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TENSIONS IN TALENT: A MICRO PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGH POTENTIAL TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN MNCs

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the utility of paradox theory and adopting a micro-practice perspective, we explore the implementation of high potential talent development (HiPo) programs in multinational corporations (MNCs). In doing so we take an emergent approach to implementation and seek to cast light on some of the day-to-day tensions that arise, along with key responses that salient actors appear to make when navigating these paradoxes. Via an inductive, mixed method study involving nine MNCs, we found that, over time, actors construed three particular sets of performance paradoxes relating to variations in their goals, in their beliefs, and in their roles in the particular HiPo programs in focus. We also found that these actors responded to the tensions experienced using an assortment of both defensive and proactive actions. Finally, we uncovered that both the tensions and responses in play vary with the implementation phase of the HiPo program. We highlight some key practice implications that arise from our work, acknowledge attendant limitations and identify possible directions for future research.

Keywords: Talent Management; HRM Implementation; Paradox, Practice Perspective; MNCs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Built upon a range of academic and applied perspectives, the body of literature on talent management has grown substantially in recent years. Much has been achieved regarding the lenses and the levels through which the phenomenon has been observed, assessed and evaluated (Abeuova & Muratebkova-Touron, 2019; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Collings, Mellahi & Cascio, 2019; Farndale, Scullion and Sparrow, 2010; Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen & Scullion, 2010; King & Vaiman, 2019; Kirk, 2020; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012). That said, there have been calls for more empirical studies because of the "limited robust evidence on effectiveness" (Powell, Duberley, Exworthy, Macfarlane & Moss, 2013: 292), resulting in some of the literature having a "foundational quality" (Farndale, Morley & Valverde, 2019: 155). In this contribution, we take up this empirical challenge and, in an effort at unpacking some of the complexities attaching to talent management practice implementation, we focus on unearthing some of the key underlying tensions that surround HiPo programs in MNCs.

Despite the centrality of implementation in the HRM domain area, it has received, in relative terms, a modest amount of attention in the literature (Ahlvik, Smale & Sumelius, 2016; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Trullen, Bos-Nehles & Valverde, 2020). Research often implicitly assumes that once a practice has been defined and designed, implementation will follow. However, MNC practice reveals that this is frequently not the case, and increasingly scholars highlight that HRM practices are liable to change during implementation (Van Mierlo, Bondarouk, & Sanders, 2018) with differences between intended and actual practices (Kehoe & Han, 2020). Implementation has been conceptualized in different ways with some authors emphasizing its process characteristics (Woodrow & Guest, 2014), and others focusing on outcomes (Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Beyond conceptualization, there are additional complexities concerning the characteristics of practice implementation related to when it begins, whether the process is planned or emergent, and who the key actors involved in implementation are. With respect to initiation, Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013), for example, conceptualize implementation as beginning with the intention to introduce a new HRM practice, whereas McCullough and Sims (2012) view implementation as occurring when the practice had been designed. In terms of the nature of the process, Van Mierlo *et al.* (2018) characterize implementation as emergent and unbounded, whereas Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) view it as having more systematic underpinnings. When it comes to the actors involved, some scholars

emphasize the place of line managers who have been characterized as bridgers and translators in embracing devolved responsibility for the handling of certain HRM activities and responsibilities (Kehoe & Han, 2020; Gooderham, Morley, Parry & Stavrou, 2015; Brewster, Gollan & Wright, 2013), while others emphasize a broader collection of actors (Arthur, Herdman & Yang, 2016; Ahlvik & Björkman, 2015), along with the subsequent importance of understanding the social exchange that occurs between this cohort of different actors in HRM implementation (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018).

Theoretically, scholars have utilized a variety of lenses to understand the implementation of practices in MNCs including: institutional perspectives which have, in particular, surfaced issues related to the gaining and maintaining of legitimacy (Jacqueminet, 2020; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) and the dialectic surrounding the desire to standardize or localize HRM practices in MNC units operating across multiple contexts (Ferner, Belanjer, Tregaskis, Morley & Quintanilla, 2013; Parry, Dickmann & Morley, 2008); process perspectives, increasingly calling attention to the complexity surrounding implementation (Van Mierlo *et al.*, 2018); and more recently paradox perspectives which underscore the contradictions inherent in organizational settings and the efforts actors engage in to navigate them (Nadiv & Kuna 2020; Keegan, Bitterling, Sylva, & Hoeksema, 2018).

In this paper we draw on key positioning insights from paradox theory and the practice perspective (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016), the combination of which facilitate the identification of tensions that arise at the level of practice in MNCs, along with holding the prospect of isolating reasons for variations in practice implementation over time. This is a valuable combination because as Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) have highlighted, day to day responses are of real significance when considering paradox, while as Lewis (2000) suggests, these micro responses are truly instrumental in molding practice implementation at the organizational level. To illustrate the tensions that arise and how actors address issues of paradox, we focus on the implementation of HiPo programs in MNCs (Finkelstein, Costanza & Goodwin, 2018; Malik, Singh & Chan, 2017). Programs of this nature serve as one of a suite of talent management practices that MNCs implement to create and develop talent pools (Harsch & Festing, 2010; Wiblen, 2020), and they represent a particularly salient intervention to study in the context of tensions and how actors address issues of paradox because such programs can evince considerable controversy due to their focus on the differentiation between elite and regular employees (Ewerlin & Süß, 2016; Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe & Dries

2020). High potentials are often given significant strategic priority within MNCs (Finkelstein *et al*., 2018) reinforcing a differentiated approach to talent management (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak & Boselie, 2018). They are positioned as part of an MNC's rolling quest for global competence (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016; Luna-Arocas & Morley, 2015) and often command significant resources to aid their effective implementation (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Latukha & Veselova, 2019). The tensions that these programs give rise to within the MNC can have a significant impact on the way in which their implementation unfolds and, consistent with Keegan, Brandl and Aust's (2019) observation, such tensions are unlikely to atrophy or fade and cannot be easily willed out of existence.

Our overall effort was guided by the following core question: *What day-to-day tensions surround the implementation of HiPo programs in MNCs and how do salient actors navigate these tensions over time**?*** To address this question, we draw on data from a series of sequential semi-structured interviews conducted among 47 actors across 9 MNCs in which the first author had an established working relationship. In addition, to further aid meaning, we curated insights from on-going practice observations made during the delivery of a succession of training and development interventions led by the first author, and from a range of assembled documents and artifacts relating to the HiPo programs designed and implemented by these MNCs. We adopt an intra-unit perspective in the sense that we give consideration to some of the tensions that arise between actors who mandate and design the practice and those who are delegated to implement it (Jacqueminet, 2020). Overall, our study augments understanding of the various tensions that arise in the context of the implementation of HiPo programs over time and the ways in which salient proximal actors respond to attendant paradoxes as they unfold. Our findings underscore the iterative, emergent and non-linear nature of the implementation process, the different types of paradox that emerge, the importance of actors embracing a 'both/and mindset' (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith & Lewis, 2018), along with the adoption of day-to-day responses that help actors to alternate between the poles of a paradox (Smith, 2014). Our research also unpacks aspects of how interactions at subsidiary levels help HR to achieve shifts in terms of implementation and bring about workable solutions in the face of ongoing paradox (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First, we outline theoretical foundational arguments that provide the point of departure for our work. In this, we draw on the utility of paradox theory, followed by an examination of paradoxical elements in the specific case of the implementation of HiPo programs, and a brief appraisal of how actors may

potentially respond to these. Following this, we describe our research setting, along with our data collection and data handling techniques. We then report key findings and we subsequently discuss the theoretical, empirical and practice contributions that arise from the work. We also set down attendant limitations and potential avenues for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Conceptualizing Paradox

A paradox is conceptualized as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that seem logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed" (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386). Lewis' (2000) seminal explication of paradox has prompted the recognition among scholars that paradoxical tensions exist throughout organizations at macro, meso and micro levels. This theorization led to the understanding that while these paradoxical tensions could potentially unleash positive energy, they could also equally interrupt organizational actors "sense of order, stability and simplicity, begetting a vicious downward spiral of defensive responses that lead to conflict and even paralysis" (Purvanova & Kendy, 2018: 36). Indeed, the conceptualization offered by Fairhurst, Cooren and Cahill (2002: 506) centered on the notion that paradoxical tensions are best conceived of as those that emerge from "the clash of ideas, principles and actions."

We focus on the paradox of '*performing'* which highlights contradictions related to organizational goals. Keegan *et al.* (2019: 83) in their key contribution in this regard emphasize that the types of paradox that arise will likely depend on what "actors perceive as contradictory, yet interrelated elements". As a consequence, the question of what constitutes paradox is open, something which empirically provides a range of opportunities for investigation. Of particular note, Jarazbkowski and Lê (2017: 434) point to an important gap in the literature concerning "how such tensions are actually constructed in the micro interactions through which people perform their contradictory tasks and roles".

A significant body of literature on paradox is concerned with how actors respond to tensions or "make decisions to move forward amid contradictions" (Cunha & Putman, 2019: 100). Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart (2016), for example, emphasized three particular types of responses: '*either-or'*, '*both-and'* and '*more-than'* sets of polarities or incongruities. *Either-or* responses emphasize situations where one paradoxical element is chosen over others through assigning these poles to different actors or denying that they are entwined (Lewis, 2000). *Both-and* responses emphasize the interdependent nature of paradoxes and the potential to enact each pole simultaneously and making use of integration to achieve a merger among opposing

perspectives or moving between opposites (Miron-Spektor & Beenan, 2015). In contrast, *more-than* responses derive energy from paradoxes to find connections between opposing pairs and ultimately reframing or transcending them (Barge, Lee & Maddux 2008). The literature in the main has given primacy to *both-and* approaches which stress the need for actors to seek compromise between opposite poles (Wenzel, Koch, Cornelissen, Rothmann & Senf, 2019). Importantly, and against the backdrop of our focus in this paper, research has to date primarily explored organizational level responses to paradox and considerably less relating to the individual level (Waldman, Putnam, Miron-Spektor & Siegel, 2019). A focus on the micro perspective is therefore potentially illuminating given the thesis proposed by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) that paradoxes are continually unfolding and, as a consequence, actors are forced to respond to these paradoxes through day-to-day interactions with other actors.

2.2 Paradoxical Tensions in the Implementation of HiPo Programs

Central to paradox theory is the notion of action and the idea that tensions, rather than being solved, are merely navigated by the pursuit of a certain course of action (Berti & Simpson, 2019). In this context, HiPo programs comprise complex, and on occasion contested, HRM practices that can be difficult to implement and that are likely to give rise to what are described as salient tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The literature on these programs highlights some of these striking tensions. At the cultural level, for example in contexts which are characterized by high in-group collectivism (Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001), they have the potential to lead to tensions in situations where they engender status differentials. Tensions may also surface in the selecting in of program participants. Here, there may be tensions around how to identify potential (Silzer & Church, 2009), who should participate on these programs (Ready, Conger & Hill, 2010) and whether and how the customization of practices to suit the particular contextual needs of subsidiaries in MNCs should proceed (Mäkelä, Björkman & Ehrnrooth, 2010) in order to strike the correct balance between corporate versus subsidiary requirements (Jooss, Burbach & Huub, 2019). In addition, there may be tensions around long-term business needs versus those that arise in the short-term, and around issues related to bureaucratic control versus flexibility in implementation (Makram, Sparrow & Greasley, 2017). Scholars have also signaled how contradictions in the aims and intentions of strategy makers versus translators (Beamond, Farndale & Härtel, 2016), and how inclusive versus exclusive approaches and whether they should include A and B talent (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Hedayati Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016) can generate tensions in program implementation. Furthermore, the very values of individual actors themselves referring to, for example, differences in cognitions about the

nature of development, whether it is planned or experiential, who should assume responsibility for it, coupled with an accompanying desire for change versus continuity, can all materially impact the process (Garavan, Shanahan, Carbery & Watson, 2016).

2.3 A Practice Perspective on Actors Micro Responses to Paradoxical Tensions

A practice perspective focuses on the implementation of practices and the salience of actors to the process (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Whittington, 2006). It pays particular attention to who performs specific practices and emphasizes that practices and practitioners are highly intertwined. Scholars have called attention to a range of micro responses in the context of the paradox of performing that have particular relevance to the implementation of talent management practices. Thus, Keegan *et al.* (2019) emphasized the role of defensive and avoidance-based responses and proactive responses in the context of HRM. Among the defensive responses highlighted are splitting, reaction formation, ambivalence, opposing, repression and suppression, while proactive responses include confrontation, acceptance, accommodation, adjustment and transcendence. Beyond the field of HRM, there is a broader base of scholarship highlighting paradoxical responses at the micro level. For example, Beech, Burns, de Caestecker, MacIntosh and MacLean (2004) revealed how managers used micro actions to keep paradox open, while Jay (2013) suggests that actors can generate innovative actions to deal with paradox. Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) found that organizational actors utilized humor to socially construct paradox and responded to it in multiple ways in day-to-day work. These responses included entrenchment, projection, acceptance, adjusting, opposing and confronting. Finally, actors' responses to day-to-day paradox are often highly iterative and dynamic with the requirement for ongoing micro responses and the likelihood of those varying with the temporal phase of the implementation (Abdallah, Denis & Langley, 2011).

3. METHOD

3.1 Setting

We focused on MNCs that had, or were establishing, HiPo programs as part of their overall long-term approach to talent management. A total of nine MNCs from a range of different sectors in which the first author had on-going contact agreed to participate. Our empirical setting is particularly appropriate for exploring the day-to-day construal and responses to paradoxical tensions in the context of talent management in MNCs. Through identifying and cataloguing salient actors' experiences of their HiPo program, we sought to isolate both the type of paradox that they experienced, and the micro responses they used to respond to it.

3.2 Data Sources and Procedure

Our primary data source comprised a series of semi-structured interviews, conducted either face to face or virtually, with 47 salient actors who had direct involvement with the HiPo programs in their respective location. We designedly focused on first person informants including talent managers, line managers, high potentials and VPs at either corporate or subsidiary levels. We gathered data at different implementation phases- namely around startup, mid-implementation and toward program completion. We interviewed the same set of actors, though in some instances aspects of their role and the scope of their responsibilities had changed in the interim. The timing and the sequencing of interviews depended on the implementation schedule governing the particular program in focus. Over rounds of interviews, these actors provided comprehensive accounts of their experiences with their HiPo programs, including descriptions of events, struggles and tensions experienced during implementation, the combination of which allowed us to gradually and incrementally build up a picture of the programs over time.

We supplemented these actor accounts with insights from on-going practice observations made by the first author. He participated in more than 20 events across the 9 MNCs including in-house conferences, training and development interventions and one-on-one feedback sessions, all of which afforded him the opportunity to make a series of focused observations about the HiPo programs as they were launched and progressed through implementation. Additionally, in order to further situate and refine our contextual understanding of the programs and corroborate information from other sources, we augmented our interview and observational data with additional insights gathered from a range of documents and artifacts including organizational charts, competency models, talent management policies, program materials, training manuals and assessment processes.

[Insert Table 1 About here]

We used aspects of the data from these documents to situate the questions that we used during the semi-structured interviews. The key advantage of this approach is that while key questions formed the basic architecture of the interviews, there was room for expansion and elaboration as the situation demanded. We made extensive use of open-ended questions to gather details about discussions, decisions, conflicts and broader events related to implementation. Examples include: Describe the MNCs overall approach to talent management? How did the program come into existence? What was your initial involvement

with the program? What did you see as the purpose(s) of the program? In later interview rounds we focused on the details surrounding implementation and the unearthing of particular tensions and contradictions that arose and the micro actions engaged in to respond to them. Throughout we followed recommended techniques designed to enhance accuracy, in particular focusing on the use of phrases and terms that were familiar to participants given their organizational context, and, where appropriate, we presented counterfactual scenarios to elicit focused details on paradox such as "why did you not just abandon the program rather than do something that was not ideal?

3.3 Data Handling

In line with recent HRM studies employing a paradox lens (Keegan *et al.* 2019; Guerci & Carallo, 2016) we inductively analyzed our data and iterated back and forth between the data and the extant literature to develop and label our codes and themes. Here we followed three steps:

Step 1: We first of all generated a general summary of each HiPo program through combining insights from our different data sources.

Step 2: We conducted an in-depth coding of our rounds of actor interviews. This process involved assiduously working through transcripts in order to identify examples of paradoxes and coding with reference to major classifications found in the literature. In following this approach, we identified three key paradoxes, namely those related to MNC actor goals for the programs; those related to the beliefs and value of MNC actors about development and development processes; and those related to MNC actor roles within the specific programs. In the case of each of these three types, we subsequently generated accompanying sub-categories. In respect of the paradox related to MNC actor goals, these related to a focus on leadership pipelines versus a focus on high potentials generally, and a focus on measuring high potential versus a focus on using past performance to identify potentials. In respect of the paradox related to MNC actors' beliefs about development and development processes, they related to an emphasis on planned experiences inside and outside the organization versus an emphasis on structured on-the-job and experiential development and accelerated development focused on competency and behaviors versus development which is incremental, progressive and whole-person based. Finally, in respect of the paradox related to MNC actor roles, they related to a strategic role for HQ versus an operational role for subsidiaries, and HQ mandated implementation of the HiPo program as designed versus a customization of the program to meet local needs.

Step 3: Given that we were interested in the micro practices that actors use to respond to the paradoxes revealed in step 2, we again followed guidance from the literature and coded for both defensive and proactive micro responses. We coded these micro responses using categories specified by Lewis (2000) and Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven (2013). In our coding, we generated four defensive responses: Ambivalence, Reaction Formation, Opposing and Regression, and three proactive responses, namely Acceptance, Adjustment and Confrontation. In what follows, we present a detailed description of the tensions that emerged related to the implementation of the HiPo programs in focus, followed by an account of the micro responses used by actors to respond to these tensions.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Tensions Inherent in HiPo Programs

We found particular examples of three key paradoxes of performing. Table 2 summarizes central instances of the three categories of paradoxical performing tensions that actors had to make sense of, and develop responses to, in their daily work routines.

[Insert Table 2 About here]

4.1.1 Tensions Surrounding MNC Actor Goals for HiPo Programs

The first tension frequently mentioned concerned the very focus of the program in question – in particular whether it should focus on leadership pipelines or high potentials in general. Actors from HQ generally expressed the need for HiPo programs to focus on leadership pipelines so as to contribute to the realization of overall MNC strategies. However, some of the HQ HR actors and a large number of subsidiary actors highlighted a concern for the full spectrum of talent including technical, individual, contributor and leadership high potentials. Study participants were particularly cognizant of the difficulties involved in combining these two elements. Line managers, in particular, were conscious of the tensions and struggles involved. For example, a line manager from Foodco subsidiary described it in the following way:

> *"Our discussion on what the program should achieve was extensive and the question of isolating leaders as the key talent that we should focus on… however, I cannot forget about the other talent in my team. I have many highly talented individual contributors and brilliant technical experts. How can I ignore that group? Yet the program as set out kind of does that." (T1)*

HR and talent actors were particularly appreciative of this tension and of their inter-dependence. They acknowledged that both groups contributed to the MNC's talent pool and it

did not make sense to show a preference for one over the other. A talent manager in Constructco explained this dilemma thus:

> *"We need a strong leadership pool, but we also need a technical talent group and high potential individual contributors. As a talent manager, I have to think about the total pool of talent available. Therefore, does it make sense to only focus on the leaders and forget about the rest? I don't think so." (T1)*

This tension was common across all nine MNCs, though with some variations in terms of how actors made sense of those tensions. For example, in Foodco, they set up the program in its pilot phase to focus only on leadership talent pools but realized that this negatively impacted the engagement of other groups.

The second tension that emerged related to contradictions in actors' goals concerning the way in which high potentials were identified. A foundational question here centered around whether to emphasize potential or past performance. This emerged as a major tension for actors across these MNCs. Study participants expressed the dilemma they faced where the corporate mandate was that potential was the most significant issue, yet their experience told them that past performance was also important. For example, Telco highlighted the complexities and tensions involved and the struggle to accommodate both in the following way:

> *"Basically, we have a high potential model that emphasizes strategic change and emotional agility. These things are very difficult to measure; however, they are what we specify. In reality, an individual could have all of these but yet have not achieved excellent performance in the past. Sometimes these two do not come together in the one individual." (T1)*

Serious tensions also arose when it came to measuring both potential and performance. A study participant in Banco described the challenges involved thus:

> *"It is very common in our organization, especially in Eastern locations, for employees to achieve excellent performance ratings and yet not have high potential. I have been caught up in this struggle for the past few years… managers nominate participants, yet when I do formal assessments of potential, they do not come through… and then you get pushback from the nominating managers." (T1)*

In other examples, we observed that this tension was sometimes addressed in subtle ways by certain actors, in particular through the use of self-ratings of potential with varying degrees of success. In addition, we found some evidence that this tension tended to differ depending on the embedding organization culture and the broader national cultural context of the subsidiary. Thus, in subsidiaries with a strong focus on performance as part of the organizational culture, actors were more likely to emphasize the leadership talent rather than high potentials in general. In addition, subsidiaries located within high power distance cultures,

a specific case in point being Malaysia, the emphasis was on leadership groups, whereas in those located in lower power distance cultures such as Ireland, the UK and Germany the emphasis was on high potential individuals.

4.1.2 Tensions Surrounding MNC Actors Beliefs Concerning Development and Development Processes

The second set of tensions that emerged concerned the tension between different notions of development and the development process. Two particular tensions could be identified in this regard. The first tension which was very frequently expressed by actors focused on the process of development – development that is about planned experiences inside and outside the organization versus being concerned with structured off-the-job development processes. Actors differed markedly in respect of this tension. For example, those from HR, while acknowledging the importance of planned and experiential learning, placed strong emphasis on using structured off-the-job interventions to achieve development. There was therefore an appreciation by HR actors in particular of the tensions between these elements. A study participant in ITSco expressed it this way:

> *"I justify my role's existence on the basis that I design structured off-the-job development experiences… otherwise I would not have a lot of tangible outcomes. On the other hand, I know that the real development takes place day-to-day, walking them through the fire and learning from mistakes. They are two sides of the coin, but line managers do not want to hear about the structured stuff. My heart tells me that on-the-job experience is good, but my brain tells me that I have to justify my role." (T1)*

Both HR specialists and line managers acknowledged these interdependencies and how difficult they are to achieve in practice. For example, a HR specialist in Healthco explained it as follows:

> *"On the one hand we expect the ideal development process to be a combination of the structured and the day-to-day experience… Both need to occur successfully. Squaring this circle can be challenging. The HR specialist wants to control and have line of sight on the development process, yet we as line managers want to see the day-to-day tasks and learning. It is difficult to achieve both effectively." (T2)*

The second tension that emerged related to actors' views on development and development processes focused on the time involved and the outcomes of development i.e. development is accelerated and concerned with competencies and behaviors verses development is incremental, progressive and whole person based. For talent development specialists, there is an appreciation of the tension between these elements and that it is

something to expect when it comes to development in organizations. This tension manifested itself in Pharmaco this way:

> *"Line managers want development to happen quickly… they focus on very instrumental outcomes. How does development change behaviors and develop competencies? To be honest, this is a very narrow way to look at development…. Development for me, is more incremental…. it takes time. I like to think that what we do on the high potential program is develop the full package… instill confidence, belief, mindset and skillset." (T2)*

However, for HR specialists and line managers, they recognized that both components of the development process are difficult to achieve in practice. The difficulties in reconciling this tension are revealed in Foodco where it was noted that here:

> "*We always start out with great intentions… however, I think I speak for many line managers when I say my perspective is short-term. I look for quick results, changes in behavior. However, I understand where the HR function is coming from. They want to take the pure approach and let development happen! They also tell me it is about the full set of individual characteristics…. I appreciate that these two dimensions are not easy to achieve." (T2)*

Again, in subsidiaries that emphasized a high-performance culture as part of their broader HR philosophy the focus was primarily on the accelerated development end of this tension. This cultural dimension was expressed by HR actors in terms of fast-track rather than incremental development. The former appeared to emphasize structured development with a focus on stretch development assignments.

4.1.3 Tensions Surrounding MNC Actors Roles Within the HiPo Programs

The final paradox of performance category to emerge centered on the roles of MNC actors within the HiPo program in focus. The first tension that was expressed by study participants concerned the tensions between the corporate role and that of the subsidiary. This paradox was prevalent across the MNCs in our study. The corporate role was understood to be solely strategic and concerned with designing a HiPo program aligned to the medium and long-term strategic needs of the MNC. In contrast, the subsidiary role was understood to be operational, focused on day-to-day implementation of the program. There was a very strong appreciation of this tension by all HR actors including line managers and subsidiary HR specialists. This tension played out in Constructco in the following way:

> *"The corporate and subsidiary frequently do not see eye-to-eye when it comes to the implementation of the program. As a subsidiary manager, I would have liked some role*

in the design of the program. The reality is different. Corporate argued that they have line of sight of the total organization, they have the strategic viewpoint, so as a subsidiary our role was essentially do to with implementation." (T2)

A major implication of this tension was that the subsidiary took responsibility for most of the burden of implementation and the praise and criticism that goes with it. A subsidiary study participant in Healthco described the difficulties of responding to this tension:

"Corporate HR were in many ways idealistic about our bandwidth to implement the program…. Often assuming that we have the insight, details and expertise to make it happen. To be honest, I found myself in the dark…. They simply handed the program to us and we were told to get on with it… they considered their job done." (T3)

The second tension that emerged related to roles focused on the classic tension in MNCs concerning standardization versus customization. Across the nine MNCs, study participants' responses reveal that almost all of the study MNCs set out with standardization in mind and gave limited consideration to how the program could or should be customized to the needs of the subsidiaries. A corporate level study participant in ITCco described the pervasiveness of this tension as follows:

"The issue of standardization versus customization is not unique to this program. I think about it every day in respect of everything I do, so on the one hand we would like the program to be implemented as designed; however, it is difficult to find a program that will fit all subsidiary needs. They are however linked because without some compromise we will never achieve what we want to do when it comes to the program objectives." (T2)

We found evidence of some differences in the way MNCs respond to this tension and the types of decisions that are made. One response highlighted focused on giving subsidiaries some flexibility to effectively implement the program at local level. In Foodco a study participant described it this way:

"My experience tells me that corporate HR are sometimes slow to respond to requests for some changes… the reality is that we sometimes turn a blind eye to what the subsidiary is doing. We insist on the spirit of the program being implemented but allow some flexibility around the way in which it is done… this is often the sensible course of action." (T2)

4.2 Responding to the Paradox of Performing: Micro Actions

We found multiple examples of both defensive and proactive micro responses to the paradoxes of performing reported in the previous section. In particular, four defensive micro actions were surfaced, labelled ambivalence, reaction formation, opposing and regression.

[Insert Table 3 About here]

4.2.1 Ambivalence

Ambivalence as a defensive micro response involved, in the main, subsidiary HR actors acknowledged tensions, but the compromises made were marginal at best. The responses largely focused on expressing doubts and concerns to corporate HQ, giving tepid support for the program and seeking to sustain those objections through making a small number of concessions to the corporate mandate. In reality, this micro response, while useful in reducing tensions in the short term, intensified them in the longer term. A subsidiary study participant from Banco acknowledged this:

> *"Looking back… yes, I think I responded very quickly and was somewhat respectful of what corporate wished to do. I just wanted to help, to get the program implemented, but in reality, as we implemented the program, we were continually fighting with corporate… I believe this had negative consequences in the long term for the program." (T3)*

4.2.2 Reaction Formation

The reaction formation response typically involved one party focusing on one element of the tension and doing things that supported that particular element but opposing the other tensions. Our findings suggest that actors often used this micro response as a way of addressing frustration where they acknowledged that there are many contradictory elements, but it was better to focus on one aspect. We found evidence of this micro response in terms of seeking to address differences in beliefs about development but voicing concerns about the high potential aspects. Similar to ambivalence, this represented a response to reduce some tensions, but the bigger issues often remained and continued to be a source of conflict. A subsidiary actor from Autco revealed how reaction formation worked:

> *"I had major problems with the program. I did not like the ideas around development found in the program and the notion of identifying high potentials grated with our focus on teamwork. I made the decision that I could do something around the development differences, but I did not compromise on my belief that the idea of a high potential employee did not sit well with our culture and context. It never addressed the elephant in the room, and it comes up every time the program is mentioned." (T2)*

4.2.3 Opposing

The opposing micro response focused on both parties rejecting key priorities of the other party such as corporate ignoring the need for customization and subsidiaries rejecting the corporate goal of standardization. This response was infused with a strong power dynamic and both sides took the view that what they wished to achieve was more important and sought to force the other side to give way to their wishes. This approach inevitably led to the parties being pitched in opposition to each other and it inevitably blocked progress. These differences

continually surfaced in meetings between corporate and subsidiary and led to polarization with one party blocking the other. This micro response was evident in three of the MNCs, however, the insights a study respondent in Constructco are particularly instructive in unveiling how this micro response played out:

> *"Corporate wished to implement the program within a three-month period; however, we objected to this course of action and refused to work around the timeline. I simply said 'No, I can't'… The reality of my response is that we did not make progress and eventually the issue was escalated to the Corporate VP who asked that we address it ASAP. Ultimately we reached a major impasse where neither set of goals were met." (T2)*

4.2.4 Regression

The regression response involved actors focusing on what happened previously and continually returning to the past ways of doing things. In many ways, regression represents a short-term response but does not address the bigger tensions or conflicts. Regression frequently involved actors highlighting that what had been done previously had worked fine and was fit for purpose and questioning whether there was any need for the program, given that what they were currently doing was working out fine. The regression micro response is illustrated by a Banco Subsidiary participant:

> *"We had a long track record of developing graduates… we never called it a high potential development program. The way we did things was very successful and it never led to competition or tension. I therefore found it difficult to get my head around the new proposal and I really did not think we needed it." (T3)*

In addition to these defensive responses, we also unearthed three proactive micro responses to the paradoxes of performing, namely adjusting, acceptance and confrontation.

4.2.5 Adjusting

The adjusting micro response involved actors starting from the position that both party's views or perspectives had legitimacy and their inter-relationship was important to achieving the outcomes set for the program. This adjusting micro response was particularly evident in respect of the tensions around development. We found evidence of where actors from corporate and subsidiaries took steps to adjust their own views, to support both sides of the paradox. Examples of adjusting responses included intensive networking between the subsidiary and HQ to progress implementation, securing the services of a senior executive to work with actors to reach a path forward, or the involvement of corporate HQ actors to visit

the subsidiary and meet the local HR team. Illustrative of this adjusting micro paradox is the following extract from Healthco:

> *"I recognized very quickly that the tensions around development threatened the implementation of the program… I therefore took a number of actions. First, I held a conference call with all the relevant subsidiary managers to openly express my understanding of the tensions that existed. Second, I became closely involved in planning the implementation of the program… my key task here was to hold weekly meetings with the HR team or helping it to reach a point where the program could go live within the subsidiary." (T2)*

4.2.6 Acceptance

This micro response involved actors accepting that tensions were inevitable and would persist throughout implementation of the program. Examples of the acceptance micro response found in the data involved asking actors to work with the program even though it is not ideal, conducting local workshops to enable actors express their views, intensive networking and messaging by corporate actors to openly explain the complexities of the program and the need to work with them. These micro actions helped actors to express that they understood the tensions and contradictions inherent in the HiPo program and accept it as an ongoing tension that would recur as the program was implemented. A study participant in Pharmaco highlighted this pragmatic approach in the following way:

> *"I kept emphasizing that the program would not meet the needs of all interested parties and that there was not a lot we could do about it…. I appealed to the needs of the MNC and that we needed to be pragmatic and realistic while also recognizing that these tensions could present problems further down the road, especially when we evaluate the effectiveness of the program." (T3)*

4.2.7 Confrontation

The confrontation micro response involved situations where the differences were surfaced upfront and openly and critically discussed at the initial stages of implementation. Study participants' responses reveal that there were serious and intense discussions between HQ and subsidiary actors and typically involved an identification of the likely negative consequences of implementing the program for employee morale, engagement, teamwork and cooperation. Subsidiary HR actors in some cases viewed the implementation of the program as something that was very much a *fait accompli* by corporate, and that there needed to be pushback by subsidiary HR specialists and line managers. This extract from a study participant in ITCco highlights the use of direct challenge and questioning as a response:

> *"I felt that we needed to interrogate and critically evaluate the intentions of the program and whether it was a good idea… to be honest this was a good idea because*

it helped us to think about the tensions that the program presented. Ultimately the confrontation helped us to look at other ways of addressing the tensions." (T1)

4.3 Evolution of Tensions and Micro Responses over Time

Thus far, we have focused on illustrating the paradoxical tensions and micro responses in evidence. Our ongoing engagement with the MNCs under study occasioned additional opportunities for an exploration of how attention shifts and different priorities surface at different phases of program implementation. In this respect, we found that while the paradox of performance relating to beliefs and values about development and development processes was particularly salient at the introduction of the program, these paradoxes were followed by tensions about the goals of the program, these eventually giving way to tensions predominantly concerned with roles in implementation. This extract from a corporate study participant in Constructco highlights this evolution:

> *"We started out with a major discussion about what we considered good development, the best way to achieve it and the outcomes expected… a consequence of this discussion is that we went back to the drawing board and created a new vision for the program. By having an intense but civil discussion about what development is about, we were then able to focus more on addressing the goals of the program and what this meant for implementation." (T3)*

The following extract provides insights on the sequencing of paradox and how they evolved in respect of the tensions around goals and roles:

> *"Our discussion of the goals of the program… really challenged how we did things to implement the program. For example, we made the decision that the label 'high potential' would apply to all categories of employees, not just leaders. This required that we in the subsidiary had to implement the program differently, think about how we communicated it and how we selected participants… We learned a lot that ultimately helped us to deal with challenges around implementation." (T3)*

Micro responses evolved over time. For example, both the ambivalence and reaction formation responses were followed by cycles of adjustment and/or acceptance. This sequence is illustrated by the following extract from Banco.

> *"I was initially skeptical about the program and gave it soft support…. This moved on to a situation where I came on board about the development aspect but was very uncomfortable about the high potential aspect… too competitive and elitist. However, given my operational focus and sense of the pragmatic, I suppose I realized that we needed to move forward." (T2)*

We also found evidence of another sequence involving moving from initially accepting to confrontation of micro actions. This extract is instructive in this context:

"I initially thought the program was a good idea. I wanted it to succeed; however, the more I talked to colleagues, they raised some red flags…. I felt that the best way was to surface and air my concerns and question the intentions of corporate…. I was direct but professional in highlighting the key challenges. This upset the apple cart but ultimately it was a good thing… we found a better way to do things." (T2)

Over time the micro level responses of actors to day-to-day paradox led in some cases in the longer term to the production of macro level talent management changes. This occurred where HR or regional HQ actors acted in the role of mediators of the micro level actions and brought about changes in the implementation of the program. To illustrate this dimension, how a regional HQ study participant described using a meeting that he attended where various subsidiary actors came together to evaluate implementation progress is insightful:

I quickly realized that my colleagues in the different subsidiaries have struggled to make the program fit their unique needs. The result of this discussion confirmed for me that we needed to take a different approach when implementing future programs. Therefore, in my reporting and meetings with senior HQ managers, I persuaded them to broaden the scope of the [program] and have different versions depending on the needs of the subsidiary." (T3)

5 DISCUSSION

Given that MNCs have been to the forefront in seeking to implement talent management practices (Farndale, Scullion and Sparrow, 2010), we sought to take a closer look in order to explore the process of implementation from a practice perspective (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In particular, we focused on the paradox of performing and the types of tensions that salient actors encountered and the micro responses they made to these tensions day to day. We observed that actors experienced three types of tensions related to the paradox of performance and they respond both defensively and proactively through employing a range of micro responses. Our research also highlights that as these tensions unfolded over time, actors took steps to achieve 'workable solutions' in the face of paradox.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The first theoretical contribution to emerge from our analysis concerns the nature of the implementation process and the types of tensions that emerged amongst actors. Our findings emphasize the process, rather than results, nature of implementation with an emphasis on a non-linear, emergent and dynamic implementation process and highlights what Weiser, Jarzabkowski and Laamanen (2020) call "the adaptive turn". This contrasts with the rational-adaptive assumptions that underpins much of the HRM implementation literature and the idea

that practices can be systematically implemented and managed (Trullen *et al.*, 2020). Our findings in particular reveal that implementation involves opposing perspectives that evoke tensions and, as a consequence, the implementation process is iterative and non-linear in nature. It is therefore inevitable that the implementation process will lead to mixed or variable outcomes across subsidiaries. The findings also reveal the implementation process to be a prolonged and time-consuming one that requires sustained energy from salient actors. This resonates with Lewis and Smith (2014) who argued that paradox theory helps to surface the complexities, dualities and tensions that arise in a constantly changing environment. When it comes to the types of tensions that actors experienced in the context of the implementation of the HiPo programs in focus, we found that these were in the main linked to their formal roles and positions within the MNC structure. In fact, those role requirements led actors to take particular perspectives on the three sets of paradoxes. This suggests that role-based priorities and interests led participants to devote particular attention to the 'paradoxical pairs' (Smith & Lewis, 2011) that emerged were, in many ways, driven by the need to control and/or resist and these invariably aligned with their role mandates and interests in day-to-day implementation.

The second theoretical contribution concerns the potential role that subsidiary culture and national cultural characteristics play in terms of understanding the tensions that arise in the process of implementing HiPo programs. The meso level variable of organizational culture potentially represents a principal contingency in influencing successful implementation and the extent to which tensions arise (Stavrou, Psychountaki, Georgiadis, Karteroliotis & Zervas, 2015). Our findings are suggestive that HiPo programs are more congruent with subsidiaries that have high performance and learning cultures (Gittell, Seidner & Wimbush, 2009). This suggests that fewer tensions may arise around the goals, processes and roles related to these programs where there is a strong high-performance culture in operation. In terms of the macro-level, dimensions of national culture may serve as important contingency on how actors perceive tensions with the result that the extent to which tensions arise has to be read against the backdrop of contextual influences such as power distance (Peretz, Levi & Fried, 2015; Obi, Leggett & Harris, 2020). Such contextual determinants may have a differential effect on the implementation process when it comes to talent management practice in organizations and prevailing norms can elevate or diminish the tensions that arise during implementation. While our findings are, in part, speculative on this front, further contextual lines of inquiry could prove illuminating.

The third contribution to emerge from our analysis that merits further attention relates to the complexity of the paradox responses that actors summoned in the context of the

implementation of the talent management practice. Actors adopted responses that helped them to move between the poles of a paradox as a way of performing "actions that breakthrough paralysis" (Jay, 2013, p140). Actors made use of multiple responses to paradox at different times across the implementation process. Some of these responses were driven by actor values concerning development processes and their emotional attachment to particular practices that prevailed prior to the implementation of the new talent management practice (Calabretta, Gemser & Wijnberg, 2017). Indeed, the ability of actors to make use of different responses to paradox speaks to the idea that they are indeed often 'paradox navigators' as characterized in the recent practice implementation literature (Ulrich, Kryscynski, Ulrich & Brockbank, 2017).

Fourth, our findings provide insights into the role of 'outsiders' or 'independent insiders' opinions in helping actors work through tensions. These 'outsiders' were in some cases consultants or managers internal to the MNC who were disconnected from the particular paradox situation. They played an important role in helping actors to break free or navigate the paradox by suggesting new ways of managing the paradox or developing actors' skills to better cope with paradox (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). This finding resonates with suggestions by Knight and Paroutis (2017) who highlighted that over time senior leaders or managers can create solutions to protect paradoxical tensions within organizations. In addition, we found that the micro responses of actors were both dynamic and micro-micro (Abdallah *et al.*, 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011). These consisted of 'in the moment' interaction such as calling out issues at meetings, questioning actors in workshops and conference call situations, openly criticizing issues, interacting with colleagues to gain support for a way forward and engaging in intensive networking. We also found that while actors utilized both defensive and proactive micro responses to paradox, the extent to which they are perceived positively or negatively depended on the situation and timing of the response. This dimension of paradox navigation highlights the power dynamics that underpin implementation and the need to address these power issues in order to navigate paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2020).

Fifth, we also found an undercurrent of trust in the way actors shared with other actors their concerns and experiences of tensions (Knight & Paroutis, 2017) and the importance of actor support for each other within the subsidiary. Indeed, one particular important insight in this context is that over time relationships and trust development allowed new responses to emerge and permit a workable solution to be implemented (Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis & Courtois, 2020). This finding reveals the important role that interactional dynamics play in the micro actions that actors use to respond to paradox (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). This in some cases allowed subsidiary actors to generate a collective response to

paradox. Thus, where for example subsidiary actors found collective ways of responding, this moved the implementation process along even though tensions persisted. These collective responses to paradoxes by groups of actors were possible due to their day-to-day interactions thus resulting in a strong alignment between individual and collective responses to paradoxes. The individual responses of actors set the stage to generate a collective response that reflected the priorities of the subsidiary.

Our final theoretical contribution concerns the utilization of both paradox theory and a practice perspective to explore HRM practice implementation over time. In pursuing this line, our work contrasts with previous work on HRM implementation which has more commonly focused on implementation at a particular point in time (Trullen, Stirpe, Bonache & Valverde, 2016). In terms of the types of paradox or tensions experienced, at the initial stages they centered around issues related to roles within the HiPo program. These tensions were particularly important in determining how the program got off the ground. Over time the tensions moved to center on issues around the approach to development and the goals of the program, with matters around the respective roles of the HQ and the subsidiary dissipating but never disappearing (Berti & Simpson, 2020). In addition, we found that over time the micro actions of actors in the context of practice implementation 'trickle up' to influence talent management practices at a corporate level. This suggest that the micro responses and actions of actors have important consequences for MNC practices situated at the corporate level. Their attempts to cope within a situation of paradox helps bring about organizational level changes in talent management practices and alter the way in which the implementation of practices is understood and implemented. Thus, as Zoller (2014), for example, has highlighted, there may indeed be macro level implications of micro level actions.

5.2 Practice Implications for HR and Talent Actors

Our findings have several implications for HR and talent management actors in MNCs. First, we observed that the intensity of implementation varies considerably with time and that implementation may in some cases be inconsistent because of paradoxical tensions. Therefore, where MNCs seek more consistent implementation within subsidiaries HR actors at corporate should take greater efforts to anticipate the paradoxes that may emerge and have strategies in place to help HR actors accept the paradoxes that will arise and navigate them. In addition, senior managers and HR executives at MNC HQ should take steps to work through the tensions that arise and make use of independent advice and outsiders where it benefits the implementation process within the subsidiary.

Our findings suggest that there indeed is an argument to be made that consistent implementation may in fact be a ineffectual goal and that a variety of responses is more preferable within subsidiaries given the need to maintain a virtuous cycle of paradox. Therefore, it may be more sensible for HQ HR actors to understand and acknowledge that their intentions for the implementation of a HR practice will not be homogeneous across subsidiaries. This further suggests that HR actors from HQ and subsidiary reach some form of pragmatic understanding and that implementation pace will differ, along with the manner in which the practice is implemented.

Our findings also highlight the value of using what we term outsiders-within to cope with paradoxical tensions. Ironically this is often a role played by HR professionals however given that they are central to the implementation of talent management practices this role may be undertaken by other managers. They can play a key role in shaping understanding and in helping focal or central HR actors to work through tensions. These outsiders within may also have a role to play in helping HR actors to shift their defensive positions when it comes to talent management practice such as HiPo programs and be more comfortable with the tensions that arise. They may have a particularly valuable role in helping HR actors to develop paradoxical mindsets (Sleesman, 2019; Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018) and cultivate their competencies to address paradox. Both courses of action potentially have value in helping HR actors to cope with paradox in the context of practice implementation and the HR stress of coping with paradox (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

Our findings also point to the important role of trust, relationships and emotional issues in the context of dealing with paradox. Therefore, HR actors at HQ and subsidiary levels should have a strong understanding of the formal and informal networks through which strategies to deal with paradox can be generated. This will involve keeping key actors informed of implementation progress, the need to emphasize the requirement for a long-term commitment, and the importance of fostering trust relationships to enable new responses to emerge to paradoxical tensions that arise during implementation. The networks of relationships that HR actors have to get work done on a day to day basis are central to ensuring momentum in the face of paradox. The way in which these networks are developed will depend on the context of the subsidiary and the ownership characteristics of the MNC (Hoenen & Kostova, 2015).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge that our attempts to curate insights using data gathered from a sample of MNCs are bounded by our research context and by the specific talent management practice that we focused on. The first limitation concerns the applicability of our findings to types of

organizations. Our sample consists of western owned MNCs who potentially have different corporate parenting styles and different approaches to talent development compared to, for example Indian owned or Japanese owned MNCs (Cooke, Liu, Liu & Chen, 2019). In addition, our findings are less likely to be applicable to small firms (Nolan, Garavan & Lynch, 2020) where there is less strategic clarity when it comes to HR practices and in the public sector where there may be a ceremonial implementation of practices (Grant, Garavan & Mackie, 2020). For example, in organizational contexts that are less high-performance focused, the nature of the tensions may be different. In addition, the cultural context may likewise impact the nature of the tensions that arise during implementation referring, for example to the prevailing performance orientation or to power distance. Further research therefore might usefully extend the insights that we offer her by investigating paradox in the context of talent management in a broader range of contextual settings e.g. public sector, small and medium-sized enterprises, and family businesses, all of which remain under researched. A second limitation concerns our focus on HiPo programs which are a narrow, though of course well-defined talent management practice. Therefore, further research could apply our approach to investigate paradox in the context of broader talent acquisition and retention practices. For example, the implementation tensions that we observed may play out differently where the focus in on inclusive rather than exclusive talent management approaches. In the context of MNCs, both inclusive and exclusive approaches may generate different tensions in high versus low performance and learning orientation cultures. In addition, future research might extend our insights by investigating paradox in the context of relationships between different sets of practices. So, for example, it may be useful to investigate how tensions arise in the context of organizations that implement a blended model of talent management emphasizing inclusive and exclusive type practices. The investigation of tensions and the dynamics that they give rise to over time could also prove instructive. For example, Raisch, Hargrave and Van De Ven (2018) propose the use of longitudinal approaches to understand transitions between 'multiple dynamic equilibria' and the factors that drive transitions in the context of HR practice implementation. Lastly, we focused more on how salient actors understood paradoxes and responded to them, and less on the quality of relationships or social capital between actors. In situations where actors share strong trusting relationships with other actors, they may be able to utilize a different set of micro responses. Further research delving more deeply into the particular role of relationship quality on micro responses to paradox could prove valuable.

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Table 1: Overview of Sample and Data Sources

Participating MNCs
• 9 MNCs operating in Pharma (Pharmaco), Food (Foodco), IT Services (ITSco), Telecommunications (Telco), Healthcare (Healthco), Construction (Constructco), Information and Communications Technology (ITCco), Investment Banking (Banco), Automobiles and Components (Autco). • HQ locations in Ireland, UK, US, Germany, France and the Netherlands with Regional HQs and Subsidiary locations in Ireland, UK, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Mexico, Singapore, India, Hong Kong, Poland, the Czech Republic, China, Luxemburg, Belgium, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Portugal, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon.
Study Participants
• Sequential Interviews with 47 salient actors (18 HQ, 6 Regional, 23 Subsidiary) at three program phases.
Documents and Artifacts
• Brochures and internal information on the organization. • Competency Models and Leadership Principles. • Talent Management policies. • Management and senior leadership presentations on the HiPo program. • Selection processes for participation on HiPo program. • Training and development plans, role and job descriptions, formal induction plans and checklists. • HiPo program folder including codes of conduct, program content and psychometric assessments.
Observations
• Field notes. • Observations during training sessions and 1:1 feedback sessions.
Semi- Structured Interview Protocol
• Describe the MNCs overall approach to talent management. • What factors led to the introduction of the program? • Who made the decision to implement the program? • How long is the program in existence? How many have undertaken the program? • What was your initial involvement with the program? • Who was responsible for the design of the program? • How was the program implemented? • What did you see as the purpose(s) of the program? • Who selected the participants for the program? • What input did the you have, if any, in the selection process? • What types of induction processes were used? • What types of development approaches were used? • What challenges or tensions arose in the context of the implementation of the program? • Did contradictory issues arise? How did you approach managing these contradictions over time? • What were the types of responses you made to deal with tensions that arose?

Table 2: Categories of Paradox Experienced by Actors

Dimension	Themes	Illustrative Extracts
Tensions Surrounding MNC Actor Goals for HiPo Programs	Focus on Leadership Pipelines	• "Our discussion on what the program should achieve was extensive and the question of isolating leaders as the key talent that we should focus on… however, I cannot forget about the other talent in my team. I have many highly talented individual contributors and brilliant technical experts. How can I ignore that group? Yet the program as set out kind of does that." (Foodco, Subsidiary, T1) • "We need a strong leadership pool, but we also need a technical talent group and high potential individual contributors. As a talent manager, I have to think about the total pool of talent available. Therefore, does it make sense to only focus on the leaders and forget about the rest? I don't think so." (Constructco, HQ, T1)
	Focus on High Potentials Generally	• "We sold the program as a way of creating a more rounded individual as an opportunity to develop self-belief and to be motivated and goal-focused. This made the program less threatening and more palatable to high potentials. They do not need to have leadership potential." (Healthco, Subsidiary, T2) • "The program was positioned as a personal development opportunity for any high potential. I am two years with the organisation so it came at the right time. It did not necessarily have leadership aspiration. They supported all of my development objectives and on completion the whole discussion was about how I had personally developed… no discussion about what the organisation gained from the program." (Constructco, Subsidiary, T1)
	Interdependencies	• "We initially concentrated on Potentials but very soon realised that B potential is also important. It is about our total talent pool not one piece of it." (Telco, HQ, T1) • "Whether the program is about leaders or high potentials in general, it sets out to achieve the same goals… A supply of talented people who can help us realise strategy." (Foodco, HQ, T1)
	Contradictions	• "We want to develop high potential leaders for the future… however, there is the day-to-day reality that they must perform. This for me is a key tension, they sometimes get seduced by the leadership appeal but forget about day-to-day expectations." (ISTCO, Subsidiary, T2) • "We realise that many high potentials are often more concerned about their career than the organisation. Inevitable but understandable. They focus too much on the career and forget about delivering results. I fully understand that the career must come first, the organisation second. If I was aged 20-30 I would also think that way." (Telco, HQ, T1)
	Focus on Measuring High Potential to Identify Participants	• "Our participant selection process is 100% focused on measuring potential… that is what we are about. We measure potential in very objective and systematic ways." (Banco, HQ, T1)
	Focus on Using Past Performance to Identify Participants	• "All of our high potentials are judged on their track record… performance is key. That is the bottom line." (Healthco, Subsidiary, T2) • "It is my experience that some individuals labelled 'high potential' often do not perform effectively. I always place past performance at the top of my list of selection criteria." (Pharmaco, Subsidiary, T2)
	Interdependencies	• "It is about the total package. You cannot separate performance from issues of potential. They are closely related… performance provides assurance but moving to the next level requires potential." (Autco, Subsidiary, T1) • "We concentrate on potential; however, it is our experience that they are closely linked… in practice it is very difficult to isolate each dimension." (Constructco, HQ, T1)
	Contradictions	• "Basically, we have a high potential model that emphasizes strategic change and emotional agility. These things are very difficult to measure; however, they are what we specify. In reality, an individual could have all of these but yet have not achieved excellent performance in the past. Sometimes these two do not come together in the one individual." (Telco, HQ, T1) • "It is very common in our organization, especially in Eastern locations, for employees to achieve excellent performance ratings and yet not have high potential. I have been caught up in this struggle for the past few years… managers nominate participants, yet when I do formal assessments of potential, they do not come through… and then you get pushback from the nominating managers." (Banco, Subsidiary, T1)

Tensions Surrounding MNC Actors Beliefs Concerning Development and Development Processes	Emphasis on Planned Experiences inside and outside of the Organization	• "For me it was all about my development as a person… They did not put pressure on me. I was free to undertake special projects that contributed very little to the organisation but were valuable to me… For example, I did some community work during work time that helped me grow and better understand that some were less privileged than me." (ITSCo, Subsidiary, T2) • "I justify my role's existence on the basis that I design structured off-the-job development experiences… otherwise I would not have a lot of tangible outcomes. On the other hand, I know that the real development takes place day-to-day, walking them through the fire and learning from mistakes. They are two sides of the coin, but line managers do not want to hear about the structured stuff. My heart tells me that on-the-job experience is good, but my brain tells me that I have to justify my role." (ITSco, Subsidiary, T1)
	Emphasis on Structured on-the-job and Experiential Development	• "High potentials selected for the program can develop their skills, abilities and competencies to enhance their progression and job mobility… We focus on structured processes to develop competencies that will enhance their career, make them more employable and increase their chances of an international career." (Constructco, HQ, T1) • "The program started off with an intensive development centre… We required nominees to undertake a variety of psychometric assessments in addition to career profiling. Participants completed a career assessment inventory for example. They also completed a 360-degree profile that focused on their general leadership competencies. Our aim was to provide participants with insights on their career potential and what they needed to develop to be employable." (Foodco, HQ, T2)
	Interdependencies	• "You will spend three months in your current subsidiary, three months working at regional HQ and another three months in corporate HQ. Your development will consist primarily of job assignments, stretch assignments and strong coaching support. You will be expected to participate in a 360-degree process six months into the program focused on evaluating your performance and future development goals and participate in formal training. It is part of the package." (Pharmaco, HQ, T1) • "On the one hand we expect the ideal development process to be a combination of the structured and the day-to-day experience… Both need to occur successfully. Squaring this circle can be challenging. The HR specialist wants to control and have line of sight on the development process, yet we as line managers want to see the day-to-day tasks and learning. It is difficult to achieve both effectively." (Healthco, HQ, T2)
	Contradictions	• "In my subsidiary, the high potential program was all about short term performance on job related activities. I acknowledged that this is what line managers expected. However, I had to often make the case to release the participant to do some deep development in a regional office or HQ. Sometimes this worked on other occasions I had to be patient and pick the right moment or opportunity." (Healthco, Subsidiary, T2) • "Line managers want development to happen quickly… they focus on very instrumental outcomes. How does development change behaviors and develop competencies? To be honest, this is a very narrow way to look at development…. Development for me, is more incremental…. it takes time. I like to think that what we do on the high potential program is develop the full package… instill confidence, belief, mindset and skillset." (Pharmaco, Regional, T2)
	Accelerated Development focused on Competencies / Behaviours	• "We invest in the development of our high potentials to quickly become strong problem solvers, innovative leaders, flexible and can work in whatever context we place them. We use the program to develop their skills to be continually thinking about what they can do for the business." (ITCco, HQ, T2)
	Development is Incremental, Progressive and Whole-Person Based	• "I really saw it as an opportunity to stretch myself professionally. To be honest, I was not particularly concerned about the fast track element at all. It didn't bother me. I had the feeling that I would enjoy the different development opportunities and meeting new people." (Foodco, Subsidiary, T2) • "I felt very motivated meeting employees and selling them the benefits of the program. I emphasised it as a development win for any employee to wished to participate. I completely downplayed the competitive element and the expectations that corporate centre emphasised in their communication. I focused on developing individuals not leaders." (Pharmco, Subsidiary, T2)
	Interdependencies	• "The program is designed to achieve multiple objectives. We are not solely focused on developing corporate elites… because talented people are required throughout the organisation… it is not all about the A player. We require B players who will

		contribute to the performance of a subsidiary or make a contribution at regional HQ level. Therefore, as a HR person l have to think about all these different priorities." (Foodco, HQ, T1) • "We assess success based on how agile and mobile the high potential is at the end of the program. This cannot be achieved through focusing solely on competencies, we want a very rounded individual." (ITCco, HQ, T1)
	Contradictions	• "I think that the subsidiary often lost sight of the overall purpose of the program and see it as filling jobs not developing people. I did not compromise on the overall goals but perhaps on how it could be achieved and when… this led to some discussion as to what was more important… the overall MNC or the needs of a specific location." (Telco, HQ, T3) • "We always start out with great intentions… however, I think I speak for many line managers when I say my perspective is short-term. I look for quick results, changes in behavior. However, I understand where the HR function is coming from. They want to take the pure approach and let development happen! They also tell me it is about the full set of individual characteristics…. I appreciate that these two dimensions are not easy to achieve." (Foodco, Subsidiary, T2)
Tensions Surrounding MNC Actors Roles Within the HiPo Programs	Strategic Role for HQ	• "All of our corporate materials that publicize the program make it clear what it is about... there is no ambiguity. HQ has a major role in ensuring that all are strongly bought into this strategic focus. When we select participants our primary concern is that thy know that this is a business development program not something that is notice to have." (Banco, HQ T2) • "The corporate and subsidiary frequently do not see eye-to-eye when it comes to the implementation of the program. As a subsidiary manager, I would have liked some role in the design of the program. The reality is different. Corporate argued that they have line of sight of the total organization, they have the strategic viewpoint, so as a subsidiary our role was essentially do to with implementation." (Constructco, Subsidiary T2)
	Operational Role for Subsidiaries	• "The role of our subsidiary was largely operational. We took the program and identified how it could be implemented. We had little involvement with the design, the program was given to us on a plate." (Constructco, Subsidiary, T3) • "I was nominated for the program by my manager… he was very career focused. We discussed the benefits of the program for me personally but the career dimension was particularly strong… I did emphasise that if I were to give the program my time, it was for career reasons… something he agreed with… I did not see myself working within the organisation long-term." (Foodco, Regional. T3)
	Interdependencies	• "I realised that the program had multiple dimensions that were all interlinked… and that their priority and relevance would fluctuate over the duration of the program … I tried to emphasise that it involved both organisational and individual dimensions." (Telco, Subsidiary, T2) • "We linked well with Corporate HQ. We realised that we needed their expertise, influence and networks to make the program work." (Telco, Subsidiary,T3)
	Contradictions	• "We continually encounter challenges, tension and conflict about what we are trying to do in terms of development… Managers are sometimes very impatient whereas we are the custodians of the program. It is important to develop a rounded individual. Managers often focus too much on the role behaviours."(Banco, HQ, T3) • "Corporate HR were in many ways idealistic about our bandwidth to implement the program…. Often assuming that we have the insight, details and expertise to make it happen. To be honest, I found myself in the dark…. They simply handed the program to us and we were told to get on with it… they considered their job done." (Healthco, Subsidiary, T3)
	HQ Mandated Implementation of the HiPo Program as Designed	• "HQ were relentless in implementing the program throughout the MNC. No compromise – a direct mandate from the HR VP. No room for compromise." (Pharmaco, Subsidiary, T2) • "The MNC President championed the program … frequently communicated its importance, identified an implementation timeline and closely monitored implementation." (Telco, HQ, T3)
	Customisation of Program to Meet Local Needs	• "We did not like the initial program … not suitable to our talent requirements. We felt that more flexibility in implementation would have worked better… We made our case but with limited success." (Banco, Subsidiary, T2) • "The issue of standardization versus customization is not unique to this program. I think about it every day in respect of everything I do, so on the one hand we would like the program to be implemented as designed; however, it is difficult to find a

		program that will fit all subsidiary needs. They are however linked because without some compromise we will never achieve what we want to do when it comes to the program objectives." (ITCco, HQ, T2)
	Interdependencies	• "An effective program has to contain elements important to both the HQ and subsidiary. It will get better traction if we go in that direction. That's what we are now going to do." (ITCco, HQ, T2) • "We sold the program as a win-win for the MNC generally. We realised that both groups had important expertise that would make the program a success." (Autco, Subsidiary, T2)
	Contradictions	• "We experienced great difficulty in resolving the needs of both HQ and the Subsidiary. HQ were not very understanding of the reactions on the ground, the resources required and the time it would take. This was a continued challenge." (Foodco, Subsidiary, T3) • "My experience tells me that corporate HR are sometimes slow to respond to requests for some changes… the reality is that we sometimes turn a blind eye to what the subsidiary is doing. We insist on the spirit of the program being implemented but allow some flexibility around the way in which it is done… this is often the sensible course of action." (Foodco, HQ, T2)

Table 3: Actors Ongoing Micro Responses to Paradox

Category of Response	Examples of Micro Actions	Illustrative Extracts
Defensive Responses		
Ambivalence	• Initially expressing doubt to Corporate HQ and giving tepid support for the program.	• "The program was sold to use by HQ as something we should get involved with… however, as employees who were selected sought out information on what was

	• Going through the motions with Corporate HQ and projecting that they are supportive of the program but with reservations. • Postponing the implementation of the program by suggesting the timing is not right.	involved… in my heart I felt that given the resources required to implement it, it was not value for money. I agreed that we could implement" (Foodco, Subsidiary, T2) • "Looking back… yes, I think I responded very quickly and was somewhat respectful of what corporate wished to do. I just wanted to help, to get the program implemented, but in reality, as we implemented the program, we were continually fighting with corporate." (Banco, Subsidiary, T3)
Reaction Formation	• Giving support to the development component but telling HQ that the high potential component will be ignored for now. • Selecting participants who do not match the HQ profile.	• "I spent a lot of my time interacting with the HQ Manager and we mainly talked about the value of development… My instinct was that the high potential piece did not fit well given the culture." (Autco, Subsidiary, T2) • "I had major problems with the program. I did not like the ideas around development found in the program and the notion of identifying high potentials grated with our focus on teamwork. I made the decision that I could do something around the development differences, but I did not compromise on my belief that the idea of a high potential employee did not sit well with our culture and context. It never addressed the elephant in the room, and it comes up every time the program is mentioned." (Autco, Subsidiary, T2)
Opposing	• Gaining support from external consultants to highlight flaws and raise questions about the program. • Indicating a willingness to design a local version of the program. • Engaging in email correspondence with corporate HQ asserting that the program is not a good fit.	• "I consistently communicated the corporate line… we had agreed that the program would be implemented as designed… major pushback from subsidiary managers; however, I stood by my initial beliefs." (Telco, HQ, T2) • "Corporate wished to implement the program within a three-month period; however, we objected to this course of action and refused to work around the timeline. I simply said 'No, I can't'… The reality of my response is that we did not make progress and eventually the issue was escalated to the Corporate VP who asked that we address it ASAP. Ultimately we reached a major impasse where neither set of goals were met." (Constructco, HQ, T2)
Regression	• Highlighting to colleagues that how we did things previously was fit for purpose. • Questioning whether the program is required at all.	• "I never believed that the program would add anything to my area. In fact, my reaction was how do I explain this to my team, how do I deal with employees who were not rated as high potentials. As a supervisor, it was more hassle than anything beneficial. I did not see the need for it… what we were currently doing worked just fine." (Banco, Subsidiary, T2) • "We had a long track record of developing graduates… we never called it a high potential development program. The way we did things was very successful and it never led to competition or tension. I therefore found it difficult to get my head around the new proposal and I really did not think we needed it." (Banco, Subsidiary, T3)
Proactive Responses		
Adjusting	• Working around the corporate blueprint to achieve both corporate and subsidiary goals. • Working with HQ actors to reach agreement on how the program can be amended. • Inviting Corporate HQ actors to talk to the local HR team.	• "Corporate management didn't realise the difficulties involved in selling the concept of a high potential program in my location. We are all about teamwork, however, this initiative was all about individuals. It cut to the core of how we do things here… patience was required to gain some traction for what Corporate requested." (ITSco, Subsidiary, T3) • "I recognized very quickly that the tensions around development threatened the implementation of the program… I therefore took a number of actions. First, I held a conference call with all the relevant subsidiary managers to openly express my understanding of the tensions that existed. Second, I became closely involved in planning the implementation of the program… my key task here was to hold weekly meetings with

		the HR team or helping it to reach a point where the program could go live within the subsidiary." (Healthco, HQ, T2)
Acceptance	• Intensive networking by Corporate HQ to build support for the program. • Asking other HR actors to work on the program even though it is not ideal. • Conducting workshops to provide local actors with an opportunity to express views openly.	• "The program was designed as a one size fits all… We know that this was not without its challenges. However, we needed some solution to ensure a good talent pool going forward… impossible to find a solution that everyone could work with … it was ultimately a compromise." (Telco, HQ, T3) • "I kept emphasizing that the program would not meet the needs of all interested parties and that there was not a lot we could do about it…. I appealed to the needs of the MNC and that we needed to be pragmatic and realistic while also recognizing that these tensions could present problems further down the road, especially when we evaluate the effectiveness of the program." (Pharmaco, Regional, T3)
Confrontation	• Criticising the program at meetings with both local and corporate actors. • Working behind the scenes to build support to have the program shelved. • Ignoring personal communication from Corporate HQ actors requesting a start date for the program. • Asking other local HR actors not to support the program.	• "We held a HR meeting with a group from HQ… very clear views expressed about the program … people highlighted lots of reasons as to why the program would not work… Corporate knew where we stood." (Banco, Subsidiary, T3) • "I felt that we needed to interrogate and critically evaluate the intentions of the program and whether it was a good idea… to be honest this was a good idea because it helped us to think about the tensions that the program presented. Ultimately the confrontation helped us to look at other ways of addressing the tensions." (ITCco, Subsidiary, T1)