



AN INTRINSIC CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF AIR FORCE COMPANY GRADE  
OFFICERS AS HIGH-POTENTIAL OFFICERS

GRADUATE RESEARCH PAPER

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### **Abstract**

This graduate research paper analyzed Air Force guidance, senior leader perspectives, and talent management case analyses involving high-potential (HiPo) individuals. The purpose was to use an Intrinsic Case Study design to discover common definitions, characteristics, and attributes of HiPo officers.

To minimize bias, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 senior leaders with Developmental Team, Management Level Review, or Central Selection Board experience, as well as multiple command tours. In total, ten general officers and four colonels with flying, maintenance, Special Tactics Officer (STO), or cyber experience participated.

The senior leaders interviewed shared their thoughts, opinions, and insights on what constituted a HiPo officer and highlighted issues in need of remedy. Using Cresswell's data analysis spiral and Nvivo qualitative analysis software, the researcher identified three themes for both high-performing (HiPro) and HiPo officers. These themes, combined with an exhaustive literature review, lead the researcher to recommend seven items for action.

*To my best friend and two children, thanks for your love, support, and patience. You make it all worthwhile.*

## **Acknowledgments**

There are several individuals I wish to express my sincerest appreciation for in their role with this arduous research project. First, I would like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Robert Overstreet. Your advice, contributions, and support provided me the required focus and motivation to complete. Equally, thank you Lieutenant General William “Bill” Bender for mentoring and providing me your radical candor throughout the process. It was an absolute pleasure working with you and I appreciate you taking a chance on a random Major's request for support! I would also like to thank all the senior leaders who took time out of their incredibly busy schedules to share their thoughts and insights into the realm of talent management. Your open and honest inputs made this research project possible. I sincerely hope I have represented your contributions fairly and accurately.

Steven T. Nolan Jr.

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# AN INTRINSIC CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF AIR FORCE COMPANY GRADE OFFICERS AS HIGH-POTENTIAL OFFICERS

## I. Introduction

### Background

Every Air Force officer is assessed, gauged, and evaluated upon earning their commission to the service. Officer Performance Reports (OPRs) and Training Reports (TRs) track these assessments. The verbiage used, awards achieved, and stratification among peers serve as a “reliable, long-term, cumulative record of performance and *promotion potential*” (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 10). Once an officer accumulates the requisite years of service to compete for the rank of Major and above, a Promotion Recommendation Form (PRF) summarizes the highlights of that officer’s career. This form is also used to communicate “an officer’s *performance-based potential*” (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 11).

The term *potential* is an important distinction as performance and potential are not synonymous with one another. In fact, according to a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) article, Maurer found that high-performance was often mistaken for high-potential (2015). The difference between the two does not mean that performance and potential are mutually exclusive. What this means is while most high-potential (HiPo) employees are also high-performing (HiPro), the converse is not always true. Although it may seem an innocent mistake to confuse the two descriptions, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of ClearCompany, Andre Lavoie, stated that “not being able to distinguish between performance and potential will make it difficult for employers

to identify, develop and retain talent” (2015). Furthermore, he claims there is a cost associated with not delineating between the two.

The cost of a misidentified HiPro as a HiPo, according to the Korn-Ferry Institute, is three-fold. First, misidentification leads to pushing people into roles they are not qualified for or do not desire; this leads to damaging people’s career. Second, misidentification leads to mediocre performance, which leads to a decrease in organizational morale, which leads to employee turnover. Third, misidentification leads to employees losing faith in the Human Resources (HR) department and processes, which is the perceived owner of the organization’s talent (Peters & Sevy, 2014). The implications of successfully identifying *potential* can have strategic military effects as outlined in the Air Force’s Strategic Master Plan (SMP), Human Capital Annex (HCA).

The HCA is one of four annexes to the SMP that translates goals and objectives required to achieve Air Force strategy into initiatives and priorities. Under the “Talent Management” section the HCA states “the detailed, personal management of the small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high *potential* will enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands” (Human Capital Annex to USAF SMP, 2016: A-9). Although the Air Force references the word *potential* in numerous documents, no characteristics or attributes are explicitly stated to aid personnel directorates in synchronizing their efforts to achieve the Air Force’s strategic guidance, as outlined in the HCA.

## **Research Problem Statement**

The problem faced by the Air Force is that it has an incomplete understanding of how to differentiate between a HiPo company grade officer (CGO) and a HiPro CGO. Research has shown that there is a cost associated with misidentifying a HiPro individual with a HiPo (Peters & Sevy, 2014). The cost is not readily apparent or easily quantifiable in the Air Force, but the cost associated with misidentifying an employee's potential is also not unique to the private sector. In fact, the cost is much steeper given key Air Force positions, as with our sister services, can only be filled from within. Thus, there is no recourse to recoup the cost of lost talent once it is gone. If the Air Force were to understand how to differentiate between a HiPo and HiPro, there would likely be significant improvements made in how the Air Force manages its limited talent pool.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to improve the way the Air Force differentiates between HiPo and HiPro CGOs. The research question thus follows: *How can the Air Force better identify, assess, and develop HiPo CGOs?* The following are additional investigative questions that this research will answer:

IQ1: Currently, how does the Air Force personnel management system differentiate between HiPo officers and HiPro officers?

IQ2: Where has this process succeeded and where has it failed?

IQ3: How could industry best practices be applied in the Air Force?

## **Methodology**

To gain an in-depth understanding of HiPo employee programs, the researcher relied on an intrinsic case study design. As there are no specific HiPo programs in place for the U.S. Air Force, the research design facilitates an evaluation of private industry HiPo lessons learned and their applicability within the Air Force. The paper draws upon multiple data sources such as scholarly journals, magazine articles, talent management case studies, webinars, textbooks, and interviews to fully immerse the researcher in the case. Once immersed, the researcher will triangulate the sources to help answer the central and investigative research questions.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to assess the perceived or realized differences between an officer's performance and their future potential. The researcher conducted the interviews in person, over the phone, and by email correspondence. This format allowed the interviewer to explore particular themes and responses further. The interviewees' geographic separation necessitated the use of these multiple mediums. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, regardless of the medium used.

The interviews were used to understand the current personnel management system, Officer Evaluation System (OES), Developmental Team (DT) process, and how performance and potential are communicated. Additionally, the interviews were intended to annotate specific attributes, knowledge, or competencies of an Air Force HiPo. Finally, the interviews provided the ability to capture OES recommendations.

The population of interest was Air Force senior leader Operations Officers. The Air Force Specialties (AFS) included were: Pilots, Air Battle Managers (ABMs),

Maintenance (Mx), Intel, Combat Rescue Officers (CROs), Special Tactics Officers (STOs), Space and Missiles, and Cyber. The potential interviewees were selected by the researcher and through recommendations of various senior leaders. The process of selecting interviewees involved reviewing personal biographies, analyzing duty histories, and DT or Promotion Board experience.

The interview questions were developed in advance and presented to all respondents. Every question was designed to avoid leading towards the desired answer. A full review of interview development and design is covered in Chapter III.

### **Assumptions & Limitations**

Due to the investigative nature of this study, there were three assumptions made. First, this research assumes there are commonalities between the private sector and the Air Force personnel management system. These commonalities centered on the value, focus, and effort of retaining top talent. This means the characteristics of a HiPo in the private sector should be closely related to a HiPo in the Air Force. The second assumption is that the senior officers interviewed are representative of the Operations Officer population. This assumption was made due to the broad inclusion of various career fields and longevity of the participants' service. Their answers may facilitate generalizable statements to be made about the attributes, characteristics, and competencies of a HiPo. Furthermore, the individuals interviewed will add validity to these traits due to their experience as Commanders, DT members, or Promotion Board members. The third assumption is characteristics, attributes, and competencies identified

by the interviewees encompass the range of qualities required to establish a standard Air Force HiPo definition.

This study also presents limitations. First, multiple organizations and individuals are involved in the management of Air Force personnel. Headquarters of the Air Force (HAF) A1 (Personnel), respective Major Command (MAJCOM) A1 directorates, and the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) have various processes to manage the force. These processes include the monitoring of high-performing individuals. These organizations are essential to understanding how the current Air Force personnel process operates. Although the individuals working in these directorates did not necessarily create the current processes, admitting any inadequacies may be perceived as an indication of poor personal performance. As such, the individuals required to provide input to the research may be biased towards the current system. This bias may also hold true for senior leaders interviewed for this paper.

### **Implications**

This research could highlight deficiencies in the current personnel management appraisal process which lead to a loss of talented officers. By identifying the attributes of an Air Force HiPo CGO, Air Force DTs and Promotion Boards could evaluate and adopt best practices from private industry to measure potential and performance. Additionally, the Air Force can reevaluate job selection processes to find the best fit based on the confluence of potential and performance. Furthermore, the Air Force can synchronize their talent management process with their vision of the future and affect doctrinal change to their human capital management strategy.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of high-potential employees, how they provide a company's strategic competitive advantage, and how talent management perceives them. First, the researcher will summarize the talent hierarchy which consists of various talent definitions, theoretical viewpoints, and implications of these theories toward HiPo talent. Next, as the term HiPo talent resides within a few talent management theories, the chapter will explore how researchers, and organizations alike, identify, assess, and develop HiPo talent. After describing HiPo talent, the chapter concludes by outlining the current Air Force Officer Evaluation System including the delineating criteria for officer promotions, Whole Airmen Factors, Institutional Competencies, officer stratifications, and the Air Force's definition of potential.

### **The War for Talent**

When The Limited, a large retail corporation, experienced a significant decline in its earnings and stock price in the early 1990s, the CEO, Lex Wexner, reached out to other CEOs for guidance. During their conversations, Wexner discovered each spent the majority of their time recruiting talent, matching the right people to the right positions, developing young stars, handling underperformers, and reviewing the entire talent pool. Jack Welch, then CEO of General Electric, told Wexner, "having the most talented people in each of our businesses is the most important thing. If we don't, we lose." (Michaels, Axelrod, & Handfield-Jones, 2001) Later, in the 1990s, McKinsey's War for

Talent research project took Welch's assertion further when it postulated employee talent varied and that some employees were more talented than others (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Although the study did not identify specific traits which made people perform better than others, the study served as a launching pad for organizations to rigorously pursue the most talented individuals available.

The war for talent is based on two underlying premises (Dries, 2013). First, in a knowledge economy, vice a traditional economy, an organization achieves competitive advantage through its human talent resource (Iles, 1997). Second, retaining talented people is increasingly problematic due to a smaller, vastly diverse, empowered, but ultimately less skilled workforce (Tucker, Kao, & Verma, 2005). The dwindling talent pool motivates organizations to understand the talent management process better. The first step in the process is to define what talent means to the company.

### **Talent Defined**

Talent is a nebulous term, and its use as an employee descriptor is rarely precise nor are the implications of its use widely known (Tansley et al., 2007). One organization's view of talent might be in stark contrast to another's. As an example, talent may refer to individuals who have the potential to "reach high levels of achievement" (Tansley, 2011: 266). Silzer and Dowell (2010) consider talent in the form of groups or pool of employees with exceptional skills, abilities, or competencies in a specific technical area. In some instances, talent is not segregated into groups, but is considered the "entire employee population" (Silzer & Church, 2010: 14). González-Cruz et al. (2009) posited talent as a set of competencies which could be developed and

applied which allowed a person to perform a “certain role in an excellent way” (2009, p. 22). Although we may surmise talent to mean whatever we deem due to the construct used (Ulrich, 2011), the commonality in the definitions resides in talent’s combination or a mixture of components.

In the War for Talent, Michaels et al. describe talent as the *sum* of abilities, “intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive” (2001: xii). Conversely, Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) viewed talent as the *product* of competence, commitment, and contribution. The difference between the two calculations depends on how one sees the elements of the equations. If the calculation is multiplicative versus additive, then a stronger element cannot mask a weaker one. It is not clear which of these talent estimates is better or worse for practical use, but the estimates are connected to the company’s mission and industry. What is clear, however, is the agreement amongst researchers that talent is an amalgamation of innate and learned factors.

In addition to the various views on talent, Tansley suggested there were three levels of explaining talent: Organizational, Group, and Individual (Tansley, 2011).

***Organizational Level Talent (A Strategic View).***

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) conducted a year long, longitudinal case study of nine organizations from both public and private sectors in 2007. The study found companies’ definition of talent was organizationally distinct, influenced by its industry, and dynamic which changed according to their priorities (2007). Below are three examples of organizations with different definitions of talent.

- Gordon Ramsey Holdings viewed talent as the creative cooking skills of its chefs.
- Google regarded a talented person as someone who is confident, generates ideas, and a challenger of the status quo.
- PricewaterhouseCoopers considered a talented person as someone with drive, energetic, willing to take on challenges and demonstrated the ability to make a difference in the business (CIPD, 2007).

Although variations exist in each organizations' talent evaluation, their measurements reside in three distinct categories: knowledge, skills, and competencies (Tansley, 2011). The U.S. Army appears to have adopted these categories in their talent management strategy, with one exception, behaviors replaced competencies (U.S. Army Talent Management, 2016). The difference between the two words is not subtle. A competency is the blend of knowledge, skills, and aptitude while behavior is a combination of beliefs, attitude, and action. Both should be considered separately and interpreted accordingly; however, in either case, they are inextricably linked (Blaga, 2014). Silzer and Dowell express talent as those "individuals who have innate abilities in an area (who are gifted) and those who have learned their skills and knowledge" (2010: 13). Currently, the U.S. Navy and Air Force do not make any such distinctions but do maintain an organizational concept of talent.

In 2015, the Honorable Ray Mabus, Secretary of the Navy, in an address to Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy, referred to talent as innovative thinking and linked it to future warfighting requirements (Mabus, 2015). By comparison, in its Human Capital Annex of the Strategic Master Plan, the Air Force defines talent as "Airmen who possess ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high-potential" (HCA to the USAF SMP, 2016: A-9). The term HiPo indicates some measure of exclusivity, but on its own

does not provide clarity of its meaning. However, in an Air Force, Air University Leadership Study regarding officer development, “high-potential” refers to officers selected to the rank of major and in-residence IDE (Currie, Conway, Johnson, Landry, & Lowther, 2012). Assuming the HiPo label is predicated on a sustained higher level of performance, we must also assume there are varying levels of performance, and therefore, another level of talent.

***Group Level Talent (An Operational View).***

Notwithstanding the litany of organizational definitions concerning talent, there must be a way to operationalize and leverage talent. Tansley (2011) conceptualized talent into four separate elements (see Table 1. Elements of Group Level Talent) which were intended to explain the positive and negative connotations associated with segregating a company’s talent pool. On the one hand, enterprise leaders can divvy organizational resources better and according to an individual’s contribution to a company’s strategic advantage. On the other hand, employees may feel marginalized, resentful towards the “key talent group,” and could have an adverse impact on work performance. Tansley refers to this emotional dichotomy as the “paradoxical nature of organizational talent” (2011: 270). As mentioned in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development study of 2007, every organization has a different view on talent. Thus, it is important to discover how critical talent groups are shaped and sized.

**Table 1. Elements of Group Level Talent**

Element	Definition
Leadership Talent	Individuals whom “the competition would hire within seconds,” are visionary, have a “high potential for leadership,” and are considered “thought leaders.”
Key Talent Group	Represent 2-5 percent of the employee population. (*Author’s note: The key talent group is similar to a HiPo group, but Tansley’s percentage of the pool is smaller than industry standard)
Core Talent	Perform “core business processes” within the short-term (6-12 months), but do not focus on the future. Individuals who are the majority of the workforce.
Peripheral Talent	Contractors and third party providers who provide essential services, but not core to the organization.

In *Talent Management: Cases and Commentary*, Blass (2009) analyzed the Chartered Management Institute and Ashridge Business School’s talent management case study of 15, distinctly different, corporations. He discovered every company carried out their talent management strategy differently but held common themes (Blass, 2009). To this end, Blass developed 18 operational dimensions to assess how organizations identify, develop, and manage talent. Table 2. Six Operational Dimensions of Talent Identification depicts the six dimensions of talent identification.

**Table 2. Six Operational Dimensions of Talent Identification**

Dimension	Definition
1. Size of Talent Pool	How many people comprise the talent pool? The extremes are all employees down to one percent.
2. Entry Criteria	How easy is it to meet criteria to enter talent pool? The extremes range from anyone can join at any time through to tough where certain criteria must be fulfilled to qualify for entry.
3. Decision Process	How many people are involved in classifying the talent? The extremes in this dimension are concentrated decision making, usually resulting in it being the line manager, through to distributed decision making of the same form.
4. Permanency of Definition	How permanent is the labeling of talent? The extremes here are ‘once talent – always talent’ through to the label of talent being transient.
5. Recruitment as a Source of Talent	Where are key vacant roles sourced? The extremes here are all internal candidates through to all external candidates.
6. Transparency	How transparent is the talent management system? The extremes are that is entirely open with everyone appreciating how the system works and their personal talent classification, through to an opaque system, sometimes to the point that individuals don’t know there is a system in place.

The importance, focus, and degree a company decides to shape each dimension are related to their strategic perspective. The strategic perspective shapes how a company views and implements its talent management system. As an example, Accenture considers all employees as talent because its business strategy revolves around the people they employ (Powell, 2009). Although Accenture views all employees as talented, it counsels out 10 percent of its workforce annually which obliquely signifies the varying

degrees of work performance and potential. A more thorough review of Blass's six strategic perspectives is discussed later in the chapter.

***Individual Level Talent (The Tactical View).***

Regardless of an organizations' strategic or operational view on talent, individuals are at the center of it all. Multiple studies conclude that not all people perform at the same level and not all persons have the potential to perform in future, more challenging roles. A talented person is one who performs better now or potentially performs better in the future. Although the adjective 'better' signifies a more excellent quality, it does not delineate the degree of the quality. Gagné (2000) suggests a person who can perform in the top 10 percent of their peer group is talented. However, this definition infers talent is bounded by the relative accomplishments of others.

Agnostic to these accomplishments, the federal definition of talent, used in educational settings, adequately addresses this shortcoming. That is, "Talented individuals are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by outstanding abilities are capable of high performance" (Periathiruvadi & Rinn, 2012: 153). A distinguishing characteristic of the federal definition is the assertion that talent is the composition of multiple characteristics, namely abilities. The term 'abilities' is one of many expressions referred to as "talent-as-object" (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013: 293). In total, Gallardo-Gallardo et al. listed 12 terms associated with talent (see Table 3. Terms Associated with 'Talent-as-Object'), the most prevalent being ability, competence, knowledge, and skills (2013).

**Table 3. Terms Associated with ‘Talent-as-Object’**

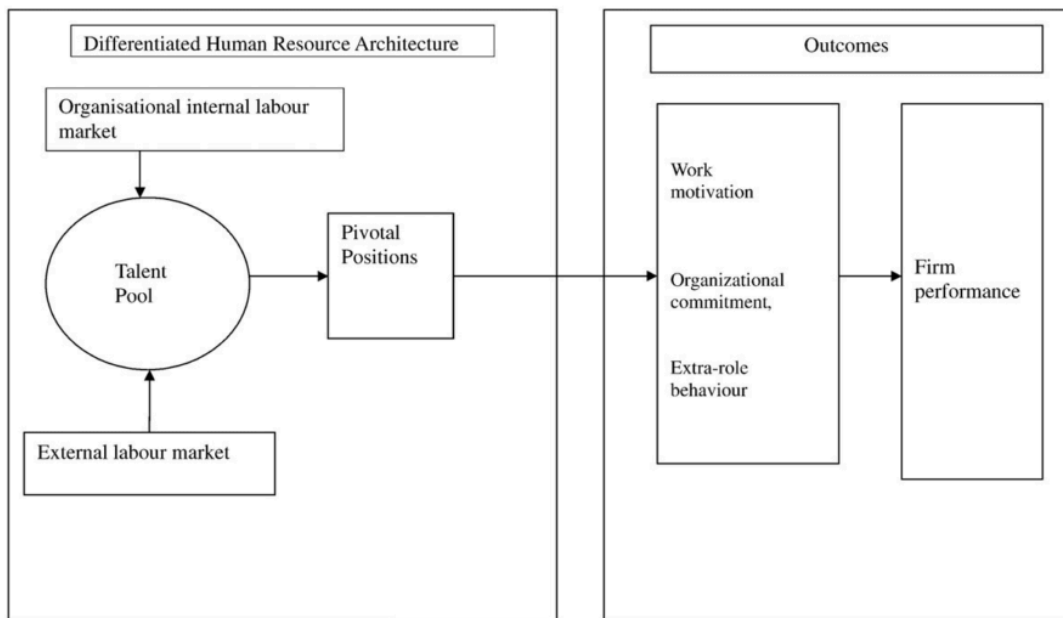
Associated Terms	Sources
Ability	Gagné (2000), Hinrichs (1966), Michaels et al. (2001), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Tansley et al. (2006), Williams (2000)
Capacity	Jericó (2001)
Capability	Stahl et al. (2007)
Commitment	Ulrich (2007)
Competence/competency	Bethke-Langenegger (2012), González-Cruz et al. (2009), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Ulrich (2007), Williams (2000)
Contribution	Ulrich (2007)
Experience	Cheese et al. (2008)
Knowledge	Bethke-Langenegger (2012), Cheese et al. (2008), Michaels et al. (2001), Tansley et al. (2006)
Performance	Stahl et al. (2007), Tansley et al. (2007)
Potential	Tansley et al. (2006), Tansley et al. (2007), Williams (2000)
Patterns of thought, feeling or behavior	Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001), Cheese et al. (2008)
Skills	Cheese et al. (2008), Gagné (2000), Hinrichs (1966), Michaels et al. (2001), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Tansley et al. (2006)

Although these characteristics illuminate the possible definitions of talent and possibly concepts of measurement, they are not all inclusive. Furthermore, the words used to define talent are dependent on the theoretical perspective in which an organization views talent. The next section delves into several perspectives to establish a framework enabling a clearer discussion on HiPo talent later in the chapter.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Despite the increased interest and practice of talent management, few codified theories exist which are exclusive to the field. Even scholarly articles differ in their nomenclature of ‘theory.’ Collings and Mellahi (2009) developed a theoretical model of strategic talent management (Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Strategic Talent

Management) which was intended to serve as a framework for future research endeavors. At its core, the model depicts pivotal talent *positions* which have the potential of providing an organization a strategic competitive advantage. The concept is slightly different from Boudreau and Ramstad’s (2005) pivotal talent *pools* which emphasize individual competencies as the source of competitive advantage. In either case, the framework and strategic talent management alike, are “premised on identifying *high potential* and high performing employees, deploying them in pivotal positions and supporting them with a differentiated HR architecture” (Collings & Mellahi, 2009: 310).



**Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Strategic Talent Management**

Sparrow, Scullion, and Tarique (2014) refer to the Collings et al. (2009) study as an outline of talent management philosophies broken down into four different *approaches*: people, practices, position, and strategic-pools (see Table 4. Talent Management Philosophies ). Although the approaches seem to compete against one another, in practice, organizations blend them together (Sparrow et al., 2014). Moreover,

regardless of the prescribed approach, each requires the identification of HiPo talent to achieve its ends. As an example, the people approach strives to identify “star” performers while the position approach identifies strategic “A positions.” However, even the “A positions” require “A players” which still signifies a differentiation of talent requirements throughout the organization, even, if only, on a smaller scale. Furthermore, Collings et al. (2009) framework and Sparrow et al. (2014) philosophies/approaches share commonalities with Blass’s (2009) six strategic perspectives: process, cultural, competitive, developmental, human resource planning, and change management (see Table 5. Blass’s Six Strategic Perspectives).

**Table 4. Talent Management Philosophies**

Approach	Focus
People	Identification of superior performers and HiPo individuals who are the source of an organization’s competitive advantage.
Practices	A dedicated set of strategically integrated, advanced and sophisticated HR practices which identify and recruit talent.
Pivotal Positions	Identification of strategically important “A” positions which provide a disproportionate amount of value for the organization.
Strategic Pools	Groupings of talent where human capital investments provide a more significant impact on an organization’s competitiveness.

As an example, Blass’s developmental perspective dictates the similar personal development processes for a majority of the employee population while “accelerating the process for high potentials” (2009: 4). The people approach advocates similarly for differentiating the management of high-performers and HiPos as they provide a “disproportionate amount of value to the organization compared to other employees” (Sparrow et al., 2014: 41). Furthermore, both the people approach and developmental

perspective share commonalities with the human capital perspective which proposes the “potential of the human capital at hand to contribute to its organization’s core competence and enhance its competitive advantage” (Dries, 2013: 276). Regardless of whether an organization shapes its talent management system around individuals, talent pools, processes, or practices, each requires an organization to define, identify, assess, develop, and retain HiPo talent.

**Table 5. Blass’s Six Strategic Perspectives**

Perspective	Focus
Process	Processes are designed to optimize people, ensuring the right talent is in place.
Cultural	Talent is a requirement for success. Every individual’s talent is developed.
Competitive	Identifying talented people and giving them what they want.
Developmental	HiPo individuals are on accelerated development paths.
HR Planning	Get the right people matched to the right jobs at the right time.
Change Management	Talent management process is the driver of organizational change.

### **HiPo Talent**

Research shows organizations designate anywhere from two to twenty percent of their employee population as “high-potential” (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005a; Silzer & Church, 2010; Tansley, 2011). Additionally, companies view their HiPo in these terms:

High potentials consistently and significantly outperform their peer groups in a variety of settings and circumstances. While achieving these superior levels of performance, they exhibit behaviors that reflect their companies' culture and values in an exemplary manner. Moreover, they show a strong capacity to grow and succeed throughout their careers within an organization—more quickly and effectively than their peer groups do. (Ready, Conger, & Hill, 2010: 3)

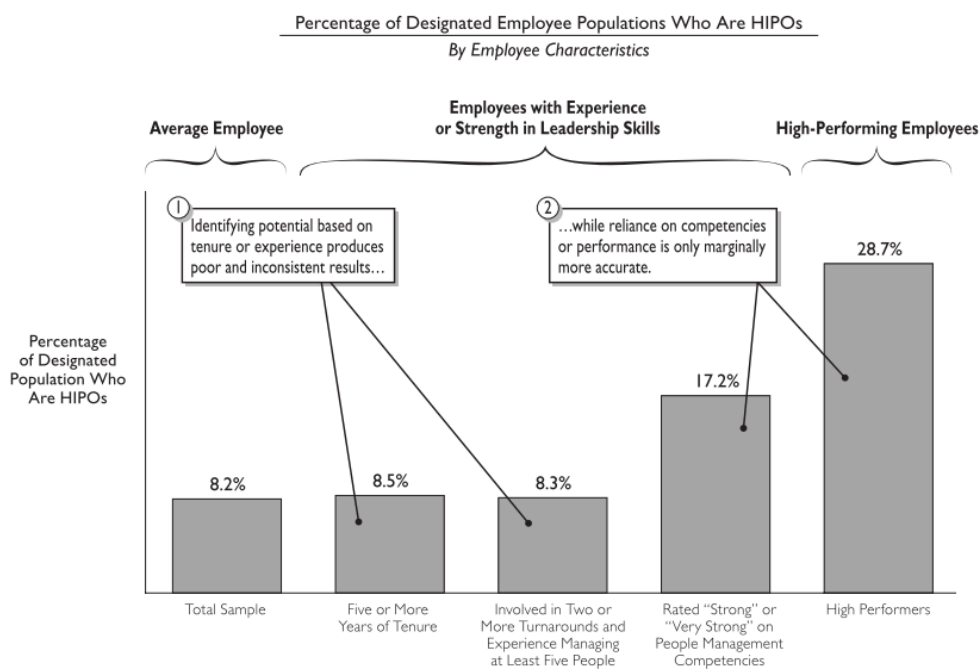
Consequently, it is important to understand how companies administer their HiPo programs and discuss major obstacles to implementation. Therefore, this section will first differentiate an individual's performance from their future potential establishing a baseline for further discussion. Next, this section will flow through the HiPo identification model including definitions, categories, solicitation, nomination, and developmental process. The section concludes by providing additional HiPo identification models.

### ***Performance versus Potential.***

Distinguishing between a HiPro and the HiPo employee is problematic. On the one hand, HiPro individuals are obvious to spot while a person's potential is less discernable. Top performers stand out, are the go-to people for challenging projects, and have a distinguished track record for getting the job done. These individuals are known as "solid citizens" or "high professionals" and makeup 85 to 90 percent of managers in the organization (Hall, 1986: 244; Cope, 1998: 16) They tend to direct their learning, seek out opportunities, and want to be challenged (Willyerd, 2014). HiPros excel in their role, are key contributors, and consistently over-deliver (Twohill, 2015). Unfortunately, performance alone is not an accurate reflection of a person's potential.

In 2005, the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) conducted a quantitative analysis on the identification and development of HiPo employees. A portion of the

study involved analyzing organizational metrics that companies used to designate employees as a HiPo. The four top results were: five or more years of tenure, management experience with at least five people, viewed as having “strong” people management competencies, or designated as a HiPro (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005a). The CLC found most of the indicators used were inaccurate with high-performing employees topping the survey at 29 percent (Figure 2. HiPo Employee Indicators ). What this means is, roughly, three out of ten high-performing employees are HiPos while the remaining seven were misidentified. The CLC finding is not a one off either.



**Figure 2. HiPo Employee Indicators**

In a recent study, Church, Rotolo, Ginther, and Levine found top companies overwhelmingly utilized current (73 percent) and past performance (75 percent) to identify their HiPos (2015). While past performance is a reliable indicator and significant predictor of future performance (Gatewood, Feild, & Barrick, 2010), forecasting an

individual's future potential is a dissimilar construct (Church et al., 2015). There are numerous examples where current high-performing employees fail to deliver at that same level post promotion. This failure to perform at a higher level is reflective of the Peter Principle and is synonymous with the "performance-potential" paradox (Church & Waclawski, 2010; Peter & Hull, 1969). Although it seems performance shares no direct linkage to potential, in truth, performance is just one of many indicators of potential but should not be overweighted (Church & Silzer, 2014). If performance is only one of several indicators of an individual's potential, then it begs the question what other predictive personal characteristics differentiate HiPros from HiPos.

### ***HiPo Definitions.***

Earlier in the chapter, we discussed the various levels of talent, from the strategic view down towards the individual. We learned that the extrication of one's performance from their potential, broadly, involves a thorough evaluation of their knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors. Reviewing the various literature streams, the researcher noticed significant, similar descriptions of the anatomy of a HiPo. Utilizing Nvivo's Word Cloud tool, the researcher populated the program with various "high-potential" articles and reports keying in on specific characteristics describing HiPo employees. The scholarly articles used were not weighted in any way nor were multiple instances of the same word, used to skew the query. As shown in Figure 3, results highlighted an emphasis on an individual's drive, learning, agility, and leadership which were also coincidental with Silzer and Church's findings of a 2010 corporate survey. In the survey, organizations top three HiPo identification factors were leadership competencies, past performance, and



on the organization, one or all three definitions are used to categorize different talent groups.

Similar to Tansley's (2011) three talent levels (Organizational, Group, and Individual) and Boudreau and Ramstad's (2005) pivotal talent pools, Silzer and Church found organizations clustered HiPo talent into four, "band-level" designations (2010: 229). The purpose of categorizing this way is to ensure a company maintains an appropriate talent level throughout the organization to maximize its strategic competitive advantage. The four levels are:

- Top Potential (senior level potential)
- Turn Potential (next level potential)
- Grow Potential (the same level but expand)
- Mastery Potential (same work, same level)

***HiPo Solicitation, Nomination, and Assessment Process.***

Senior executives play a significant role in the identification process whereby a majority of organizations solicit for and nominate potential candidates. The process is typically conducted on an annual basis and is top-down driven. Managers at all levels can nominate candidates based on the organizational definition and categorization of HiPos. The candidate's nomination package often includes (Silzer & Church, 2010: 235):

- Career and educational history, including tenure in current position and with the company
- All performance evaluations, including significant accomplishments and failures
- Past developmental experiences and programs
- Current development plans and an indication of recent developmental progress
- An assessment of the person's leadership strengths and development needs
- The individual's career interests and mobility
- Critical experiences already gained and skills required for career progress
- Reasons why the person is nominated

As the nomination packages transition through the organizational hierarchy, higher-level managers assess, approve, or remove prospective HiPos providing senior leaders a calibrated list of candidates. Additionally, organizations leverage technological advances in data collection to develop better robust background information on candidates which offer a wide array of assessment tools (Silzer & Church, 2010). Current tools in use are leadership competency surveys, 360-degree interviews, practical competency measures, career background interviews, cognitive ability tests, personality inventories, assessment centers, or individual assessments. Depending on the organization, data collected is either used to make HiPo decisions or used to assess after a person is accepted as a HiPo talent. If an organization uses the data for the latter, it is to facilitate an individual's development.

### ***HiPo Development.***

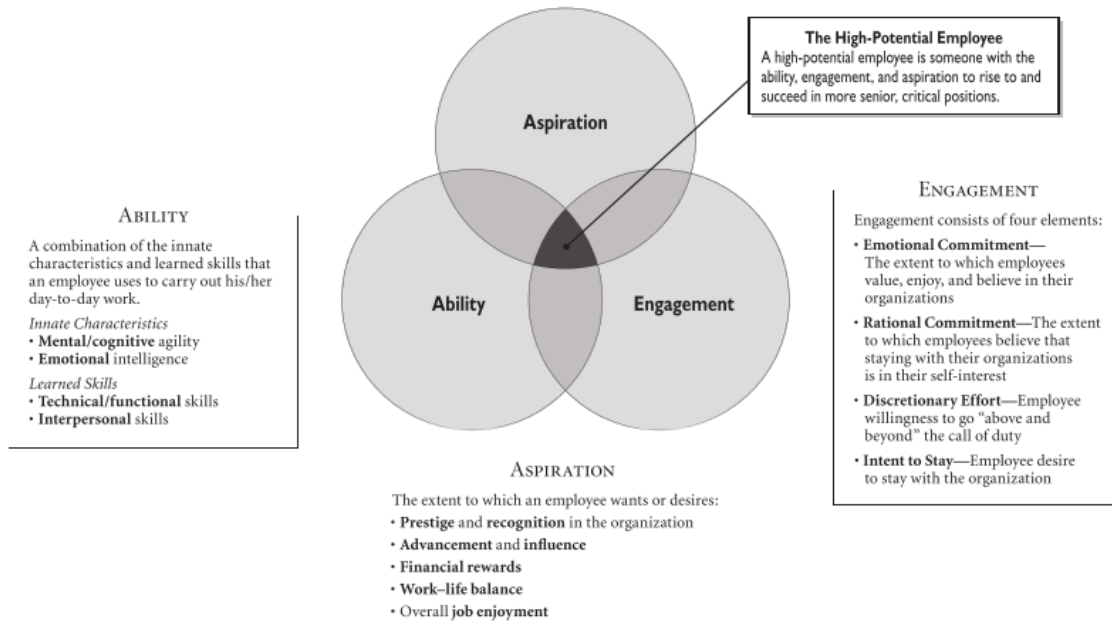
Once identified as a HiPo talent, organizations begin preparing individuals for future leadership roles through systematic development. Irrespective of the transparency of HiPo designation, senior leaders continuously review and discuss developmental opportunities for HiPo employees. Examples of deliberate development include but are not limited to: formal leadership programs, being provided a coach or mentor, in-depth executive assessments, career planning, distinctive work assignments (projects, task forces, temporary assignments), or executive education courses (Silzer & Church, 2010). Typically, these opportunities are individual dependent, but some are standardized.

Although companies execute an exhaustive process for identifying HiPo talent, it is worth noting research shows 5-20 percent of initially labeled HiPos do not succeed during the developmental process (Ready et al., 2010). This failure may be a result of misidentifying a HiPo talent or a sign of an inefficient developmental process. In either case, the CLC (2005b) identified over 300 “drivers of employee potential” but found fewer than 80 build potential (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005b: x). The top three themes for drivers of potential were: leveraging employee relationships, supporting organization commitment, and structuring job challenges. Conversely, the least and most counterproductive drivers of potential were frequent manager changes, working with people a person dislikes, working without clear goals or objectives, dealing with organizational politics, and regular rotations across business units.

### ***Other HiPo Models.***

The CLC developed another popular HiPo model (Figure 4. Corporate Leadership Council HiPo Employee Model) which is a confluence of the factors

discussed above and consists of three core components: ability, engagement, and aspiration. The CLC argued that “to rise and succeed in more senior, more critical positions, employees must have the aspiration, engagement, and ability to do so” (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005a: xi). Being weak in one of the three key areas is indicative of a HiPro who is not a HiPo employee.



**Figure 4. Corporate Leadership Council HiPo Employee Model**

Development Dimensions International (DDI) proposes another leadership model which consists of four cornerstones of executive potential (Rogers & Smith, 2007: 3-6):

- Leadership promise: “...defines a person who shows certain inherent abilities to lead others” .
- Personal development orientation: ...defines a person who “never stops trying to become an even better leader”.
- Mastery of complexity: “...touches on an individual’s ability to excel in a work environment rife with constant, rapid change, swirling ambiguity, and competing demands from many quarters” .

- Balance of values and results: “...reflects a senior leader’s ability to work within a company’s culture and still get the desired results” .

Regardless of the HiPo talent model used, organizations must synchronize their talent management efforts with its culture and strategic objectives (Campbell & Smith, 2014).

### **Air Force Officer Evaluation System**

A Part of Your Way of Life. You have chosen to serve your country as a member of the United States Air Force. In accepting your commission, you obligated yourself to distinctive professional responsibilities and a special way of life. The Air Force officer promotion program is an advancement program for officers established in law, modified over time, and carefully managed by senior Air Force officials. The Air Force promotion program is your program--you should understand it and be able to explain it to your family and friends and discuss it with contemporaries, subordinates and supervisors. (AFPAM 36-2506, 1997)

This passage is the introductory paragraph to *AFPAM 36-2506, You and Your Promotions – The Air Force Officer Promotion Program*, and is still a valid publication today. The pamphlet is designed to outline and communicate the timeline, procedures, and criteria used for officers’ promotion. Although there are have been some updates to the system since its publication, the information contained within is still relevant. Additionally, the document serves as a baseline for the Air Force’s talent management processes and practices which facilitate the service’s ability to distinguish the performance and potential of its officers.

#### ***Whole Airman Factors.***

The seven major distinguishing criteria for officer evaluations are job performance, leadership, professional qualities, breadth and depth of experience, job responsibility, academic and professional military education, and specific achievements.

The Air Force evaluates every officer's "relative potential" and refers to the grading process as the "whole-person concept" (1997: 9-10). The "whole-person concept" nomenclature is now called "whole airman factors" and is expanded in greater detail in Table 6 (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 307). The term potential comes up numerous times in AFPAM 36-2506 and is included throughout AFI 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems*, as well.

**Table 6. Air Force Whole Airman Factors**

Criteria	Expanded Detail
Job Performance	The most important indicator of <i>potential</i> is performance in the job as Promotion Recommendation Forms (PRF), Officer Performance Reports (OPR), Officer Evaluation Records (OER), Training Reports (TR), and Letters of Evaluation (LOE) document. The most recent performance record is very important to the board; however, the board considers the entire performance record in making its assessment of an officer’s potential.
Leadership	Staff, operations, and command positions.
Professional Qualities	Expertise as a specialist, supervisor, operator, etc.
Breadth and Depth of Experience	Where the officer is assigned, at what level, when, a variety of jobs and tasks, etc. A breadth of experience is more appropriate for field grade officers versus company grade officers. Lieutenants and captains should concentrate on a depth of experience in their career area. Field grade officers need to place more emphasis on broader considerations--that is PME, advanced education, and breadth of duty experiences that may include command, career broadening assignments, and headquarters assignments.
Job Responsibility	Scope of responsibility, exposure, opportunity to make decisions, resources managed, etc.
Academic and Professional Military Education	Appropriate level, relationship to the career field, and possible assignments, etc. NOTE: Advanced academic degrees have been masked and unmasked multiple times, so it is unclear how to evaluate this category.
Specific Achievements	Awards, decorations, special recognition, etc.

***Air Force Definition of Potential.***

The Air Force defines potential as “performance-based,” and uses its numerous forms to create a “cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance” (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 10). It is then a fair assessment to posit the Air

Force's definition of HiPo talent is "By Record." Meaning, it is an organization in a non-rapidly changing environment, it believes future roles are similar to the past or current positions and resides within the minority of organizations identifying HiPos in this manner (Silzer & Church, 2010). However, this assertion is incongruent with its current strategic guidance.

In the previous Chief of Staff's, General Mark A. Welsh III (ret.), *A Call to the Future*, emphasized two strategic imperatives: agility and inclusiveness. Additionally, he states "we must commit to changing those things that stand between us and our ability to rapidly adapt" (Welsh, 2015: 7–8). Moreover, the *Air Force's Strategic Master Plan, Human Capital Annex* parlayed this sentiment into its Talent Management section. One of the deliverables was for the Air Force to "ensure an institutional HR system capable of rapidly recognizing and adapting to the changing environment" (HCA to the USAF SMP, 2016: A-10). This statement insinuates certain changes must occur for the Air Force to identify its "small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential which enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands" (2016: A-9). Currently, the only conduits for capturing potential are through the OPR, PRF, TR, and LOE documents, as well as vetting through DTs, MLRs, and CSBs. One major component of the documents mentioned above is the extensive use of stratifications to differentiate officers amongst each another.

### ***Stratifications.***

An OPR is an annual performance review which doubles as a data point for future potential. Notwithstanding the importance of the other eight lines on the document, the bottom line of both the Rater and Additional Rater's block are where differentiation

amongst officers and “push statements” occur. These push statements involve stratifying officers against one another, must be quantitative in nature, and based on the following:

Stratification based on peer comparisons: Peers (#1/10 Majors or #1/5 Captains); Peer Group (#1/10 FGOs or #1/10 CGOs); Duty Positions (#1/7 Action Officers, #1/7 Sq/CCs); Aggregate Groups (#1/50 officers in my Group; #1 of my 50 officers; #1 of 50 majors in my 20 years of service); Additional Qualifiers (#1/4 Force Support CGOs; Best Major in my 32 years); Recognition Level (Wing CGO/yr, #1/200). (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 90)

Additionally, the push line serves as the rater’s way of communicating where they see the officer’s potential, but only one level above. As an example, one is authorized to state “Send Major Brown to SDE” or “SDE ready,” however, one is not permitted to say “Send Major Brown to SDE, Group/CC next, then Wing/CC” as it is considered “mapping out a career” (2016: 92). Assuming an individual receives a stratification as a means of differentiating their performance and potential from other officers, there’s a lack of official guidance on what constitutes a stratification’s order of merit.

Nonetheless, the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) typically conducts informative briefings highlighting the tiering of stratifications.

During a search for additional officer stratification guidance, the researcher discovered a 2001 AFPC briefing discussing the matter. Below is an excerpt from the note sections of the slides:

Stratification is the quickest way to tell the board where an officer stands. We now recognize four “tiers” or levels of stratification: Top, 2nd, 3rd, Lowest. The first level gives an exact picture of where the officer stands amongst his/her peers and helps the board “see” the size of the pool of comparison. The second level stratification makes it hard to see how big the pool is and puts the officer a bit further down the “food chain” than the 1st level example. (Elsbury, 2001: Slide 9)

While some may argue the information is dated, the 55th Wing Writing Guide from 2007 and AFPC Officer Evaluation System Training Guide (2009) echo the tiering sentiment. Examples include:

- Top Level: “My #1 of 12...Finest officer I’ve ever known...” (Elsbury, 2001: 9); “My best Captain...#1 of 236...the best Captain I’ve ever known” (55th Wing, 2007: 10)
- Second “Plus” Level: “Top 1 percent... top 2 of 84...” (2007: 10)
- Second Level: “Top 10%...in the wing” (Elsbury, 2001: 9); “Top 10 percent... the top third of my officers...” (55th Wing, 2007: 10)
- Third Level: “One of my best officers...head and shoulders above his peers” (2007: 10); “One of my best...” (Elsbury, 2001: 9)
- Lowest level: “Outstanding, Superior, etc.” (2001: 9); “Outstanding...superb...” (55th Wing, 2007: 10)

What stands out from these examples is the lack of a numerical figure, introduction of a percentage, or numerator greater than one indicates a lesser caliber of an officer. Additionally, there is an implied distribution of stratified officer. However, it is arduous to determine where the numerical tiering occurs. Furthermore, the second and third level stratifications are confusing. What is the difference between “one of my best officers” and “Top 10%... in the wing?” It seems to imply that “one of my best officers” is less than 10 percent of top officers but greater than an “outstanding” officer. The researcher assumes the third and fourth level of stratification are irrelevant as there is no clear delineation between the two. Despite this discrepancy, a stratification is a tool for differentiating officers of different caliber (Wexley, 1979). An officer’s capability, as outlined in AFPAM 36-2506, is measured in how well they embody the “whole airman

factors.” However, the Air Force also describes 8 “institutional competencies” (IC) and 25 sub-competencies in AFMAN 36-2647, *Institutional Competency Development and Management* (see Table 7) as a requirement for Airmen to “accomplish assigned airpower missions” (AFMAN 36-2647, 2016: 3).

**Table 7. Air Force Institutional Competencies (IC)**

Competency	Sub-Competencies
Employing Military Capabilities	Operational & Strategic Art; Leverage Technology; Unit, Air Force, Joint, and Coalition Capabilities; Non-Adversarial Crisis Response
Enterprise Perspective	Enterprise Structure & Relationships; Government Organization & Processes; Global, Regional, and Cultural Awareness; Strategic Communication
Managing Organizations & Resources	Resource Stewardship; Change Management; Continuous Improvement
Strategic Thinking	Vision; Decision Making; Adaptability
Leading People	Develops and Inspires Others; Takes Care of People; Diversity
Fostering Collaborative Relationships	Builds Teams and Coalitions; Negotiating
Embodies Airman Culture	Ethical Leadership; Followership; Warrior Ethos; Develops Self
Communicating	Speaking & Writing; Active Listening

***Institutional Competencies.***

Derived from Air Force Doctrine, Annex 1-1, *Force Development* (2014), ICs are “the foundation for developing PME programs” and those programs “allow Airmen to understand and *possibly* demonstrate the desired IC proficiencies” (AFMAN 36-2647, 2016: 3). Additionally, ICs are intended to “create the appropriate strategies, policies, and processes required to prepare all Airmen with the necessary leadership expertise to

accomplish assigned airpower missions” (2016: 3). Furthermore, the explicitly stated purpose of ICs is to “set behavioral standards of leadership for all levels,” and ICs are “observable, measurable patterns of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed to perform institutional of occupational functions successfully” (2016: 3). Observations and measurements are divided into five distinct levels: basic, intermediate, proficient, skilled, and advanced. Each measurement corresponds to various pay-grades, applies to both enlisted and officer personnel, as well as civil servants (see Table 8). In many instances, there is an expectation for enlisted, officer, and civil servants to demonstrate the same level of proficiency. In any case, it stands to reason these competencies are intended for inclusion in an officer’s performance evaluation to gauge their developmental progress as well as assess their future potential.

**Table 8. Air Force IC Proficiency Definitions**

**Basic** – Airmen are focused on learning and developing a foundation skill set. They face similar challenges and have limited responsibilities and are given narrowly focused tasks.

**Intermediate** – Airmen continue to learn and develop professional skills, understand how to leverage other professionals and knowledge sources, and begin to apply knowledge of the assigned objectives to their work.

**Proficient** – Airmen leverage knowledge of issues and objectives to design and develop solutions. They understand how actions taken in one area of competence impact other related areas, and establish and manage the scope and quality of those areas of an assignment for which they are responsible. They may manage complex organizations.

**Skilled** – Airmen leverage knowledge of strategies and issues to develop, present, and implement solutions. They consult with other subject matter experts and have a deep understanding how actions taken in one area of competence impact other related areas within proposed solutions. They contribute to the development of new levels of capabilities by articulating the added value of proposed solutions to leadership and staff and are considered subject matter experts within their organizational area. In addition, they may manage large, complex multi-tiered organizations.

**Advanced** – Airmen impact the organization and the Air Force by leveraging their knowledge and expertise across the theatre to identify and address the critical success factors for complex areas. They apply knowledge of the strategic alignment of solutions with Air Force mission objectives and serve as recognized subject matter experts and thought leaders inside and outside their own organizations and/or represent the Air Force externally. In addition, they may manage large, complex multi-tiered organizations.

## Summary

Targeting the top talented individuals internal and external to an organization is a well-established practice in all industries, the Air Force included. Despite the obvious and continual interest in the topic of HiPo talent over the years, McKinsey's War for Talent study changed how organizations strategically viewed their top talent or HiPo employees.

Before instituting formalized HiPo talent programs, companies must codify and standardize their definition of talent. While various literature streams agree talent is more than just one unique attribute, it is unclear if their relationship is summative or multiplicative. Regardless of the calculation, HiPo talent is an amalgam of qualities which must be strategically, operationally, and tactically aligned at every level.

Notwithstanding the numerous definitional forms talent may take, several theoretical perspectives guide how companies manage their top talent. In some instances, top talent is a small percentage of people who provide an organization's competitive advantage. In other cases, top talent is a result of a company's employee optimization process whereby the best individuals are developed at an accelerated pace. In any event, organization's leverage their HiPo talent through identifying, assessing, and developing their HiPo employees.

Numerous studies conclude performance is a major factor in the HiPo identification process, but performance alone is not an accurate indication of an individual's future potential to perform. The question, "Potential for What?" is another point of contention. Some company's view a person's potential as their ability to excel in senior management roles while others see it as the potential to master their craft. In both instances, the purpose of categorizing is to ensure a company maintains an appropriate talent level throughout the organization.

According to Air Force Doctrine, Air Force Instructions, and Air Force Strategic Guidance, talent is in high demand at all levels of the service. The qualities and characteristics the service values come in the form of "Whole Airman Factors" and "Institutional Competencies." The degree to which an officer embodies these factors and

competencies is the differentiating criteria used for determining an officer's potential to serve in a higher grade. While we may presume those who excel in these competencies as HiPo officers, it is unclear if this is the case or how this information would be communicated on OPRs, TRs, PRFs, and LOEs. It may be possible to gain fidelity on the topic through interviewing senior leaders with extensive DT, MLR, and CSB experience to determine if, in fact, these competencies are a distinguishing characteristic of HiPo officers. The next chapter will review the methodology of interviewing these senior leaders.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research method used while conducting this case study. First, the researcher will discuss the study's composition. Next, the investigator's data collection and preparation section will delve into how and why interviews were used as the primary data source. After discussing the data collection methodology, the researcher will explain the qualitative data analysis process used to uncover emerging themes, how these themes were coded, and how they were tracked. Finally, this chapter will conclude by describing what strategies the researcher implemented to ensure validity and reliability of this case study.

#### **Research Design**

A case study design is one of several ways to conduct qualitative research. According to Bromley, a case study is a “systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (1990: 302). The phenomenon, in this case, involves understanding what characteristics or attributes constitute a HiPo CGO and how the Air Force can better identify, assess, and develop them. Baxter and Jack (2008) recommend determining the case study type once the study’s boundaries and research question are established. There are seven different types of case studies categorized by Yin (2003) and Stake (1995). Stake suggests an intrinsic case study approach when the researcher has a genuine interest in the case, is *not* trying to understand an abstract construct, and *not* attempting to understand an abstract phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Therefore, as the researcher has an intrinsic interest in the

HiPo CGO case, an intrinsic case study design is used. An outline of Baxter and Jack's table of case study type, definition, and examples is in Appendix B.

Beyond the central research question, a case study typically consists of four additional components: propositions, units of analysis, the linkage of data to propositions, and criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 1994). Although propositions are helpful in case studies, Baxter and Jack postulate that they are not required or always present (2008). Therefore, the researcher has not included propositions in this study.

Additionally, emerging themes from senior leader interviews served as the units of analysis for this research paper. As themes emerged, the researcher coded and tracked the data with Nvivo qualitative research software. The coding process and emergent themes are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

### **Data Collection and Data Preparation**

This section describes how and why the researcher selected interview participants, how the researcher crafted interview questions, as well as how the research data were collected and prepared for analysis.

#### ***Interview Participants.***

The members consisted of Air Force senior leaders from a variety of operational career fields. Air Force Specialty range enabled the researcher to evaluate commonalities and differences amongst career fields to derive overarching themes of Air Force high-performing and HiPo officers. Additionally, the researcher sought officers with multiple command tours, but the researcher specifically targeted individuals with Developmental Team (DT), Management Level Review (MLR), and/or Central Selection Board (CSB)

experience. The intent of the selection criteria was to leverage the robust experiences of officers interviewed; however, rank played no role in the valuation of responses.

Furthermore, the researcher solicited participation by approaching potential interviewees and explaining the purpose of the research. The solicitation included a bullet background paper (see Appendix C), which provided context to the request, and interview questions, which prepared the participant for the upcoming interview. Moreover, at the conclusion of every interview, the researcher solicited the member for additional officers whom they believed would add value to the research. Finally, the researcher conducted interviews from September 2016 through January 2017.

#### ***Interview Format and Medium.***

The researcher acted as the interview facilitator and conducted semi-structured interviews in person, over the phone, and via email. The medium used was entirely dependent on the interviewee, their location, and their schedule. The semi-structured format is well suited for situations where a researcher may only get one opportunity to interview an individual (Bernard, 2006). Furthermore, Bernard states “semistructured interviewing works very well in projects where you are dealing with high-level bureaucrats and elite members of a community – people who are accustomed to the efficient use of their time” (2006: 212). Although some participants were available for additional interviews, allowing for follow-up questions, the researcher assumed every interview was an exclusive event. As such, the researcher requested each member's permission to record the interview. All participants agreed.

***Interview Protocol and Questions.***

The researcher utilized Castillo-Montoya’s (2016) Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework to develop a research instrument, which was appropriate for senior leaders interviewed and in line with the purpose of the study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). Table 9. Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Method lists the four phases of the IPR framework and includes the aim of each step. The researcher only used the first two stages, formally, and conducted the last two stages informally through circulating possible questions to other classmates.

**Table 9. Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Method**

Phase	Purpose of Phase
Phase 1: Ensuring interview questions align with research questions	To create an interview protocol matrix to map the interview questions against the research questions
Phase 2: Constructing an inquiry-based conversation	To build an interview protocol that balances inquiry with conversation
Phase 3: Receiving feedback on interview protocol	To obtain feedback on interview protocol (possible activities include close reading and think-aloud activities)
Phase 4: Piloting the interview protocol	To pilot the interview protocol with small sample

During the first phase of IPR, the researcher ensured interview questions aligned with the research questions by developing an Interview Protocol Matrix (Table 10). Alignment increases the interview questions utility while simultaneously providing their “necessity for the study” (Castillo-Montoya, 2016: 812). As there is no published research on HiPo programs in the Air Force, the researcher required in-depth answers, which facilitated a better understanding of the topic. The researcher kept in mind:



The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions...At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience...At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth. (Seidman, 2013: 9)

**Table 10. Interview Protocol Matrix**

	Central Research Question	Investigative Question 1	Investigative Question 2	Investigative Question 3
Interview Question 1	X	X		
Interview Question 2		X		
Interview Question 3	X	X		
Interview Question 4		X		
Interview Question 5	X			
Interview Question 6	X	X		
Interview Question 7		X	X	
Interview Question 8		X	X	X
Interview Question 9	X		X	X
Interview Question 10		X	X	
Interview Question 11		X		
Interview Question 12		X	X	
Interview Question 13	X	X	X	X

Once the researcher established an Interview Protocol Matrix, the next phase of the IPR framework dictated formulating questions, which imbued an inquiry-based conversation. Brinkmann and Kvale stated, “The researcher questions are usually formulated in a theoretical language, whereas the interview questions should be expressed in the everyday language of the interviewee” (2015: 158). Montoya breaks down interview questions types into four categories: introductory, transition, key, and closing questions (2016). Due to the limited available time to conduct senior leader interviews, and to be as efficient as possible, key issues related to the purpose of the study comprised the majority of questions asked. Below are the 13 questions:

- What do you consider a high performing officer? (i.e., what are their characteristics and attributes?)
- What do you consider a high potential officer? (i.e., what are their characteristics and attributes?)
- Is there a difference between the two? If so, how do you differentiate between the two?
- When considering an officer’s potential, how do you communicate this potential to the Air Force’s personnel management system? (Phone calls, emails, meetings, OPR, PRF, etc.)
- Do all officers have the same potential or are there varying degrees of potential?
- When considering officer’s potential, what do you consider the target area? (Example: Potential to become a General Officer, Squadron Commander, Wing Commander, etc.?)
- When you identify a high potential officer, how do you develop them? (i.e., Job placement, awards, stratifications, etc.)
- What do you think the Air Force does to develop their high potential officers?

- Are there instances of misidentified high potential officers? If so, what were the reasons? What should we do to take misidentified high potential officers “off” the fast track?
- What deficiencies and subsequent improvements would you recommend to identify better and assess a HiPo officer? If you believe improvements are not necessary, please explain why.
- If you have been a part of a Developmental Team (DT), what information do you value in stratifying officers?
- What is the most difficult portion of the DT, in regards to information provided for identifying high performers and high potentials?
- What would you change in the OPR, PRF, or DT process to make the system better?

### ***Post Interview Wrap Up.***

At the conclusion of every interview, the researcher created a denaturalized transcription of the audio file, reviewed notes, and wrote an interview summary to capture themes or keywords and phrases. Denaturalized transcription captures a verbatim depiction of speech, but is not concerned with every “utterance” (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005: 1275). Naturalized transcription, by comparison, analyzes the idiosyncrasies of speech patterns, body movements, and other non-verbal activity which Hutchby and Wooffit refer to as “talk-in-interaction” (2008). Therefore, denaturalized transcription was deemed sufficient in capturing the substance, essence, and meaning of the interviewee’s thoughts. After completing the summary sheet, the researcher will input answers into the Interview Protocol Matrix for further analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, continuous endeavor conducted throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014). Unlike quantitative research, the

researcher collects and analyzes data simultaneously. The iterative process aids the researcher in organizing their findings for the final report. This section discusses how the researcher analyzed data and coding techniques used.

### ***Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral.***

One of the many difficulties in qualitative research is developing a process to analyze data collected. It is common for a researcher to vacillate amongst various qualitative research strategies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The author adopted Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral (Figure 5. Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral) as a guide to flow through interview data. The data analysis spiral contains the following steps:

1. Organize - Creswell recommends using index cards, manila folders, or a computer database (2013). The researcher used a combination of audio files, transcripts, summary sheets, and Nvivo qualitative research software to organize data.
2. Peruse - The researcher listened and read interview transcripts several times. Additionally, the investigator continuously updated the summary sheet with new thoughts and comments after every review session.
3. Classify - During the interview process, general categories and themes emerged. Initially, the researcher used high-performance officer indicators, HiPo officer indicators, personnel management system processes, and process improvement ideas to categorize themes. As additional patterns emerged, the researcher developed new themes and sub-themes.
4. Synthesize - At the conclusion of the study, the researcher will summarize the data for readers. In this portion of the analysis process, the researcher triangulates data increase the paper's reliability and solicits feedback from interviewees to ensure findings are accurate. Triangulation and member checking is discussed later in the chapter.

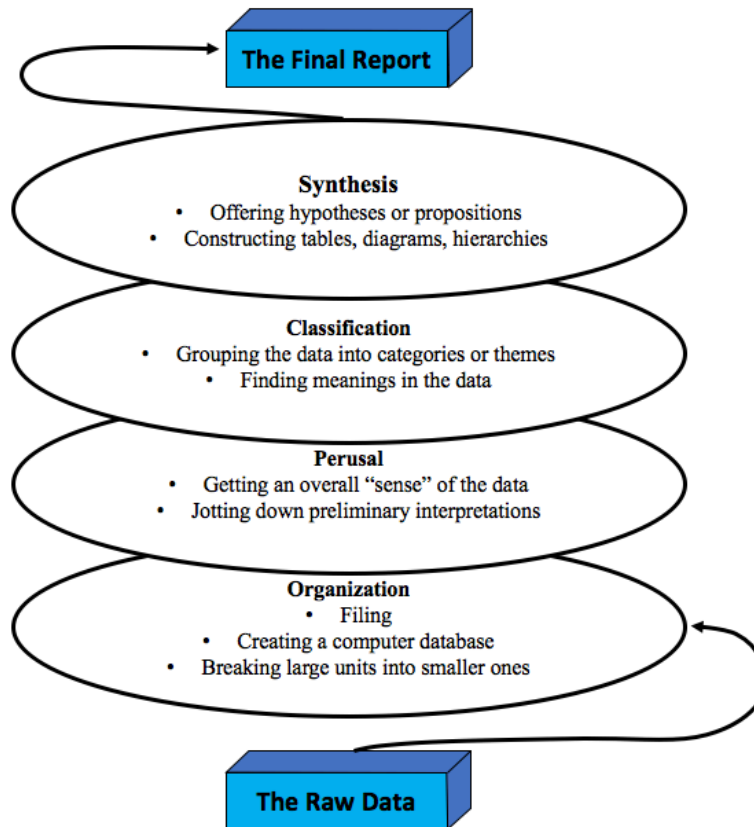


Figure 5. Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral

***Coding Technique.***

Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually “attached to ‘chunks’ of varying size – words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs” (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 56). They help to answer several questions such as what is happening, what does this say, and what is the participant conveying? Creswell describes codes falling into three categories:

- Codes readers would *expect to find*, based on common sense and literature
- *Unanticipated* or surprising codes
- Codes that are *unusual* and of *conceptual interest* to readers (2014: 198-199)

The latter two coding categories emerge as the researcher analyzes data. Initially, the researcher started with four major coding categories: high-performance officer indicators, HiPo officer indicators, personnel management system processes, and process improvement ideas. These codes are directly related to the central and investigative questions. Furthermore, codes were established utilizing the Interview Protocol Matrix and relating interview questions to research questions. As the study progressed, the researcher used Nvivo's qualitative research program software to track and manage codes. Additionally, the researcher implemented Tesch's (1990) eight step coding process to discover emerging themes (Table 11. Tesch's Eight Step Coding Process) systematically.

**Table 11. Tesch's Eight Step Coding Process**

1. Get a sense of the whole. Read all the transcriptions carefully. Perhaps jot down some ideas as they come to mind as you read.
2. Pick one document (i.e., one interview)—the most interesting one, the shortest, the one on the top of the pile. Go through it, asking yourself, “What is this about?” Do not think about the substance of the information but its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin.
3. When you have completed this task for several participants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics. Form these topics into columns, perhaps arrayed as major, unique, and leftover topics.
4. Now take this list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. Try this preliminary organizing scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways of reducing your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between your categories to show interrelationships.
6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7. Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8. Recode existing data, as necessary.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Merriam-Webster’s defines reliability as “the extent to which an experiment, test, or measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials” while validity is something that is “well-grounded or justifiable” (2016). Regarding qualitative research, Gibbs states reliability indicates the researcher’s consistent approach across different projects while validity means the researcher checks for accuracy of research findings by employing various procedures (2007). Trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility are other descriptors used by researchers to address validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Regardless of adjectives used to describe the intent for employing such strategies, Creswell recommends “qualitative researchers engage in at least two of them in any given study” (2013: 253). The researcher implemented two strategies: triangulation, and member checking.

### ***Triangulation.***

Triangulation involves analyzing different data sources to justify themes (Creswell, 2014). During the data analysis phase, the researcher cross-referenced with private industry HiPo employee studies. The purpose of comparing the two was to uncover similar themes in industry. The intent was to link ideas, discover implemented enterprise solutions and how they may relate to the research study.

### ***Member Checking.***

Member checking is a process where the researcher solicits participants’ feedback on the interpretations and credibility of the findings (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lincoln and Guba considered this technique to be “the most critical technique for establishing “credibility” (1985). Member checking is performed at various times and was done so in this study. During the interviews, the researcher restated and summarized information provided which allowed participants an opportunity to clarify or affirm their positions. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews, discussed major themes, and provided an opportunity for interviewees to analyze the findings critically. Additionally, the interviewee comments served as another check on the viability of the researcher’s interpretations (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

## **Summary**

The case study used senior leader interviews as the primary data source. The researcher selected participants with multiple command tours but targeted individuals with DT, MLR, and/or CSB experience. All participants were provided a bullet background paper and questions before the interview. All interviews were transcribed, coded, and summarized by the researcher for further analysis; data was tracked with Nvivo, a qualitative research software program. The initial coding categories were segmented into four major areas: high-performance officer indicators, HiPo officer indicators, personnel management system processes, and process improvement ideas. Although the transcripts were coded and analyzed into predetermined categories, the researcher allowed additional codes to emerge. Post-analysis, the investigator, ensured validity and reliability of findings through triangulation and member checking.

## **IV. Analysis and Results**

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter describes the collected data, reports the study's participant demographics, details the volume and sources of data, illustrates the final data coding process, explains the data analysis process, and represents findings of the interviews. Senior leader interviews were the primary data source. The researcher tracked recordings and transcripts in Nvivo's qualitative analysis software. Nvivo enabled the researcher to develop word frequency tables, word clouds, and word trees which facilitated a better understanding of emerging themes. These tools and the findings of the interviews are presented in this chapter.

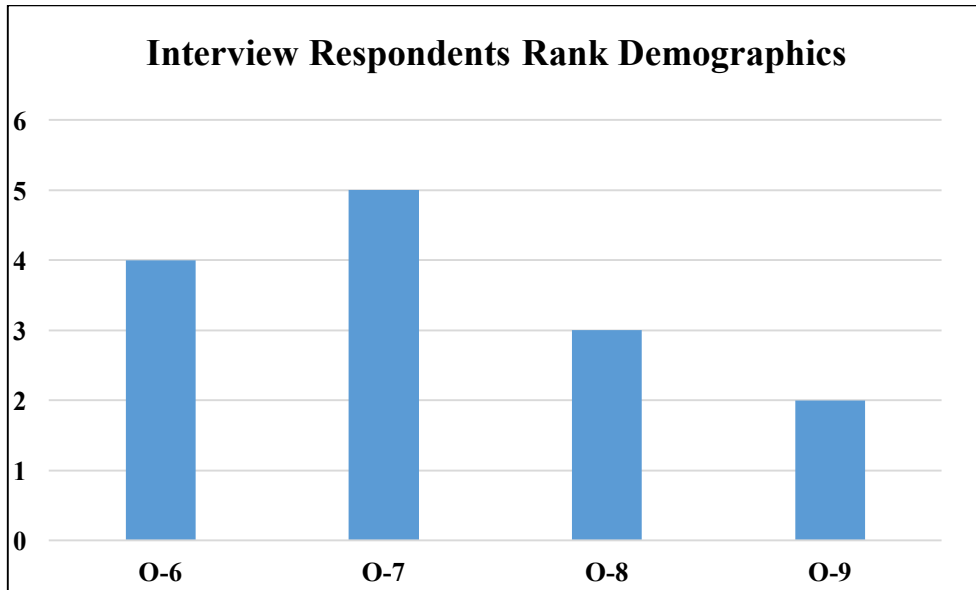
### **Participant Demographics**

The researcher invited 18 Air Force senior leaders to participate in the study with 14 individuals accepting (77.7 percent response rate). Interviews were conducted from September 2016 through January 2017, either in person or over the phone. In some cases, respondents provided written answers post-interview. Participants were chosen based on experience with DTs, MLRs, and CSBs, as well as command positions held, and operational background.

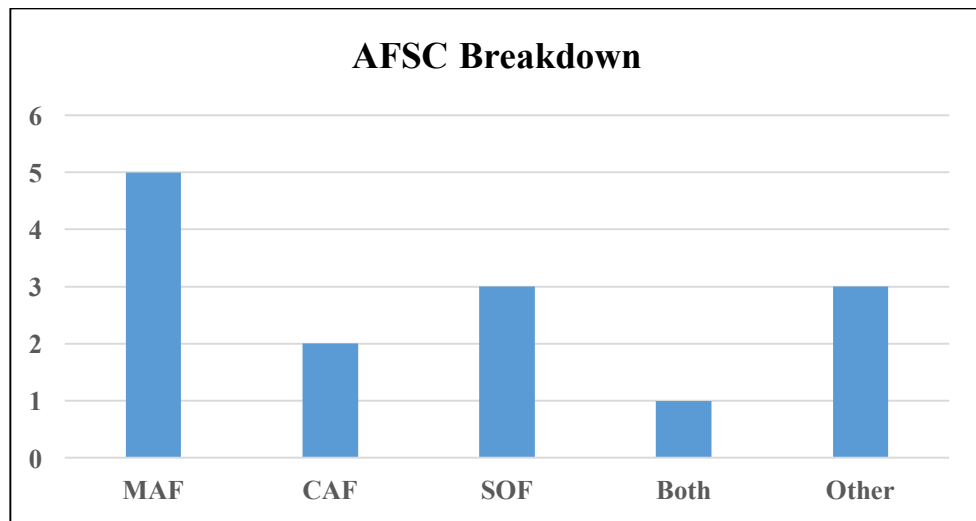
The demographical breakout of interview participants included ten general officers (71.4 percent) and four colonels (28.6 percent). Of the general officers interviewed, two were Lieutenant Generals, three were Major Generals, and five were Brigadier Generals (see Figure 6. Rank Demographics). AFSC breakdown included five MAF pilots, two CAF pilots, one who was in both MAF and CAF, one helicopter pilot,

one cyber, and one maintenance officer (see Figure 7. AFSC Demographics and Table 12. MWS Demographics). Although the research study intended to capture only 1X career fields, the researcher interviewed the maintenance officer based on availability. Unfortunately, no intelligence senior leader was interviewed due to time and scheduling restraints.

The total time in service varied between participants, but ranged from 19 years up to 35 years, with an average and median of 28 years. Experience with DTs, MLRs, and CSBs was dependent upon the participant's time-in-service and rank. In some instances, the respondent had only been a part of a couple of MLRs, while several participants had multiple experiences with all three. The researcher was unable to determine an exact total for each participant as more than half of the respondents stated they were a part of "too many to recall." In all cases, participants served multiple command tours. Thirteen of the 14 officers (92.9 percent) have been squadron commanders, all either held or were currently serving as group commanders, and 10 of the 14 respondents were graduated wing commanders (see Figure 8. Commands Held Demographics). Additionally, four of the officers interviewed served in other command positions, not easily categorized in the squadron, group, or wing construct.



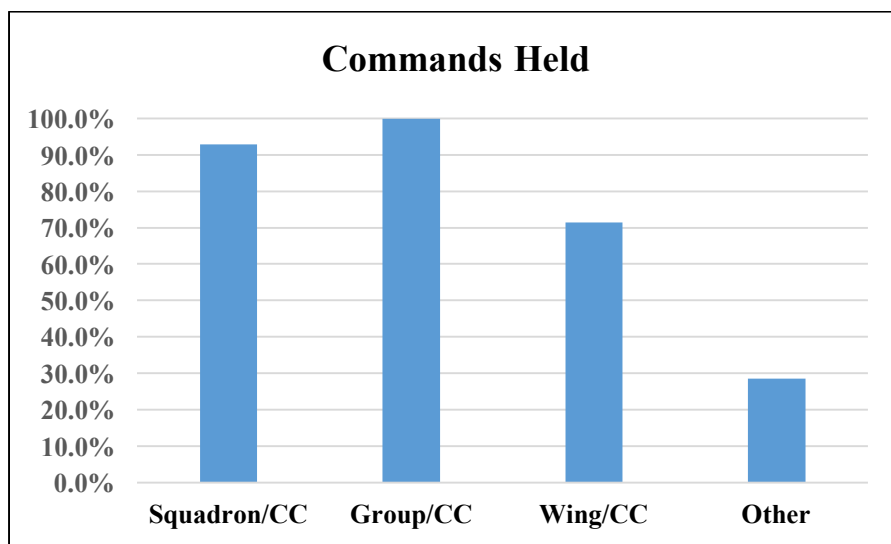
**Figure 6. Rank Demographics**



**Figure 7. AFSC Demographics**

**Table 12. MWS Demographics**

MWS	Count	Percentage
C-17	5	35.7
C-141	2	14.3
STO	2	14.3
A-10, AC-130, B-52, C-130, C-21, Comm/Cyber, F-15E, UH-1, MH-53, KC-10, KC-135, Maintenance	1 each	7.1



**Figure 8. Commands Held Demographics**

### **Data Analysis**

The primary research data comprised of senior leader interviews with an exhaustive literature review serving as the secondary data source. In total, the researcher referenced or cited 175 scholarly articles, textbooks, and talent management case studies. The literature review enabled the researcher to orient, compare, and help analyze interview data.

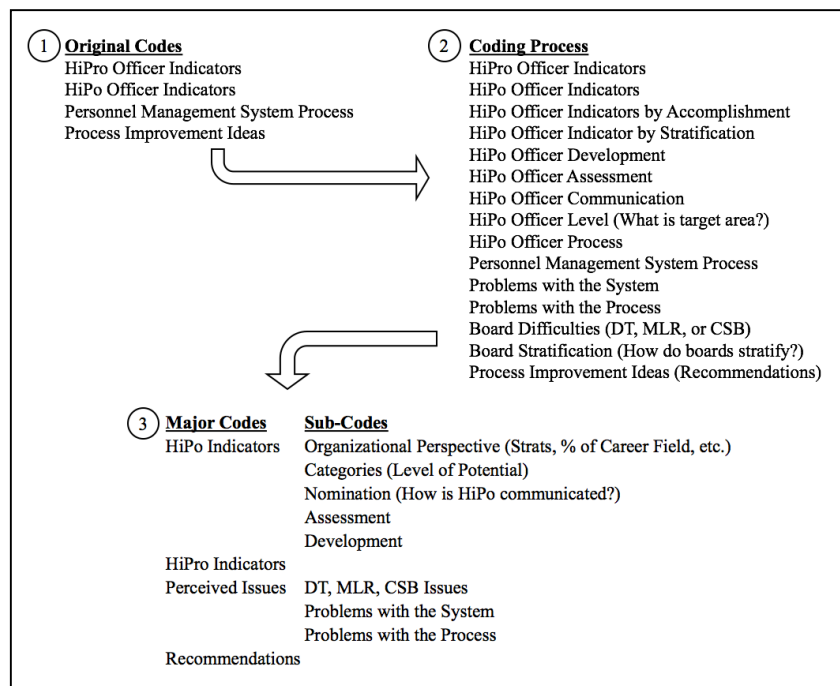
The 14 interviews totaled over 12 hours of audio, which equated to 193 pages of transcripts. The medium used for interviews varied with the preponderance conducted via telephone. In all cases, the conversations were recorded using Apple's Voice Memo application or the TapeACall application. Once completed, all audio files were transcribed using denaturalized techniques and Wreally Transcribe software. The researcher concluded the interview process when "data saturation" was achieved.

Although participants used a variety of words and descriptions during the interview process, information and themes remained static towards the end. The lack of new information or themes is quintessentially data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Additionally, Guest et al. noted saturation might occur with as little as six interviews, depending on the sample size (2006). Moreover, Burmeister and Aitken (2012) emphasized the depth of data vice the quantity which implies that data quality supersedes data quantity. Furthermore, Dibley recommended evaluating data in regards to its richness and thickness (2011). Rich data refers to data quality while thick data refers to data quantity. As such, the researcher concluded new information, albeit valuable, would not significantly affect the findings of the research due to the lack of new themes or information.

### **Finalized Coding**

As previously noted in the methodology section, the researcher utilized Cresswell's (2014) Data Analysis Spiral and Tesch's (1990) Eight Step Coding Process to facilitate the analysis of interview data. Before conducting interviews, the researcher established four major coding categories: high-performance officer indicators, HiPo

officer indicators, personnel management system processes, and process improvement ideas. At the conclusion of every interview, the researcher coded the data based on the crux of the participant’s response. After all the interviews, the total number of initial codes was fifteen. Through the use of Nvivo’s word frequency query, word cloud, and word tree function, the researcher found that codes fell into four broad categories and nine sub-categories. The four broad categories were HiPo Indicators, HiPro Indicators, Perceived Issues, and Recommendations. The eight sub-categories were organizational perspectives, categories of potential, HiPo nomination, HiPo assessment, HiPo development, board issues, system problems, and process problems (see Figure 9. Researcher’s Coding Process).

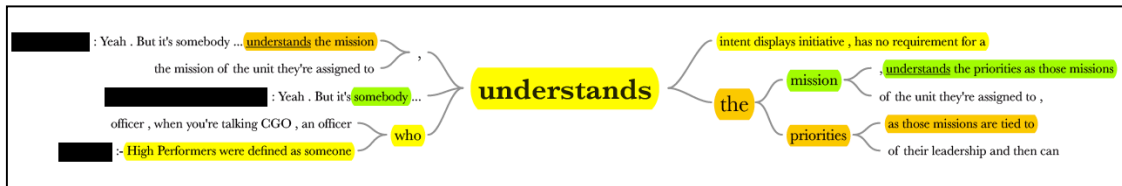




**Figure 10. HiPro Officers Word Cloud**

***HiPro Officers Understand, Are Proactive, and Display Initiative.***

It is fair to ask what does a HiPro officer understand and what does that mean? One senior leader elaborated that a HiPro officer “understands the mission of the unit they are assigned. They understand their leadership’s priorities and can execute with little to no additional direction.” Another leader defined a HiPro as an officer who “understands the intent of leadership, displays initiative, has no requirement for follow-up and gets the job done.” The lack of little to no direction or any follow-up led the researcher towards the terms “proactive” and “initiative” (see Figure 11. Word Tree Example).



**Figure 11. Word Tree Example**

Multiple respondents stated they valued an officer’s ability to seek out problems, find issues, identify opportunities, or take on challenges that “confront the organization.” One senior leader expanded on this theme of proactivity and understanding by adding the degree to which an officer demonstrates these qualities further delineate themselves from other HiPro officers. A HiPro officer can “demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the current situation, can dynamically navigate or maneuver around and through the problem to influence a positive outcome.” This last statement alludes to the importance of not focusing solely on “what” an officer does but measuring “how” the officer accomplished the mission.

One senior leader elaborated on this fact by defining a HiPro officer as someone “who is effective at delivering on the mission they have been assigned.” The term effectiveness, as defined by the participant, was described as having the “cognitive complexity and human skills necessary to lead any group, on any mission.” What stands out in this last excerpt is the mention of “skills” which is one of the several references used by researchers to define talent. While no single skill, ability, or competence emerged from the research, the second top indicator of a HiPro officer was competence.

***HiPro Officers Are Competent and Maintain Technical Expertise.***

The competencies of a HiPro officer, as identified by the participants, were communication and technical expertise. The ability for an officer to effectively speak and write must be viewed regarding the level and impact of their message as well. Initially, the researcher assumed the value or level of message’s “impact” of a message was positively related to higher echelons of an organization. However, one senior leader made a point to state this was not the case, explicitly.

Once an officer is tasked with or identifies an organizational problem, it is incumbent on that officer to effectively communicate solutions throughout the organization’s echelons. Sometimes, the problems are strategic in nature while often, they are at the tactical level. The most important thing to remember is the officer must have the courage to speak out in a way that is informative, works towards a solution, and is done with critical thought.

What stands out from this senior leader’s excerpt is its similarity to Aristotle’s three critical elements of great communication: ethos, pathos, and logos. An officer’s ability to speak credibly on issues signifies their ethos (Braet, 1992; Demirdögen, 2010). An officer’s ability to make a connection and effectively communicate at all levels of the organization epitomizes their pathos. Finally, the critical thought is an example of an

officer's logos. The researcher does not insinuate that this particular senior leader is a follower of classical antiquity philosophy. Rather, the researcher believes the respondent values an officer's ability to take on challenges as appropriate and is more interested in how they go about solving issues at hand.

The other overtly identified competency was technical expertise. Although technical proficiency and skills stood out as a HiPro attribute, there are a couple of caveats worth mentioning. First, one leader used the term credibility to define expertise. They stated credibility is "more of a mindset," and there is no requirement to have the expertise. Rather, it is important to "recognize the deficiency internally, know how to develop the expertise, or seek out and integrate with experts in the field." Another participant valued the "competency in one's craft" as an important identifier of a HiPro officer. Though, the same participant declared later on that the expertise in one's original technical area becomes less necessary as they move through the ranks. In any case, these two interview excerpts are indicative of industry best practices. Specifically, there is a positive correlation between the degree to which a boss, supervisor, or leader is as or more technically competent than their subordinates and their employees' happiness (Goodall, Artz, & Oswald, 2016). This fact relates to the case study, as participants agreed being technically competent was relevant to some extent.

### **HiPro Officers Deliver Results and Take Risks.**

Multiple participants commented on the value of an officer's understanding of risk, risk management, "stepping outside of their comfort zone," and "risk responsibility" of their job, as it related to a HiPro officer's performance. Additionally, there seemed to

be some interchangeability with the term risk and responsibility. As an example, one participant discussed how they evaluated the results of an officer by relating it to the liability of the job and risk associated with potential failure. Another respondent valued the “willingness to take risks regarding their professional career or standing credibly with their peers and leadership.”

Two of the respondents spoke of Elbert Hubbards (Hubbard & Daniels, 1900) “A Message to Garcia” as the epitomy of a HiPro officer. Hubbard’s story described a U.S. Army officer’s secret mission to seek out a Cuban General for the purposes of military cooperation between the two countries. In the story, then President, Theordore Roosevelt required communication with the Cuban resistance to the Spanish. Unfortunately, the Cuban General “Garcia” had long since died, however, another individual took his place. Rowan, the U.S. Army officer, was recommended to carry out the mission. The story describes how Rowan required only the intent of the President to communicate with Garcia, and nothing else. During the short story, Hubbard explained the various ways others may have worked through the problem with each example requiring additonal details to accomplish the task.

Although there are critiques concerning the accuracy of First Lieutenant Rowan’s mission to find the Cuban general, the desire to develop employees, and officers alike, in his mold, remains constant. The researcher concludes leaders must seek out these type of individuals that can deliver results with minimal guidance remains

## **HiPo Officers**

As with other HiPo talent case studies, there was overlap in how participants defined an officer's performance versus their potential. The researcher inferred the top three HiPro indicators were also expected of HiPo individuals, just at a higher level of responsibility. The major question left outstanding was parsing the difference between the two definitions. In this section, the researcher will provide the Top 3 HiPo indicators, report the Air Force's organization perspective of HiPo officers, and describe how the participants nominate, assess, and develop HiPo officers.

### ***HiPo Identifiers.***

The Top 3 indicators of HiPo talent, as described by interview participants, were sustained performance, continuous learning, and demonstrative leadership skills (see Figure 12. HiPo Officers Word Cloud). It should come as no surprise that sustained performance was identified as a major indicator of an officer's future performance as the promotion system is designed to reward such behaviors. As mentioned earlier, the Air Force defines potential as "performance-based," and uses its numerous forms to create a "cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance" (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 10). Additionally, it is worth noting only 10 percent of organizations identify HiPo talent in this manner. Moreover, this identification methodology is best suited for static, non-rapidly changing environments as future roles are similar to the past or current positions (Silzer & Church, 2010). Furthermore, one senior leader identified this as a problem. While "officers can perform well at one level, but that does not indicate they will successful in future roles, or they are high potential officers." This statement highlights a deficiency.



they take smart risks.” Risk and risk management is not exclusive to the military. Ron Ashkenas (2011) describes the term “smart” risks regarding effective risk taking.

Effectively taking risks requires a leader to anticipate the impacts of action and inaction.

Despite the participant’s extensive military background, HiPo officer indicators closely relate to industry standards. By comparison, top indications of HiPo talent in the private sector are drive, learning, agility, and leadership, while HiPo officers are identified through sustained performance, learning, and leadership skills. This analysis leads the researcher to conclude that industry best practices may provide pragmatic solutions in the Air Force’s HiPo officer identification process.

A few items not prominently displayed in the Word Cloud was the reliance of stratifications, awards, and formal training programs as a means to identify HiPo officers. Stratifications were deemed important based on the belief that there was no other way to compare, unlike AFSCs. The same logic may be applied to work awards and awards received from formal training programs (e.g., Distinguished Graduate). Moreover, several senior leaders mentioned there were issues with the weight applied to these data points and will be discussed later. Additionally, one senior leader provided a chess analogy to explain the difference between a HiPro and HiPo individuals.

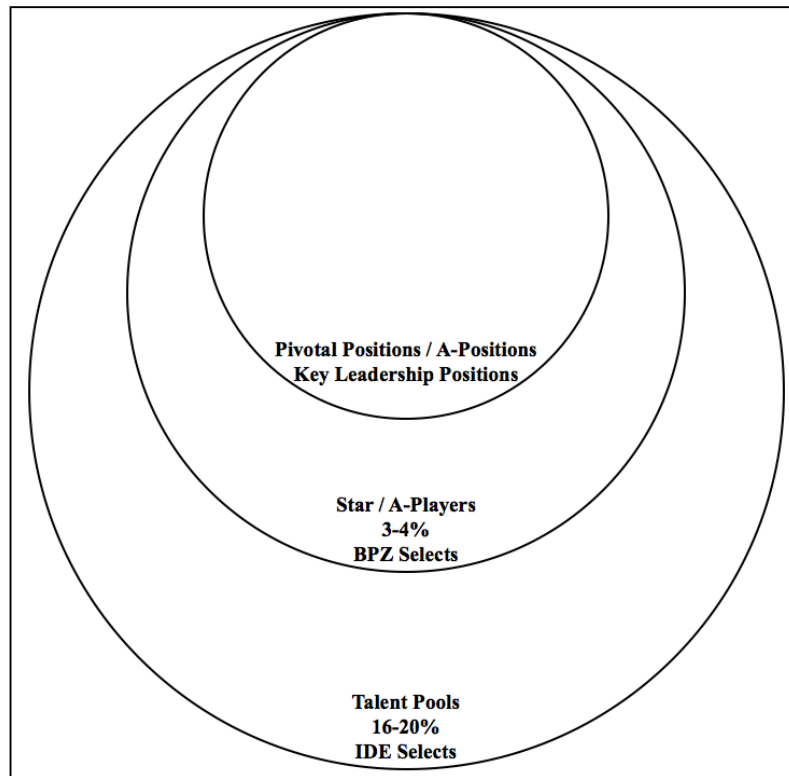
Years ago, I had the opportunity to discuss with a grand master chess player their thought process and approach to the game. He said “when I look at a chess board, I see where the pieces are, relate them to where I have seen them before, and decide which move will lead to a successful game. It does not matter who I am playing or whether I have played them before. I know I have studied various moves and I know what may work and what will not. However, once the move is made, I move to the next board and start the process over.” His approach resonated with me. I view high-performing and high-potential leaders in the same manner as I view the three different types of chess players. A bad chess player is like a bad leader. They are unable to see past the move in front of them and are either unable or unwilling to understand the subsequent effects of their moves. A good chess player is like a good, successful leader. They are able to sequentially think through moves that increase the probability of successful engagements and are able to see the effects of possible decisions. These are your high-performing leaders. They know the moves required to put their pieces, or their organizations, in the right spot to be successful. The grand master chess player is like a high-potential. They have the competencies, the experience, and have deliberately developed skills, which enable them to see multiple decisions, or moves, on multiple boards. These individuals are extremely reflective and have a high desire to improve.

The researcher found this story interesting as the emphasis was on “how” individuals approached problems, or chess in this example, rather than the action itself. Furthermore, analogies and anecdotal examples were present throughout the interviews. Although no single story remained constant across respondents’ answers, the ability to develop skills and competencies was a theme. Ultimately, while one may disagree with the analogy provided, the story embodies two of the three HiPo identifiers found in this research paper: sustained performance and continuous learning.

#### ***Air Force HiPo Officers: An Organizational Perspective.***

Although the Air Force does not maintain an official definition of a HiPo officer, in practice, the researcher determined three layers of HiPo officer exist (see Figure 13. Air Force HiPo Layers). The Major selection boarding process establishes the first layer of HiPo officer. This layer consists of those officers selected for IDE. The percentage of

school selection during the last three years ranges from 16.4 to 18.3 percent (AFPC, 2017). A few respondents, who work as functional leads stated the pool size ranged from 16 to 20 percent. The slight difference in percentages may reflect the introduction of school candidates selected for school at a later time, but for analysis, the difference is not significant.



**Figure 13. Air Force HiPo Layers**

The below-the-zone for promotion (BPZ) process to Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) establishes the second layer. Although the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) authorizes up to 10 percent of eligible officers, since 2004, the Air Force has selected an average of 3.8 percent of BPZ officers for Lt Col (Marx, 2014; Rostker, Thie, Lacy, Kawata, & Purnell, 1993). While it seems the percentage discrepancy implies the

Air Force does not promote its entire 10 percent allotment, this assertion is not factually correct. In fact, the opposite is true.

The perceived divergence in numbers involves how the Air Force computes the 10 percent allotment. As an example, in the 2012 calendar year (CY), 1,236 Majors were selected for Lt Col. The authorized promotion rate for that year was 85 percent. The researcher derived the promotion rate by adding the total number of selects (1,236) and dividing by the IPZ officers considered (1,453); IPZ eligible officers are the baseline for the total number officers promoted. Out of the 1,236 promoted to Lt Col, only 10 percent could be selected BPZ (123.6). As shown in Table 13, 123 officers were selected BPZ. This computation is consistent every year (AFPC).

**Table 13. CY 2012 LAF Lt Col CSB Statistics**

Promotion Zone	CON	SEL	Rate
In Primary Zone	1453	1096	75.4%
Above Primary Zone	1405	17	1.2%
Below Primary Zone	3604	123	3.4%

Regardless of the mathematical calculations, it is apparent BPZ officers are a small pool of identified “Star” players the Air Force considers ready for the next level. By extension, we can also infer in-the-promotion-zone (IPZ) to Lt Col who are selected for Senior Developmental Education (SDE) remain in the talent pool layer.

Officers selected for leadership positions, such as squadron command, comprise the final layer of HiPos. According to one participant with experience in the Air Reserve Personnel Center (ARPC), simply going through a commander’s screening list will mark you as an individual with high potential. Despite these findings, according to an official from Air Mobility Command, no solid policy definition exists. However, the criteria

used for identifying a “top grade officer” are BPZ and SDE selection which is in line with the researcher’s observations.

***Air Force HiPo Officer Nomination, Assessment, and Development.***

The overwhelming majority of respondents stated stratifications were used as a means of communicating an officer’s potential. As mentioned earlier in the paper, stratifications reside on the fifth and ninth line of an OPR, as well as the bottom line of a PRF. In most instances, respondents stated stratifications served as both a current performance and future potential for performance indicator. However, a few respondents reported they believed stratifications to be an indicator of only current performance. In any case, when asked how they evaluated records while working on a DT, MLR, or CSB, stratifications were mentioned as a way of differentiating the promotion potential, in all instances. Several of the participants explicitly tempered stratifications with the officers “full body of work.” An entire body of work consists of jobs held, position level within the organization, position relative to primary AFSC, awards won, and training reports.

As commander's, the respondents stated their intention of pushing HiPo officers to different jobs or assignments was a means of communicating their potential. In some instances, the other jobs were in the form of challenging projects which received “higher visibility” from senior leaders. In other cases, commanders would push their HiPo officers towards executive officer positions or aide jobs. A few of the participants stated the purpose for these actions was to highlight the officer’s potential based on their knowledge of how the system works. While pushing officers to closer proximity to senior leaders is a way of communicating an officer potential, the act served as a means of assessment as well.

The other method of assessing HiPo officers is through the use of challenging projects and assignments outside their “comfort zone.” This sentiment was embodied best by one senior leader's response:

We cannot overlook the role of the assignment process. If a commander has identified an officer as a high-potential, but they are not provided opportunities to prove it, how can we legitimately claim they have potential? If we do not challenge them, how can they demonstrate potential?

It was difficult for the researcher to extricate the difference between HiPo communication and assessment practices for Air Force officers. On the one hand, once a senior leader identifies a HiPo officer, the leader communicates this through OPR stratifications and push lines. Additionally, the leader will push the HiPo officer towards challenging projects or assignments. These assignments typically include, but were not limited to, executive officer positions and aide jobs for higher ranking officials. The assignment push serves two purposes: first, working for a higher-ranking official provides the HiPo officer an opportunity to perform in a “high visibility” position. Typically, another strong stratification follows. The subsequent and improved stratification is the second purpose of the assignment which is a means to assess the officer's potential from another leader's perspective. One other medium a commander has to communicate potential is through the ADP. However, unlike the data contained on OPRs, PRFs, decorations, and training reports, the ADP's information is only viewed by AFPC assignment officers and DTs. While a cursory look at the responses given in this category may lead some to determine HiPo officer development only occurs through working for senior officials, many respondents stated otherwise.

Just as it was stated in the HiPo assessment process, senior leaders use “stretch” assignments to challenge officers outside of their core competency. The purpose of a “stretch” assignment, according to Huang and Tansley (2012), is to take a HiPo employee out of their normal day-to-day activities and make them accountable for something more strategic in nature. At the wing level, one senior leader advocated for developing HiPo officers by assigning them to an office requiring or in the middle of an improvement effort. Other respondents were not as specific with an exact office, but the overall theme was to place HiPo officers in challenging, diverse jobs outside of their comfort zone. Beyond stretch assignments, the majority of respondents stated coaching, mentoring, and senior leader feedback as a means to develop HiPo officers.

Although some may argue coaching, mentoring, and feedback should not be reserved solely for a select group of individuals, multiple studies and articles recommend deliberately investing more resources towards these efforts (Campbell & Smith, 2014; Christensen & Ready, 2013; Grossman, 2011; Huang & Tansley, 2012). The key term, both from studies and respondents, was the perceived and realized value of deliberately conducting all three activities commensurate with officer’s or employee’s talent level.

Regarding development, two respondents claimed the Air Force has a rigid and standardized way of developing its officers. Both respondents recommended developing “consistent, steady performers the service can count on” versus “developing every officer to become the next CSAF.” Another senior leader similarly felt “the Air Force does not have any deliberate plan for joint warfighting expertise, and we need one.” These statements are only a few examples of issues raised by the interview participants.

## **Perceived Issues**

The overwhelming majority of respondents stated the boarding process was extremely efficient given the volume of records requiring review. However, 10 of the 14 respondents (71.4 percent) identified several issues with the system or process. One senior leader claimed the most difficult portion of a board was the amount of “homework required, before arrival.” In this instance, the individual was discussing a DT and believed some of the work accomplished on-site could be achieved beforehand, excluding the records scoring process. Additionally, several respondents mentioned the difference in scoring outcomes when comparing a DT to a CSB. Although the “population size and makeup the officer is competing with is different, there are times where the scores between the groups are significantly different.”

### ***Records Scoring Amongst the Boards and Board Members.***

It is important to note that the DT, MLR, and CSB boards do not share scores or information amongst each other. The only way for DTs to notice the discrepancy is by using actual results and comparing them against their own. As an example, if a DT provides a JCS Vector to an officer, but the CSB does not promote and/or the officer is not an IDE school select, the DT knows there is a delta between the way the DT scored the officer's records and how the CSB scored. This problem may be identified in the reverse order as well. Assume an officer was promoted and was a school select the previous year. The proceeding DT knows this individual did not receive a strong vector and when scoring the records, determined the officer was outside of the Top 20 percent of their functional area. In both instances, the DT must reconcile the difference. This

particular discrepancy may best be explained by another senior leader's difficulty with the board:

The most difficult portion or the most frustrating portion of being on a board is when others had a different paradigm or value system from my own. What ends up happening is we look at the same records, but come up with different results.

Both these passages are significant as they highlight the subjective nature of the boarding process. While all senior leaders interviewed discussed the value of stratifications, awards, jobs held, and training accomplishments as data points for evaluating an officer's records, discrepancies still emerged during the boarding process and performance management system. One senior leader went so far as to say:

The boarding process and the scoring of records suffer from a couple of flaws. First, the scoring process relies heavily on the use of instinct and intuition. This fact is not a bad thing, per se, as some officer's intuition and instinct are pretty good. Second, the records we see on the board are snapshots in time. These snapshots may rely heavily on one attribute the leader prefers. This preference is a recipe for mirror imaging. Furthermore, it leads to promoting people who look like and act like you which perpetuates the past and does not seek out a diversity of thought.

The central premise behind this leader's response is that there is a tendency to promote familiarity and preference over objective criteria of the service's needs for the future. To be clear, the researcher is not insinuating board members ignore SECAF or commander guidance deliberately when scoring records. The researcher posits there is a possibility board members bring their values into the process which is in line with interview responses and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX). LMX describes the relationships between leaders and their subordinates (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). In-group members share common value systems while out-group members have little in common with the leader (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly Jr., & Konopaske, 2012).

Research also shows approximately 90 percent of work units are differentiated through LMX relationships (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980). Therefore, the researcher's finding is not uncommon, should be expected, and was reaffirmed in another participant's similar sentiment.

One of my critiques of the personnel management system, is we tend to continuously seek out the same high-performing individuals and drag them along with us. During conversations I have had with other folks in leadership positions, I would submit this critique is held by others as well. I think this is to the detriment of the overall institution as there is no telling of whether the individuals we bring along with us have the true potential to perform in greater roles.

### ***Institutional Inertia of Early Success.***

Another senior leader believed “a person's real strength and leadership are not found in a paper record, which is clearly where the rubber meets the road.” As the paper record contains numerous accomplishments during an officer's career, the current system views the accumulation of accomplishments as an analogous metric for talent. Several referred to certain accomplishments as “career milestones.” Half of the participants explicitly identified SOS Distinguished Graduate (DG) as one of these milestones while the other half referenced all awards received from training or development programs as such. While the preponderance of the senior leaders agreed DG awards were indicative of demonstrating “excellent performance, relative to their peers,” only 5 of the 14 of the respondents (35.7 percent) claimed SOS DG was not proportionately weighted in the process. Below are excerpts of their reasoning and consternation:

- The problem with valuing DGs early on in an officer's career, specifically during their PME, is three-fold: First, it acts as a positive discriminator in an officer's record, regardless if it is correct or not. Second, these identifiers lead to opportunities for school or promotion to a command which further positively discriminates the officer amongst their peers. Success begets

success and the next thing you know, the officer is early to promote. This leads to my final point, once an officer gets on this train, nobody is really watching. The system seems to take over, and once you have been identified, you remain identified.

- Just look at the weight the SOS DG award carries in our system. I am not trying to downplay or take anything away from the accomplishment, but this happens relatively early in an officer's career. I have seen this factored into Colonel promotion boards extensively. This makes it extremely hard for late bloomers to get sequenced into the system. Folks that start fast continue fast.
- The boarding process of Captain through General is relatively similar. We look at the same information and evaluate all the accomplishments of an officer. However, the weight of those accomplishments changes relative to the rank of the individual. While a SOS DG may be valid to the promotion of Major, it has relatively little importance or bearing on the promotion to higher ranks, in my opinion. I would caveat this last statement by stating depends on what the board values regarding whether early accomplishments are accounted for in the process.
- The SOS DG award is a funny thing. It is a problem as it is a measurement against your peers. There are very few times in an officer's career where this happens. So, what you will see on boards while comparing two similar records, is the SOS DG winner will get the nod. What is the award based on though? Test scores? How well your instructor liked you? When I went through SOS, the correspondence tests were identical to the in-residence tests, it was only three weeks, so I am not certain how smart or accurate winning DG was during that time.

### ***Overreliance On and Ambiguity of Stratifications.***

Although formal training awards were identified as significant discriminators in an officer's records and not proportionally weighted, stratifications on OPRs and PRFs were another issue raised by respondents. The value and importance of stratifications cannot be overemphasized. From a commander's perspective, an officer stratification indicates potential. However, one participant rhetorically asked, "do you think stratifications mean the same thing to all commanders?" The respondent went on to say "determining how thinly we slice the stratification is an important distinction." The

“thinness” of a stratification describes the specificity of a relevant peer group (Example: “#1/10 ’08 Instructor Pilot Captains” versus “#1/10 Captains”). This last statement alludes to the lack of codified or universal way of crafting an officer stratification which may lead to issues in the boarding process. To be clear, and as mentioned previously, AFI 36-2406 contains a list of authorized stratifications. However, it is possible to “game” the system by administering multiple “#1” stratifications. As an example, a commander is authorized to give the following stratifications, during the same rating period: “#1/10 Majors,” “#1/10 FGOs,” “#1/10 Instructors,” and “#1/12 officers in my Squadron.”

The prudence of stratifying many officers as the “#1” of a particular category is a valid question, but ultimately, the evaluation and performance management system drive this tactic. In an Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) paper, Major Douglas Huttenlocker (2013) demonstrated how commanders could change the denominator of a stratification to “take care of” multiple elite officers. Although his paper provided examples of FGO stratifications, the same logic holds true with CGOs as well. How does a commander take care of many elite officers? The researcher determined there are two ways: first, the commander must move the talent out of his purview and towards another rater who will provide a good stratification. This step provides additional stratifications for other talented officers. The second way is to change the denominator in various ways to provide the highest possible ranking, relative to an officer's peers. Although one may argue the latitude provided to commanders is needed to account for the vast amount of talented personnel in the service, it also serves to inflate the overall evaluation records of the population. Inflated records make it tough for board members to discern between

officers which lead to searching for any semblance of quantifiable or objective data. The data comes in the form of “checking key boxes.” One senior leader blames the culture of the evaluation process.

I do not think we accurately rate the effectiveness of an officer's work. On a promotion board, I try to find words connecting an officer's mission with their actions. Unfortunately, it is hard to determine the metrics used to gauge their performance. This issue is cultural and is part of the trap we get into on these boards. We show up to a board, have a stack of records, and there is some decoder ring with words that mean something. We identify “definitely promotes” (DP) versus “promotes” (P), school push, and the amount of number one stratifications in the officer's record. What we get is an entire culture that spends 20 seconds on a record looking for checked key boxes, and that is how people get promoted.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented results and analysis of the 13 interview questions outlined in Chapter 3. Participant demographics were presented for interview response rate, participant time in service, rank, AFSC, and command positions held. The researcher outlined the software and applications used for data collection and analysis, including the point when data saturation occurred. Additionally, the researcher described the iterations of the coding process which served as the basis for presenting the interview results. Senior leaders declared HiPro officers as individuals who understood the commander’s intent, the unit’s mission, and displayed initiative. One person referred to a HiPro officer as “fire and forget” while two others suggested Elbert Hubbard’s (1899) “A Message to Garcia” epitomized a HiPro individual. Other attributes of HiPro officers discovered throughout the interview process were: competence, technical expertise, risk taker, and someone who delivers results.

When asked to delineate between performance and potential, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated sustained performance was their indication of a HiPo officer. This method of identification is characteristic of Silzer and Church's (2010) description of "Potential by Role" which is in use by 10 percent of companies they studied. Beyond sustained performance, respondents did not provide any additional HiPo attributes of significance for this study. However, data collected from the literature review, specifically AFPC's website and personnel regulations, coupled with information gleaned from interviews indicate the Air Force supports an unofficial HiPo program. The program starts as a talent pool of 16 to 20 percent of top officers identified at their Major's promotion board. Refinements to the pool occur during the BPZ to Lt Col which adjusts the pool to 3 to 4 percent. Eventually, as an individual moves up in rank, further delineations are made. Officers fall within the HiPo category based on the strength of their stratifications, push lines, formal training awards, annual awards, and jobs held. The most significant of these qualifiers were identified as stratifications, jobs held, and formal training awards.

Consequently, these three areas were the center of perceived issues as well. During the boarding process, some respondents indicate a frustration with the different values of the board members. Two other participants reported the boarding process rewarded perceived "in-group" members which are parallel to LMX Theory. Another issue identified is the relative weight of formal training awards has in the promotion process. The crux of the complaint centered around the value or validity of the award. Although formal training awards are supposed to be a relative measurement of an

officer's ability, across career fields, the metrics used to determine the award were questioned.

Furthermore, one senior leader stated that an SOS DG award was factored extensively into Colonel promotion boards. Finally, respondents indicated that there is an overreliance on stratifications and that there is a level of ambiguity involved in stratifications which cause inflation in officer's performance records. The next chapter will address the investigative and central research questions in addition to providing recommendations.

## V. Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

The results of this study offer insight into how the Air Force delineates an officer's current performance from their future potential. Additionally, the findings illuminate the scope and depth the Air Force defines talent at the strategic, operational, and individual level. The analysis and subsequent findings were then triangulated and cross-referenced with an extensive literature review to develop recommendations for the Air Force to improve its talent management practices. What follows is a synopsis of answered investigative questions and conclusions.

***IQ1: Currently, how does the Air Force personnel management system differentiate between HiPo officers and HiPro officers?***

Every respondent interviewed was familiar with the term “HPO,” however, there was some confusion on whether the acronym stood for a high-performing or high-potential officer. Despite the confusion, respondents use of the term and purpose of designating an individual in this manner is similar to industry’s use of the phrase HiPo. Nevertheless, two respondents, one active duty, and one reservist, with experience in the A1 (Personnel) community gave diverging answers concerning the Air Force’s policy definition of a HiPo. One senior leader explicitly stated “there is no Air Force policy definition of a HiPo,” while another stated a HiPo was someone who made a commander’s screening list, the Key Personnel List (KPL), or was in the top 20 percent of their career field. Although it may seem odd for two leaders with A1 experience to give different answers, the discrepancy may be attributable to differences between official active duty and reserve guidance.

Air Force Reserve Command Instruction (AFRCI) 36-2640, *Executing Air Force Reserve Force Development* (2013), is the only official guidance the researcher found with a formal definition of HiPo officers and also supports the KPL assertion of one of the respondents. It is worth noting, AFRCI 36-2640 uses the acronym “HP” for the term “high-potentials” which is yet another way of describing HiPo officers. Beyond AFRCI 36-2640, the only other mention of “high-potential” in the Air Force lexicon was in an Air University Leadership Study (2012), which claimed that officers selected to the rank of major and in-residence IDE were “high-potentials.” This assertion aligns with the researcher’s analysis and three levels of HiPo officer description, but it does not explain how the Air Force personnel management system differentiates HiPos from non-HiPos or HiPros for that matter.

The predominance of the senior leaders interviewed linked sustained performance with an officer's future potential. The objective measurement of that performance varied amongst participants; however, the researcher concludes an officer that continuously embodies the HiPro characteristics, described in Chapter 4, delineates a HiPo from a HiPro officer. Additionally, while only one of the respondents mentioned the Air Force's Institutional Competencies, the ability for an officer to score high in multiple categories is indicative of a HiPo officer as well. Unfortunately, it is hard to assess how leaders explicitly capture these competencies or characteristics on performance reports. Nevertheless, respondents provided insight on how they communicated officer potential in the personnel management system (Question 4).

All stated the OPR and the PRF were the primary means of communication. When asked what information they valued on boards to rack and stack officers, they

mentioned three items (Question 11): quarterly and annual awards, formal training accomplishments, and stratifications. Board members valued stratifications most, followed by formal training awards, with annual awards rounding out the list. However, the weighting and prioritization of the list are difficult to discern by any quantitative measure. As awards and stratifications are measurements of performance, one may conclude an individual with the best stratifications, from the highest-ranking officials, and the most awards are indicative of a HiPro officer. Unfortunately, this same claim supports an unofficial definition of a HiPo officer as someone who demonstrates sustained performance, which was also the top indication of potential. Despite this conundrum, the lack of a HiPo or HiPro formal definition, the researcher concludes the Air Force personnel management system differentiates HiPo officers from HiPro in the following manner:

- An officer who continuously garners high-level stratifications and awards are considered a HiPo officer. High-level stratifications include low numerator with high denominator stratifications, stratifications received from higher-ranking officials, or stratifications received while working in demanding and crucial DoD organizations. These officers are selected for in-residence PME, formal training, and quite possibly BPZ selection.
- An officer who sporadically garners high-level stratifications and awards are considered a HiPro officer. Additionally, an officer who continuously accumulates good stratifications and awards are regarded as a HiPro officer. “Good” stratifications may be interpreted as a lower tier of stratification (see Chapter 4). These officers promote on time, might be selected for PME, and are not selected for BPZ.
- An officer who has a minimal amount of good stratifications and awards is not considered a HiPo or HiPro officer. These officers might be promoted on time or APZ and will almost certainly not be selected for in-residence PME.

***IQ2: Where has this process succeeded and where has it failed?***

Measuring the success of any program involves gauging the degree of accomplishment against a stated purpose. An organizational HiPo employee program acknowledges some individuals are more talented than others. The aim, then, is for a company to effectively identify, assess, develop, and retain their top talent. As mentioned in Chapter 2, before an organization can successfully implement a HiPo program, a company must define what “high-potential” means and answer the question “potential for what?” According to AFI 36-2406, an officer’s potential is “performance-based,” a “cumulative record of performance,” and indicative of an officer’s “promotion potential” (2016: 10). These passages imply an individual’s potential is strictly based on past accomplishments and those achievements are valid indicators of future performance in a higher grade. Since OPRs, PRFs, and training reports comprise the majority of records viewed on selection boards, the personnel management system is successful in implementing their HiPo criteria. However, this conclusion negates the Air Force’s Strategic Master Plan, Human Capital Annex, as well as the Institutional Competencies (IC) List.

The Human Capital Annex (2016) outlines a desire for a rapidly recognizing and “adaptable” HR system. Additionally, the document wants the personnel management system to identify its “small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential which enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands” (A-9: Page). Although the HCA does not explicitly state what comprises those “skills” and “experiences,” the researcher concludes that AFDD, Annex 1-1, Force Development (2014), serves as the Air Force’s identification and assessment

tool for HiPo talent. Nonetheless, the researcher was unable to determine how the personnel management system evaluates or tracks the IC's listed in this document. Furthermore, only one of the respondents was familiar with the IC list while other participants recommended moving towards a competency-based evaluation system. This point highlights a shortcoming of the system.

OPRs, PRFs, and training records are snapshots in time and are indicative of past achievements. While respondents indicated OPR stratifications were intended to measure both the performance and potential of an officer, this sentiment was not 100 percent. Subsequently, had the researcher interviewed 14 other senior leaders, there is a possibility the results might have been different. Moreover, these documents do not track IC's nor are there any clear indicators of potential. While one may argue the "push line" serves as a rater's opportunity to communicate potential, there is a lack of guidance on what constitutes a push line's order of merit and how the significance of the push line changes over time. Therefore, the researcher concludes the personnel management system fails in establishing clear, explicit guidance on what HiPo talent means, HiPo assessment, and HiPo development of CGOs.

The timing of an officer's career heavily influences the outcome of talent identification and subsequently may negatively affect the Air Force's ability to identify "late bloomers." Although the focus of this research was on CGO's, participants mentioned the "24 pole year" as an issue in need of remedy. The "pole year" is the first year an officer is eligible to promote to the rank of Brigadier General. In a Federal Executive Fellowship policy paper, LTC Marx found the Air Force "rarely promotes officers to brigadier general after 24 years of service, compared to the Marine Corps,

which primarily promotes officers to brigadier general only after 24 years of service” (Marx, 2014: 15). After accounting for six years of command (Wing, Group, Squadron), two years for PME (IDE and SDE), and one year for an Advanced Study Group (ASG), only 12 to 13 years remain for an officer to catapult themselves to HiPo status.

Depending on the career field, this number is further reduced when accounting for technical schools (i.e. UPT). What remains is a system that must on-board talent at a younger age, which dictates much more scrutiny is required to determine an officer's potential for future leadership roles accurately. Furthermore, it stands to reason, the deliberate development of younger officers must be of high importance as well.

Unfortunately, the current system is not designed to cater to this level of CGO development. Two aspects of this last statement require further explanation.

The senior leaders interviewed indicated that no formal Air Force office tracks or is designed to develop HiPo CGOs. One exception may be Air Mobility Command's (AMC) Phoenix Torch, Reach, and Mobility programs, which are intended to broaden mobility officers as CGOs. A few respondents, not in the MAF community, expressed praise for AMC's attempt to grow their officers at a younger age. One aspect which closely parallels private industry is the role the functional force development office plays in strategically placing these officers in follow-on assignments. This point highlights another shortcoming of the current system, which is the lack of formal authority force development offices and DTs have in using the assignment system to develop officers. A major portion of HiPo development is through experiential learning, which directly ties to assigning people to mentors, jobs, or education programs. Currently, DTs only provide

macro-level vectors for AFPC to consider when assigning personnel and have no formal authority in the process.

***IQ3: How could industry best practices be applied in the Air Force?***

There is a litany of academic and corporate research in the field of HiPo talent management. While the amount of studies and interest concerning the topic numbers in the thousands, overwhelmingly, research recommends organizations strategically align HiPo talent management practices to better capitalize on these employees ability to make a strategic impact. Delineation of successful HiPo employee cultivation involves a systematic and robust development program which provides structure, guidance, and tools for HiPo's and supervisors alike. However, an outstanding development program that ignores effectively identifying HiPo talent does not lend itself to positive outcomes. More specifically, an organization stands to lose valuable time and resources in HiPo talent development when it incorrectly identifies an individual as a HiPo, at the onset of the process. Exacerbating the problem further, the Air Force does not have the ability to hire officers from outside its service. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Air Force to adopt a transparent and methodical process for identifying, assessing, and developing its HiPo officers earlier in the officer's career. Furthermore, "best practice" organizations for these types of management programs tend to use models to identify and assess an employee's potential (see Chapter 4 for HiPo model examples). The researcher did not find a codified Air Force model for potential.

Developmental Teams can review Airman Development Plans (ADPs), discuss individual records, and engage in productive dialogue concerning the development of an officer. However, their notes and vectors are not included in the promotion process. The

researcher could not find any AFI or legal basis for this lack of inclusion, but one may argue the separation of such functions serves to prevent undue influence or bias the boards. However, the same argument would dictate the removal of the “DP/P” block of the PRF. As an example, the FY16, IPZ, Lt Colonel CSB promoted 100 percent of “DP” officers versus less than 50 percent of “P” officers. This fact means the judgment of one senior officer and their perception of an individual's potential to serve in a higher grade already influences the board. In any case, an effective talent management program demands a healthy supply of information sources to identify HiPo talent accurately.

### **Recommendations**

Based on a thorough literature review, analysis presented in the previous chapter, and conclusions from the three investigative questions, the researcher identified five recommendations to improve how the Air Force can better identify, assess, and develop HiPo CGOs.

The first recommendation involves a thorough evaluation and establishment of a codified, formal definition of HiPo officers. This definition must capture the “ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential which enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands” (HCA to the USAF SMP, 2016: A-9). AFI 36-2406, Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems, states potential is “performance based” and uses numerous forms to create a “cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance.” AFRCI 36-2640, Executing Air Force Reserve Force Development, uses the acronym “HP” to mean “high-potential” and says an individual has met a command screening board or on the key personnel list (KPL).

HAF/A1 Guidance outlines indicators of potential as being a Distinguished Graduate from a commissioning source, formal training program, PME, IDE, SDE, high-level OPR stratification, BPZ selection, and other objective criteria. However, all of these areas may not be valid indicators of potential. In fact, research and private industry agree that drive, ability to learn, leadership, and other leadership competencies and skills, are the top signs of HiPo employees. The researcher found the senior leaders interviewed agreed with this conclusion as well. Consequently, questions left outstanding are what skills should the Air Force measure and how should they measure them? These questions lead to the second recommendation.

The Air Force must evaluate officer's, and Airmen alike, against the ICs outlined in AFMAN 36-2647. The purpose of ICs is to “set behavioral standards of leadership for all levels,” and are “observable, measurable patterns of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed to perform institutional and occupational functions successfully” (AFMAN 36-2647, 2016: 3). Therefore, these criteria require inculcation into every officer's records. Some may argue this recommendation is too cumbersome and difficult to manage, given the current documentation used to evaluate Airmen. This statement may be true, however, assuming ICs align with the HCA, then we must determine how the Air Force can act on this recommendation.

The Air Force must adopt a simple, executable model to evaluate the potential of its CGOs. Organizations considered to have “best practices” in the field of talent management, use models to identify and assess an employee's potential. Two examples mentioned earlier were the CEB and DDI model for HiPo employee identification and assessment. These are only two of many models available to gauge an employee's future

potential; however, they all intend on measuring the probability an individual can successfully take on greater roles and responsibilities, in both breadth and depth, as leaders in their organization. These models are an excellent template to use for deliberately and methodically identifying and assessing HiPo CGOs.

The fourth recommendation involves increasing the roles and responsibilities given to CGOs. If the purpose of a HiPo officer program is to identify future leaders, then the assessment process must include leadership challenges that truly test the capability of an officer. These “tests” must be monitored and tracked beyond a stratification or push line. During the literature review, the researcher did not find any instances where companies distilled the performance of an individual or their potential to perform in the future, into one singular number, relative to their peers. In fact, the best talent management companies use multiple sources to assess HiPo employees. These sources include an objective assessment of budget management, project impact to business performance, as well as peer, subordinate, and supervisor feedback. The Air Force must achieve this level of fidelity of an individual's capability to accurately assess their potential for future leadership roles. The information captured must then be monitored and maintained by a central talent management entity. Currently, force development offices are best aligned to serve this function while DTs are best suited to carry out the annual assessment and development of the HiPo talent pool. Unfortunately, DTs lack the authority to be as effective as intended, which leads to the fifth and final recommendation.

Developmental teams must have the power to utilize the assignment process as a means to deliberately develop officers. Although DTs must identify “the education,

training, and experiences appropriate for officers,” the only outputs they provide are assignment vectors and career feedback (AFI 36-2640, 2008: 11). The AFPC is the only organization with authority to provide assignments. DTs must be able to pair their developmental strategies with officer assignments. Moreover, the movement of personnel, in industry, does not happen serendipitously, especially one singled out as a HiPo. The assignment and development of a HiPo is a very deliberate process. Employees move to locations where the job experience is intended to prepare them for future roles in the organization. Furthermore, the Air Force should consider deliberately placing CGOs with mentors that can facilitate further professional development. to grow This practice is something we must emulate to extract maximum value from a HiPo officer program.

### **Other Findings and Recommendations**

Although younger officers were the focus of the paper, the rich data collected from senior leader interviews lead the researcher to other findings and recommendations.

#### ***Replace BPZ/IPZ/APZ Promotions with Promotion Windows.***

Presently, BPZ boards do not follow a similar construct as IPZ and APZ boards. The Air Force “DP” allocation rate is 10 percent for BPZ promotions to Lt Colonel and 15 percent to Colonel. Comparatively, IPZ and APZ “DP” rates are 40 and 20 percent, respectively (AFPAM 36-2506, 1997). These caps to “DP” allotment are intended to ensure only “the most qualified records are endorsed” and provide a greater chance that “a significant number of officers receiving 'P' recommendations” are promoted as well (AFI 36-2406, 2016: 233-234). Although the Air Force can promote to their allotted

“DP” rate, they seldom do (Marx, 2014). Furthermore, the BPZ records scoring is dissimilar to the IPZ and APZ process. First, BPZ scoring starts with an up/down, yes or no vote, which determines what records are considered “Exceptionally Well Qualified” (AFI 36-2501, 2016: 22). Once deemed EWQ, the board then scores the records.

While there are processes in place to calibrate BPZ selects with IPZ selects, a few senior leaders insinuated, with one directly stating, the process was “purely a square-filling exercise” (senior leader interview). The participant went on to say BPZ boards “look for the markers that stand out. These items include DG of PME, what school an individual attended, and the amount of number one stratifications received. These boards look at past career milestones or achievements as analogs for promotion criteria, whereas the IPZ board at least attempts to determine an individual's ability to serve in the next grade.” The leader interviewed understood the quota system but did not understand why the process was different. Likewise, the researcher postulates, based on the literature reviewed, HiPo talent or promotion potential is indifferent to year groups.

As such, the researcher proposes an alternative to the current promotion construct by creating promotion windows which look similar to the BPZ timeline but changes the quota system and mentality. The main difference between the two methods is anyone eligible for Lt Colonel or Colonel sees the same exact board and is vetted the same exact way. This modification allows for equitability and transparency in the process.

***Allow DT Notes, Vectors, and ADP comments in the MLR and CSB process.***

Developmental Teams have much more flexibility and latitude when reviewing officer records. According to the senior leaders interviewed, the amount of time spent on each record varies from board to board. However, DTs typically spend eight minutes on

a record, while MLRs and CSBs spend no more than two minutes per file. Additionally, DTs are allowed to discuss individuals openly and are not bound to the rigid scoring process the MLR and CSB must follow. The reason for this difference is attributable to their respective outputs. A Management Level Review Board allocates additional “DP” recommendations, which provides a demonstrable positive effect on promotion rates, while the CSB promotes individuals. By comparison, DTs offer assignment vectors and feedback, with no formal authority. Still, DTs view the same records, develop a similar rank ordered officer list, but have the luxury of reviewing an officer's ADP as well. When combined with the functional experience of their career field, the rich data source provides a means to assess the potential of an officer better. Why not use this information when determining who to promote?

Some may argue this would provide an undue influence on subsequent boards. The researcher's counterpoint is how does the DT support for promotion differ from an MLR “DP” recommendation? In the end, it is just information, and each board must independently evaluate the future potential of an officer to serve in greater roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, DTs are best situated to know and understand the officers they evaluate. Therefore, the researcher recommends the results of DTs be packaged and included for MLRs and CSBs to consider. A few ideas offered for consideration are providing: percentiles of officer's standing within their respective community, outplacement vectors, DT notes on individuals, or a DT rank ordered officer list, which is intended to serve as a comparative analysis tool after a board convenes. The purpose of these ideas is to produce a more robust data source for analyzing an officer's ability to serve in a higher grade.

## **Limitations**

Every researcher strives to reduce their study's limitations while bolstering its reliability and validity; this study was no different. Nevertheless, limitations may be present and must be discussed in this paper.

Qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher's skills, which leads to possible personal biases and idiosyncrasies (Anderson, 2010). As the researcher solicited, selected, and interviewed all participants, multiple steps were taken to mitigate the influence of possible bias. First, senior leaders were chosen based on their background and range of experience. Maintaining a wide swath of operational backgrounds avoided slanting answers exclusive to one AFSC. Second, the researcher utilized Castillo-Montoya's IPR Method (2016) to develop the research instrument and ensure interview questions aligned with research objectives. Third, the semi-structured interview format enabled the researcher to gather focused, qualitative textual data repeatedly. Finally, while various steps were taken to mitigate or remove bias, the fact that the researcher personally interviewed senior leaders may have affected the participant's responses.

Preventing researcher influence during interviews is a difficult task. Although semi-structured interviews allow for some leeway to capture rich data from the respondent, this freedom can also lead to influencing the participants towards a particular answer or point of view. As an example, there were times in the interview where respondents requested clarification or additional context on a question. In those instances, the researcher expanded on the issue while attempting to avoid leading the participant. The extent to which additional researcher guidance affected interview

answers is hard to measure, but the researcher utilized triangulation and member-checking strategies to mitigate this issue.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this intrinsic case study highlighted several ways the Air Force can better identify, assess, and develop HiPo CGOs, some recommendations lend themselves to exploratory case study analyses.

Stratifications were determined to be an overly significant determinant in identifying HiPos in the current system. As such, an exploratory case study of officer stratifications, promotion rates, and school selection would provide greater insight and understanding into the effects stratifications have on an officer's career.

The other markers used to determine an officer's HiPo status demands a long-term outlook of these criteria as a means of identification and assessment. Therefore, a longitudinal study of these talent identification criteria and evaluation methods will help determine their predictive validity over time.

One recommendation made was to allow integrating DT results into MLRs and CSBs for consideration. Due to the scope of this paper, the researcher was unable to determine the second or third order effects of such an action. Consequently, an exploratory case study analysis of integrating DT results into the MLR and CSB process will identify any deleterious effects of the recommendation.

Finally, the researcher found the DT, MLR, and CSB constructs overly redundant. Developmental teams make recommendations, MLRs allot "DP" to officer PRFs, and CSBs promote individuals. However, all review records and all create a rank-ordered list

of officers. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to analyze each of these boards at a level to provide a valid recommendation for optimizing the promotion system.

Accordingly, the researcher recommends future study focus on analyzing how the Air Force can optimize its promotion processes.

## **Summary**

The Air Force faces several challenges in the coming years. Whether it is the retention of personnel or fiscal constraints, the current operating environment dictates a fresh look at the various ways we conduct business. At its core, Airmen shape our strategy, develop our operational game plan, and execute the TTPs for us to thrive in our dynamic world. Therefore, it is imperative the Air Force effectively identify, assess, and develop its top talent to succeed in future military conflicts.

Through an exhaustive literature review and multiple senior leader interviews, this paper discovered the current characteristics and attributes of both HiPro and HiPo officers. Furthermore, senior leaders expressed concern for personnel practices the service must improve upon to flourish in the future. These issues lead the researcher to outline five recommendations directly tied to the research question and two additional proposals based on the rich data collected.

While it may seem the focus of this paper was only on the top tier talent of the Air Force, the criteria used to assess applies to all Airmen. Currently, it is tough to evaluate the finite standards the service values for defining talent. The system requires simplicity and transparency. By capitalizing on the recommendations made, the Air Force will be able to leverage its greatest asset, its people.

## Glossary of Terms

<b>ABM</b>	Air Battle Manager
<b>AFPC</b>	Air Force Personnel Center
<b>AFS</b>	Air Force Specialties
<b>CAF</b>	Combat Air Forces
<b>CGO</b>	Company Grade Officer
<b>CLC</b>	Corporate Leadership Council
<b>CRO</b>	Combat Rescue Officer
<b>CSB</b>	Central Selection Board
<b>DT</b>	Developmental Team
<b>FGO</b>	Field Grade Officer
<b>HAF</b>	Headquarters Air Force
<b>HCA</b>	Human Capital Annex
<b>HiPo</b>	High-Potential
<b>HiPro</b>	High-Performing
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>IC</b>	Institutional Competencies
<b>LAF</b>	Line of the Air Force
<b>LOE</b>	Letter of Evaluation
<b>MAF</b>	Mobility Air Forces
<b>MAJCOM</b>	Major Command
<b>MLR</b>	Management Level Review
<b>MX</b>	Maintenance
<b>OES</b>	Officer Evaluation System
<b>OPR</b>	Officer Performance Report
<b>PRF</b>	Promotion Recommendation Form
<b>SOF</b>	Special Operations Forces
<b>SMP</b>	Strategic Master Plan
<b>STO</b>	Special Tactics Officers
<b>TR</b>	Training Report

## Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter



### DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE AIR UNIVERSITY (AETC)

13 Sep 2016

MEMORANDUM FOR Lt Col Robert Overstreet

FROM: John J. Elshaw, Ph.D.  
AFIT IRB Research Reviewer  
2950 Hobson Way  
Wright-Patterson AFB, OH 45433-7765

SUBJECT: Approval for exemption request from human experimentation requirements (32 CFR 219, DoDD 3216.2 and AFI 40-402) for "Performance versus Potential: Can the Air Force Tell the Difference?"

1. Your request was based on the Code of Federal Regulations, title 32, part 219, section 101, paragraph (b) (2) Research activities that involve the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior unless: (i) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.
2. Your study qualifies for this exemption because you are not collecting sensitive data, which could reasonably damage the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. Further, the demographic data you are utilizing and the way that you plan to report and store it cannot realistically be expected to map a given response to a specific subject.
3. This determination pertains only to the Federal, Department of Defense, and Air Force regulations that govern the use of human subjects in research. Further, if a subject's future response reasonably places them at risk of criminal or civil liability or is damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation, you are required to file an adverse event report with this office immediately.

9/13/2016

X   
\_\_\_\_\_

Signed by: ELSHAW, JOHN J. 1078680454  
JOHN J. ELSHAW, PH.D.  
AFIT Exempt Determination Official

## Appendix B – Summary of Case Study Definitions

Type	Definition	Published Study Example
Explanatory	This type of case study would be used if you were seeking to answer a question that sought to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. In evaluation language, the explanations would link program implementation with program effects (Yin, 2003).	Joia (2002). Analysing a web- based e-commerce learning community: A case study in Brazil. <i>Internet Research</i> , 12, 305-317.
Exploratory	This type of case study is used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003).	Lotzkar & Bottorff (2001). An observational study of the development of a nurse-patient relationship. <i>Clinical Nursing Research</i> , 10, 275-294.
Descriptive	This type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003).	Tolson, Fleming, & Schartau (2002). Coping with menstruation: Understanding the needs of women with Parkinson’s disease. <i>Journal of Advanced Nursing</i> , 40, 513-521.
Multiple-case studies	A multiple case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases are chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003).	Campbell & Ahrens (1998). Innovative community services for rape victims: An application of multiple case study methodology. <i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i> , 26, 537-571.

Intrinsic	Stake (1995) uses the term intrinsic and suggests that researchers who have a genuine interest in the case should use this approach when the intent is to better understand the case. It is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case itself is of interest. The purpose is NOT to come to understand some abstract construct or generic phenomenon. The “purpose is NOT to build theory (although that is an option; Stake, 1995).	Hellström, Nolan, & Lundh (2005). “We do things together” A case study of “couplehood” in dementia. <i>Dementia</i> , 4(1), 7-22.
Instrumental	Is used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation. It provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case is often looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, and because it helps the researcher pursue the external interest. The case may or may not be seen as typical of other cases (Stake, 1995).	Luck, Jackson, & Usher (2007). STAMP: Components of observable behaviour that indicate potential for patient violence in emergency departments. <i>Journal of Advanced Nursing</i> , 59, 11-19.
Collective	Collective case studies are similar in nature and description to multiple case studies (Yin, 2003)	Scheib (2003). Role stress in the professional life of the school music teacher: A collective case study. <i>Journal of Research in Music Education</i> , 51,124-136.

Source: (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 547-548)

## Appendix C – Bullet Background Paper for Interview Participants

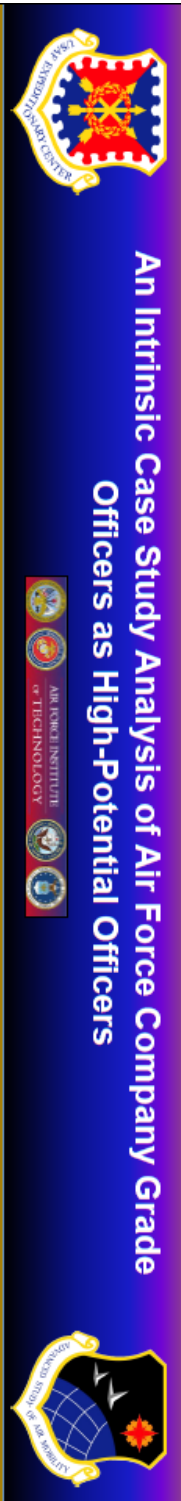
### TALKING PAPER ON

#### PERFORMANCE VERSUS POTENTIAL: CAN THE AIR FORCE TELL THE DIFFERENCE? RESEARCH PROJECT?

- The purpose of this talking paper is to introduce a research study being conducted by the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) to assist AF/A1 in understanding the difference between high performance and high potential 1X officers. The purpose of this study is to improve the way the Air Force differentiates between high-potential and high-performing CGOs.
- Issue / Research Problem Statement
  - The problem faced by the Air Force is it has an incomplete understanding of how to differentiate between a high potential company grade officer (CGO) and a high performing CGO.
  - Research shows there is a cost associated with misidentifying a high-performing individual with a high-potential individual.
  - This cost is not readily apparent or easily quantifiable in the Air Force, but the cost of misidentifying an employee's potential is not unique to only the private sector. In fact, the cost is much steeper given key Air Force positions, as with our sister services, can only be filled from within.
  - There is no recourse to recoup the cost of lost talent once it is gone, as we cannot simply go out and higher a new Major with the same experience and background to fill the billet. If the Air Force were to understand how to differentiate between a high potential and high performer, there will likely be changes made in how the Air Force manages its finite talent pool.
- Research Objectives
  - Identify current gaps in differentiating between a CGO's performance and potential.
  - Identify industry best practices for talent management, specific to high potential officers, and determine if they can be applied to the Air Force.
- Research Methodology
  - A qualitative research design will be used. Interviews with 1X officers will be conducted to gather information from 1X officers ranging from Lt Col to Gen. The purpose of the data collection is to identify variances in respondents answers compared to official guidance and industry best practices.
- Points of Contact
  - Lt Col Robert Overstreet, Assistant Professor, AFIT, Department of Operational Sciences
  - Maj Steven Nolan, Graduate Student, AFIT, Department of Operational Sciences

Maj Nolan/AFIT/ENS/DSN650-7320/stn/3 Sep 2016

# Appendix D – Quad Chart



### Abstract

This graduate research paper analyzed Air Force guidance, senior leader perspectives, and talent management case analyses involving high-potential (HiPo) individuals. The purpose was to use an Intrinsic Case Study design to discover common definitions, characteristics, and attributes of HiPo officers.

To minimize bias, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 senior leaders with Distinguished Talent (DT), High Potential Review (HiPR), or Global Selected Board (CSB) experience, as well as multiple command tours, in total, ten general officers and four colonels with flying, maintenance, STO, or Cyber experience participated.

The senior leaders interviewed shared their thoughts, opinions, and insights on what constituted a HiPo officer and highlighted issues in need of remedy. Using Creswell's data analysis spiral and Nvivo qualitative analysis software, the researcher identified three themes for both high-performing (HiPo) and HiPo officers. These themes, combined with an exhaustive literature review, lead the researcher to recommend seven items for action.

### Methodology

An intrinsic case study design was used to gain insights from Air Force senior leaders with diverse operational backgrounds to learn how the service differentiates between high-performing (HiPo) and high-potential (HiPr) COOs. Voluntary interview participants comprised of pilots from all communities, as well as Cyber, MA, and Special Tactics Officers. The researcher selected those with multiple command tours but specifically targeted those with DT, MLR, or CSB experience.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in person, over the phone, and via email. Conversations were recorded, transcribed, and coded into four major categories: HiPo and HiPr Indicators, Personnel Management System Process, as well as Process Improvement Ideas. Transcripts were coded using Tesch's 8-step coding process and analyzed using Nvivo Word Cloud and Word Tree qualitative analysis software.

Once complete, the researcher ensured validity and reliability of the findings through triangulation and member-checking. Data was cross-referenced against private industry HiPo studies and the researcher offered all interview participants an opportunity to clarify or affirm their positions.

Maj Steven "SWAP" Nolan  
 Advisor: Lt Col Robert E. Overstreet, PhD  
 Advanced Study of Air Mobility (ENS)  
 Air Force Institute of Technology



Figure 10. HiPo Officers Word Cloud



Figure 11. HiPo Officers Word Cloud



Figure 12. HiPo Officers Word Cloud



Figure 4. Corporate Leadership Council HiPo Employee Model (2005: 5)

### Perceived Issues

1. Differences in valuation system amongst the boards and board members, when scoring records.
2. Institutional inertia of early success.
3. Overreliance on and ambiguity of stratifications.

### Final Recommendations

1. The Air Force must thoroughly evaluate and establish a codified, formal definition of HiPo officers. The definition must move beyond formal accomplishments and include observable, measurable knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors.
2. The Air Force must evaluate officer's against its merit-based competencies List, as outlined in AFMAN 38-247. The evaluation must assess better performance reports to ensure the organization better visibility on language and highlights skills it desires.
3. The Air Force should adopt a simple, executable model to evaluate the nature potential of its CGOs. CEB Global uses an Ability, Aspiration, Engagement model, which requires high scores in all three to be considered a HiPo.
4. The Air Force must increase the role and responsibilities of CGOs to assess and develop its high-potential officers. To accomplish this, the "select" assignments should be based on the depth and breadth of an individual's career in their career. These assignments must be monitored and tracked beyond a stratification and push line of an OPR.
5. The Air Force must provide Developmental Teams the authority to utilize the assignment process as a means to deliberately develop officers. This authority must include deliberately assigning mentors to CGOs that can facilitate further professional development.
5. The Air Force should create promotion windows versus promotion by year group. Talent is inherent to a person's age or commissioning date. This proposal removes the quota mentally and allows for more transparency and equitability in the process.
7. The Air Force should allow Developmental Team notes, vectors, and APE comments in the MLR and CSB process. As DTs are best evaluated, their knowledge should be packaged in the form of competencies or officer's standing within their community/ouplacement vectors, and a DT rank-ordered officer list. This recommendation serves as an additional data source as well as comparative analysis tool.

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> This graduate research paper analyzed Air Force guidance, senior leader perspectives, and talent management case analyses involving high-potential (HiPo) individuals. The purpose was to use an Intrinsic Case Study design to discover common definitions, characteristics, and attributes of HiPo officers. To minimize bias, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 senior leaders with Developmental Team, Management Level Review, or Central Selection Board experience, as well as multiple command tours. In total, ten general officers and four colonels with flying, maintenance, STO, or cyber experience participated. The senior leaders interviewed shared their thoughts, opinions, and insights on what constituted a HiPo officer and highlighted issues in need of remedy. Using Cresswell's data analysis spiral and Nvivo qualitative analysis software, the researcher identified three themes for both high-performing (HiPro) and HiPo officers. These themes, combined with an exhaustive literature review, lead the researcher to recommend seven items for action.								
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