

Where Potential Meets Opportunity

Korn Ferry

The lecture hall was nearly full, and I looked out onto a sea of eager faces. Then, from the back row, a young man called out, “So, what do I need to get *your* job one day?”

The question came as I wrapped up my guest lecture at a university a few years ago—and I welcomed it. “Clearly you all have potential or else you wouldn’t be here,” I told the students. “But how can you *exceed* that potential?” Not one of them could guess the answer I had in mind.

“It takes an abundance of opportunity,” I suggested, and then the discussion went to another level.

We all sit at the intersection of potential and opportunity. Potential is the common denominator—we all have potential. But it will remain a mere fraction—substantially less than one—without the numerator of opportunity. After all, leadership is, in essence, creating opportunities for others.

The challenge, though, is that potential is about tomorrow. Opportunity is about today.

Our progress is seldom linear. Life is full of setbacks: the time we got cut from the team. We didn’t make the school band or get cast in the play. We didn’t get the job we wanted—or the promotion went to someone else. In those moments, it can feel as if someone else controls our fate.

But who’s to say what someone can or cannot do? Only with opportunity will we ever know.

So where does potential meet opportunity? With leadership. It’s all of us—and it’s up to us, as leaders, as colleagues, as mentors, sponsors, and coaches, and as friends and family members. Inspiring others to believe, investing the time so others can achieve.

I was barely a teenager and just learning to drive when my dad took me to the community college parking lot to practice. My dad’s car was a “three on the tree”—a three-speed transmission with the shifter on the steering column. I can still remember the H pattern—first gear, second gear, third gear, reverse, with neutral in between.

I tried and tried to get it right, but that old car just sputtered and lurched, then stalled. I wanted to give up, but Dad told me to pull over. Then he put his hand over mine and led me through the gears: “Give it a little gas. Ease off the clutch ...” Soon, I was driving solo, and Dad was sitting back and enjoying the ride around the parking lot—a smile on his face.

That’s what we all need today—for ourselves and others—with an “H pattern” that unleashes potential and puts opportunity into gear. Here are some thoughts:

Humility...

Humility begets self-awareness, and self-awareness begets growth. With humility, we see beyond our own insularity into a bigger world. Self-awareness means not only knowing ourselves, but also how and where we can surround ourselves with others who are strong where we are weak. Always and everywhere, humility is the grace that constantly whispers, “It’s not about you.”

Hunger...

All of us have two choices. We can go with the crowd—the path of least resistance. Or we tap into our purpose—and our hunger for that purpose. Namely, our drive. That’s why of all the qualities I look for in new employees, one of the big ones is hunger. Hunger manifests in many ways, starting with learning agility—the No. 1 predictor of success that’s all about applying past experiences and lessons learned to new challenges and first-time opportunities. Or, as I call it, knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do. Hunger also fuels mental agility—embracing complexity, making fresh connections, examining problems in new ways, and staying curious. Hunger encourages people agility—being open to diverse viewpoints and challenging preconceived notions. And finally, it empowers change agility to move beyond “this is the way we’ve always done things.” Indeed, hunger is the bridge that takes us from potential alone into the fullness of opportunity.

Hustle...

This is the other big quality—because hustle quashes pedigree every time. It’s what turns possibilities into opportunities. But here’s the caveat—no one can teach us hustle. But we know it when we see it. Our research indicates that there are several signposts of potential—and all of them point to hustle. Drive and motivation. Awareness of strengths and blind spots. Experience and our track record of accomplishments. Learning agility. Capacity for logic and reasoning. Leadership traits that propel our advancement. And, on top of all that, knowing how to manage our career derailment risks. Hustle is the proverbial first foot on the field, last one off.

Heart...

And if there’s a fourth gear—topping off our H pattern—it’s this one. Heart speaks to having the courage to undertake the journey—and the humanness to meet others where they are and bring them along. For leaders, heart speaks not only to passion and compassion, but also as importantly to authenticity and vulnerability. It’s a reminder that what we do is not who we are. And, with St. Valentine’s Day around the corner, the story of this long-ago saint brings additional meaning to heart. Among all the various myths, common themes stand out around selflessness and service to others. In one story, while St. Valentine was imprisoned, he restored the sight of his jailor’s daughter. Talk about helping someone rediscover their potential to live a life of greater opportunity! These are the times for leaders to tap into their heart for emotion and courage, instead of relying only on their heads—rational and strategic. Indeed, the heart is where inspiration lives and breathes.

It's true that we're all in the “why,” “what,” “how,” and “when” business. But ultimately, we must be in the business of bringing together potential and opportunity—for others.