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Development at the top: Who really cares?

A survey of executive teams

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Development at the top: Who really cares?

High performance in business is strongly associated with the top team's attitudes and practices towards developing themselves and others[1]. So it would be logical to expect leaders to be role models for good practice in managing their own individual and collective development. Logical – but completely wrong. The Developmental Conversations at the Top survey reveals a sharp contrast between top teams that are investing in their individual and collective development, and those whose attention to their own development is more often than not perfunctory, haphazard and uncoordinated.

The survey, conducted by four of the UK's leading organizations in top team development (Ashridge, Career Innovation, Clutterbuck Associates and The Talent Foundation) found that:

- Around a third of top teams rarely or never discuss their personal or their team development, and for most others it is an annual formality
- Less than one in five top teams has a Top Team Development Plan
- Less than half of developmental conversations for directors differentiate between directorial and managerial roles and competences
- Less than half of top team members have a budget for their own development
- Major barriers to top team development appear to be time pressures (an indication that learning takes a low priority) and lack of trust in colleagues[2]

Overall, the picture revealed by the survey is one where leaders are poorly motivated to demonstrate good practice from the top. Among the questions it raises are:

- How much could organisational performance be improved, if leaders paid more attention to their own development?
- If leaders are poor role models for self-development, how does that impact upon attempts to establish a learning culture?
- To what extent should HR be held responsible for the collective failure of top teams to develop themselves?

1 Wageman et al (2008) Senior Leadership Teams, Harvard Business School Press
2 Consistent with the findings of Winter & Jackson, The Conversation Gap, Career Innovation 2004

This picture is reinforced by other research published as our survey was underway. In a study of 352 US companies, Bersin & Co found that one in five executives received no development support from their organization; that fewer than half had development plans; and that only half of leaders participated in any form of personal development during the previous year.

While shocking, the survey responses suggest a major opportunity for the HR function to add value and increase its reputation, by focusing and steering the individual and collective development of the top team. This would, however, require a much more proactive approach to top team development than has traditionally been the case. This approach needs to be courageous (in raising the need for development), creative (in finding ways to accommodate relevant developmental activity within the constraints of time pressures and executive egos) and both systematic and systemic (addressing the complexity of the top leader's role).

Assumptions within the survey design

Drawing on literature on effective leader behaviour, personal development and team learning, the survey assumes that good practice includes:

- Frequent attention to learning objectives and to progress against those objectives is essential to individual and collective development[3]
- Team Development Plans provide an essential link between individual and business development[4]
- Executive directors often fulfil both the roles of director and function head. Good appraisal practice at the top separates these two roles[5]

The survey addressed both individual and collective developmental conversations, but it was not always possible from participant responses to distinguish which perspective they were taking in answering the survey questions. This may be related to the difficulties leaders often experience in behaving and thinking of themselves as a genuine team (Katzenbach, 1998). Whether leaders are able clearly to make the link between their own development and that of the executive team as a whole appears to be an interesting theme for further research.

How the survey was conducted

The survey consortium distributed invitations to participate through their respective networks. The survey was conducted online between May and August 2009 and attracted 107 completed responses. Respondents were mainly located in the UK and Benelux. The survey methodology was intended to gather valuable examples of current practice amongst top teams and broad evidence of their extent, rather than exact statistics. The questions and sample size were not sufficient to analyse differences between – for example – large vs. smaller organisations.

3 Locke, Edwin A., Latham, Gary P. (1990) A theory of goal setting & task performance. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, US; Prentice Hall Inc.
4 Clutterbuck, D. (2008), Coaching the team at work, N Brealey, London
5 Katzenbach,J.R. (1998),Teams at the Top, Harvard Business School Press

About the survey consortium

Ashridge is one of the world's leading business schools, also offering a Consulting group. Ashridge Business School is ranked number one in the UK for tailored executive education in the 2009 Financial Times rankings for the third year running. It has been a place of executive learning and development for 50 years, having been founded in 1959 by visionary leaders from organisations including Shell, Guinness and Unilever. Ashridge Business School helps people and organisations to be the best. Ashridge offer a combination of learning, consulting, facilitation, coaching and research that is directly applied to the realities and challenges being faced by organisations.

Career Innovation (Ci) is a catalyst organisation using research, events and online tools to help some of the world's best-known employers understand today's dynamic workplace and develop appropriate career strategies. This enables leaders to build a sense of purpose, introduce new ways of working and agree an explicit career partnership that works well for today's talented workers. The result is an agile workplace that inspires people, enhances collaboration and delivers the right capabilities in the right place at the right time.

Clutterbuck Associates specialises in helping organisations, teams and individuals develop the capability for more effective dialogue. It is the international thought leader in developmental mentoring, and a pioneer of developmental coaching. Practice leader Professor David Clutterbuck has a particular interest in Board/ top team dialogue and in succession planning at senior levels. He is currently researching and writing a book aimed at answering the question If traditional succession planning processes work, why do so many of the wrong people end up at the top?

The Talent Foundation is a not for profit company devoted to bringing people with a passion for developing talent in the workplace together. Through regular networking sessions (including a weekly e-zine) and by commissioning and producing research, the Talent Foundation provides support for the myriad of professionals working to develop people in organisations.

The survey in detail

A number of key themes and issues emerge from the survey responses:

1. Development on the agenda

Only one in five respondents reported that:

- Their team treats its own development as a regular item for discussion
- There is a collective team development plan
- They discussed their development with the CEO or Chair more frequently than twice a year

How frequently does your top team discuss their own personal developmental issues with the CEO or chair?
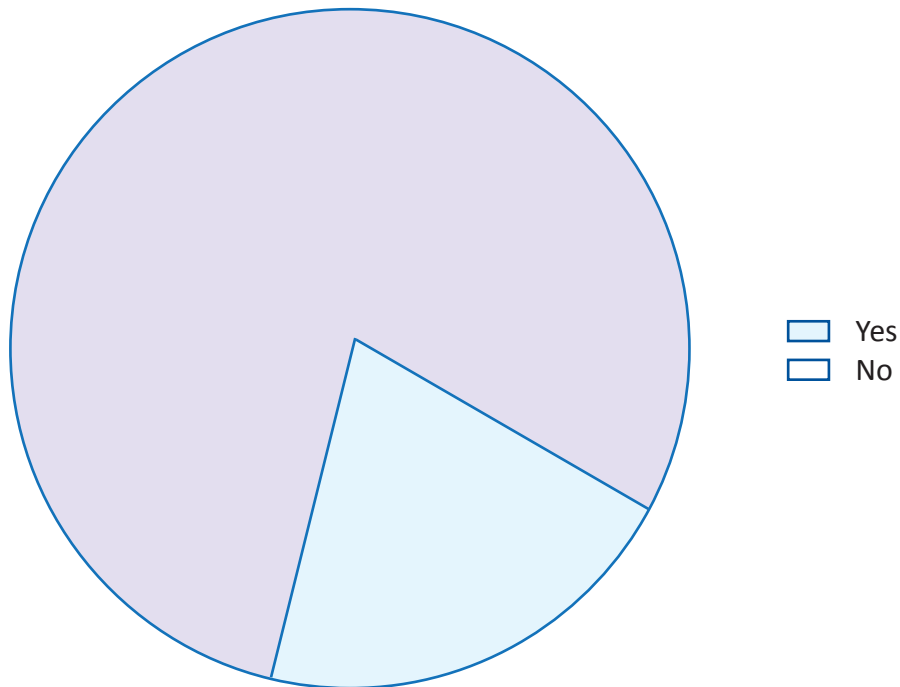

Legend:
- Annually
- Twice a year
- More than twice a year
- Rarely or never
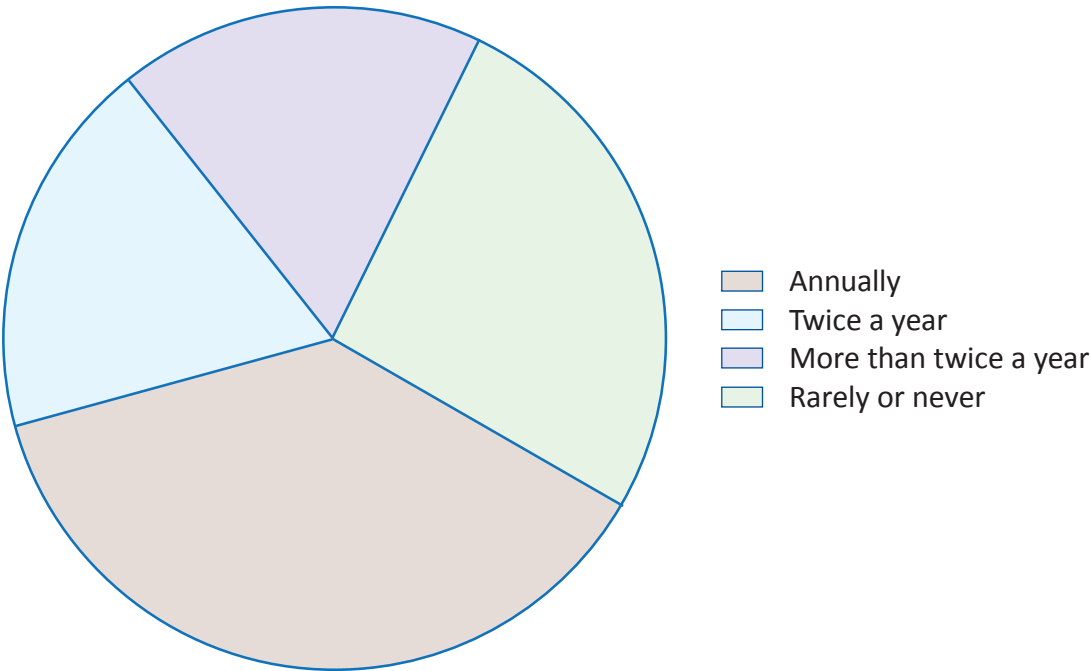
Is development of the top team a regular agenda item for its meetings?

Yes
No
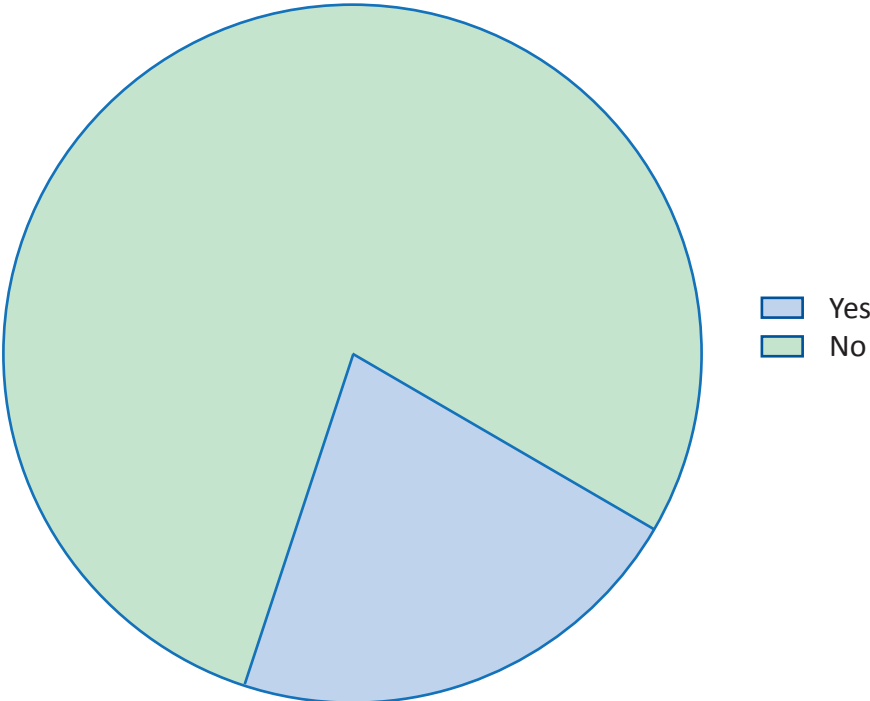
Is there a collective Top Team Development Plan?

It might be expected that leaders, who were serious about their own development, would have a budget for it. In practice, only 44 did so. If anyone in an organisation has the authority to approve a personal development budget, the leaders do. So it is hard to escape the implication that development simply isn't high on their agenda.

The data suggest that top teams generally do not make a strong connection between development and leadership. If the demands on leaders are increasing year on year, this suggests that the gap between skills requirements and leader capability may be growing. It points to a real opportunity to increase business performance; a 'quick win' for boards that are sufficiently self-aware to see it.

## 2. Who do leaders discuss development needs with?

To our surprise, 54% of respondents reported that they discussed development needs with peers.

The proportion of leaders making use of an external coach is also relatively high, with just 11% using internally resourced executive coaches. The latter figure can be expected to rise, if current trends to replace external resourcing with internal continue.

Most disturbing was how few (less than a quarter) of respondents turn to Human Resources to explore their developmental needs. In theory, development for the leadership team should be a key role for HR. While the survey did not examine reasons why leaders preferred or avoided specific resources as developmental confidants, it is a reasonable inference that leaders do not afford HR the status it aspires to as partners in their development.

The low proportion (15% of leaders, who engage their direct reports in conversations about their own -- the leaders' – development) is unsurprising, but equally disappointing. Support from below is a powerful reinforcement for behavioural change, but welcoming it takes courage and humility!

**Who else do they discuss their development needs with?**
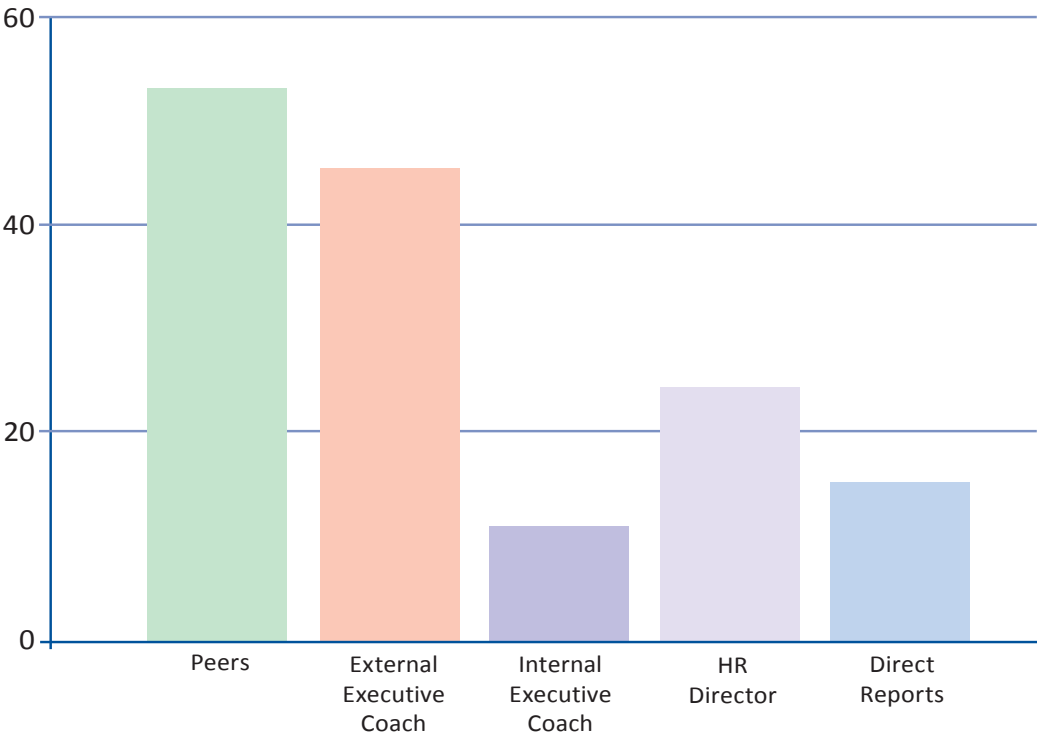
3. Gathering data

Less than two-fifths of respondents reported their team used a competency model to inform development needs. Yet most received some form of performance appraisal. This suggests that many of these appraisals may be unstructured and only weakly linked to consistent measures – an extrapolation that is reinforced by the fact that less than half reported that their developmental conversations distinguished between managerial and directorial roles and responsibilities.

Relatively few used 360-degree feedback as a means of gathering data on development needs. Only a quarter made use of individual learning logs – a figure that supports the perception of executives as lacking time and inclination to reflect on their experiences and performance.

How do you gather data for these developmental conversations?
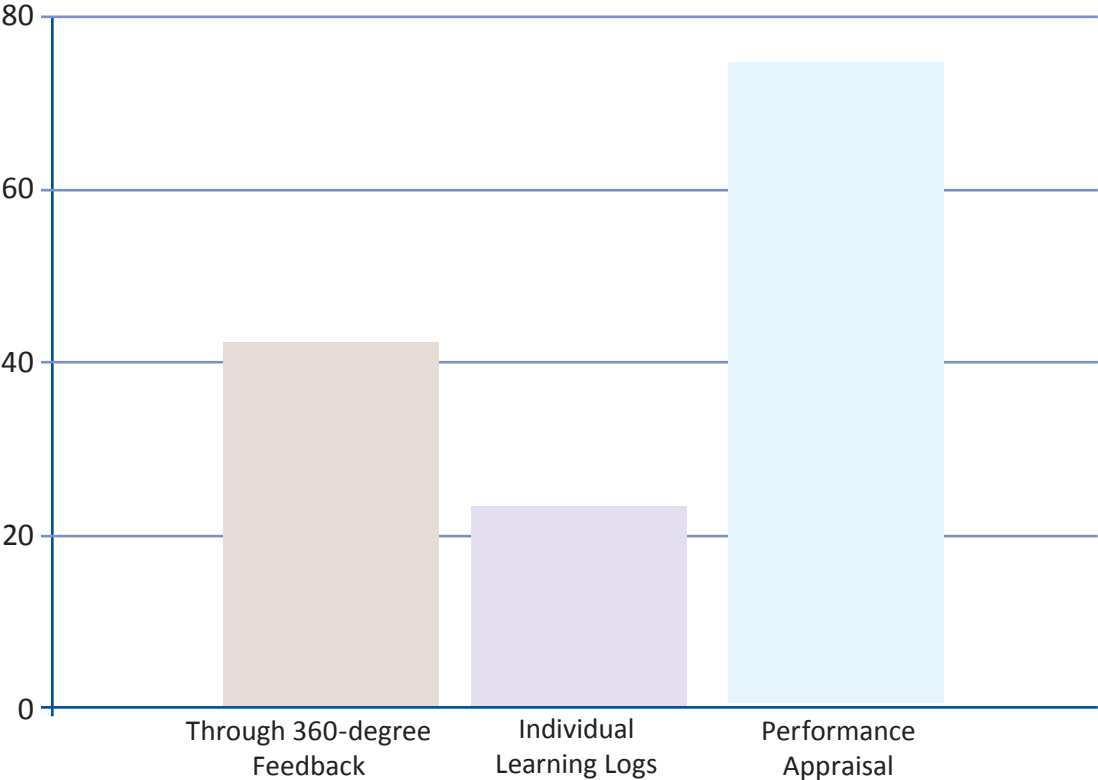
4. Measurement

Top teams in our survey most commonly use annual or bi-annual appraisals to measure the effectiveness of their measurement or conduct a team review. Very few review development effectiveness using any form of external review. The lack of external validation is a potential weakness – it can be very easy to make cosy assumptions without objective evidence.

Respondents were also asked about the effectiveness of executive coaching – could they recall an example where it had made a difference to one of their team? The differences they noticed fell into a number of categories:

- Insights into and changes in behaviour, particularly in relationship management
  e.g. "greater openness of leadership team members"
- Changes in skills
- Changes in "being" – greater authenticity, awareness, confidence
- "Unblocking" talent
- Practical outcomes e.g. "developing a marketing plan & direction for the business"

Other observations included "having the space to think in a non-threatening environment" and "it's like opening a door releasing a part of the person that has always been there, but they have been concealing it".

5. Key challenges for development at the top

Not surprisingly, finding time for development and developmental conversations figured highly in responses. Other replies reinforced the picture of inadequate processes for top team development and lack of commitment to personal development. Examples include:

- Getting them out of an operational mindset
- Prioritizing between the business needs and self-development needs
- Getting them to adhere to decisions about developmental issues
- Lack of a formal process and buy-in across the board
- Identification of potential in all team members. Usually it's only directed at the next-in-line
- Lack of cohesive succession plan & individual career plans
- Identifying development needs
- [Lack of] self-review of performance, openness to new ideas
- Maintaining protected time
- Countering the negative effects of 'competencies'
- Creating an open environment

These challenges reflect an unsurprising tension at the top of organisations, which if not addressed can impact the development of the whole organisation. Namely: In a culture of performance and accountability, how can we create a sufficiently open environment that people will admit their need to develop? We expect leaders simultaneously to exhibit great confidence, and humble learning. It's not an easy mix. Perhaps we need to decide whether a culture of performance or of development takes priority? We would argue that this is a false choice and that the two go hand-in-hand: Tomorrow's performance, after all, is today's development. And a board with open, honest conversations about development needs, is one that knows what good performance looks like.

6. Making time for development

Leaders report they create time for their individual or collective development in a variety of ways, including:

- Monthly away day
- Annual time out/review
- Development meetings across the year
- Annual strategic week
- Quarterly people development meeting
- Meeting for informal discussions once a week

Only 14 respondents reported any formal or systematic process to ensure developmental conversations and activities happen.

The strong impression from responses is that time for development is meagre, squeezed into the routine of annual activities. One top team "sets a minimum of 20 hours per year for development". In another, "It's purely self-directed. If the top team members have a passion for development, they build it into their own departmental meetings… there is no expectation that leaders direct development efforts"

The most common comments were despondent. "Development issues are not a subject [for discussion] in my company." "Development is not seen as a priority – operational issues come first."

7. Formal v informal development

The responses reveal a wide variety of resources, which leaders use for their personal development. Top score was short courses at business schools or other educational institutions (71%). This is a traditional response to leader development, and one which may appeal because of its implication of status. However, time away from the job is increasingly difficult to justify, so this isn't necessarily the most practical option. Executive coaching (52%) is widely used, as is executive mentoring (32%). These comparatively high levels of usage (compared with secondments, shadowing webinars and so on) indicate a mixture of formality and informality – and a preference for high status developmental options. More than a quarter did not answer this question, but responses indicate that generally this is because they do not do any collective development.

With regard to collective (whole team) development, there was a fairly even distribution between short courses, invited speakers and top team coaching, with about half of respondents' teams using each. Again, more than a quarter did not answer this question, but their responses indicate that generally this is because the top team does no collective development.

Do top team members have a budget for their own development?

Yes
No
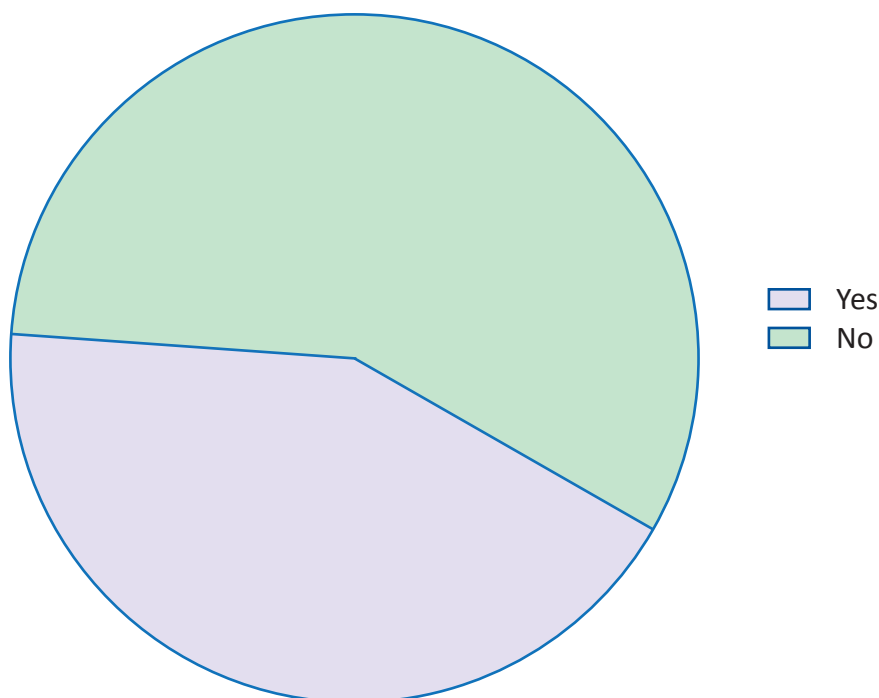
8. Succession planning

Development conversations should, in theory, inform discussion and decisions about succession planning at executive level. The more openly these discussions are carried out, the stronger the link with development is likely to be. In practice, less than half of top teams discuss succession planning issues openly. In just over a quarter of top teams, succession planning conversations happen in secret, between the CEO and the chair; and in slightly fewer cases, do not happen at all.

How openly are succession planning issues discussed in the top team?
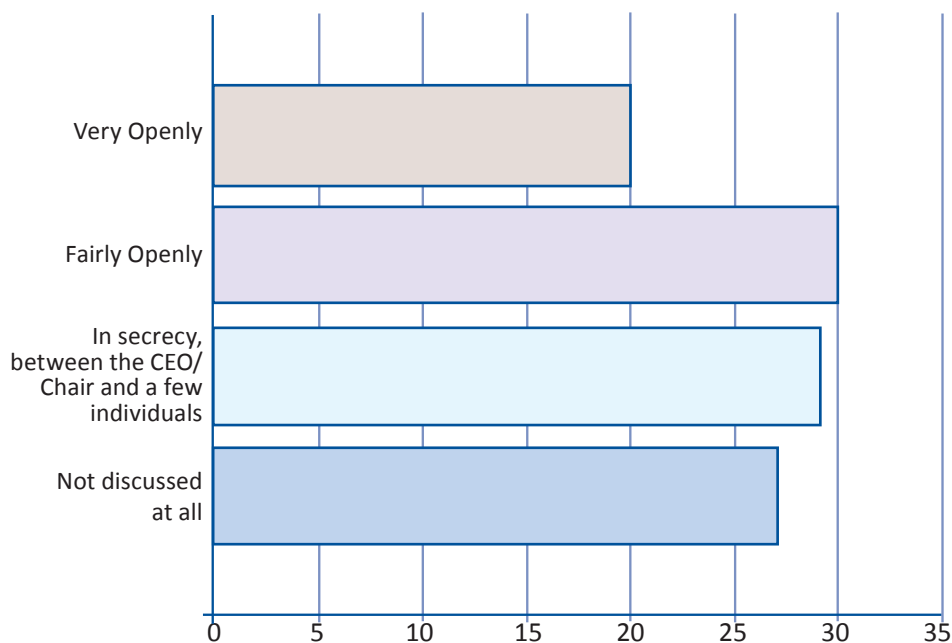
Many boards acutely feel the lack of talent at the next level below. What might be the impact on available talent if the top team, and the team below, could embed a stronger development culture? The evidence from this survey, when compared with known good practice, suggests that a significant number of boards could unlock much greater talent from their existing teams by focusing more on their individual and collective development.

The CIPD survey published earlier this year – Employee attitudes towards management, show that only two in five employees says their boss "discusses my training and development needs with me". So the picture in our survey is repeated at lower levels in organisations.

Getting this right at the top of organisations may not only improve board effectiveness but also create waves of high performance throughout the organisations that seize this opportunity.

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