other is premature containment: they are exceptional here, so this is where we should keep using them.

Performance evidence tells you what someone can do under conditions you have already created. It does not tell you what they can do under conditions you have never given them.

That distinction is simple. In practice, it changes the way succession conversations should work.

Put a Capability Evidence Review around critical talent

This does not need to become another process applied to everyone. Use it where the stakes justify it: a named or plausible successor to a critical role; someone the organization repeatedly depends on for one category of consequential work; a position carrying material single-person dependency; a candidate being considered for substantially broader scope; or a situation in which an unexpected vacancy would probably force an external search.

The **business leader owns the judgment**. HR, talent management, or a chief of staff can administer the review, maintain the record, and challenge weak evidence. They should not own the conclusion about whether someone is ready to carry operating responsibility. That judgment belongs with leaders accountable for the work.

Every important next-level capability should fall into one of three categories:

DEMONSTRATED	UNTESTED	DEVELOPMENT REQUIRED
Credible evidence already exists in consequential work.	The organization does not yet have enough real evidence.	Observed performance shows that a specific capability needs strengthening.

Development Required should be used because evidence demonstrates a gap, not because the evidence is missing. It should also describe the capability, not become a generalized judgment about the person.

The evidence bar matters for the same reason. Ratings, reputation, visibility, and executive confidence can all inform the conversation, but they are not substitutes for observable work. Strong evidence tells you what the person actually owned, which decisions were theirs, what tradeoffs they carried, how they responded when circumstances changed, and when a more senior leader had to step back in.

The review should answer four questions.

1. What have we actually observed?

Start with the record, not the reputation.

“High performer,” “strategic,” “strong leader,” and “great with people” may all be accurate descriptions. They still do not tell you what the person has actually carried when the outcome mattered.

Look instead at consequential work. Did they stabilize an operation? Lead a customer recovery? Make a difficult resource decision? Integrate competing functions? Build a leadership team? Shape the recommendation before the decision was made? Carry a commercial tradeoff through execution?

Then establish attribution. Which decisions were genuinely theirs? What happened when conditions changed? Where did they change course intelligently? What could they carry without a more senior leader taking the difficult part back?

The job here is simply to establish what the organization actually knows.

2. What does the next role require that the record does not yet establish?

Now look at the role, not the person.

What becomes materially different at the next level? The answer may be enterprise prioritization, capital allocation, longer time horizons, cross-functional tradeoffs, organizational design, influence without authority, development of other leaders, judgment under ambiguity, or the ability to give up direct control of work the person knows better than anyone else.

Compare those demands with the observed record and classify each material capability as **Demonstrated**, **Untested**, or **Development Required**.

This is where succession discussions often become imprecise. “We have not seen it” slowly turns into “I am not sure they can do it,” and then into “they are not ready.” Those statements are not equivalent.

If you have not seen the capability, call it Untested. If you have observed enough to identify a real gap, call it Development Required. The difference should determine what happens next.

3. What real assignment could create credible evidence?

If an important capability is Untested, create a legitimate opportunity to observe it. That does not mean inventing developmental theater.

A useful assignment has a real business consequence, meaningful discretion, and enough uncertainty that judgment is required. The person has to make choices, carry tradeoffs, adjust when the evidence changes, and remain accountable for the outcome.

Attendance is not evidence. Exposure is not evidence.

Sitting in an executive meeting does not demonstrate executive judgment. Adding someone to a steering committee does not prove cross-functional leadership if every consequential decision still belongs to someone else. The work has to contain enough ownership to answer the question you are trying to test.

For an execution leader, that might mean owning part of the recommendation before the plan has hardened. For a functional leader, it might mean carrying a cross-functional problem where the right answer cannot simply optimize their own function. For someone known as a rescuer, it might mean deciding which initiatives should be stopped, narrowed, or sequenced before they become emergencies.

The assignment should also matter to the business. If the work exists mainly so someone can be seen doing it, everyone involved will recognize that quickly.

And the person should know what capability the assignment is intended to test. A development assignment should not become a covert assessment. Transparency improves the quality of the evidence and the trust around the process because the individual understands the responsibility they are being asked to demonstrate.

4. Who will be able to judge the evidence afterward?

A strong assignment can still produce weak evidence if nobody is close enough to understand what actually happened.

Name the executive or senior leader who will be able to evaluate the work with enough proximity to separate the individual's judgment from the team result.

They should be able to answer practical questions. What decision did the person make? What tradeoff did they carry? When did they change direction because the facts changed? What did they escalate appropriately? What did they own through completion? Where did senior intervention remain necessary?

This is not surveillance. It is basic evidence discipline. If nobody will be able to explain what the individual actually demonstrated, the assignment may create useful business results and still leave the succession question unresolved.

Make the review produce a Capability Evidence Map

The review should produce a **one-page Capability Evidence Map** attached to the relevant succession or talent record.

For each material next-level capability, record the requirement, its status - Demonstrated, Untested, or Development Required - the evidence supporting that status, any qualifying assignment being used to test it, the

senior leader responsible for evaluating the evidence, and the date or decision point at which the conclusion will be revisited.

The accountable business leader signs the Map. HR or the talent function maintains it. Review it with the normal succession process at least annually, and revisit it when a designated assignment concludes or when the target role changes materially.

Most importantly, do not allow a material capability to remain **Untested** indefinitely. If it is still Untested across two succession cycles, force an explicit decision: create a qualifying assignment, remove the individual from near-term succession consideration, or determine that the capability is no longer material to the role.

That is what keeps “Untested” from becoming a permanent holding category.

Repeated allocation also creates concentration risk

The same pattern creates another problem. If the most difficult work keeps going to the same proven person, the organization can become increasingly dependent on them. What looks efficient today becomes fragile when that person leaves, burns out, becomes unavailable, or finally gets promoted.

Who gives us the highest probability of success on this problem today, and what allocation pattern gives us the capability we will need tomorrow?

Sometimes the same choice solves both. When it does not, the tradeoff should be conscious.

Know when depth is the strategy

None of this means every strong performer should be developed toward broader management responsibility. Some roles create exceptional value through depth. Some people want deeper expertise rather than larger organizational scope. Businesses need technical authorities, master operators, commercial specialists, and functional leaders whose concentrated capability is itself strategically important.

And sometimes the current succession judgment is simply right. The person wants broader responsibility but does not yet have the judgment, experience, or capability required to carry it safely.

In that case, do not manufacture an assignment to change the conclusion. Build the capability first. Test it when the work can support the test.

The point of the review is not to move everyone upward. It is to distinguish a genuine capability limit from a limit created because the organization has repeatedly asked the person to prove the same thing.

The decision

Add a **Capability Evidence Review** to succession discussions for critical roles and for high-value operators whose assignment pattern has become materially repetitive. Require every important next-level capability to be classified **Demonstrated, Untested, or Development Required**, and require every material Untested capability to have either a real business assignment attached to it or an explicit decision not to test it yet.

Then test the standard against your own recent decisions. Take the last three senior roles where an internal candidate was judged “not ready,” where someone was promoted and later struggled, or where the organization went outside because the internal bench appeared too narrow.

Did we lack the capability, or did we lack the evidence because we never created the work that would have shown us?