

Mentor Tips: Recognizing Potential

Purpose: To help you recognize potential in mentees or students, and to think about ways to deliberately communicate what you recognize.

The Discussion: I believe observation might be the most important thing a mentor or teacher can do. I suggest that you should try to see in your mentee (or students) *something that has not been made manifest to the rest of the world... yet*. Pause and consider what spark they possess that needs fanning to become a flame.

If you want to learn how to do this (and be inspired), I suggest watching the brief Crystal Williams video on *Stories from the Stage*. In it, she urges us to recognize something in others—their potential—perhaps before they recognize it in themselves. It is a powerful talk. Here's a link: <https://youtu.be/-OdTCazBFo0>.

Additionally, in two Harvard Business Review articles, researchers list overlapping traits that help us recognize high potential in an individual. In the first, Chamorro-Premuzic, Adler, and Kaiser (2017) name three general markers:

1. **Ability:** Can they do the job? Do they demonstrate knowledge and skill needed to perform key tasks?
2. **Social skills:** How are their working relationships? How is their EQ, their ability to manage themselves?
3. **Drive:** Do they have high motivation to work hard?

In the second article, Fernández-Aráoz suggests assessing potential of aspiring managers by “*checking their motivational fit*” and then rating them on four key hallmarks. These are:

1. **Curiosity:** Do they seek new experiences, knowledge, and feedback? Are they open to change?
2. **Insight:** Can they gather and interpret information to leverage it to cast a future vision? (*clarity*)
3. **Engagement:** Do they use emotion and logic to connect with people? (*EQ*)
4. **Determination:** Is their focus on the mission despite any challenges? Can they bounce back from adversity?

Summary: All these citations point to one thing: *recognizing potential*. Observing and naming the spark you see in a mentee or student can help them find a path, career advancement, or a strength they did not (yet) recognize themselves. Our job is to look for these things. Identify them. Then let these mentees and students know what you see. It will encourage them more than you might imagine. It can change their life for the better. As I noted, those changes can ripple out to their family, friends, coworkers, and networks. Your observation and encouragement could start a sequence of events that can change not only them, but our *world* for the better.

Homework: Observe and identify a spark in someone you're mentoring, a student, coworker, or even someone in your family. Consider their potential. Jot down some ideas. Then share those with them.

For additional reading:

Chamorro-Premuzic, T., Adler, S., and Kaiser, R. (2017). Harvard Business Review. Available from:

<https://hbr.org/2017/10/what-science-says-about-identifying-high-potential-employees>

Fernández-Aráoz, C., Roscoe, A., and Aramaki, K. (2017). Harvard Business Review. Available from:

<https://hbr.org/2017/11/turning-potential-into-success-the-missing-link-in-leadership-development>

Williams, Crystal (2021). Stories from the Stage, March 1, 2021: <https://youtu.be/-OdTCazBFo0>