

# Why Leaders Overlook Emerging Talent

## And How To Spot It Sooner

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Every leader can name the standout performers on their team — the charismatic supervisor, the enthusiastic new hire, the person who naturally draws attention in meetings or responds immediately to radio calls when something needs to be handled. These individuals attract visibility through their style, presence or comfort stepping forward.

But many emerging leaders don't stand out. They lead with consistency rather than volume. They build trust quietly rather than publicly. They influence peers in ways that aren't immediately visible to senior leadership. And yet, they're often overlooked. The risk isn't that leaders don't value talent. It's that they don't always see it.

Last issue, we explored how men and women often use different leadership languages, and how that can influence who gets noticed, supported and promoted. This companion piece looks at the issue from a different but equally important angle: why emerging talent goes unseen and what leaders can do to widen the gateway upward.

In mountain communities like ours, where relationships stretch across seasons, opportunities often flow toward those who are most visible, not those who are most capable. Broadening awareness, not just intention, is what begins to change that.

As we explore six patterns that narrow the talent pipeline, note what resonates. These patterns aren't deliberate. But they are predictable, and we can interrupt them.

### 1 Familiarity Bias: Frozen in Time

We are drawn to people who resemble us in style, personality, communication or background. They're easy to read. We get them. That ease often gets misinterpreted as leadership promise.

Case in point: David led the children's ski school at a mid-sized ski area for nearly a decade. He was the steady, dependable leader everyone relied on to manage chaos, build great teams and create magic for families. When he moved to a much larger resort to lead adult snowsports, he didn't just step up, he flourished. In a more complex environment, David:

- + Inherited a larger and more technical operation
- + Partnered with a progressive director who expanded his scope
- + Elevated instructor training with measurable improvements in consistency and guest ratings
- + Modernized terrain-based learning, scheduling and certifications
- + Strengthened cross-department relationships that improved flow on peak days



John Rice, president of Ski California and longtime Sierra-at-Tahoe GM encourages leaders to give the next generation a voice, not just a task list.

After four successful seasons, David learned that the snowsports director role had opened at the mid-sized ski area where he built his early career. Given the scope he now led, he was undeniably qualified. With much anticipation, David interviewed with his former director. He thought he did well and had a lot to offer, but he didn't get the job. The feedback was polite, but dismissive: "We went with an internal hire." The official explanation was vague. The real reasons were more complex:

**The director chose familiarity over trajectory.** A candidate from the current team may have felt easier to manage, more predictable or more aligned with *how we've always done it*.

**He was still the kids' program guy.** The director relied on an old mental snapshot rather than the leader David had become.

**Ego and comfort played a quiet role.** Hiring him into a bigger role required acknowledging how much he'd grown elsewhere — unsettling for the leaders who shaped his early trajectory.

**Loyalty bias favored those who stayed.** Boomerang candidates are respected but not always prioritized.

Familiarity bias rarely looks harmful; that's what makes it so powerful. It quietly freezes people in time. It rewards what's comfortable instead of who's capable.

David wasn't overlooked because he lacked potential. He was overlooked because his growth happened out of sight, and the leader never refreshed the mental file.

"Leaders who spot diverse potential don't look for a replica of themselves. They look for readiness, adaptability and the capacity to grow," according to Heidi Ettliger, a PSIA snowsports educator, examiner and industry innovator. "The moment a leader steps outside their own style bias, they start seeing talent they've been walking past for years."

## 2 | The Visibility & Proximity Gap

Some roles are built for recognition: leadership, front-of-house managers, operational leads, profit center teams. Others, like mountain ops, HR, accounting and IT, operate behind the scenes. Likewise, some communication styles naturally attract attention while others avoid it. But visibility does not equal readiness.

Collaborative and interpersonal skills — the kind that quietly stabilize teams — are often invisible to senior leadership. At resorts, that includes:

- + The coordinator who eases friction between departments
- + The grooming lead who prevents issues before they occur
- + The front-line supervisor who de-escalates challenging guest situations so effectively that no one else even knows they happened

Leaders tend to promote the ones who speak up, work nearby or are frequently in their line of sight. When leaders equate proximity with potential, they may inadvertently reward visibility, style and confidence over relational influence, competence and emotional intelligence.

“Too many good people leave not because they lack ability, but because they don’t feel seen, heard or valued,” according to John Rice, president of Ski California and longtime Sierra-at-Tahoe GM. “When people feel invisible, they disengage. Leaders owe it to the next generation to give them a voice, not just a task list.”

Individuals, Rice added, must then use that voice, adapt to change and take ownership of their development; growth is a shared responsibility.

“As I’ve often said, ‘If it is to be, it is up to me,’” he continued. “When leaders and employees meet each other with that level of intention, talent doesn’t get overlooked, it rises.”

## 3 | Role Stereotyping

Our internal definition of a leader is shaped by years of seeing certain styles rewarded. We tend to think of leaders as direct, assertive, action oriented, confident under pressure and comfortable in the spotlight.

These qualities matter, but they aren’t the only path to effective leadership. Calm, steady, thoughtful, intuitive and relational leaders bring a different kind of strength:

- + They are disarming and build trust quickly
- + They de-escalate with ease
- + They read teams and metessages intuitively
- + They lead through influence rather than force

Both styles exist across genders. Both work. But if leaders only recognize one, they shrink the gateway without realizing it.

## 4 | Uneven Feedback Quality

Research shows that women are systematically more likely to receive vague feedback and less likely to receive specific, actionable guidance tied to business outcomes than men, who are told exactly what to do next to grow or get promoted — even when performance levels are similar. Women also tend to get feedback about their personality, style or communication tone rather than behaviors tied to leadership or results. These kinds of comments are less useful for advancement because they don’t clearly relate to promotable skills or outcomes.

Sofia was a respected supervisor — competent, steady, trusted. Her teams consistently hit their targets. Her guest feedback was excellent. Every review she received sounded the same: “You’re doing great, Sofia. We appreciate you. Keep being you, you’re such an asset.” The praise was kind. But it taught her nothing about how to advance.

Meanwhile, Danny — hired the same season, performing at a similar level — received specific, directional feedback: “You crushed X, but you need to improve Y. Here’s the next skill to build for promotion.” Danny wasn’t more capable. He just had more actionable feedback.

After two seasons, he moved into an assistant manager role. Sofia stayed exactly where she was: respected, valued and unclear why she wasn’t rising. It wasn’t that Sofia was missing talent, but a road map.

This can arise as the result of longstanding unconscious biases about what leadership looks like and/or linking women to teamwork and support rather than measurable outcomes. Another potential reason for the disparity, according to a study in the Journal of Business and Psychology, is that managers inflate women’s performance evaluations so as to avoid appearing misogynistic. The less critical feedback that’s given as a result isn’t protective, as intended, but limiting. ▶

TEAM TALENT REVIEW		
CATEGORY	DEFINITION	LEADERSHIP ACTION
Limited Potential	May have plateaued or prefer their current scope	Maintain engagement; align role with strengths
Solid Performer	Dependable, consistent, anchors the team	Recognize value; ask about interests so they don’t stagnate
Greater Potential	Ready for expanded responsibilities or stretch projects	Provide exposure: cross-training, projects, guest-facing roles
High Potential	Shows capability and capacity for broader leadership impact	Invest actively: mentoring, sponsorship, leadership training



Heidi Ettliger, a PSIA snowsports educator, examiner and industry innovator stressed that once leaders learn how deeply the gender talent gap is woven into our systems, it's hard to unsee.

Harvard Business Review studies show that while there are a variety of structural causes driving gender inequity in the workplace, this difference in developmental feedback is an important factor. Not only are men typically given more concrete commentary to work with, they're often encouraged to be assertive whereas women are asked to focus on getting along with others. This implicitly gives male employees a mandate to forge ahead and take on leadership roles, while women are directed toward more collaborative endeavors. Instead, managers should invite women to be explicit

about their leadership aspirations and proactively pursue development opportunities.

The contrast in feedback quality helps explain why women often stagnate in mid-career roles. Without clear guidance on what to develop next, women may not build the specific skills decision-makers look for in higher roles. When feedback focuses on personality or vague positivity instead of strategic impact, it fails to signal promotability to the broader leadership team. Beyond limiting opportunities for career advancement, it can also contribute to pay inequalities.

"When leaders learn how deeply the gender talent gap is woven into our systems, they begin to look at their teams with new eyes," noted Ettliger. "And once you see the gap, you can't unsee it — you feel responsible to widen the pathway forward."

## 5 | Assumed Readiness

Two employees may have equal capability, but one projects confidence while the other projects humility. One asks for stretch assignments; the other doesn't want to overstate their ambition. One radiates *I've got this*. The other quietly masters every challenge placed in front of them.

Leaders often mistake confidence for readiness and hesitation for lack of ability. Yet countless careers for men and women alike have transformed because someone finally said, "I think you're ready for this," even when the person would not have said it about themselves. ▶

### ROAD MAP: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (IDP) Mentor-Guided Growth for Emerging Leaders

#### Employee Information

Current role:

Department:

Supervisor/mentor:

Review period:

Readiness rating:

- Ready now
- 1 year
- 1–3 years
- 3+ years

#### 1. Current Assessment\*

- Limited Potential
- Solid Performer
- Greater Potential
- High Potential

\*See Team Talent Review

#### 2. Target Role/Growth Direction

Role(s) or responsibilities the employee is being prepared for:

Timeframe:

#### 3. Career Interests

Summarize what the employee wants next:

#### 4. Development Priorities

Choose 3–5 areas based on technical requirements and leadership skills.

##### Technical Skills:

- Operational knowledge
- Systems or technology
- Safety or regulatory knowledge
- Equipment or terrain familiarity
- Job-specific certifications

##### Leadership Skills:

- Communication clarity
- Confidence/presence
- Emotional intelligence
- Feedback skills
- Influence without authority
- Decision-making under pressure
- Conflict navigation
- Coaching others
- Cross-department awareness
- Relationship building
- Political savvy
- Negotiation skills

#### 5. Development Methods

- Mentoring and coaching
- Training and education
- Stretch assignments
- Visibility and exposure

#### 6. Follow-Up & Success Indicators

- Bi-weekly or monthly check-ins.
- Indicators include improved communication, confidence, decision-making, influence and readiness.

How did you ascend to the role you're in today? Someone believed in you and gave you a chance. Emerging leaders rarely become known quantities until someone offers the opportunity to step into unfamiliar territory.

## 6 | On Repeat: Every Season's Broken Record

Our industry has its own version of the definition of insanity: We don't invest in preparing our seasonal leaders early enough because we've convinced ourselves we can't afford to. Year after year, ski areas wait until the last possible moment to bring supervisors, leads and managers back on the clock. And year after year, returning managers walk straight into a crunch; they spend the first two to three weeks doing tasks below their pay grade. They want to delegate and empower their new supervisors, but they don't yet have the bandwidth.

It's a classic catch-22: Managers don't have time to empower and delegate successfully because they didn't have time or budget to train. This cycle erodes bench strength, burns out our best people and builds a leadership pipeline based on luck instead of intention. The solution isn't just financial, it's conceptual: We need to move from *we can't afford early prep* to *we can't afford another year of unprepared leadership*. If we want strong bench strength in January, we can't start building it in December.

Speaking of burnout, Rice pointed to a broader leadership shift that many organizations are still catching up to.

"Working 80-hour weeks and leading through authority alone isn't a badge of honor anymore," he said. "Today's workforce expects purpose, respect and development."

Now that we know the common pitfalls, we can examine some strategies to avoid them.

## From Tasks to Talent

Managers ensure tasks are completed. They correct, clarify and check all the boxes. It's the ticket to the game of management, but it's not transformational.

Mentors develop people. Having a conversation with your mentor is a completely different experience, one to look forward to. You're asked better questions: "What did you notice?" "What did you learn?" "Where do you want to grow next?" And then the sentence that changes everything: "I see leadership in you."

Team members are often managed for years, never experiencing mentorship. But we all want to learn, grow and enjoy the ride, speed bumps and all. This is where leaders can shift from task supervision to talent identification. Brittany Clelan, chief human resource officer for Boyne Resorts, MI, sees this shift as cultural, not tactical.

"Mentorship is about choosing to invest your time into relationships that have long-term impact. The strongest mentor relationships are built on trust and communication, and they

## 4 Steps from Manager to Mentor

- 1. Widen your line of sight and realize that talent isn't always loud. Take note of the quieter, more predictive indicators of leadership like calm under stress; invisible problem-solving; emotional intelligence; peer support; and relational influence. Leaders who choose mentorship over supervision should ask weekly:**
  - + Who gets my direction?
  - + Who gets my attention?
  - + Who on my team needs to hear clearly that I believe in them?
- 2. Once you see potential, make it visible. Feedback builds competence; sponsorship builds careers. Balance feedback and sponsorship by asking weekly:**
  - + Who needs clearer, more precise coaching?
  - + Who needs visibility, not more generic praise?
  - + Who would benefit from hearing exactly which next-level skills matter most now?
- 3. Next, name potential out loud. A single sentence from a leader can shift identity. Use lineup conversations, huddles and cross-department meetings to acknowledge contributions, growth and leadership signals. This is where confidence grows because someone powerful has said, "I see you." Clelan emphasized that these moments compound over time.**

"A leader's real legacy isn't the job they held," she explained. "It's the leaders they helped create."
- 4. Those on the team identified as high performing with high potential could then be considered for a stretch assignment. These opportunities shouldn't overwhelm people; they should reveal leadership. Give the right stretch at the right time with assignments that build momentum, not burnout. Such as:**
  - + Facilitating a lineup (communication + confidence)
  - + Co-leading a cross-department project (EQ + collaboration)
  - + Problem-solving with peers (influence + judgment)
  - + Taking a guest-facing leadership role (presence + decision-making)

often last well beyond the job itself," Clelan said, adding that the most meaningful mentorship often isn't formalized at first. "Finding the right chemistry takes time. Some of the best mentorships develop organically — through shared challenges, consistency and mutual respect — long before anyone labels the relationship."

Strong pipelines aren't built during annual reviews. They're built through regular, intentional action to elevate talent in real time. The next generation of ski area leaders is already here — running lifts, guest services, patrol, marketing, snowmaking, grooming, rentals and ski school. Their rise depends on whether leaders notice them. In the end, widening the gateway isn't a structural initiative, it's a choice. The future of our workforce depends on this deliberate choice to truly see someone, shift the trajectory of a career and, over time, an entire industry. 