

# From Inclusion to High Performance

LEVERAGING AND SUSTAINING  
THE DIVERSE WORKPLACE

Michael Hyter and Maureen Giovannini



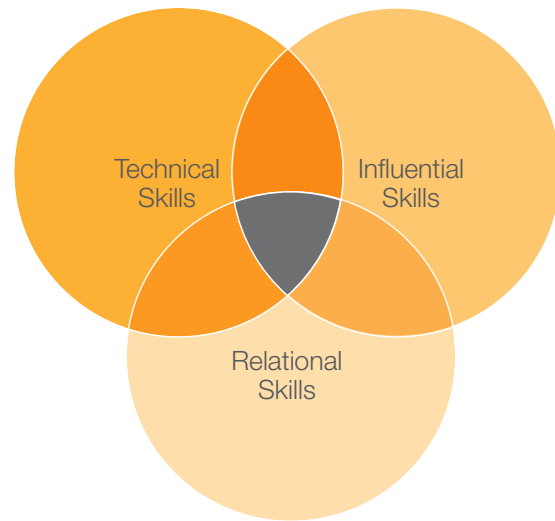
©2008 Novations Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

Four Stages and Novations are trademarks of  
Novations Group, Inc.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by  
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,  
recording or otherwise, without prior permission of  
Novations Group, Inc., 10 Guest Street, Suite 300,  
Boston, MA 02135 USA

NG135, REV A

*Why is it that, even after years of diversity and inclusion initiatives, many organizations still fall short of their key objective—the representation of talent from diverse groups at all levels supported by a corporate culture of career development and high performance for all employees? This article draws upon Novations’ 30 years of consulting and research experience to answer that question and offer solutions that companies can implement to maximize the capacity for high performance among their employees, with specific reference to traditionally underrepresented groups. Our point of view focuses on the importance of relational and influential confidence in building successful careers, along with the need for an explicit road map that outlines what “high performance” looks like at different stages of career development. By making the criteria for high performance and career success transparent, organizations can maximize the engagement and contributions of employees at all levels, regardless of their diversity backgrounds.*



## The Secret of Success

It is our belief that professional development and high performance are related to both the “effective efforts” of individual employees as well as the development policies and managerial practices of organizations. In other words, both the employees and the organization/manager must work together toward the same goal of ensuring high performance.

A common obstacle to achieving this goal is the fact that employees and managers alike tend to focus on proficiency at **technical skills** and never really address the other two areas critical to career success: **relational skills** and **influential skills**. So while their technical abilities may be strong, many employees lack skills around forging solid business partnerships and effectively influencing others.

The acquisition of necessary skills in each of the three areas is built on a foundation of confidence. What do we mean by “confidence”? First of all, it is the belief that you can control, or can learn to control, your outcomes. Truly confident people trust their capacity to learn whatever is required of them. They understand that learning is a process, and they believe that with commitment, focus, and strategy, their efforts will produce the desired outcomes. As a result, confident people face new challenges and take on moderate risks with enthusiasm and energy. It is through this process that they learn, and excel at, the new skills necessary for success at various stages of career development. Hence, while our focus is on skills, we maintain that confidence is the prerequisite for skill building in the process of development and the achievement of high performance.

- In **technical situations**, confidence is knowing that you are capable of delivering quality performance and that you can increase that capability by acquiring the skill sets you need to be effective on the job. Some examples of related technical skills are (1) taking the initiative to keep yourself current and up-to-date on the state of the industry or technology, (2) consistently maintaining high-quality standards for your own work and outcomes, and (3) actively seeking solutions to technical processes or work product issues.
- In **influential situations**, confidence is knowing who you are, or can become, feeling powerful, and believing that you can make a difference—that you can learn how to influence situations, leverage relationships, and gain the respect of others. Here, influential skills might include (1) understanding how

things really happen in the organization regarding formal processes as well as interpersonal dynamics, (2) successfully getting others to listen to your ideas and follow your recommendations, and (3) representing your accomplishments appropriately to the right people in the organization.

- In **relational situations**, confidence is having a positive self-regard and knowing that your presence is valuable, that you can become relationally skillful, establish people’s trust, and build strong support networks. People with the confidence to build skills in this area are able to (1) know enough about colleagues to relate to them as individuals beyond the job, (2) initiate introductions and conversations in formal as well as informal settings, and (3) build and maintain a strong professional network in which they are supported as well as support others.

We’ve all seen, and perhaps even experienced, how neglecting influential and relational skills can negatively impact careers. Often, people who limit themselves to technical excellence are those who are overlooked when career development and advancement opportunities become available. Sometimes the decision makers are not even aware of the performance that such an individual has demonstrated. Moreover, there is no one in a position of power who can sponsor this employee, regardless of how technically talented he or she may be. So the individual keeps getting passed over with no understanding of why. Over time, this experience can erode engagement, negatively affect performance, and even result in losing a valuable technical contributor.

In another typical case, an employee has a great idea for a new product or service that could very well increase the company's market share in a particular area. However, this individual lacks the political and social confidence necessary to informally "socialize" his or her idea, let alone present it with credibility to decision makers. So it's a lose-lose situation—the individual feels ignored and undervalued, and the company misses out on a potentially significant business opportunity.

An additional example is the not uncommon situation in which a person is promoted to a supervisory position based on technical expertise but is not given the necessary training in relational and influential skills critical to success in that new role—for example, delegating, motivating, and coaching. So in this situation everyone loses—the new manager, his or her direct reports, and the company.

## The Legacy of Neglected Skill Building

**What gets in the way of employees building skills in all three areas? We've identified four typical obstacles.**

To begin with, our entire socialization process emphasizes the acquisition of technical skills. We have all been raised and taught to strive for the "A grades". This is ingrained in most of us from early childhood up through professional education. Correspondingly, for many employees, their only real training and skill-building opportunities have been in the technical arena. These include workshops and courses offered by their respective companies.

Even those companies that offer "on-boarding" programs rarely spend enough, if any, time on the importance of developing relational and influential skills as part of one's long-term value to the organization.

Second, there is a common tendency to avoid influential or "political" skills because of their negative reputation. Many of us consider politics as less than admirable and pride ourselves on not playing "office politics" or being a "brownnose" to get ahead. There may also be the belief that by playing politics we are compromising who we really are. This belief can be particularly prevalent among members of underrepresented groups who are trying to forge their own identity in situations where they are "the only one" or one of a few. Unfortunately, this very narrow and skewed view fails to attribute any positive aspects to the politics of human, social interaction and to acknowledge that both influential and relational skills are inherent in any and all social groups, including organizations. Indeed, success—for example, advancement in most organizations—is contingent on excelling at skills in these areas.

Third, with an emphasis on work/life balance, some employees may deliberately limit their jobs to the "necessary" technical aspects, believing that they can't afford the time to participate in social activities, network, and build political and social capital. This is particularly true of women, many of whom have to juggle family and work responsibilities to a greater extent than their male colleagues. Often these employees don't realize that, if they want to continue adding value to the organization, they can't afford **not** to spend time developing relational and influential skills.

Fourth, when informal and formal political and social networks are dominated by one demographic group—typically white males—it may be more difficult and challenging for women and professionals of color to establish relational and influential networks. If they are unsuccessful, they may revert back to what they know best and where they are most comfortable—technical skills. For example, we have found that too often many professionals of color focus 100% of their attention on the technical area (grades, tenure, multiple college degrees) and as a result, miss out on the ability to advance their value “brand.” Moreover, they fail to realize that the higher you advance in an organization, the more important influential and relational skills become.

In sum, while attaining relational and influential skills is essential for success among all employees, the challenges to achieving this are greater for women and people of color. Therefore, companies must ensure that the development programs and processes they offer to employees—both in general and to specific demographic groups—include knowledge and skill building in all three critical areas. In addition, as some of our clients have done, they can offer inclusive training programs with a strong coaching component that focuses on building essential relational and influential skills.

## A Road Map for High Performance

While acquiring relational and influential skills is necessary for career success, this may not be sufficient if the actual behaviors associated with high performance at different points in one’s career are not made explicit and communicated effectively. Without such clarity, employees may feel uncertain as they try to figure out what it takes to get ahead. Moreover, when they are not selected for development and advancement opportunities, they may assume that favoritism or other unfair practices are operating against them. Indeed, when we conduct inclusion surveys with our client organizations, it is not surprising to find a high percentage of respondents who agree with the statement, “*Around here ‘who you know’ is more important than ‘what you know’ for advancement.*” Our experience has also demonstrated that when employees perceive a lack of fairness, their level of engagement and performance decrease accordingly.

To remedy this situation, we recommend that companies be explicit and transparent about the stages of career development and skill expectations for all their employees. This includes being clear about the behaviors that define high performance in each stage as well as what, specifically, it takes to move from one stage to another. These behaviors should include relational and influential as well as technical skills.

*The Four Stages® of Contribution* is a descriptive model that can serve as such a road map (Table 1). It is based on more than 30 years of research with various companies with the goal of understanding how employees increase

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
<b>Contributing Dependently</b>	<b>Contributing Independently</b>	<b>Contributing Through Others</b>	<b>Contributing Strategically</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingly accepts supervision</li> <li>• Grasps basic and routine tasks</li> <li>• Learns how “we” do things</li> <li>• Demonstrates success on a portion of a larger project or task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumes responsibility for definable projects</li> <li>• Relies less on supervision; produces significant results</li> <li>• Increases in technical expertise and ability</li> <li>• Develops credibility and a reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases in technical breadth</li> <li>• Develops a broad business perspective</li> <li>• Builds a strong internal and external network</li> <li>• Involved as a manager, mentor, coach, or idea leader in developing others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides direction to the organization</li> <li>• Defines/drives critical business opportunities</li> <li>• Sponsors promising individuals</li> <li>• Represents the organization on critical strategic issues</li> </ul>

**TABLE 1 THE FOUR STAGES® OF CONTRIBUTION MODEL**

their value and contribution over time.<sup>1</sup> This model also provides an excellent way to view the importance and sequence of developing technical, influential, and relational skills.

According to the model, a direct correlation exists between a person’s stage and his or her contribution to the organization. Making transitions through the stages is **the** primary way of remaining highly valued over time. In contrast, remaining in one stage too long, especially Stages 1 and 2, may result in stagnation and a decrease in the perceived value of one’s contributions. We’ve all seen this pattern in people who have been doing the same job year after year and just seem to be putting in their time without any real enthusiasm or motivation to excel. Of course, the timetable for optimal transitions varies widely by job, company, and industry.

So how do people typically progress through the Four Stages? People in Stage 1 are most commonly those who are new—to a job, department, company, or career. They are in a learning mode and, if successful, will make the transition to Stage 2, where they are expected to contribute independently.

In both Stages 1 and 2, excelling at technical skills is particularly important. At the same time, relational and influential skills are also necessary in each of these stages. For example, successful Stage 1 employees need to develop relationships with people who will educate them about the informal culture (the way things really work around here) and may use influential skills to get informal coaching from subject matter experts. Stage 2 employees typically require influential skills to ensure that their ideas are acted upon as well as to obtain scarce organizational resources necessary to get the job done.

<sup>1</sup> *Novations: Strategies for Career Management* by Gene W. Dalton, Paul H. Thompson

The transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3 is the most difficult for all employees because it requires the most significant psychological shift, along with a change in the way they work. Instead of working independently, Stage 3 employees work through others (coaching, delegating, and/or managing); thus, their contribution is multiplied. While relational and influential skills are important at every stage, they are essential to making this transition. Indeed, employees who concentrate almost exclusively on technical skills tend to get stuck in Stage 2, where their value and often their engagement diminishes over time. While employees must take personal responsibility for their careers, managers play a key role in ensuring that their people—especially women and people of color—get the necessary assignments and coaching that will help them to develop relational and influential skills appropriate to each stage.

Finally, Stage 4 employees are expected to have the relational and influential skills needed to provide the high-level leadership that defines the future of the organization. Acquiring these skills is usually the result of getting visible, important, and complex developmental assignments that require both personal confidence and management support. It is important to note that the Four Stages refer to the way work gets done and the scope of the work, not to one’s formal job title. Hence, people at Stage 3 or 4 may not necessarily be formal managers or leaders in the organization. This is particularly true for Stage 3.

### An Inclusion Issue

The Four Stages Model is being implemented by many organizations in the United States and internationally for setting performance

expectations, career development, and succession planning. However, its value in supporting the career success of women and people of color has received little attention until recently.

The companies that have analyzed how their people are distributed across the Four Stages by gender and race/ethnicity uncover patterns that do not surprise us. With regard to gender differences, women represent disproportionately smaller percentages in Stages 3 and 4 than do men (Figure 1).

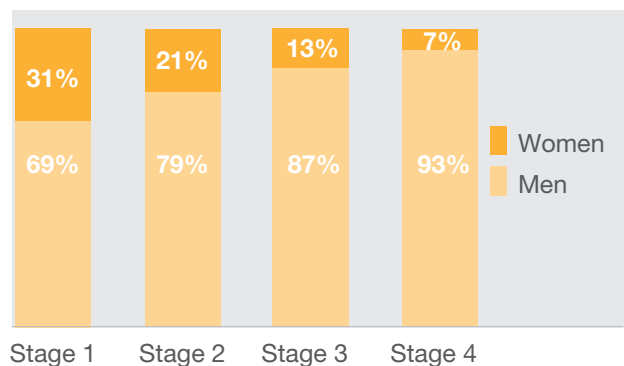
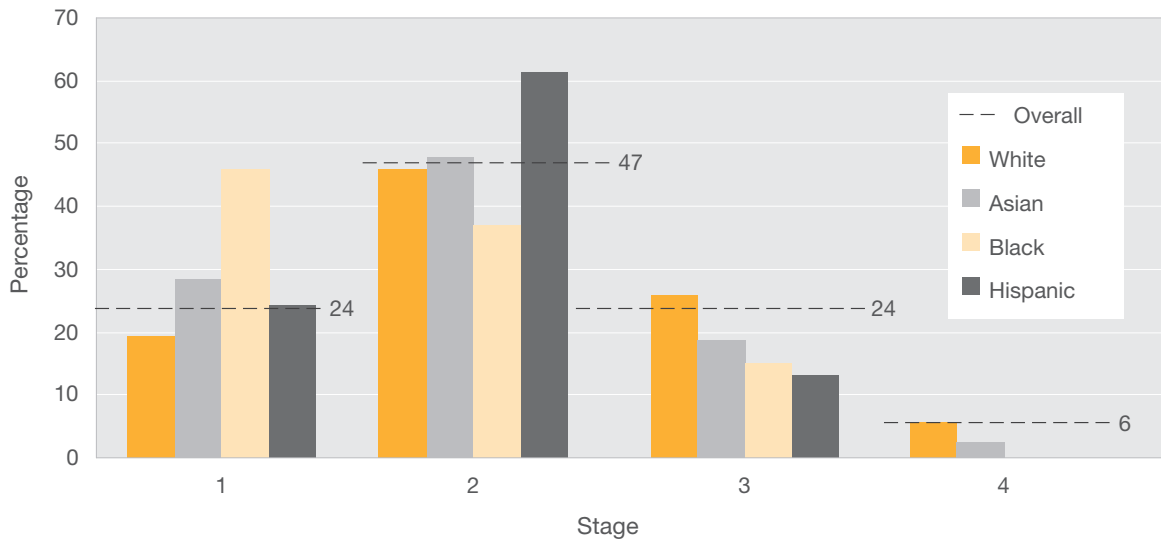


FIGURE 1 DISTRIBUTION BASED ON GENDER

The differences are even more striking for race and ethnicity where people of color are statistically underrepresented in Stages 3 and 4 (Figure 2). This distribution reflects the very real glass ceiling that pigeonholes people of color in roles with limited contributions and, over time, negatively affects their careers. To begin with, people who spend too much time in Stage 1 may be seen as a “poor hire,” which could serve to reinforce existing stereotypes and negative assumptions. Then, if those who make it to Stage 2 don’t eventually transition to Stage 3, they risk obsolescence, with a corresponding decrease in the value of their contribution as expectations for their performance continue to rise.



**Note:** Sample includes technicians

**FIGURE 2** DISTRIBUTION BASED ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

## Creating a High-Performing, Inclusive Organization

For those organizations committed to inclusion, how can the Four Stages be proactively used to facilitate the continuous engagement and contributions for women and people of color? To begin with, this model provides a common language of development and capacity building—with each of the Four Stages outlining specific roles and critical relationships for high performance. The stages also provide a clear road map that outlines the approaches to work and behaviors necessary to succeed in each stage and to transition to the next stage. All too often the rules of the road for career success, including relational and influential skills, have been part of a company's informal system to which woman and people of color have had limited access.

## Barriers for Women and People of Color

All employees may encounter certain barriers to success within a stage or in attempting to transition from one stage to another. Women and people of color face additional barriers—both external and internal—that must be acknowledged and removed. Each of these undermines the technical, influential, and/or relational skills necessary for high performance in a stage as well as the successful transition between stages.

### Technical Skills

- Higher standards—often individuals must hold up under longer proving periods and more scrutiny based on negative stereotypes
- Low risk taking—the fear of being disproportionately punished if they fail, undermining the willingness to take moderate risks

### Influential Skills

- Lack of mentors—especially individuals with whom they can identify
- Negative racial and gender stereotypes—these biases influence evaluation and limit opportunities, thus becoming self-fulfilling prophecies
- In-group resentment—they are sometimes viewed by other members of their group as selling out to the dominant culture

### Relational Skills

- Exclusion from informal networks—individuals have limited access to informal and social networks in their organization
- Peer resentment—finding themselves surrounded by people who question their merit and right to have such a job, resulting in exclusion and isolation

## Recommendations for Inclusive Capacity Building

We recommend the following areas where organizations can use the Four Stages of Contribution Model to enhance the value added by all employees, including women and people of color:

- **Assess the existing situation.** Conduct an assessment to compare the percentage of all employees in each stage with the percentage of women and people of color in those same stages. This will help direct an organization's efforts on inclusive succession planning initiatives for growing and developing future leaders.
- **Go beyond “diversity” or just documenting the “numbers” to focus on inclusion.** Document organizational policies, programs, and managerial practices that position employees for successful transitioning into Stages 3 and 4. This includes appropriate job assignments, such as making a Stage 2 employee a co-leader on a large, complex project to gain experience coordinating, integrating, and coaching—essential skills in Stage 3.
- **Emphasize the need for relational and influential skills at each stage.** Begin with on-boarding to make all employees aware of the need to develop relational and influential as well as technical skills. In addition, provide the resources to help them acquire these skills at each stage. For example, partner new-hire women and people of color with a seasoned “buddy” with a similar background to serve as a valuable resource about the informal culture and other do's and don'ts necessary for success in the organization. Also, harness the networks of existing affinity groups to provide resources and special programs that focus on building relational and influential skills.
- **Set performance expectations and support success.** Once a manager and employee determine what stage the employee should be operating in, they can identify job assignments that will help the individual succeed in that stage and (when appropriate) transition to the next stage. This provides a clear career road map and necessary management support that is especially valuable for women and people of color, who often operate with a deficit in both areas.

- **Incorporate the Four Stages in the on-boarding process.** Solid on-boarding allows women and people of color to have a common language and road map. This includes understanding that Stage 1 employees need to be proactive, willing learners. Since asking questions is critical in Stage 1, managers should understand that women and especially people of color may be reluctant to do so for fear of being labeled incompetent. This way they can be more proactive in encouraging these employees to ask questions.
- **Provide coaching and mentoring.** To put forth effective effort in the face of peer group and in-group resentment, women and people of color need coaches and mentors who understand that these barriers are real and how they impact performance. Candidates include senior women and people of color—either internal or external—who have overcome these barriers and are effective mentors and coaches. Other managers and leaders should also be given opportunities—indeed, be required—to develop awareness and skills necessary to help employees different from themselves deal with these barriers. In addition, the organization can actively encourage affinity groups to provide similar types of coaching and counseling to their members.

## Summary

As our discussion has illustrated, moving more women and people of color into highly valued roles is both necessary and challenging for twenty-first-century corporations, especially given the demographic shifts within the pool of eligible employees. We have provided a point of view and related tools to help achieve this.

What is the real value of what we are proposing? Helping employees develop relational and influential skills while providing a career road map like the Four Stages of Contribution Model can benefit companies in critical ways:

- Desired talent will be attracted to a company where there is evidence of clear career pathways and a commitment to development.
- The attrition of high-potential women and people of color will be significantly reduced as employees experience personal and professional growth in relational and influential, as well as technical areas, and see that career opportunities are attainable through a formal, transparent process.
- Engagement and high performance at every stage will be maximized as people join their “effective effort” with organizational resources and support to ensure both long-term career growth and organizational success.

**Are these benefits worth the effort?** Just ask yourself what the organization would be like if significantly more employees from all backgrounds were high performers, and you’ll have the answer.

## About the Authors

**Michael Hyter** is President and CEO of Novations Group, Inc. He was previously President and CEO for J. Howard & Associates, a division within the Boston-based Novations, Inc. specializing in diversity and inclusion consulting. Hyter's work with executive leaders in Fortune 1000 companies has resulted in organization-wide diversity and development initiatives that have enhanced the business objectives with those companies. He has also helped those firms expand their diversity efforts into their subsidiaries in Europe.

Mike has published articles in *2004 Handbook of Business Strategy*, *Director's Monthly*, *Profiles in Diversity Journal*, and *Inc.* He is also co-author of *The Power of Inclusion: Unlock the Potential and Productivity of Your Workforce*, published by Wiley in 2005. Please visit [www.powerofinclusion.com](http://www.powerofinclusion.com) for more information.

**Maureen Giovannini** is a Senior Consultant at Novations Group where she oversees the firm's research and evaluation projects and conducts many of these projects herself. With professional training in cultural anthropology, Dr. Giovannini specializes in assessing both the formal and informal components of a company's culture as they affect diversity and inclusion. In addition to her research and evaluation roles, she consults with clients around issues of inclusion, performance management, team building, and career development.

## About Novations Group

Novations Group, Inc. is a full-service talent development firm. We partner with clients to enhance their organizational performance by creating environments of continuous learning and development for their employees.

For over 25 years, our professionals have developed research-based approaches to enhancing organizational performance. Headquartered in Boston, MA, Novations has partnered successfully to implement solutions with over 600 clients from a wide spectrum of industries and trained over 100,000 employees.

**To find out more about our capabilities, visit our website at [www.novations.com](http://www.novations.com) or call us at 800.308.2668 for more information.**