

High-Potential Leaders Personality Assessment Feedback: A Phenomenological Exploration

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This study investigated the reactions of high-potential leaders to personality evaluations and feedback within a leadership development program in a Fortune 500 company. The aim was to identify trends and insights related to self-awareness and leadership growth. Twelve high-potential leaders were interviewed using convenience sampling. These participants received feedback on personality evaluation questionnaires as part of a year-long program designed to identify future leadership talent. The findings revealed that participants developed deeper self-awareness by understanding how their beliefs and motivations influenced their leadership behaviors. The study also highlighted the impact of negative habits on professional growth and the alignment between participants' perceptions and the accuracy of the evaluation feedback system.

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Introduction

The landscape of organizational leadership development has evolved significantly, with an increasing emphasis on the use of managerial tools and personality assessments for selection and talent development. In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, learning and continuous improvement are essential for leaders to thrive (Korzynski, Mazurek, & Haenlein, 2020; Sockbeson & DeNisi, 2023). Executive coaching, particularly through the provision of timely feedback, emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing managerial performance by facilitating unlearning and learning appropriate skills (Knight, Grant, & Young, 2020; Lee & Frisch, 2015; Mishra & Shukla, 2021). In an era dominated by social media and digital platforms, the evaluation of

managerial performance gained paramount importance (Chen & Wei, 2020; Korzynski et al., 2020).

Leadership development thrives on multi-perspective critical reflection, enabling leaders to gain insights from diverse viewpoints and experiences (Densten & Gray, 2001). Personality assessments, integrated into executive coaching practices, offered valuable insights into leader behaviors, preferences, and motivations (Allworth & Passmore, 2012; Del Giudice, Yanovsky, & Finn, 2014; Lai & Palmer, 2019). However, while the coach-client relationship had been extensively studied, less attention was paid to how leaders perceived and responded to assessment feedback (Del Giudice et al., 2014).

Feedback derived from personality assessments played a crucial role in shaping leader perception and behavior, guiding them to leverage their strengths and address potential areas of development (Carvalho, Carvalho, & Carvalho, 2023; Colbert et al., 2012; Mishra & Shukla, 2021; Rowe, Arghode, & Bhattacharyya, 2023; Sockbeson & DeNisi, 2023). The quality of feedback delivery, coupled with leaders' comfort and rapport with feedback facilitators, significantly influenced their career trajectory and growth choices (Mainert, 2015; Sarkar, 2022). Despite the potential benefits, empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of personality assessment feedback in enhancing leader development and performance remained inconclusive (Carvalho et al., 2023; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

This study aimed to explore high-potential leaders' responses to personality tests and feedback within the context of a leadership development program. By examining the experiences of leaders within a Fortune 500 firm, this research sought to uncover patterns and insights related to self-awareness and leadership growth. Utilizing convenience sampling, the study conducted interviews with twelve high-potential leaders who participated in the development program. These leaders received feedback on personality assessment questionnaires as part of a year-long program designed to identify and groom future leaders. Employing a four-level analysis, the study identified emergent themes while ensuring the confidentiality and safety of participant data.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework portion introduced personality evaluation constructs to this research investigation. It showed how personality studies have changed. We examined how a leader's personality affected their team from both the leader's and followers' perspectives. This differentiation is crucial since it gives leaders feedback for development (Hogan & Hogan, 2007; McCormick & Burch, 2008; Howard & Thomas, 2010; Sarkar, 2022). It also stressed the importance of leader traits, such as consistent and unified behavior patterns, in a variety of business settings (Bian, 2023; Ng & Ahmad, 2018; Mansi,-- 2007). However, the literature on the relationship between personality traits and leadership effectiveness is unclear, emphasizing a critical area of study (Maheshwari & Rai, 2022).

Personality testing was applied to executive and managerial selection in enterprises. It stressed the necessity of recognizing a leader's resilient personality traits to predict their future success (Bian, 2023; Church, 1997). Leaders entering new responsibilities need self-awareness to avoid blind spots in their abilities (Densten & Gray, 2008; Ren & Zhu, 2017). Critical reflection and self-examination were recommended for leadership development (Densten & Gray, 2001). Personality feedback also shapes a leader's self-narrative, aligning superior, peer, and subordinate perspectives (Chen & Zhang, 2023; Church, 1997; Day et al., 2014; Sockbeson & DeNisi, 2023; Subramanian & Palo, 2021).

Beyond identifying strengths and weaknesses, the assessment process helped understand and address leadership derailment, which ranged from slower-than-expected progress to extreme termination due to poor performance, often associated with dark side behaviors. This assessment-based coaching addressed dark-side habits and gave growing leaders evidence-based insights into their issues (Densten & Gray, 2001; Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009; Subramanian & Palo, 2021). It deepens their understanding of their problems and provides a skill development plan to help them succeed in their workplaces (Judge et al., 2009).

The combination of rigorous hiring and promotion processes became a leadership development strategy as firms prioritized effective leadership (Maheshwari & Rai, 2022). The goal was to hire the proper leaders and position them well as

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they advanced (Del Giudice et al., 2014). Leaders are prepared for present and future roles through ongoing growth (Densten & Gray, 2001). Organizational development practitioners can use personality assessment tools to predict leader selection and promotion without directly engaging with the leader (Harvey, Arghode, & Bhattacharyya, 2024). To engage in self-development, leaders must be informed of assessment outcomes, emphasizing the value of feedback (Lyons & Bandura, 2021; Ng & Ahmad, 2018; Subramanian & Palo, 2021).

Research Method

The study included leaders who had recently finished a high-potential leader program. The high-potential leaders questioned for this research underwent the Hogan Leadership Forecast Assessment (HFA) by Hogan and Hogan in 2007. This was a component of a developmental program offered by their organization. The organization that supplied the participants for this study conducted an analysis, as referenced by Howard and Thomas in 2010. The Hogan instruments have been verified for mid-level leaders' leadership success inside that organization (Mansi, 2007). Høffding and Martiny (2015) described phenomenological interviews as a continuous and evolving discourse between two individu-

als, each capable of providing an independent viewpoint of the interaction.

The leaders participated in several developmental activities during the year-long program, following the recommendations of Densten and Gray (2001). One task involved a series of personality tests and feedback based on the recommendations of Del Giudice et al. (2014). Upon receiving this feedback, leaders were required to integrate this knowledge into their growth plans, as recommended by Lee and Frisch (2015). This study primarily examined how leaders get evaluation feedback and integrate it into their development plans.

Study Participants

We interviewed 12 people. All participants were high-potential supervisors and managers who had completed leadership training. This curriculum prepared them for organizational advancement. The leadership program was multifaceted. Participants performed a personality evaluation

exam and received comments on their results. All participants were high-potential leaders in the chosen organization. The organization identified these leaders as high-potential because they were effective and could take on more leadership duties.

This study used convenience sampling (Christensen et al., 2011). The Hogan Personality Index (HPI) was used to evaluate fit to the Hogan normative paradigm (Hogan & Hogan, 2007). Leaders scored high, moderate, or low on model fit. Fit calculations were based on the leader’s score on four of the seven HPI scales (Hogan & Hogan, 2011). This stratification examined whether the leader’s normative personality fit affects their life (Allworth & Passmore, 2008).

Table 1 summarizes the participant information. It was important to note that the leaders were exposed to the broad Hogan Leadership Forecast® assessment battery for the first time in their lives (Hogan & Hogan, 2007).

Table 1 Study Participants

Participant pseudonym	Current role	Tenure with organization	Gender	Hogan fit
Amelia	Director	5	Female	Moderate
Ava	Supervisor	8	Female	Low
Emma	Individual contributor	4	Female	Moderate
George	Director	6	Male	Low
Harper	Director	17	Female	Low
Isabella	Director	8	Female	Low
Mary	Director	4	Female	High
Mia	Vice President	18	Female	High
Olivia	Manager	14	Female	Low
Paul	Manager	23	Male	Moderate
Ringo	Director	17	Male	Low
Sophia	Manager	17	Female	Low

Source: Authors’ own conceptualization

This was the first time participants received significant performance or developmental input from someone other than their supervisor (Ng & Ahmad, 2018). Some leaders were exposed to HPI batteries. HPI was used for all sponsoring organization leadership appointments. Leaders may have used HPI to get their jobs. The organization did not give managers and supervisors HPI development feedback during selection.

Data Collection

We conducted in-person interviews after IRB approval. Participants were briefed on the interview method (Christensen et al., 2011). Transcription followed the digital recording of interviews. The interviews used open-ended questions to better understand participants' evaluation feedback experiences (Seidman, 2006). Independent third-party transcription was used (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Interviews were held in a secure conference room in the sponsoring organization's human resources department (Christiansen et al., 2011; Husserl & Moran, 2012). Every participant was informed about the study. The researchers advised participants not to discuss the study with other participants until all interviews were complete to minimize any impact (Van Manen, 2017).

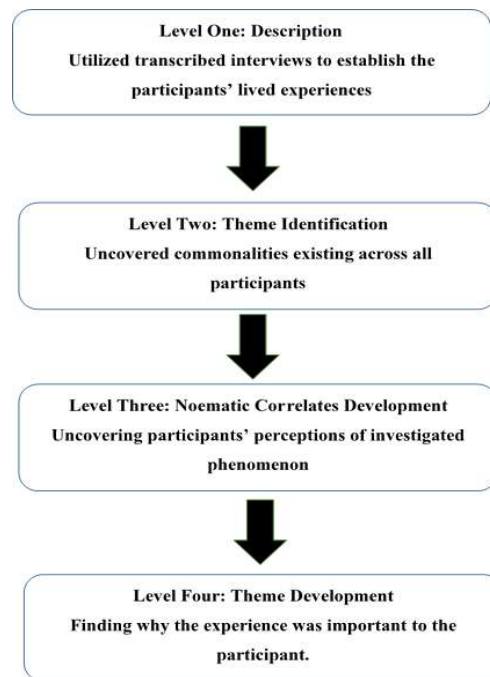
Participants were informed of research confidentiality. Structured notes and theme coding files were used (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). To disguise participation in files, a unique identity was used.

Researchers had exclusive access to the file (Seidman, 2006). At the same time, researchers notified participants they would share the results and discussion summary with the sponsoring organization. This allowed study participants to modify their assessment and feedback procedure.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed Sanders' (1982) approach. Description, theme identification, noematic correlate generation, and essence abstraction were the four levels of analysis (Sanders, 1982). Fig. 1 shows this study's data analysis tiers.

Fig. 1: Data Analysis Steps



Source: Authors' own conceptualization and representation

Transcribed interviews were used to describe the participant's life. Sanders (1982) encouraged this to capture their unique viewpoints on the issue being examined.

The second step, topic identification, revealed participant similarities. The third level identified noematic correlations (Sanders, 1982). Each noematic correlate was "the individual's perception of the reality of the phenomenon under investigation" (Sanders, 1982:357). This phase was crucial because it linked a phenomenon's observation to a reason for its importance. The fourth and last step is theme development from noematic correlations. An eidetic reduction helped explain why the individual valued the event. The conversation centers on these ideas. Themes were utilized to interpret study participants' lives (Husserl & Moran, 2012). Table 2 lists theme clusters and themes.

Ethical Assurances

Participants' anonymity and safety were guaranteed. Interviews, recordings, and transcripts were securely stored (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The NVivo® file contained anonymous, unattributed interview transcriptions (Seidman, 2006). The sponsoring organization's attorney, chief privacy officer, and human resources officer discussed this research project. Complete findings and practice suggestions were available to the organization.

Findings

In this study, a deep exploration into the lived experiences of high-potential leaders concerning the assessment and feedback process within their respective organizations was conducted. Employing a phenomenological approach, the objective was to unveil the nuanced perspectives and insights of these leaders as they traversed through the assessment journey. Through open-ended conversations and in-depth interviews, participants shared their thoughts, emotions, and reflections, providing invaluable insights into their experiences.

Participants' Initial Impressions

The discussions commenced with participants offering their initial impressions of the assessment and feedback process. These responses offered a glimpse into their expectations, concerns, and overall perceptions. For instance, Ava articulated a desire for greater transparency from leaders in sharing assessment results, stating, "I do wish that our leaders would share it [assessment results] more with us so that we can gain some more insight on them." This sentiment reflected a common desire among participants for more openness and clarity regarding assessment outcomes.

As the conversations progressed, participants elaborated on their experiences, shedding light on the intricacies of decision-making concerning sharing assessment results. Emma, for example, acknowledged her oversight in not discussing her results with her immediate

Table 2 Theme clusters and themes

1. Self-awareness prior to the assessment
1.1. The leader was (or was not) surprised by the assessment results
1.2. The leader had prior experience with a psychometric or 360-degree assessment
1.3. The feedback from the assessment was consistent with prior feedback that the leader had received
1.4. The assessment feedback aligned with the leader's prior self-image
1.5. The leader considered themselves to be self-aware prior to the assessment
2. Discomfort during the feedback session
2.1. The assessment feedback session made the leader uncomfortable
3. Perceived value of the feedback
3.1. The leader found the assessment and feedback valuable
3.2. The leader found the assessment results and/or feedback process to be interesting
3.3. The leader found the feedback to be motivating or non-motivating
3.4. The leader stated that psychometric assessments should not be used for hiring or selection purposes
3.5. The leader wants feedback
3.6. The assessment created awareness of the "real me" for the leader
3.7. The feedback from the assessment was mixed – both positives and negatives
3.8. The assessment results and feedback identified strengths and weaknesses
3.9. The assessment results identified the leader's values
4. Objectivity of the assessment and feedback
4.1. The leader wanted feedback from someone other than their immediate supervisor
4.2. The assessment and the assessment feedback were objective
5. Reactions to the leadership model
5.1. The assessment results informed the leader's perspective on a model of successful leaders
5.2. The model of leadership from the assessment aligns with the leader's view of leadership
6. The accuracy of the feedback
6.1. The leader considers personality to be situational and changing over time
7. Sharing or not sharing the assessment results with others
7.1. The leader discussed or shared their assessment results with a co-worker or boss
7.2. The leader focused on informal leadership development approaches post-feedback
7.3. The leader would have liked the process to include a discussion with their immediate superior
8. Taking or not taking developmental actions
8.1. The leader took no development action post-feedback
8.2. The assessment feedback identified development needs
8.3. The leader wanted more follow-up from the feedback facilitator after the feedback meeting
8.4. The leader focused on formal and documented leadership development approaches post-feedback
8.5. The leader would like to confirm assessment results with their immediate superior

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

superior, stating, “Now that I think about this, I never really said anything to [my boss] about it. I don’t think we ever had a conversation about the results.” Emma’s revelation underscored the importance of proactive communication and the potential consequences of assuming leaders’ awareness of assessment outcomes.

Sharing or Withholding Assessment Results

The decision to share assessment results emerged as a pivotal aspect of participants’ experiences. While some participants found value in sharing results with peers and informal mentors, others hesitated to disclose information upward to their immediate superiors. Ringo, for instance, highlighted the mutual benefit of sharing results with a peer, stating, “The individual and I understood each other a little bit better... This is how we tick. This is what matters to us.” Ringo’s experience underscored the potential for shared vulnerability and deeper understanding through open dialogue.

The decision to share assessment results emerged as a pivotal aspect of participants’ experiences.

Conversely, participants like George and Sophia expressed reluctance to share results with their immediate managers, citing reasons ranging from uncertainty about managers’ interest to a lack of follow-up. George admitted, “I didn’t recall identifying any developmental needs and therefore, did not take any developmen-

tal action.” This reluctance to engage in developmental discussions with leaders highlighted potential barriers within organizational cultures and leadership dynamics.

Taking Charge or Standing Still

Participants’ responses to developmental action post-assessment varied widely. While some actively incorporated assessment feedback into their development plans, others opted not to take any action. Olivia, for example, shared her commitment to addressing areas for improvement, stating, “Networking is not my favorite thing ever... So that is something I’ve been targeting as part of my development.” Olivia’s proactive approach highlighted the potential for leveraging assessment insights to drive targeted development efforts.

Conversely, participants like Sophia expressed skepticism about the value of developmental guidance, preferring to focus on informal networking opportunities. Sophia remarked, “Who you had coffee with was more important than assessment results.” This divergence in perspectives underscored the importance of considering individual motivations and preferences in shaping developmental pathways.

Insights & Lessons Learned

Overall, the findings unveiled a complex tapestry of experiences and perspectives surrounding the assessment and feedback process among high-potential leaders. From the initial impressions and

decision points to the diverse responses to developmental action, each aspect highlighted the intricate interplay between individual preferences, organizational culture, and leadership dynamics.

The direct quotes from participants provided a rich context and depth to the findings, offering firsthand accounts of their thoughts and emotions throughout the assessment journey. These insights not only shed light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in the process but also underscored the importance of fostering open communication, proactive engagement, and targeted development efforts within organizations.

Moving forward, these findings offered valuable implications for organizations seeking to optimize their assessment and feedback processes for leadership development. By embracing transparency, fostering open dialogue, and tailoring developmental approaches

to individual needs, organizations can empower high-potential leaders to realize their full potential and drive organizational success.

Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of the emergent themes identified from the qualitative investigation into leaders' experiences with leadership assessment processes and subsequent developmental actions. Built upon themes extracted from in-depth interviews, the table offers a structured overview of participants' engagement with assessment feedback, decision-making regarding result sharing, integration of feedback into developmental plans, and perceptions of organizational support and follow-up. Each theme reflects the multifaceted nature of leadership development initiatives within organizational contexts, offering valuable insights for practitioners and scholars alike.

Table 3 Summary of Emergent Themes in High-Potential Leaders' Experiences with Assessment Feedback & Developmental Actions

Major Theme	Key Findings
Leadership Assessment Experience	Participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction and engagement with the assessment process. Some desired more transparency regarding assessment results from organizational leaders.
Decision-Making on Sharing Results	Participants exhibited diverse approaches to sharing assessment outcomes, influenced by organizational culture, perceived value, and personal discretion.
Integration of Feedback into Development	While some actively integrated assessment feedback into their development plans, others showed reluctance or preferred informal self-improvement methods.
Organizational Support and Follow-up	Participants expressed a need for continued support and follow-up from organizational stakeholders post-assessment, emphasizing the importance of ongoing engagement in leadership development.

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

Discussion

This study delved into the lived experiences of high-potential leaders regarding the assessment and feedback process within their respective organizational contexts. Through a phenomenological approach, the aim was to uncover the nuanced perspectives and insights of these leaders as they navigated through the assessment journey. The findings shed light on various aspects of the assessment process, including initial impressions, decision-making concerning result sharing, responses to developmental action, and reflections on the journey.

Addressing Theoretical Gaps & Literature Positioning

The findings of this study contributed to addressing theoretical gaps and enhancing the existing literature on leadership assessment and development. By examining the lived experiences of high-potential leaders, this research provided valuable insights into the practical implications of assessment processes within organizational contexts. The integration of emotional intelligence (EI) measures, as highlighted in studies such as Jang Elfenbein, and Porath (2023), underscored the importance of considering individual emotional competencies in leadership development initiatives. The study by Zhou, Gul, and Tufail (2022) further emphasized the significance of trust in leaders as a moderating factor in the relationship between leadership styles and work engagement. These studies provided theoretical frameworks that complemented the findings of this research, offering a broader under-

standing of the factors influencing leadership assessment outcomes.

Participants' Initial Impressions

The discussions initiated with participants offering their initial impressions of the assessment and feedback process revealed diverse expectations and perceptions. This aligned with the findings of Jang et al. (2023), which highlighted the predictive value of ability-tested emotional intelligence in academic performance. Participants' desire for greater transparency and clarity regarding assessment outcomes resonated with the literature emphasizing the importance of open communication in fostering trust and engagement (Zhou et al., 2022). These initial impressions set the stage for further exploration into the decision-making processes and subsequent actions of the high-potential leader

Navigating Decision Points: Sharing or Withholding Assessment Results

The decision to share assessment results emerged as a crucial aspect of participants' experiences, reflecting the complex interplay between individual preferences and organizational dynamics.

The findings aligned with the study by Kyei-Frimpong et al. (2022), which emphasized the mediating role of knowledge sharing in the relationship between leadership behaviors and organizational performance. Participants' reluctance to share results with immediate managers highlighted potential barriers within or-

Participants' reluctance to share results with immediate managers highlighted potential barriers within organizational cultures and underscored the need for fostering open dialogue and trust.

ganizational cultures and underscored the need for fostering open dialogue and trust (Jacobsen et al., 2022). These insights offered practical implications for organizations seeking to optimize their assessment processes and enhance leadership development initiatives.

Diverse Responses to Developmental Action

Participants' responses to developmental action post-assessment varied widely, reflecting individual motivations and preferences. The proactive approach adopted by some participants, as highlighted in studies such as Scholtz (2023), underscored the importance of leveraging assessment insights to drive targeted development efforts. Conversely, the reluctance of some participants to engage in developmental discussions with leaders suggested the need for tailored approaches and supportive organizational cultures (Kyei-Frimpong et al., 2022). These findings underscored the importance of aligning leadership development initiatives with individual needs and preferences to maximize effectiveness.

Insights & Lessons Learned

Overall, the findings provided valuable insights into the assessment and

feedback process among high-potential leaders, offering practical implications for organizations and scholars alike. The integration of direct quotes from participants enriched the discussion, offering firsthand accounts of their experiences and perspectives. These insights underscored the importance of fostering open communication, proactive engagement, and targeted development efforts within organizational contexts (Jacobsen et al., 2022). Moving forward, organizations could leverage these insights to optimize their assessment processes and empower high-potential leaders to realize their full potential and drive organizational success.

Research Implications

This study underscored the need for further exploration into the effectiveness of various leadership development supports. While internal coaches, immediate managers, mentors, and peer dyads or triads had been identified as potential sources of support (Warrenfeltz & Kellett, 2017), more nuanced investigations were required to understand their specific roles and contributions. Future research should delve into specific contextual situations and processes to optimize the efficacy of leadership development methods. By building on established leadership theories (Cummings & Cummings, 2014), this study highlighted the importance of examining how individuals interacted with their environment to foster collaboration with coworkers and followers (Wachira, Karanja, & Iravo, 2018). Emphasizing the acquisition of both formal and informal feedback through multiple channels (Rawlings &

Janson, 2022), this research underscored the value of personality assessment feedback in facilitating leadership growth, aligning with prior theoretical research in leadership development (Wachira et al., 2018).

Practice Implications

The findings of this study had direct implications for leadership development practices within organizations. While assessment was recognized as a crucial aspect of leadership development (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004; Warrenfeltz & Kellert, 2017), the study highlighted a gap in providing adequate support for leadership development initiatives. As outlined by McCauley and Van Velsor (2004), support could manifest through feedback facilitators, direct supervisors, or other organizational members. Additionally, organizational policies and processes played a pivotal role in demonstrating support for leadership growth. Therefore, organizations should not only focus on assessment but also prioritize providing comprehensive support mechanisms to nurture leadership talent effectively.

Conclusion

This study revealed significant gaps in post-feedback development support for leaders participating in organizational development programs. The findings underscored the need for executives to leverage these insights to enhance the effectiveness of such programs. Drawing from the findings and discussions above, several recommendations can be made

to improve organizational development initiatives:

Firstly, there is a pressing need for longer coaching interactions with feedback facilitators, as suggested by Lyons and Bandura (2021). Organizations should invest in competent internal coaches who can provide comprehensive support to high-potential leaders throughout their development journey. These coaches should be readily available to facilitate feedback discussions and guide leaders in crafting actionable development plans.

Secondly, high-potential program expectations should include the documentation of comprehensive development plans, outlining defined tasks, measurable outcomes, and clear timelines. Encouraging high-potential leaders to communicate these plans with their immediate bosses can foster accountability and ensure alignment with organizational objectives.

Thirdly, a feedback facilitator (coach) should play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between high-potential leaders and their managers. An organized approach to involving immediate managers in the leader's growth journey is essential, especially considering the reluctance of some participants to discuss assessment results with their managers.

Lastly, a commitment to active engagement and progress beyond mere attendance and completion of program requirements is crucial. Leadership development initiatives must prioritize leadership competencies on par with technical

or managerial skills. This entails providing opportunities for participants to translate feedback into tangible actions and observable progress.

In essence, participants in leadership development programs respond to feedback based on their personalities, motivations, and perceptions. Positive feedback can inspire action, while negative feedback may not necessarily lead to behavioral change. By implementing these recommendations, organizations can ensure that leadership development programs effectively utilize feedback to drive continuous improvement and maximize the potential of high-potential leaders.

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