CHAPTER 3: The First Key: Select for Talent

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Talent: How Great Managers Define It

"Why does every role, performed at excellence, require talent?"

Normally we associate talent only with celebrated excellence — with a strong emphasis on the word "celebrated." We look at Michael Jordan, swaying and knifing his way to the basket, and we know that neither his training nor his dogged determination is the prime source of his brilliance. He may have both of these, but then so do most other NBA players. Alone, these cannot explain why Michael shines. Deep down we know that his secret weapon is his talent. We look at Robert De Niro and we think the same: He has talent. Tiger Woods, Jay Leno, Maya Angelou, they are all part of the talent club. They are blessed with a secret gift. For most of us talent seems a rare and precious thing, bestowed on special, faraway people. They are different, these people with talent. They are "not us."

Great managers disagree with this definition of talent. It is too narrow, too specialized. Instead they define a talent as "a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied." The emphasis here is on the word "recurring." Your talents, they say, are the behaviors you find yourself doing *often*. You have a mental filter that sifts through your world, forcing you to pay attention to some stimuli, while others slip past you, unnoticed. Your instinctive ability to remember names, rather than just faces, is a talent. Your need to alphabetize your spice rack and color-code your wardrobe is a talent. So is your love of crossword puzzles, or your fascination with risk, or your impatience. Any *recurring* patterns of behavior that can be productively applied are talents. The key to excellent performance, of course, is finding the match between your talents and your role.

This definition of talent is deceptively neutral, almost bland. Nevertheless it guides great managers toward a momentous discovery: *Every* role, performed at excellence, requires talent, because *every* role, performed at excellence, requires certain *recurring* patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. This means that great nurses have talent. So do great truck drivers and great teachers, great housekeepers and great flight attendants. (We will describe some of these talents later in this chapter.)

Whether the excellence is “celebrated” or anonymous, great managers know that excellence is impossible without talent.

The Right Stuff

"Why is talent more important than experience, brainpower, and willpower?"

For most roles, conventional wisdom advises managers to select for experience, for intelligence, or for determination. Talent, if mentioned at all, is an afterthought.

Conventional wisdom says:

"Experience makes the difference." Managers who place a special emphasis on experience pay closest attention to a candidate's work history. They pore over each person's résumé, rating the companies who employed him and the kind of work he performed. They see his past as a window to his future.

"Brainpower makes the difference." These managers put their faith in raw intelligence. They say that as long as you are smart, most roles can be "figured out." Smart people simply "figure it out" better than the rest. When selecting people, they tend to favor articulate applicants blessed with high-powered academic records.

"Willpower makes the difference." This is the "Success is 10 percent inspiration, 90 percent perspiration" school of thought. Managers from this school believe that the technical part of most roles can be taught, whereas the desire to achieve, to persist in the face of obstacles, cannot. When selecting people, they look for past evidence of grit.

As far as it goes, great managers would agree with all of this advice — experience *can* teach valuable lessons; intelligence *is* a boon; and willpower — which great managers actually label a talent — *is* almost impossible to teach. But conventional wisdom stops there. It fails to take into account that there are so many other kinds of talents and that the *right talents*, more than experience, more than brainpower, and more than willpower alone, are *the* prerequisites for excellence in all roles — talents such as a waiter's ability to form opinions, empathy in nurses, assertiveness in salespeople, or, in managers, the ability to individualize. Conventional wisdom assumes either that these behaviors can be trained after the person has been hired or that these characteristics are relatively unimportant to performance on the job.

Both assumptions are false. First, you cannot teach talent. You cannot teach someone to form strong opinions, to feel the emotions of others, to revel in confrontation, or to pick up on the subtle differences in how best

to manage each person. You have to select for talents like these. (We shall explain why this is true later in the chapter.)

Second, talents like these prove to be the driving force behind an individual's job performance. It's not that experience, brainpower, and willpower are unimportant. It's just that an employee's full complement of talents — what drives her, how she thinks, how she builds relationships — is *more* important.

No matter how carefully you select for experience, brainpower, or willpower, you still end up with a *range* in performance. In the retail company described in chapter 1, all store managers faced the same conditions and were provided the same training, yet some were 15 percent over their P/L budget and some were 30 percent below.

In a large telecommunications company, the lower-performing customer service representatives take three times as many calls as the best reps to resolve the same customer complaint — and since millions of customers call in each year, and each call costs the company $10, this range in performance rightly gets management's attention.

Similarly, a nationwide trucking company reports that their average drivers cover 125,000 miles per year and suffer four accidents per year — yet one of their best drivers has just celebrated his four millionth mile of accident-free driving.

There is range in every role, no matter how simple it seems. While experience, brainpower, and willpower all affect performance significantly, only the presence of the right talents — recurring patterns of behavior that fit the role — can account for this *range* in performance. Only the presence of talents can explain why, all other factors being equal, some people excel in the role and some struggle.

Let's take an extreme example where candidates were carefully selected for experience, brainpower, and willpower. They were expertly trained, and yet they still performed very differently from one another.

Brigadier General Don Flickinger faced one of the more daunting management challenges in history. He had to find and train seven men to perform an extremely difficult role. No one had ever performed this role before, and each man would have the opportunity to do it only once. The stakes were very high. Succeed in their role, and these men would restore America's faith in America. Fail, and they would add fuel to the Eastern bloc's swelling self-confidence.

As any manager would, the general spent a great deal of time and energy trying to find the right men for the job. First he laid out his minimum criteria: They had to be no older than thirty-nine, no taller than five feet eleven, in excellent physical condition, and graduates of a military test-pilot school, with at least 1,500 hours of flying experience in jets.

After passing muster, all successful applicants were subjected to the most exacting physical and psychological tests. Tests of physical endurance — how long can you support a column of mercury with one lungful of breath? Tests of mental stability — how long can you endure being locked up in a pitch-black, soundproof "sensory deprivation chamber" with no idea when you will be released? Tests of pain suppression — if we drive a long needle into the big muscle at the base of your thumb and pass an electric current through it, what will you do?

Eventually the general found his seven men.

He found Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, John Glenn, Scott Carpenter, Wally Schirra, Gordon Cooper, and Deke Slayton. He found the seven astronauts of the Mercury Space Program.

And like any good manager, after having found them, he trained them. They were taught everything from the esoterics of gravitation and rocket propulsion to the very practical matter of how to control yaw, roll, and pitch in the vacuum of space. They were given the best teachers, the most up-to-date equipment, and the time to focus. Over two years they acquired a wealth of new skills and knowledge.

By May 5, 1961, they were ready. Alan Shepard's fifteen-minute sub-orbital flight was the first of six successful missions (Deke Slayton fell foul of a preexisting heart condition), which culminated in Gordon Cooper's thirty-four-hour, twenty-two-orbit marathon.

By the time Cooper splashed down on May 17, 1963, the Russians had been caught up with, America's pride had been restored, and the platform had been laid for the leap to the moon.

From almost every angle, the MISS program (Man in Space Soonest) was a model of project execution excellence: superior technology combined with carefully selected and well-trained employees, all focused on a specific mission and buoyed by the hopes of a nation. No wonder it succeeded.

But look closer. When you examine the Mercury Program through a strictly managerial lens, you do not see a picture-perfect project. You

see six very different missions. And putting aside for a moment the spectacular dimension of the endeavor and the inspirational bravery of each astronaut, the quality of the performance in each of the six missions can be comparatively ranked — two textbook, two heroic, and two mediocre. Look closer still and you realize that, in most instances, the individual astronauts themselves caused this variation.

Alan Shepard and Wally Schirra, both career military men, executed their duties perfectly: no drama, no surprises, textbook missions.

John Glenn and Gordon Cooper were a little special. Glenn was the heroes' hero. Cooper was so laid-back, he actually fell asleep on the launchpad. But both of them faced severe mechanical difficulties and then responded with cool heroism and technical brilliance — Cooper even managed to achieve the most accurate splashdown of all, despite the complete failure of his automatic reentry guidance systems.

The performances of Gus Grissom and Scott Carpenter were rather less impressive. Grissom piloted a clean flight, but he appeared to panic after his capsule splashed down. It seems he blew the escape hatch too early, the capsule filled with water, and it sank to the sea floor sixteen thousand feet below. NASA never recovered the three-thousand-pound capsule.

Carpenter, meanwhile, was so excited to be up in space that while in orbit he maneuvered his capsule this way and that until he had used up almost all his fuel. When it came time to reenter the earth's atmosphere, he was unable to make the appropriate corrections to his angle of reentry and ended up splashing down 250 miles from his designated landing site. He was lucky. If he had been a couple of degrees shallower in his approach, the capsule would have bounced off the atmosphere and spun off into space for eternity.

NASA must have looked at the performance of their astronauts and wondered, "Why this *range* in performance? We selected for experience, for intelligence, and for determination. They all had the same training and the same tools. So why didn't they perform the same? Why did Cooper excel while Carpenter struggled? Why did Glenn behave so calmly and Grissom less so?"

The answer is that despite being similar in many ways — and all exceptionally accomplished, in comparison with the rest of us — these six men possessed different talents.

What does that mean? It means that although each of these men faced the same stimuli, the way they reacted to these stimuli and then behaved was very different. During orbit, Carpenter was so excited that he couldn't stop playing with the altitude jets; yet Cooper felt so calm, he actually slept through some of his orbits. At takeoff, Grissom's pulse rate spurted to 150. Glenn's never climbed above 80.

Same stimuli, vastly different reactions. Why? Because each man filtered the world differently. Each man's mental filter sorted and sifted, making one man acutely aware of stimuli to which another was blind. Bobbing in the water after splashdown, the dependable Wally Schirra was so focused on "doing it right" that he stayed in the capsule for four hours in order to complete every step of his postflight routine. His mental filter blocked out any twinges of claustrophobia. Gus Grissom's didn't. All indications are that barely five minutes after splashing down, he felt the tiny little capsule closing in around him. His mental filter, no longer able to dampen his growing panic, told him to get out, to escape, now, *now*. The hatch blew.

You have a filter, a characteristic way of responding to the world around you. We all do. Your filter tells you which stimuli to notice and which to ignore; which to love and which to hate. It creates your innate motivations — are you competitive, altruistic, or ego driven? It defines how you think — are you disciplined or laissez-faire, practical or strategic? It forges your prevailing attitudes — are you optimistic or cynical, calm or anxious, empathetic or cold? It creates in you all of your distinct patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. In effect, your filter is the source of your talents.

Your filter is unique. It sorts through every stimulus and creates a world that only you can see. This filter can account for the fact that the same stimulus produces vastly different reactions in you from those in the person next to you.

For example, imagine you are asleep on a long flight when the plane encounters some high-level turbulence. Do you wake up, convinced that the main reason you haven't heard any explanation from the cockpit is that the pilots are too busy strapping on their parachutes? Or do you stay sleeping, a slightly more vigorous head nodding the only sign that your body notices the bumps?

Imagine you are at a party with some people you know and some you don't. Do you find yourself compelled to dive into the crowd of strangers and swim easily through the throng, remembering names, telling stories,

turning strangers into friends? Or do you hug the corner with your significant other, scanning the room for anyone else you might know and nervously rehearsing the one joke you might have to tell tonight?

Imagine you are arguing with your boss. As the argument intensifies, do you find yourself becoming colder, clearer, more articulate, as your brain hands you one perfect word after another? Or, despite all your preparations, does your emotion rise and your brain shut down, separating you from all of those carefully rehearsed words?

Because every human being is guided by his unique filter, the same situation produces very different reactions. What is ridiculously easy for him is excruciatingly difficult for you. What is stimulating to you is tedious for someone else.

All truck drivers face the same situation — miles of road, an unwieldy load, and swarms of little cars buzzing around them. They all have the same training, the same experience. But some of these drivers drive twice as many miles as their colleagues yet suffer half as many accidents. Why? Their filter. When you ask the best drivers, "What do you think about when you are driving?" they all say the same thing. They all say, "I think about what would I do *if* ... *if* that car pulled out right now. *If* that pedestrian decided to try to cross before the light changed. *If* my brakes failed." While the other drivers are thinking about the next rest stop, how much longer they have to go today, or other, more diverting subjects, the best drivers are playing "what if?" games, anticipating scenarios, planning evasive maneuvers. Same stimuli, different reactions, very different performance.

Likewise all customer service representatives face the same situation — thousands of telephone calls coming in from disgruntled customers. They all have the same technology, the same experience and training. Yet the best take a third fewer calls than the average to solve the same complaint. Why? Because for the best, many of whom are shy in person, the phone is an instrument of intimacy. It offers them shelter from the customer while at the same time giving them the chance to reach through the phone and connect more quickly and more closely than if they were standing face-to-face with her. They picture what room the customer is in. They imagine what the customer looks like. They smile and wave their hands even though they know that the customer cannot see what they are doing. Instinctively their filter takes every disembodied voice and fashions a full human being. On the other end of the line, the customer feels the difference.

This filtering of their world is not a conscious, rational process. It does not happen once a week, allowing them the luxury of sitting back and weighing up all alternatives before deciding on the most “sensible” course of action. Rather, their filter is constantly at work, sorting, sifting, creating their world in real time.

Yours does the same. It’s happening now, as you read this book. Maybe, just at this moment, you have looked up from the page to pause and think through something. Maybe you haven’t. Maybe you are speed-reading this so that you can get to the end of the chapter before your plane flight ends. Maybe the flight has nothing to do with it; you are simply a compulsive speed reader. Maybe you have just picked up your pen to underline this paragraph or to make a scrawled note in the margin. Maybe you hate it when people mark up books.

Your filter is always working. Of all the possibilities of things you could do or feel or think, your filter is constantly telling you the few things *you must* do or feel or think.

Your filter, more than your race, sex, age, or nationality, is You.

The Decade of the Brain

"How much of a person can the manager change?"

How much of You can be changed?

If you hate meeting new people, can you learn to love the icebreaking with strangers? If you shy away from confrontation, can you be made to revel in the cut and thrust of debate? If the bright lights make you sweat, can you be taught to thrill to the challenge of public speaking? Can you carve new talents?

Many managers and many companies assume that the answer to all these questions is "Yes." With the best of intentions they tell their employees that everyone has the same potential. They encourage their employees to be open and dedicated to learning new ways to behave. To help them climb up the company hierarchy, they send their employees to training classes designed to teach all manner of new behaviors — empathy, assertiveness, relationship building, innovation, strategic thinking. From their perspective, one of the most admirable qualities an employee can possess is the willingness to transform herself through learning and self-discipline.

The world's great managers don't share this perspective. Remember their mantra:

People don't change that much.
Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out.
Try to draw out what was left in.
That is hard enough.

They believe that a person's talents, his mental filter, are "what was left in." Therefore no amount of "smile school" training is going to transform the person who is intimidated by strangers into a smooth wooer. Despite his best efforts, the person who becomes less articulate the angrier he gets will never acquire what it takes to excel at debate. And no matter how much he understands the value of "win-win" scenarios, the intense competitor will never learn to love them.

A person's mental filter is as enduring and as unique as her fingerprint. This is a radical belief, one that flies in the face of decades of self-help mythology. But over the last ten years, neuroscience has started to confirm what these great managers have long believed.

In 1990 Congress and the president declared the nineties the decade of the brain. They authorized funding, sponsored conventions, and

generally did everything within their power to help the scientific community unravel the mysteries of the human mind.

Their encouragement accelerated ongoing efforts by industry, academia, and research organizations. According to Lewis L. Judd, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health: “The pace of progress in neuroscience is so great that 90 percent of all we know about the brain we learned in the last ten years.”

In the past we had to infer the workings of the brain from the behavior of the patient. Today new technologies like positron emission tomography (PET) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) actually allow scientists to see the brain at work. Armed with these and other tools, we have taken giant leaps in learning.

We have learned that the causes of mental illness are as biological as any physical disease. We have learned why the neurotransmitter dopamine calms us down and why serotonin fires us up. We have learned that, contrary to what we used to think, our memories are not stored in one particular place but are scattered like clues on every highway and back alley of our brain.

And we have learned how the brain grows. Given the pace of scientific discovery in this arena, we shall surely advance our knowledge dramatically over the next few years. But this is what we know today.

At birth the child’s brain contains one hundred billion neurons, more brain cells than there are stars in the Milky Way. These cells will grow and die regularly throughout the child’s life, but their number will remain roughly the same. These cells are the raw material of the mind. But they are not the mind. The mind of the child lives between these cells. In the connections between the cells. In the synapses.

During the first fifteen years of life, the carving of these synaptic connections is where the drama unfolds.

From the day she was born, the child’s mind begins to reach out, aggressively, exuberantly. Beginning at the center of the brain, every neuron sends out thousands and thousands of signals. They are trying to talk to one another, to communicate, to make a connection. Imagine everyone alive today simultaneously trying to get in touch with 150,000 other people and you will get some idea of the wonderful scale, complexity, and vitality of the young mind.

By the time the child reaches her third birthday the number of successful connections made is colossal — up to fifteen thousand

synaptic connections for each of its one hundred billion neurons.

But this is too many. She is overloaded with the volume of information whirling around inside her head. She needs to make sense of it all. Her sense. So during the next ten years or so, her brain refines and focuses its network of connections. The stronger synaptic connections become stronger still. The weaker ones wither away. Dr. Harry Chugani, professor of neurology at Wayne State University Medical School, likens this pruning process to a highway system:

“Roads with the most traffic get widened. The ones that are rarely used fall into disrepair.”

Scientists are still arguing about what causes some mental highways to be used more regularly than others. Some contend that the child’s genetic inheritance predisposes her toward certain mental pathways. Others claim that the way she is raised has a significant effect on which pathways will survive the Darwinian pruning and which will die.

These views are not mutually exclusive. But whatever their nature-nurture bias, few disagree on the outcome of this mental pruning. By the time the child reaches her early teens, she has half as many synaptic connections as she did when she was three. Her brain has carved out a unique network of connections. She has some beautiful, frictionless, traffic-free, four-lane highways, where the connections are smooth and strong. And she has some barren wastelands, where no signal at all makes it across.

If she ends up with a four-lane highway for empathy, she will feel every emotion of those around her as though it were her own. By contrast, if she has a wasteland for empathy, she will be emotionally blind, forever saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person — not out of malice, but simply out of an inability to pick up the frequency of the emotional signals being sent. Likewise if she has a four-lane highway for confrontation, she will be that lucky person whose brain just hands her one perfect word after another during the heat of a debate. If she has a wasteland for confrontation, she will find that her brain always shuts her mouth down at the most critical moments.

These mental pathways are her filter. They produce the recurring pattern of behaviors that makes her unique. They tell her which stimuli to respond to and which to ignore. They define where she will excel and where she will struggle. They create all of her enthusiasms and all of her indifferences.

The carving of these pathways is the carving of her character. Neuroscience is telling us that beyond her mid-teens there is a limit to how much of her character she can recarve.

This does not mean that she cannot change. As we will describe later, she can learn new skills and new knowledge. She can alter her values. She can develop a greater sense of self-awareness and a greater capacity for self-regulation. And if she does indeed have a wasteland for confrontation, then with enough training, coaching, and encouragement, she can probably be helped to build a thin path so that she is at least able to cope with confrontation. But it does mean that in terms of these mental pathways, no amount of training, coaching, or encouragement will enable her to turn her barren wastelands into frictionless four-lane highways.

Neuroscience confirms what great managers know. Her filter, and the recurring patterns of behavior that it creates, is enduring. In the most important ways she is permanently, wonderfully, unique.

So are you. And, of course, so are the people you hire.

Skills, Knowledge, and Talents

"What is the difference among the three?"

Great managers are not troubled by the fact that there is a limit to how much they can rewire someone's brain. Instead they view it as a happy confirmation that people are different. There is no point wishing away this individuality. It's better to nurture it. It's better to help someone understand his filter and then channel it toward productive behavior.

So if you can't carve out new talents for your people, what, if anything, can you change about them?

First, you can help them discover their hidden talents. As we shall discuss in more detail in chapter 5, the best managers are adept at spotting a glimpse of a talent in someone and then repositioning him so that he can play to that talent more effectively.

Second, a manager can teach her employees new skills and new knowledge. Here we come to one of the most profound insights shared by great managers: Skills, knowledge, and talents are distinct elements of a person's performance. The distinction among the three is that skills and knowledge can easily be taught, whereas talents cannot. Combined in the same person, they create an enormously potent compound. But you must never confuse talents with skills and knowledge. If you do, you may waste a great deal of time and money trying to teach something that is fundamentally unteachable.

Skills are the how-to's of a role. They are capabilities that can be transferred from one person to another. For accountants, arithmetic is a skill. If, for some strange reason, the neophyte accountant doesn't know how to do arithmetic, he can still be taught. For pilots, the mechanics of yaw, roll, and pitch are a skill. For administrative assistants, Microsoft Word or Excel are skills. For nurses, the details of how to give a safe injection are a skill. The best way to teach a skill is to break down the total performance into steps, which the student then reassembles. And, naturally, the best way to learn a skill is to practice.

Your knowledge is simply "what you are aware of." There are two kinds of knowledge: *factual knowledge* — things you know; and *experiential knowledge* — understandings you have picked up along the way.

Factual knowledge for an accountant would be knowing the rules of double-entry bookkeeping. For flight attendants, the Federal Aviation

Administration's safety regulations are factual knowledge. For salespeople, their products' features and benefits are factual knowledge. For engineers, the National Bureau of Standards' electrical frequencies are factual knowledge. Factual knowledge can and should be taught.

Experiential knowledge is a little different. It is less tangible and therefore much harder to teach. Acquiring it is your responsibility. You must discipline yourself to stop, look back on past experiences, and try to make sense of them. Through this kind of musing or reflection, you can start to see patterns and connections. You can start to understand.

Some of these understandings are practical. For example, over a number of years an accountant comes to know a variety of ways to shield a client's assets from excessive taxation. A retail store manager, reflecting back on customer buying patterns, now knows which products to highlight during the holiday seasons. A teacher, remembering the glazed eyes of past students, is now prepared with videos and field trips to spice up the particularly stodgy sections of the course.

Some understandings are more conceptual. Your awareness of who you are and how you come across to others is experiential knowledge. It comes with time, if you are listening. In the same way, your values — those aspects of life that you hold dear — are experiential knowledge. As you make your choices, sometimes compromising, sometimes holding firm, you come to realize that certain aspects of your life are more important than others. These critical aspects become your values, guiding the choices you make in the future. Some of these values will remain constant throughout your life. Others will change with time and reflection.

Talents are different phenomena altogether. Talents are the four-lane highways in your mind, those that carve your recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. Through Gallup's studies of great accountants, we have discovered that one of their most important talents is an innate love of precision. Ask a great accountant — not any accountant, but a great accountant — when he smiles and he will tell you, "When the books balance." When the books balance, his world is perfect. He may not show it, but inside he is aglow. All he can think about is, Oh, when can I do that again! This might seem rather odd to you. But if you think about it, for the person blessed with an innate love of precision, accountancy must be a wonderful job. Every time his books

balance he experiences absolute perfection in his work. How many of us can claim that?

A love of precision is not a skill. Nor is it knowledge. It is a talent. If you don't possess it, you will never excel as an accountant. If someone does not have this talent as part of his filter, there is very little a manager can do to inject it.

THREE KINDS OF TALENT

At Gallup we have studied the talents of over 150 distinct roles and, in the process, have identified a multitude of different talents (some of which are described in the appendix). As you would imagine, the talents needed to excel at these roles vary greatly — an all-star goalie in the NHL possesses rather different talents than an excellent Catholic deacon; the best nurses are not cut from the same cloth as the best stockbrokers.

Fortunately we have found a way to simplify these diverse talents into three basic categories: **striving** talents, **thinking** talents, and **relating** talents.

Striving talents explain the *why* of a person. They explain *why* he gets out of bed every day, *why* he is motivated to push and push just that little bit harder. Is he driven by his desire to stand out, or is good enough good enough for him? Is he intensely competitive or intensely altruistic or both? Does he define himself by his technical competence, or does he just want to be liked?

Thinking talents explain the *how* of a person. They explain *how* he thinks, *how* he weighs up alternatives, *how* he comes to his decisions. Is he focused, or does he like to leave all of his options open? Is he disciplined and structured, or does he love surprises? Is he a linear, practical thinker, or is he strategic, always playing mental "what if?" games with himself?

Relating talents explain the *who* of a person. They explain *whom* he trusts, *whom* he builds relationships with, *whom* he confronts, and *whom* he ignores. Is he drawn to win over strangers, or is he at ease only with his close friends? Does he think that trust must be earned, or does he extend trust to everyone in the belief that most will prove worthy of it? Does he confront people dispassionately, or does he avoid confrontation until finally exploding in an emotional tirade?

Striving, **thinking**, and **relating**: these are the three basic categories of talent. Within each you will have your own combination of four-lane

highways and barren wastelands. No matter how much you might yearn to be different, your combination of talents, and the recurring behaviors that it creates, will remain stable, familiar to you and to others throughout your life.

A COUPLE OF MIND GAMES

If you want to experience firsthand the distinct properties of skills, knowledge, and talents, try this little game.

Can you see the well-known phrase or saying in this word:

MILL1ON

The solution: “One in a million.”

If the answer leapt out at you, then you probably have an innate talent for finding word patterns. We have seen this kind of thinking talent in great computer programmers. Like them, you might also love crossword puzzles and brainteasers.

But perhaps you didn’t see the answer immediately. If so, don’t worry. We will try to teach you a skill that will help you to improve your pattern-finding performance. The skill has three steps:

1. Identify what seems out of place within the word.
2. Evaluate where it is in relation to the whole word.
3. Combine steps 1 and 2 and discover the phrase.

Thus, with this first puzzle, the number 1 is out of place. Where is it in relation to the whole word? It is in the middle. So by combining these two facts, you discover the phrase: “One in a million.” Simple, really.

Now try gaining some experience at applying this new skill. Can you see the well-known phrase in this word:

PAY

What is out of place? The letter A. Where is it in relation to the rest of the word? It is raised and in the middle.

The solution: “A raise in pay.”

How about this one:

TEMPERATURE

What is out of place? The letter A again. Where is it in relation to the rest of the word? It is dropped and in the middle.

The solution: “A drop in temperature.”

One more:

Hopefully the solution is starting to come a little quicker: “A fall from grace.”

Okay, you have been given the opportunity to learn a new skill and to gain some experiential knowledge at applying this skill, just as you provide your people in the real world. But now we are going to change the rules on you, just as in the real world.

Can you see the well-known phrase in these words:

This one is a little harder, but if you have the innate thinking talent for perceiving patterns, then once again the solution should gradually emerge:

“But on second thought.”

But if you don’t have this talent, then the skills and knowledge you just acquired didn’t help you at all, did they? Lacking the talent, your performance suffered when you were confronted with a novel situation not covered in your training.

The same thing happens in the real world. Let’s say you have just trained some new associates in the skills and knowledge they need to provide good customer service. You send them out into the field. As long as the customers’ requests stay within the guidelines covered in training, most of them perform acceptably well.

But what happens when, all of a sudden, they are confronted by a customer request that they have never heard before? If they have the relating talent of empathy and/or persuasion, they will perform well. Instinctively they will find just the right words and just the right tone to calm the customer down and resolve the situation.

But if they lack these talents, all the skills and knowledge they have just acquired will be of little help. Their performance will suffer.

The power of skills and knowledge is that they are transferable from one person to another. Their limitation is that they are often situation-

specific — faced with an unanticipated scenario, they lose much of their power.

In contrast, the power of talent is that it is transferable from situation to situation. Given the right stimulus, it fires spontaneously. If you have the striving talent of competitiveness, then almost any kind of contest can spark you. If you have the relating talent of empathy, then every emotion speaks to you. If you have the relating talent of assertiveness, then no matter what the subject, you will be able to state your case plainly and persuasively.

The limitation of talent, of course, is that it is very hard to transfer from one person to another. You cannot teach talent. You can only select for talent.

SIMPLE LANGUAGE, SMART THINKING

Now that you know the difference between skills, knowledge, and talents, you can use these terms to throw light on all the other words used to describe human behavior — words like "competencies," "habits," "attitude," and "drive." At present many of us assume that they all mean virtually the same thing. We use phrases like "interpersonal skills," "skill set," "work habits," or "core competencies" so naturally that we rarely question their true meaning.

This isn't just careless language. It's careless thinking. It leads managers astray. It leads them to waste precious time, effort, and money trying, with the best of intentions, to train characteristics that are fundamentally untrainable.

So let's look more closely at competencies, habits, attitude, and drive. Which of these are skills, or knowledge, and therefore can be changed in a person? And which are talents and therefore cannot?

Competencies

Developed by the British military during World War II to define the perfect officer, competencies are now used in many companies to describe behaviors that are expected from all managers and leaders. Although no one really believes that this perfect manager/leader exists, competencies can occasionally be useful if they help a company think through the ideal set of behaviors for a particular role.

But if you do use them, be careful. Competencies are part skills, part knowledge, and part talent. They lump together, haphazardly, some characteristics that can be taught with others that cannot. Consequently,

even though designed with clarity in mind, competencies can wind up confusing everybody. Managers soon find themselves sending people off to training classes to learn such “competencies” as strategic thinking or attention to detail or innovation. But these aren’t competencies. These are talents. They cannot be taught.

If you are going to use competencies, make it clear which are skills or knowledge and therefore can be taught, and which are talents and therefore cannot. For example, a competency such as “Implements business practices and controls” is a skill — all managers can learn it to some minimum degree of proficiency. A competency such as “Calm under fire” is a talent — you cannot teach someone to be cool.

Habits

“Habit” is another potentially confusing term. We have been told that our habits are second nature. We have been told that we can all change this nature and acquire new habits. Again, this advice is well-intended but inaccurate. Most habits are our *first* nature. Most habits are talents.

If you are habitually assertive or habitually empathic or habitually competitive, then you are going to have a tough time changing these habits. They are enduring. They make you You. It’s potentially disastrous to suggest that the only way to become more effective is to try to change your first nature.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that you cannot change some of your behaviors. You can. Over time, through reflection, you might change your values and so learn a more positive and productive way to apply your talents. You might choose to play to one talent more than another. You might combine your talents with relevant skills. You might learn to accept your unique combination of talents and so become less defensive or insecure. There is a great deal you can change.

But whatever you do, the beauty of this approach is that it relies on *self-awareness*, rather than self-denial, to help you become more effective. Some of your behaviors may have changed, but you haven’t been forced to contort yourself into someone else. You have simply cultivated your unique set of talents.

Attitudes

Many managers say they select for attitude — a positive attitude, a team-focused attitude, a service-oriented attitude. They are right to do so, because a person’s prevailing attitudes are part of her mental filter.

They are created by the interplay of her unique pattern of highways and wastelands. Her attitudes are talents.

She may be cynical or trusting. She may be an optimist or a malcontent. She may be experimental or conservative. None of these attitudes are necessarily better than any of the others. None of them will prevent a person from playing certain roles extremely well — for example, the malcontent might be a powerful entrepreneur, driven by her dissatisfaction with the status quo. The cynic might fit right into a role in law, policing, or investigative reporting, anywhere a healthy mistrust is a prerequisite.

But *all* of these attitudes form part of the person's recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. Managers may be able to change someone's mood from one day to the next. However, managers will always struggle to change that person's prevailing attitudes. As Mick K., a manager in a large consulting company, describes it: "If I find myself telling the same person to 'look on the bright side' time and time and time again, I should take a hint. He's not a bright-sider. He's a dark-sider. I should stop wasting my breath and try to find a role where skepticism is key to success."

Drive

Many managers make a distinction between talent and drive. They often find themselves counseling someone by saying: "Look, you are very talented. But you need to apply yourself or that talent will go to waste."

This advice sounds helpful. More than likely it is well-intended. But fundamentally it is flawed. A person's drive is not changeable. What drives him is decided by his mental filter, by the relative strength or weakness of the highways in his mind. His drives are, in fact, his striving talents.

Take the striving talent of competitiveness as an example. Some people have a four-lane highway for competition. Show them scores and they will instinctively try to use these scores to compare their performance with that of their peers. They love scores, because what you can measure you can compare; and if you can compare, you can compete.

However, people with a wasteland for competition will see the same scores and not feel any jolt of energy at all. Putting themselves on a level playing field, pitting their best efforts against their peers, and winning …

means nothing to them. They rationalize their behavior by opining, “I don’t like competition; I prefer win-win scenarios,” or the classic, “I prefer to compete with myself.” But these comments are just signs that their filter is, understandably, trying to describe itself in the most positive light.

The truth is that they are not competitive. There is nothing good or bad about this. It is simply who they are. And there is not much that either they or you, their manager, can do about it.

Similarly, some people have a four-lane highway for constant achievement, a striving talent we call achiever. They may not have to win, but they do feel a burning need to achieve something tangible every single day. And these kind of people mean “every single day.” For them, every day — workday, weekend, vacation — every day starts at zero. They have to rack up some numbers by the end of the day in order to feel good about themselves. This burning flame may dwindle as evening comes, but the next morning it rekindles itself, spurring its host to look for new items to cross off his list. These people are the fabled “self-starters.”

Not all roles require employees to possess this striving talent of achiever. Nurses, for example, do not have to generate all of their drive from within. Instead they have to *respond* caringly and efficiently to the urgent needs that face them every day — for nurses the altruistic striving talent mission is much more important than achiever. But if you manage roles that do require achiever — like an insurance agent, a pharmaceutical salesperson, or any role where the person must initiate rather than respond — then remember: You had better select for it. Because if a person does not feel this burning fire, you cannot light it for him.

The same applies to all striving talents: the need to be of service, the need to be on stage, the need to be seen as competent, the need to help others grow. All of these drives are talents, and therefore they have the same characteristics as other talents. Namely, they are part of each person’s mental filter. They are unique and enduring.

A manager can never breathe motivational life into someone else. All she can do is try to identify each employee’s striving four-lane highways and then, as far as is possible, cultivate these. (More on this in chapter 5.)

When describing human behavior, we would advise you to stick with the clarity of skills, knowledge, and talents. Tread carefully when using

habits or competencies — they lump too much together rather haphazardly. Likewise, if you feel a need to use attitude or drive, be cautious. Remember that a person's drive and her prevailing attitudes are talents, and as such, they are very hard to change. When you hear yourself berating the person to "get a better attitude," watch out. You might be asking her to tackle the impossible.

None of this implies that a person cannot change. Everyone can change. Everyone can learn. Everyone can get a little better. The language of skills, knowledge, and talents simply helps a manager identify where radical change is possible and where it is not.

The World According to Talent

"Which myths can we now dispel?"

Guided by their own beliefs, and supported by recent scientific advances, great managers can now dispel two of the most pervasive management myths.

MYTH #1: "TALENTS ARE RARE AND SPECIAL"

There is nothing very special about talent. If talents are simply recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior, then talents are actually rather commonplace. Everyone has certain recurring patterns of behavior. No one can take credit for these talents. They are an accident of birth, "the clash of the chromosomes," as the ethologist Robert Ardrey described them. However, each person can and should take credit for cultivating his unique set of talents.

The best way to help an employee cultivate his talents is to find him a role that plays to those talents. Employees who find such roles *are* special. These people are naturally able to do what someone is prepared to pay them to do. We rightly label these people "talented."

Take nursing as an example. Working with a large healthcare provider, Gallup had a chance to study some of the best nurses in the world. As part of our research we asked a study group of excellent nurses to inject one hundred patients and a control group of less productive nurses to perform the same injection on the same population of one hundred patients. Although the procedure was exactly the same, the patients reported feeling much less pain from the best nurses than from the rest. Why? What were the best nurses doing to lessen the pain? Did they have some special technique with the needle? Did they apply the disinfectant using a firmer hand or a softer swab?

Apparently not. Apparently it all came down to what the nurse said to the patient right before the needle punctured the skin. The average nurses introduced themselves with a brisk, "Oh, don't worry, this won't hurt a bit," and then plunged in the needle with businesslike efficiency.

The best nurses opted for a very different approach. They were just as efficient with the needle, but they set the stage rather more carefully. "This is going to hurt a little," they admitted. "But don't worry, I'll be as gentle as I can."

The best nurses were blessed with the relating talent empathy. They knew the injection would hurt, and each of them, in their own style, felt compelled to share that knowledge with the patient. Surprisingly, this confession eased the patients' pain. To the patients it seemed as though the nurse were, in some small way, going through the experience with them. The nurse was on their side. The nurse understood. So when the needle broke the skin, somehow it didn't feel as bad as they thought it would.

The relating talent of empathy is not particularly special. Many people have it and call upon it in all aspects of their life. But those people with empathy who become nurses *are* special. They can share a patient's pain. They are "talented."

Similarly, some people are fascinated with risk. This striving talent is neither a good thing nor a bad thing, although it can prompt some otherwise normal people to hurl themselves out of planes or swim with great white sharks just for the fun of it. However, if these people become anesthesiologists or surgeons, then their four-lane highway for risk becomes a positive strength. For them, the literal life-or-death quality of their work is a thrill, not a pressure. They are special, these people. They are "talented."

The same goes for the person with the talent for remembering names as well as merely faces. This talent is nice to have, but it becomes particularly valuable if she is hired as the concierge in a hotel.

In all of these situations the talent alone isn't special. It is the matching of the talent with the role that is special. As with the performing arts, the secret to great performances is all in the casting.

Of course, in today's highly specialized business world, finding the right fit between the person and the role is a good deal more challenging than it used to be. It is not enough to say, "This person has a talent for assertiveness; I think I'll hire him to sell." You have to know very specifically what kind of selling you are going to be asking him to do. For example, to be a great salesperson for IBM, as in many sales roles, you have to love pushing for the close — a striving talent — and you have to know exactly when and how to do it — a relating talent. These talents, among others, are critical to an individual's success in the role.

But if you are a salesperson for Merck, the pharmaceutical giant, you'd better not have these talents, because you'll never have a chance to use them. The job will quickly frustrate you. The goal of pharmaceutical sales is for the sales representative to build up influence

with the doctor or the HMO gradually, so that, over time, more of *your* drugs are prescribed. Here, success has a great deal to do with the sales rep's relating talent for patience and influence and almost nothing to do with a talent for closing.

As a manager your job is not to teach people talent. Your job is to help them earn the accolade "talented" by matching their talent to the role. To do this well, like all great managers, you have to pay close attention to the subtle but significant differences between roles.

MYTH #2: "SOME ROLES ARE SO EASY, THEY DON'T REQUIRE TALENT"

The famous management theorist Oscar Wilde once said:

"A truth ceases to be a truth as soon as two people perceive it."

All right, so Mr. Wilde was better known for his wit than for his management advice; nonetheless, every manager should be required to remember this one remark. Although he phrased it in the extreme, Mr. Wilde simply meant that the only truth is your own. The world you see is seen by you alone. What entices you and what repels you, what strengthens you and what weakens you, is part of a pattern that no one else shares. Therefore, as Mr. Wilde said, no two people can perceive the same "truth," because each person's perspective is different.

This can be both a blessing and curse. You are blessed with a wonderfully unique filter but cursed with a systematic inability to understand anybody else's. True individuality can be lonely.

One way to cope with this loneliness is to succumb to the illusion that other people operate under many of the same assumptions as you. Your ambitions, passions, likes, and dislikes are not special or distinct. They are "normal." So you are "normal." In moments of calm objectivity, you may concede that your point of view is not the only one, but day to day it is simply easier if you assume that everyone shares yours.

Of course, this is a generalization — some people, particularly empathic people, seem able to walk a genuine mile in someone else's moccasins. Nonetheless it is a generalization that pervades our working world. Managers look at "lower-level" roles like housekeeping or outbound telemarketing and wonder, "How could anyone want to do that job? That job must be so demoralizing." Misled by the illusion that everyone shares their filter, they make two false assumptions: first, that virtually anyone with the right training could do the job adequately; and

second, that everyone, regardless of who they are, will want to be promoted out of the job as soon as possible. With the best of intentions, they then define these roles as “entry-level” and build career paths and compensation plans that reward top performers with speedy promotion out of the “drudgery.”

Great managers do not believe that their filter is common to everyone. Instead, when they select for a role, they are guided by the belief that some people are probably wired to excel at this role and to derive enduring satisfaction from doing it well. The Gallup research confirms this belief. Let’s take hotel housekeepers as an example.

Most of us haven’t spent much time mulling over the details of housekeeping. But consider, for a moment, what hotel housekeepers do and how often they have to do it. Put yourself in their shoes.

Okay.

Two things might have occurred to you: first, that this is an easy job anyone with a modicum of responsibility can do; and second, that this is a terrible job that everyone, including housekeepers, must hate to do.

If these thoughts crossed your mind, then you would be wrong on both counts.

We shouldn’t devalue housekeepers. Anyone can probably clean a hotel room once in a while, but great housekeepers are special. Every day they vacuum themselves out of each room knowing that the next day they will return to find the room hit by the usual tornado of towels, toiletries, and bed linen. It is enough to make Sisyphus weary, endlessly pushing his rock up the hill. But great housekeepers don’t get weary. They get stronger. They are not beaten down by the relentless grind of their work. On the contrary, they seem to be energized by it. In their mind, their work asks them to be accountable, to be creative, and to achieve something tangible each and every day. They *want* to come in and attack their section of rooms. The challenge gives them strength.

All this is so because great housekeepers possess a certain special set of talents. Does this sound incongruous? What follows may give you a clearer sense of some of the talents needed to be a great housekeeper.

Gallup was asked by a large entertainment company to help them find more housekeepers like their best. This company already knew how special housekeepers were. Leaders in service quality the world over, they had over fifteen thousand hotel rooms, cleaned by over three

thousand housekeepers. But to maintain their edge over competitors, they wanted to learn more about what made their best the best.

Sitting around the table we had assembled eight of this company's best housekeepers. Some were shy, perplexed by being asked to talk about their work. Others were completely relaxed, chatting away in English or Haitian Creole or Portuguese. One of them had been a housekeeper for only eighteen months, while another had cleaned the same section of rooms in the same hotel for twenty-three years. They were of different races, sexes, and ages. But they were all great housekeepers.

Our goal was to encourage them to talk about their work to see what, if anything, these eight great housekeepers had in common.

"How do you know if a room is clean?" we asked them. They said that the last thing they did before leaving a room was to lie on the guest's bed and turn on the ceiling fan.

"Why?"

"Because," they explained, "that is the first thing that a guest will do after a long day out. They will walk into the room, flop down on the bed, and turn on the fan. If dust comes off the top of the fan, then no matter how sparkling clean the rest of the room was, the guest might think it was as dirty as the top of the fan."

We asked them if they were front-of-house or back-of-house. (In many hotel companies housekeepers are considered back-of-house staff.)

"Front-of-house. I am always on stage, always, always." A grumpy chorus of English, Creole, and Portuguese.

"Why do you say you are on stage?"

"Because we make a show for our guests. Unless the guests object, we will take the toys that the children leave on the bed and every day we will make a little scene with them. We will put Pooh and Piglet on the pillows together. Pooh will have his arm in a chocolate candy box. Piglet will have his on the remote control. When the children come back, they imagine that all day long Pooh and Piglet just hung out on the bed, snacking and watching TV. The next day they find Donald and Goofy dancing on the windowsill. We make a show."

These eight great housekeepers were not just trying harder, nor did they simply "take more pride in their work." These great housekeepers had talent. They shared a unique filter. Seen through this filter, a hotel room wasn't just another chore to be completed. It was a world, a

guest's world. When they cleaned the room, they looked through the guests' eyes and imagined how the world should look. Making each guest's world just right brought them strength and satisfaction.

No one told these housekeepers to behave like this. But for some reason their mental filter drove them to these behaviors and to gain enduring satisfaction from the outcome. These individuals were probably some of the best housekeepers in the world.

The managers of these housekeepers knew that the best way to recognize these Michael Jordans of housekeeping was not necessarily to promote them out of it. They looked for other ways — more specific praise, better compensation, tighter selection criteria for aspiring housekeepers — to highlight these superstars. Guided by the knowledge that great housekeepers possessed talent, they did everything in their power to make excellence in housekeeping publicly revered and a genuine career choice.

In the minds of great managers, every role performed at excellence deserves respect. Every role has its own nobility.

Talent: How Great Managers Find It

"Why are great managers so good at selecting for talent?"

Even if you know to select for talent, it is not always easy to identify those who have it. First off, many people don't know what their true talents are. They may be experts in their chosen field, but when it comes to listing their unique set of talents, they are stumped. As Peter Drucker, the elder statesman of management wisdom, says:

"Even today, remarkably few Americans are prepared to select jobs for themselves. When you ask, 'Do you know what you are good at? Do you know your limitations?' they look at you with a blank stare. Or they often respond in terms of subject knowledge, which is the wrong answer."

This confusion is understandable. Your own skills and knowledge are relatively easy to identify. You had to acquire them, and therefore they are apart, distinct. They are "not You." But your talents? Your talents are simply your recurring patterns of behavior. They are your very essence. It takes a rare objectivity to be able to stand back from yourself and pick out the unique patterns that make you You.

Second, when someone applies for a job, he naturally wants to impress. Therefore those few recurring behaviors of which he is aware will be painted in as rosy a hue as possible. In the job interview he labels himself "assertive," not "aggressive." He describes himself as "ambitious" rather than "pushy." More often than not these are not deliberate misrepresentations. They are genuine attempts to describe himself to you positively. But whatever his true motivations, his instinct to try to impress you makes your job — the talent scout — that much more difficult.

These barriers to talent scouting are a fact of life. Human nature being what it is, people will always struggle to know themselves, and they will always sell themselves in job interviews. Despite these barriers, great managers still do much better than their colleagues at selecting people with the right talents for the role. They have discovered some simple techniques to cut through the barriers and so find the match between the person and the role.

KNOW WHAT TALENTS YOU ARE LOOKING FOR

In the early nineties Gallup began work with two of the largest retail brokerage firms in the United States. Both companies wanted help in selecting brokers. And both of them defined the role in exactly the same way — the broker was not paid to be a money manager, doing financial analysis, picking stocks. Instead he was paid to be a money *gatherer*, identifying high-potential prospects and then persuading them to invest their money with his firm. He was a salesperson.

Although the definition of both roles was the same, each company organized itself differently. One was extremely structured. Each broker spent months learning how to represent the same suite of meticulously packaged products, and regular refresher courses helped keep him from straying too far from the company's mandate.

By comparison, the other company was wildly entrepreneurial. Licensed brokers were told, "Here's a phone, here's a phone book. I want to see $500,000 in assets under management by this time next year. Best of luck."

Both strategies had their strengths. And as it turns out, both strategies have proven very successful. However, both could not be executed by the same kind of person. Although the job title was the same — "broker" — and the job description was the same — "gather money" — the talent profiles were significantly different.

For the structured company, the critical striving talent was achiever, the burning inside-out push; in this environment of frequent supervision, other striving talents, like the need for independence, were actually weaknesses. The critical thinking talent was discipline — an ability to work in a highly regimented environment. Thinking talents like focus or strategic thinking were much less important because the company, not the broker, set the direction and determined the best routes forward. Any broker who wanted to do this for himself would quickly start to butt heads with the company. He would lose.

In the entrepreneurial company, the opposite was true. The critical striving talent was desire — a burning need for independence — and the critical thinking talent was focus — the ability to pick out a genuine prospect from the phone book, to sort out whom to call from everyone

who could be called. Lacking these talents, the unfortunate broker would feel lost and lonely, a company man in an entrepreneur's world.

A broker with lots of desire and focus is not necessarily a better broker than one with lots of achiever and discipline. But she would certainly fit better in the entrepreneurial company, just as the broker blessed with achiever and discipline would be better cast in the more structured company. Lacking this knowledge, both companies might have ended up hiring each other's brokers, with disastrous repercussions.

As a manager you need to know exactly which talents you want. To identify these talents, look beyond the job title and description. Think about the culture of the company. Is your company the kind that uses scores to drive performance and makes heroes out of those with the highest scores? If so, make sure that the striving talent competition is in your profile. Or maybe yours is an organization that emphasizes the underlying purpose of its work and confers prestige only on those who manifestly live the values of the company. If so, search for people who possess the striving talent mission, people who *must* see the greater purpose of which their efforts are a part.

Think about how expectations will be set and how closely the person will be supervised. Think about who you are as a manager and who will mesh with your style. Do you prefer to set short-term goals and expect to check in regularly with each person to monitor incremental progress? If so, you need to surround yourself with direct reports who yearn for structure and detail and regular updates, the thinking talent discipline. Or are you the kind of manager who likes to hand off as much responsibility as possible, who sets long-term goals and then expects employees to orient themselves toward those goals without much help from you? If so, your direct reports will need the thinking talent focus, which we described previously.

Think about the other people on the team. Think about the total work environment into which this person must fit. Perhaps the team is filled with solid but serious performers who are in need of drama and excitement — find a person with the relating talent stimulator, a person who can find the drama in almost any milestone or achievement. Perhaps the team is friendly but lacks the ability to confront one another with the truth — look for a person who leads with her relating talent assertiveness, so that you have at least one team member who feels compelled to bring every issue, no matter how sensitive, to the surface.

Perhaps your organization has a strong human resources department that can give your managers detailed feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of each of their direct reports. In this case you may not need to select managers who possess the relating talent individualized perception, defined as the ability to identify and capitalize upon the uniqueness in people. Or perhaps your organization offers no HR support at all. In this case relating talents like individualized perception, or relator — the need to build bonds that last — or developer — the need to invest in other people's growth and to derive satisfaction from doing so — will need to serve as the cornerstones of your desired talent profile.

Pondering all of these variables can become overwhelming. So simplify, bring things down to size. Try to identify *one critical talent* in each of the three talent categories, striving, thinking, and relating. Use these three talents as your foundation. Focus on them during the interviewing process. Mention them when asking people for referrals. Do not compromise on them, no matter how alluring a candidate's résumé might appear.

STUDY YOUR BEST

If you want to be sure that you have started with the right three talents, study your best in the role. This may sound obvious, but beware: conventional wisdom would advise the opposite.

Conventional wisdom asserts that good is the opposite of bad, that if you want to understand excellence, you should investigate failure and then invert it. In society at large, we define good health as the absence of disease. In the classroom, we talk to kids on drugs to learn how to keep kids off drugs and delve into the details of truancy to learn how to keep more kids in school.

And in the working world, this fascination with pathology is just as pervasive. Managers are far more articulate about service failure than they are about service success, and many still define excellence as "zero defects."

When it comes to understanding talent, this focus on pathology has caused many managers to completely misdiagnose what it takes to excel in a particular role. For example, many managers think that because bad salespeople suffer from call reluctance, great salespeople must not; or that because bad waiters are too opinionated, great waiters must keep their opinions in check.

Reject this focus on pathology. You cannot infer excellence from studying failure and then inverting it. Why? Because excellence and failure are often surprisingly similar. Average is the anomaly.

For example, by studying the best salespeople, great managers have learned that the best, just like the worst, suffer call reluctance. Apparently the best salesperson, as with the worst, feels as if he is selling himself. It is this striving talent of feeling personally invested in the sale that causes him to be so persuasive. But it also causes him to take rejection personally — every time he makes a sales call he feels the shiver of fear that someone will say no to him, to *him*.

The difference between greatness and failure in sales is that the great salesperson is not paralyzed by this fear. He is blessed with another talent, the relating talent of confrontation, that enables him to derive immense satisfaction from sparring with the prospect and overcoming resistance. Every day he feels call reluctance, but this talent for confrontation pulls him through it. His love of sparring outweighs his fear of personal rejection.

Lacking this talent for confrontation, the bad salesperson simply feels the fear.

The average salesperson feels nothing. He woodenly follows the six-step approach he has been taught and hopes for the best.

By studying their best, great managers are able to overturn many similarly long-standing misconceptions. For example, they know that the best waiters, just like the worst, form strong opinions. The difference between the best and the worst is that the best waiters use their quickly formed opinions to tailor their style to each particular table of customers, whereas the worst are just rude — average waiters form no opinions and so give every table the same droning spiel.

And the best nurses, contrary to popular opinion, do form strong emotional relationships with their patients. The difference between the best and the worst is that the best nurses use their emotions to take control and smooth the patient's world as far as is possible, whereas the worst are overwhelmed by their emotions. Average nurses? Average nurses protect themselves by keeping their distance. They are emotionally disengaged.

Take time to study your best, say great managers. Learn the whys, the hows, and the whos of your best and then select for similar talents.

In the end, much of the secret to selecting for talent lies in the art of interviewing. When interviewing for talent, most managers are aware of the more obvious pitfalls: don't put the candidate under undue stress; don't evaluate people on their appearance alone; don't rush to judgment. Avoiding these will certainly lay the foundations for a productive interview.

However, if you want to excel in the art of interviewing you will need to do more. In chapter 7 we will describe in detail the interviewing techniques that have enabled great managers to select for talent so unerringly.

A Word From the Coach

"John Wooden, on the importance of talent."

Selecting for talent is the manager's first and most important responsibility. If he fails to find people with the talents he needs, then everything else he does to help them grow will be as wasted as sunshine on barren ground. John Wooden, the legendary coach of the UCLA Bruins, puts it more pragmatically:

"No matter how you total success in the coaching profession, it all comes down to a single factor — talent. There may be a hundred great coaches of whom you have never heard in basketball, football, or any sport who will probably never receive the acclaim they deserve simply because they have not been blessed with the talent. Although not every coach can win consistently with talent, no coach can win without it."

According to everything we have heard from great managers, the coach is right. But he is also a little humble. What made John Wooden so successful was not just the talents on his teams, but also his own ability to create the right kind of environment to allow those talents to flourish. After all, talent is only potential. This potential cannot be turned into performance in a vacuum. Great talents need great managers if they are to be turned into performance.

Selecting for talent is only the first of the Four Keys. In the chapters that follow we will present the others and describe how great managers focus, recognize, and develop the talents they have so carefully selected.

CHAPTER 5: The Third Key: Focus on Strengths

- Let Them Become More of Who They Already Are
- Tales of Transformation
- Casting Is Everything
- Manage by Exception
- Spend the Most Time With Your Best People
- How to Manage Around a Weakness

Let Them Become More of Who They Already Are

"How do great managers release each person's potential?"

So, you have selected for talent and you have defined the right outcomes. You have your people, and they have their goals. What should you do now? What should you do to speed each person's progress toward performance?

Great managers would offer you this advice: Focus on each person's strengths and manage around his weaknesses. Don't try to fix the weaknesses. Don't try to perfect each person. Instead do everything you can to help each person cultivate his talents. Help each person become more of who he already is.

This radical approach is fueled by one simple insight: Each person is different. Each person has a unique set of talents, a unique pattern of behaviors, of passions, of yearnings. Each person's pattern of talents is enduring, resistant to change. Each person, therefore, has a unique destiny.

Sadly, this insight is lost on many managers. They are ill at ease with individual differences, preferring the blanket security of generalizations. When working with their people, they are guided by the sweep of their opinion — for example, "Most salespeople are ego driven" or "Most accountants are shy."

In contrast, great managers are impatient with the clumsiness of these generalizations. They know that generalizations obscure the truth: that all salespeople are different, that all accountants are different, that each individual, no matter what his chosen profession, is unique. Yes, the best salespeople share some of the same talents. But even among the elite, the Michael Jordans of salespeople, the differences will outweigh the similarities. Each salesperson will have her distinct sources of motivation and a style of persuasion all her own.

This rampant individuality fascinates great managers. They are drawn to the subtle but significant differences among people, even those engaged in the same line of work. They know that a person's identity, his uniqueness, lies not just in what he does — his profession — but in how he does it — his style. Peter L., the founder of a capital equipment

rental company, describes two unit managers, one who is a terrific salesperson, networking the neighborhood, joining local business or community groups, literally wooing customers into the fold. The other is an extraordinary asset manager who squeezes life out of every piece of machinery by running the most efficient workshop in the company. Both of them excel at their roles.

Guy H., a school superintendent, manages two exemplary school principals. The first principal is what he calls a "reflective practitioner." He consumes libraries of journals, stays current with educational theory, and teaches others what he has learned. The second operates exclusively out of a sense of mission and a natural instinct for teaching. There is no educational jargon in her school, just boundless energy and a passion for learning, however it happens.

One of the signs of a great manager is the ability to describe, in detail, the unique talents of each of his or her people — what drives each one, how each one thinks, how each builds relationships. In a sense, great managers are akin to great novelists. Each of the "characters" they manage is vivid and distinct. Each has his own features and foibles. And their goal, with every employee, is to help each individual "character" play out his unique role to the fullest.

Their distrust of generalizations extends all the way to the broader categories of race and sex. Of course, cultural influences will shape some of your perspectives, giving you something in common with those who shared those influences. An affluent white female living in Greenwich, Connecticut, might have a more benign view of the world than, say, a young Hispanic male growing up in Compton, California. But these kinds of differences are too broad and too bland to be of much help. It would be more powerful to understand the striving talents of this *particular* white female or the relating talents of that *particular* Hispanic male. Only then could you know how to help each of them turn his or her talents into performance. Only then could you help each one live out his or her individual specialness.

For great managers, then, the most interesting and the most powerful differences are among people, not peoples.

This is a grand perspective, with far-reaching implications, but it's just common sense. Here's what Mandy M., a manager of a twenty-five-person design department, has to say on the subject:

"I want to find what is special and unique about each person. If I can find what special thing they have to offer, and if I can help them see it,

then they will keep digging for more."

Gary S., a sales executive for a medical device company, describes it in even more pragmatic terms:

"I deliberately look for something to like about each of my people. In one, I might like his sense of humor. In another, I might like the way he talks about his kids. In another, I'll enjoy her patience, or the way she handles pressure. Of course, there's a bunch of stuff about each of them that can get on my nerves. If I'm not deliberate about looking for what I like, the bad stuff might start coming to mind first."

For Mandy, Gary, and other great managers, finding the strengths of each person and then focusing on these strengths is a conscious act. It is the most efficient way to help people achieve their goals. It is the best way to encourage people to take responsibility for who they really are. And it is the only way to show respect for each person. Focusing on strengths is the storyline that explains all their efforts as managers.

Tales of Transformation

"Why is it so tempting to try to fix people?"

As you might expect, conventional wisdom tells a rather different story. First, it spins us this tale: You can be anything you want to be if you hold on to your dreams and work hard. The person you feel yourself to be every day is not the real You. No, the real You is deep inside, hidden by your fears and discouragements. If you could free yourself of these fears, if you could truly believe in yourself, then the real You would be released. Your potential would burst out. The giant would awaken.

This is a tale of transformation, and we love it. It is just so uplifting and so hopeful, who wouldn't root for the hero who confronts his demons and transforms himself into everything he always knew he could be? Well, surely we all would. That's why we root for Michael J. Fox in *The Secret of My Success*, Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*, and John Travolta in *Phenomenon*. We love all these stories of transformation, not least because they imply that all of us have the same potential and that all of us can access this unlimited potential through discipline, persistence, and perhaps some good luck along the way.

Softened by conventional wisdom's first installment, we are easily persuaded by the second: To access your unlimited potential, you must identify your weaknesses and then fix them. This remedial approach to self-perfection is drummed into you from your first performance appraisal. You are told that to advance your career, you must "broaden your skill set." You must become more "well-rounded." During each subsequent appraisal there may be a few words of congratulation for another year of excellent performance, but then it's into the nitty-gritty of the conversation — how to improve your "areas of opportunity." Your manager brings up, yet again, those few areas where you struggle — where you have always struggled — and you and she then cobble together another "developmental plan" to try to shore up your weaknesses once and for all. By the time you reach the end of your career, you have spent so much time fixing yourself that you must be well-nigh perfect.

The best managers dislike this story. Like all sentimental stories, it is comforting and familiar, but strangely unsatisfying. The hero, diligently shaving off his rough edges, seems sympathetic and noble, but somehow not … real. The more you ask these managers about this

story, the more vivid their criticisms become. Listen to them long enough and they will peel back its cheery surface completely to reveal the rather sinister messages hidden beneath. This is what they told us:

First, its promise that each of us can "be anything we want to be if we just work hard" is actually quite a stark promise. Because if we can all "be anything we want to be," then we all have the same potential. And if we all have the same potential, then we lose our individuality. We are not uniquely talented, expressing ourselves through unique goals, unique capabilities, and unique accomplishments. We are all the same. We have no distinct identity, no distinct destiny. We are all blank sheets of canvas, ready, waiting, and willing, but featureless.

Second, there's the message that if you keep working away on your nontalents, your persistence will pay off in the end. On the surface this is a solid, if clichéd, morsel of advice: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Yet the most effective managers reject it. Why? Because if the focus of your life is to turn your nontalents, such as empathy or strategic thinking or persuasiveness, into talents, then it will be a crushingly frustrating life.

Persistence is useful if you are trying to learn a new skill or to acquire particular knowledge. Persistence can even be appropriate if you are trying to cut a thin path through some of your mental wastelands, so that, for example, your nontalent for empathy doesn't permanently undermine your talents in other areas. But persistence directed primarily toward your nontalents is self-destructive — no amount of determination or good intentions will *ever* enable you to carve out a brand-new set of four-lane mental highways. You will reprimand yourself, berate yourself, and put yourself through all manner of contortions in an attempt to achieve the impossible.

From the vantage point of great managers, conventional wisdom's story, no matter how optimistic it may appear on the surface, is actually about fruitless self-denial and wasted persistence.

Third, this story describes a doomed relationship. The conventional manager genuinely wants to bring out the best in the employee, but she chooses to do so by focusing on fixing the employee's weaknesses. The employee probably possesses many strengths, but the manager ends up characterizing him by those few areas where he struggles. This is the same dynamic that often proves the undoing of other failed relationships.

Have you ever suffered through a bad relationship, the kind of relationship where the pressures of each day sapped your energy and

made you a stranger to yourself? If you can stand to, think back to how you felt during that relationship and remember: A bad relationship is rarely one where your partner didn't know you very well. Most often, a bad relationship is one where your partner came to know you very well indeed … and wished you weren't that way. Perhaps your partner wanted to perfect you. Perhaps you were simply incompatible and your weaknesses grated on each other. Perhaps your partner was a person who simply enjoyed pointing out other people's failings. Whatever the cause, you ended up feeling as though you were being defined by those things you did not do rather than those things you did. And that felt awful.

This is the same feeling that many managers unwittingly create in their employees. Even when working with their most productive employees, they still spend most of their time talking about each person's few areas of nontalent and how to eradicate them. No matter how well-intended, relationships preoccupied with weakness never end well.

Finally, at the heart of this story lurks its bleakest theme: The victim is to blame. Less effective managers cast themselves in the mentor role. Blind to the distinction between skills and knowledge — both of which can be acquired — and talents — which cannot — these managers relentlessly point out each employee's nontalents in the belief that he can fix them and become well-rounded. "You can become more persuasive, more strategic, or more empathic if you just work at it," or so their story goes. Their implicit message is that you, the employee, can control the outcome by "working at it." You can take classes, modify your reactions, censor yourself. The responsibility is yours. Therefore when you fail to achieve the impossible, to turn your nontalents into talents, the invisible finger of blame is left pointing at you. *You* weren't persistent enough. *You* didn't apply yourself. The fault is *yours*.

By telling you that you can transform nontalents into talents, these less effective managers are not only setting you up to fail, they are intrinsically blaming you for your inevitable failure. This is perverse.

For all of these reasons, great managers reject conventional wisdom's story. Their rejection does not mean that they think all persistence is wasted. It simply means that persistence focused primarily on nontalents is wasted. Nor does their rejection mean that they ignore a person's weaknesses. Each employee has areas where she struggles, and these areas must be dealt with — we will describe in more detail

how great managers deal with a person's weaknesses later in this chapter.

But it *does* mean that great managers are aggressive in trying to identify each person's talents and help her to cultivate those talents.

This is how they do it: They believe that casting is everything. They manage by exception. And they spend the most time with their best people.

Casting Is Everything

"How do great managers cultivate excellent performance so consistently?"

As we have noted, everyone has talents — recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that can be applied productively. Simply put, everyone can probably do at least one thing better than ten thousand other people. However, each person is not necessarily in a position to use her talents. Even though she might initially have been selected for her talents, after a couple of reshuffles and lateral moves, she may now be miscast.

If you want to turn talent into performance, you have to position each person so that you are paying her to do what she is naturally wired to do. You have to cast her in the right role.

In sports this is relatively straightforward. Given his physical strength and combative personality, it's obvious that Rodman should be paid to crash the boards, not run the floor. In the performing arts, it is almost as clear cut. The original casting of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* had Paul Newman playing Sundance and Robert Redford as Butch. After a few rehearsals it became apparent that the roles did not elicit the actors' strengths. The switch was made, and almost immediately both characters materialized. Newman reveled in the glib, self-confident persona of Butch Cassidy, while Redford captured perfectly the more brooding, almost deferential Sundance Kid. The strength of these performances gave this classic film an appeal it might otherwise have lacked.

In the working world casting becomes a little more challenging. First, what matters is what is inside the person, not physical prowess or appearance. Some managers find it hard to see beyond the physical to each person's true talents. Second, managers are often preoccupied with the person's skills or knowledge. Thus people with marketing degrees are inevitably cast into the marketing department and people with accounting backgrounds are siphoned off into the finance department. There is nothing wrong with including a person's skills and knowledge on your casting checklist. But if you do not place a person's talent at the top of that list, you will always run the risk of mediocre performance.

Casting for talent is one of the unwritten secrets to the success of great managers. On occasion it can be as simple as knowing that your aggressive, ego-driven salesperson should take on the territory that requires a fire to be lit beneath it. And, by contrast, your patient, relationship-building salesperson should be offered the territory that requires careful nurturing. However, most of the time casting for talent demands a subtler eye.

For example, imagine you have just been promoted to manage a team of people. You have no idea whether these people have talent or not. You didn't select them. But they have now been handed to you. Their performance is your responsibility. Some managers quickly split the team members into two groups: "losers" and "keepers." They keep the "keepers," clear the house of "losers," and recruit their "own people" to fill the gaps.

The best managers are more deliberate. They talk with each individual, asking about strengths, weaknesses, goals, and dreams. They work closely with each employee, taking note of the choices each makes, the way they all interact, who supports who, and why. They notice things. They take their time, because they know that the surest way to identify each person's talents is to watch his or her behavior over time.

And then, yes, they separate the team into those who should stay and those who should be encouraged to find other roles. But, significantly, they add a third category: "movers." These are individuals who have revealed some valuable talents but who, for whatever reason, are not in a position to use them. They are miscast. By repositioning each in a redesigned role, great managers are able to focus on each person's strengths and turn talent into performance.

Mandy M., the manager of the design team whom we met earlier, tells this story. Recently promoted to head up her company's design division, Mandy inherited an employee called John. He was positioned in a strategic role where he was being paid to offer conceptual advice to the client. The environment was intense and individualistic, with associates competing with each other to devise the cleverest solution for the client. And John was struggling. Everyone knew that John was smart enough to do the job. But the performance just wasn't there. He was emotionally disengaged and, according to most company sources, on his way out the door. If he didn't jump, he would soon be pushed.

But Mandy had seen something in John. A couple of months before being promoted, she had noticed that the only time he really blossomed was when he was working for a supervisor who paid attention to him. They developed a relationship, these two, and John began to shine. But then the supervisor moved on to a new role, and John's light dimmed.

Guided by that one glimpse, Mandy put John into the "movers" category. She guessed that he was a person who needed connections the way some people need recognition. So she took his thirst for relationships and applied it where it could be of great value to the company: business development.

John became a sales machine. He was naturally wired to reach out to people, to learn their names, to remember special things about them. He built genuine relationships with hundreds of individuals scattered among his company's clients and prospects. Bonded by these relationships, the clients stayed clients, and the prospects soon joined them. John was in his element, using his natural strengths to everyone's advantage.

When Mandy tells this story you can hear a little catch in her throat. Like many fine managers, she is overjoyed at the thought of someone using his talents to the fullest. She knows that it is a rare thing to be able to find a role that gives you a chance to express the specialness inside you, a role where what makes you You is also what makes you good. It is rare, not because there aren't enough interesting roles — virtually every role performed at excellence has the potential to interest somebody — but because so few individuals ever come to know their true talent and so many managers fail to notice the clues. Mandy knows that on another day, in another company, she might have missed that brief glimpse of John's talent. He would have failed, and he would have had little to learn from his failure.

But she didn't miss it. She noticed the sign of a latent strength. And through careful recasting she was able to focus on that strength and so turn John's talents into performance.

Everyone has the talent to be exceptional at something. The trick is to find that "something." The trick is in the casting.

Manage by Exception

"Why do great managers break the Golden Rule?"

"Everyone is exceptional" has a second meaning: Everyone should be treated as an exception. Each employee has his own filter, his own way of interpreting the world around him, and therefore each employee will demand different things of you, his manager.

Some want you to leave them alone from almost the first moment they are hired. Others feel slighted if you don't check in with them every day. Some want to be recognized by you, "the boss." Others see their peers as the truest source of recognition. Some crave their praise on a public stage. Others shun the glare of publicity, valuing only that quiet, private word of thanks. Each employee breathes different psychological oxygen.

Kirk D., a sales manager for a pharmaceutical company, learned this quickly. He tells of one particular salesperson, Mike, who was always in the top ten of the company's 150 salespeople, but who, Kirk felt, still had more to give.

"Initially I couldn't figure him out. I'm real competitive, and since he was a professional football player for eight years, a running back, I naturally assumed he must be as competitive as me. I would try to rile him up by telling him how much some of the other salespeople had done that month. But when I told him he just looked bored. No fire, no burn. Just bored. It turned out that, despite his background, Mike wasn't competitive at all. He was an achiever. He simply wanted to beat himself. He didn't care about anybody else. In his mind, they were irrelevant. So I started asking him what he was going to do this month to better himself. As soon as I asked him this he couldn't stop talking. Ideas poured out. And together we made them happen. He became the number one salesperson in the company for six straight years."

Remember the Golden Rule? "Treat people as you would like to be treated." The best managers break the Golden Rule every day. They would say *don't* treat people as *you* would like to be treated. This presupposes that everyone breathes the same psychological oxygen as you. For example, if you are competitive, everyone must be similarly competitive. If you like to be praised in public, everyone else must, too. Everyone must share your hatred of micromanagement.

This thinking is well-intended but overly simplistic, reminiscent perhaps of the four-year-old who proudly presents his mother with a red

truck for her birthday because that is the present *he* wants. So the best managers reject the Golden Rule. Instead, they say, treat each person as *he* would like to be treated, bearing in mind who he is. Of course, each employee must adhere to certain standards of behavior, certain rules. But within those rules, treat each one differently, each according to his needs.

Some managers will protest, “How can I possibly keep track of each employee’s unique needs?” And who can blame them? It’s hard to treat each employee differently, particularly since outward appearance offers few clues to an individual’s particular needs. It’s a little like being told to play chess without knowing how all the pieces move.

But the best managers have the solution: Ask. Ask your employee about her goals: What are you shooting for in your current role? Where do you see your career heading? What personal goals would you feel comfortable sharing with me? How often do you want to meet to talk about your progress?

Feel her out about her taste in praise: does she seem to like public recognition or private? Written or verbal? Who is her best audience? It can be very effective to ask her to tell you about the most meaningful recognition she has ever received. Find out what made it so memorable. Also ask her about her relationship with you. Can she tell you how she learns? You might inquire whether she has ever had any mentors or partners who have helped her. How did they help?

With such a bulk of information to remember about each employee, managers often find that it helps to jot it all down. Some design organized filing systems, where each employee has his own folder, flecked with ticklers that remind the manager when each employee’s check-in cycle has come full circle. Others just scribble the details down on scruffy little note cards and carry them around in their pocket — employee “cheat sheets,” they call them.

Obviously there is no right way to capture this information. Just capture it. Without it you are functionally blind, flailing around with stereotypes, generalizations, and misguided notions that “fairness” means “sameness.” But armed with it you are focused. You can focus on each person’s strengths and turn talents into performance. You can “manage by exception.”

Spend the Most Time With Your Best People

"Why do great managers play favorites?"

If you are a manager, you may want to try this exercise. On the left-hand side of a blank sheet of paper write down the names of the people who report to you in descending order of productivity, the most productive at the top, the least productive at the bottom. On the right-hand side, write down the same names, but this time in descending order of "time you spend with them," the most time at the top, the least time at the bottom. Now draw straight lines joining the names on the left with the appropriate names on the right.

Do your lines cross? They often do. Many managers find themselves spending the most time with their least productive people and the least time with their most productive people. On the surface this would appear to be an eminently safe way for a manager to invest his time. After all, your best employees can already do the job. They don't need you. But those few employees who are struggling? They need all the help you can give them. Without your support they might not only fail as individuals, they might also drag down the entire team.

Investing in your strugglers appears shrewd, yet the most effective managers do the opposite. When they join the names, their lines are horizontal. They spend the *most* time with their *most* productive employees. They invest in their best. Why?

Because at heart they see their role very differently from the way most managers do. Most managers assume that the point of their role is either to control or to instruct. And, yes, if you see "control" as the core of the manager role, then it would certainly be productive to spend more time with your strugglers because they still need to be controlled. Likewise if you think "instructing" is the essence of management, investing most in your strugglers makes similarly good sense because they still have so much to learn.

But great managers do not place a premium on either control or instruction. Both have their place, particularly with novice employees, but they are not the core: they are too elementary, too static.

For great managers, the core of their role is the catalyst role: turning talent into performance. So when they spend time with an employee,

they are not fixing or correcting or instructing. Instead they are racking their brains, trying to figure out better and better ways to unleash that employee's distinct talents:

- They strive to carve out *a unique set of expectations* that will stretch and focus each particular individual; think back to the detail and the uniqueness of Rodman's contract, and remember that every other Bulls player will demand a similarly detailed and similarly unique set of expectations.
- They try to *highlight and perfect each person's unique style*. They draw his attention to it. They help him understand why it works for him and how to perfect it. That's what Mandy was doing with John; it's what she has to do for all of her direct reports.
- And they plot how they, the manager, can *run interference* for each employee, so that each can exercise his or her talents even more freely. As Robert T., a branch manager for a large brokerage house, explains: "My brokers don't work for me. I work for them. If I can't think up any new ideas to help my superstars, the least I can do is grease the administrative wheels so that nothing gets in their way."

If this is how you see your role, if this is what you are doing when you spend time with your people — setting unique expectations, highlighting and perfecting individual styles, running interference — you cannot help but be drawn toward your most talented employees. Talent is the multiplier. The more energy and attention you invest in it, the greater the yield. The time you spend with your best is, quite simply, your most productive time.

"NO NEWS" KILLS BEHAVIOR

Conversely, time away from your best is alarmingly destructive. Graduates from the machismo school of management, with its steely-eyed motto "No news is good news," would be surprised by just how destructive it is.

At its simplest, a manager's job is to encourage people to do more of certain productive behaviors and less of other, unproductive behaviors. Machismo managers have forgotten that their reactions can significantly affect which behaviors are multiplied and which gradually die out. They

have forgotten that they are on stage every day and that, whether they like it or not, they are sending signals that every employee hears.

Great managers haven't forgotten. They remember that they are permanently center stage. In particular they remember that the less attention they pay to the productive behaviors of their superstars, the less of those behaviors they will get. Since human beings are wired to need attention of some kind, if they are not getting attention, they will tend, either subconsciously or consciously, to alter their behavior until they do.

Therefore, as a manager, if you pay the most attention to your strugglers and ignore your stars, you can inadvertently alter the behaviors of your stars. Guided by your apparent indifference, your stars may start to do less of what made them stars in the first place and more of other kinds of behaviors that might net them some kind of reaction from you, good or bad. When you see your stars acting up, it is a sure sign that you have been paying attention to the wrong people and the wrong behaviors.

So try to keep this in mind: You are always on stage. Your misplaced time and attention is not a neutral act. No news is never good news. No news kills the very behaviors you want to multiply.

In practical terms, then, great managers invest in their best because it is extremely productive to do so and actively destructive to do otherwise. However, during our interviews great managers were happy to explain the benefits in more conceptual terms. They told us that investing in their best was, first, *the fairest thing to do*; second, *the best way to learn*; and, third, *the only way to stay focused on excellence*.

INVESTING IN YOUR BEST IS ... THE FAIREST THING TO DO

Although great managers are committed to the concept of "fairness," they define it rather differently from most people. In their mind "fairness" does not mean treating everyone the same. They would say that the only way to treat someone fairly is to treat them as they deserve to be treated, bearing in mind what they have accomplished. Jimmy Johnson, the coach who led the Dallas Cowboys to two Super Bowl rings and who now manages the Miami Dolphins, captures their attitude toward "fairness." He made this point in a speech to the Miami players immediately after taking the reins from Don Shula:

“I am going to be very consistent with every one of you because I’ll treat every one of you differently. That’s the way it is. The harder a guy works, the better he performs, and the more he meets my guidelines, the more leeway he is going to have with me. By the same token, if a guy doesn’t work very hard or if he’s not a good player, he’s not going to be around for very long.”

That language might seem a little blunt for the corporate environment, but the concept rings true with great managers. Quite simply, they choose to invest more time with their best because their best are more deserving of it.

They know that human beings crave attention. Each individual might value different kinds of attention, but, to a person, we all hate to be ignored. If love is not the opposite of hate, then surely indifference is the opposite of both. If you spend the most time with your worst performers, then the message you are sending to your employees is that “the better your performance becomes, the less time and attention you will receive from me, your manager.” From any angle, this is an odd message.

So spend the most time with your top performers. Pay attention to them. Be fair to the right people.

One of the most powerful things you can do after reading this book is to go back and “rehire” your best people — that is, go back and tell them why they are so good. Tell them why they are one of the cornerstones of the team’s success. Choose a style that fits you, and don’t allow the conversation to slip into promises about promotion in the future — that’s a different conversation, for a different time. Simply tell them why their contribution is so valued today. Don’t assume your best know.

INVESTING IN YOUR BEST IS ... THE BEST WAY TO LEARN

There’s a great deal you can learn from spending time with your strugglers. You can learn why certain systems are hard to operate. You can learn why initiatives are poorly designed. You can learn why clients become unhappy. And over time, you can become, as some managers are, highly articulate in describing the anatomy of failure and its various cures.

Ironically, none of this is going to help you understand what excellence looks like. You cannot learn very much about excellence from

studying failure. Of all the infinite number of ways to perform a certain task, most of them are wrong. There are only a few right ways. Unfortunately you don't come any closer to identifying those right ways by eliminating the wrong ways. Excellence is not the opposite of failure. It is just different. It has its own configuration, which sometimes includes behaviors that look surprisingly similar to the behaviors of your strugglers.

For example, if you spent most of your time investigating failure, you would never discover that great housekeepers lie on the guests' bed and turn on the ceiling fan, or that great table servers offer clear opinions, or that great salespeople feel call reluctance on almost every call they make, or that great nurses form strong emotional attachments with their patients. Instead, having found some of the very same behaviors among the very worst housekeepers, the worst table servers, salespeople, and nurses, you might have actually devised regulations or policies to prevent these behaviors from happening.

Gallup worked with one of the largest healthcare providers in Europe to help them find more nurses similar to their best. As part of our research we identified, using supervisor ratings, one hundred excellent nurses and one hundred average nurses. We then interviewed each individual, searching for those few talents that the excellent nurses shared.

Among the many talents common to great nurses, we discovered one called "patient response." Great nurses *need* to care. They cannot not care. Their filter sifts through life and automatically highlights opportunities to care. But if the caring itself is a need, the *joy* of caring comes when they see the patient start to respond. Each little increment of improvement is fuel for them. It is their psychological payoff. This love of seeing the patient respond is the talent that prevents great nurses from feeling beaten down by the sadness and suffering inherent in their role. It is the talent that enables them to find strength and satisfaction in their work.

When we told their managers this, they replied: "We're not organized that way, because we don't want our nurses getting too close to their patients." They said that patients were moved around all of the time. That it was usual for a nurse to return after a weekend or a day off and find his patients gone, moved to a different ward, transferred to a different hospital, or simply discharged. "There's a great deal of pressure to make beds available," they said. "And there's no way we

can organize ourselves to keep a nurse and a patient together for very long at all. Some of our nurses got upset when they found their patients gone. Consequently we now tell our nurses to keep their distance. We don't want them feeling any loss when the patient is moved."

Despite these worthy intentions, their arrangement caused suffering all around. The nurses suffered — the whole setup denied them one of their most potent sources of satisfaction. The patients suffered — many studies have shown that patients will recover faster if they are cared for by a nurse with whom they have established a relationship. And the managers suffered — they had to cope with patients feeling isolated and nurses feeling demoralized.

How should the hospitals have been organized? This is a difficult question. There's no getting past the fact that in order to keep healthcare costs down, every hospital feels pressure to "turn" patients quickly so that the beds can be made available. However, although Gallup couldn't offer them a quick-fix answer to their predicament, we could highlight the best route to that answer: Sit down with your best nurses and ask them to describe how *they* would balance the needs of patients, nurses, and number crunchers. Whatever solution they came up with, they couldn't do worse than the assembly-line system that demeans patients and cuts great nurses off from their oxygen supply.

Unfortunately this organization chose to ignore the voices of their best. They could not find the reasons, or perhaps the will, to alter their flawed but superficially efficient system. They are now struggling more than ever with patient dissatisfaction, nurse morale, and rising costs.

Fortunately many other companies have started to realize the wisdom of studying excellence to learn about excellence. Organized business tours of such "gold standard" companies as Southwest Airlines, GE, and Ritz-Carlton have year-long waiting lists, and the Walt Disney Company even packages the secrets of "the Disney Way" as a seminar series.

Doubtless managers can learn something useful from investigating the practices of these companies, but even when focused on external best practices, they often miss the most important lesson: Go back and study your *own* top performers. That's what Disney, Southwest Airlines, GE, and Ritz-Carlton did. To generate the material for their tours and seminars, they interviewed, shadowed, filmed, and highlighted their best practitioners. They studied excellence as it was happening every day within their world. They learned from their best.

Every manager should do the same. Spend time with your best. Watch them. Learn from them. Become as articulate about describing excellence as you are about describing failure. Studying external best practices has its merits. But studying *internal* best practices is the regimen that makes the difference.

How can you do it? The best way to investigate excellence is simply to spend a great deal of time with your top performers. You might start by asking them to explain their secret — although most of them are so close to their own success that it often proves difficult for them to describe exactly what they do that makes them so good.

Instead, many of the great managers we interviewed said they spend a lot of time just observing their best. Sales managers discipline themselves to travel with one or two of their sales stars every month. School principals observe a couple of their best teachers' classes. Customer service supervisors regularly listen in on their top customer service reps' calls. The point of this time and attention is not to evaluate or monitor. The point is, as one sales manager put it, "to run a tape recorder in my head, so that back in my office I can replay it, dissect it, understand what happened and why it worked." Like other great managers, you need to keep that tape recorder running.

INVESTING IN YOUR BEST IS ... THE ONLY WAY TO REACH EXCELLENCE

The language of "average" is pervasive. Reservation centers calculate the "average" number of calls a customer service representative can handle in an hour. Restaurant chains project staffing needs by estimating how many servers are needed to staff the "average" restaurant. In sales organizations, territories are divided up based on how many prospects the "average" salesperson can handle. "Average" is everywhere.

The best managers wouldn't necessarily disagree with this kind of "average thinking." They would admit that the effective management of a company requires some way of approximating what is going on every day within the company. However, they disagree vehemently when this "average thinking" bleeds into the management of people. Unfortunately it happens all the time.

They might not be aware of it, but many managers are fixated on "average." In their mind they have a clear idea of what they would

consider to be an acceptable level of performance; what sales organizations often call a “quota.” This quota, this performance “average,” serves as the barometer against which each individual’s performance is assessed. So, for example, a manager may give her employees a rating based upon how far above or below “average” their performance lies. She may calculate her employees’ bonuses by figuring out the correct proportion of the “average” bonus each should receive. And, probably the most obvious symptom of “average thinking,” she may well spend most of her time trying to help her strugglers inch their performance up above “average,” while leaving her above average performers to their own devices.

This kind of “average thinking” is very tempting. It seems so safe and so practical — by focusing on your strugglers you are protecting yourself, and the company, from their inevitable mistakes. Nonetheless, great managers reject it.

Here are a couple of reasons why. First, they don’t use average performance as the barometer against which each person’s performance is judged. They use excellence. From their perspective, average is irrelevant to excellence.

Second, they know that the only people who are ever going to reach excellence are those employees who are already above average. These employees have already shown some natural ability to perform the role. These employees have talent. Counterintuitively, employees who are already performing above average have the greatest room for growth. Great managers also know that it is hard work helping a talented person hone his talents. If a manager is preoccupied by the burden of transforming strugglers into survivors by helping them squeak above “average,” he will have little time left for the truly difficult work of guiding the good toward the great.

Jean P.’s story illustrates both the irrelevance of average and the growth potential of talent.

For data entry roles, the national performance average is 380,000 keypunches per month, or 19,000 per day. Many companies use an average performance measure like this to determine how many data entry employees they need to hire. Upon hiring these data entry folk, a good manager should probably be able to raise his employees’ performance higher than this national average. How much higher? Using this average as your measure, what should a good manager’s goal be — 25 percent higher? 35 percent higher? 50 percent higher?

Fifty percent higher would put you over 500,000 keypunches per month. In fact, the top-performing data entry employees make a mockery of the national average. They outperform it almost tenfold.

Jean P. is one such employee. When she was first measured, she averaged 560,000 punches per month, already 50 percent above the national average. She was recognized for her performance, then she and her manager set out some individual goals that could help her improve and track her performance. Three months later she hit a million keypunches. A couple of weeks after that milestone, Jean checked her total at the end of the day and saw that she had managed 112,000 keypunches in one day. She approached her manager and said, "You know what? If I average over 110,000 for the whole month, then I'll hit the 2 million mark." They put a plan together, and six months later she soared past 2 million.

Jean became a model for the role. Her manager spent time watching her, asking her why she loved her work so much — "I'm real competitive; I love counting" — and why she seemed to make fewer mistakes the more keys she punched — "I have more practice." He designed a talent profile to find more like her and a compensation plan to reward her excellence. Today Jean's personal best is 3,526,000 keypunches in a month, and the average of all the data entry employees working around her is over a million.

The lessons from Jean's story are applicable to almost any role. Don't use average to estimate the limits of excellence. You will drastically *underestimate* what is possible. Focus on your best performers and keep pushing them toward the right-hand edge of the bell curve. It is counterintuitive, but top performers, like Jean P., have the *most* potential for growth.

BREAKING THROUGH THE CEILING

"Average thinking" not only leads managers away from excellence and away from their top performers. There is one final, and perhaps most damaging, way in which it harms a manager's best efforts. "Average thinking" actively limits performance. Jeff H., a sales manager for a computer software company, describes this debilitating effect:

"I work for a company with one goal: 20 percent annual growth in revenue and profits. We have it drummed into us from day one that 20 percent growth is how we will judge our success as a company. We've hit it for twelve years straight, and Wall Street loves us. I can see why

the company needs to shoot for that number every year. I can see why Wall Street likes that predictability. But as an individual manager of people, it's hard.

"Put yourself in my shoes. We've been the number one region for the last four years. Every year I get to the end of the third quarter and all my people have hit their 20 percent growth targets. They have a whole quarter to go, but they've already reached their target. You try motivating this group to give it all they've got for the final three months. To them, it makes much more sense to save all their sales for next year, so that, come January, they've got themselves off to a rolling start. You can't blame them for slowing down. The quota system encourages it. Every year I have to fight against the very system that was designed to help us all excel. I have to hunt for other ways to keep everybody fired up."

How does he do it? Jeff happens to have an intense and conceptual style, so he resorts to writing thoughtful letters to all of his people, cajoling them to look inside themselves and deliver one last ounce of effort. Here's an example:

> October 29
>
> People:
>
> With only two months remaining it is imperative that you stay focused on your goals for this year. It has been a long, well-run race so far this year, and for many of you, you could just coast the rest of the year and still make quota. That decision is yours; I can't make that for you — and I will not pound or threaten for more.
>
> However, if we want and you want to be the best you are capable of being and you want to develop your abilities to their maximum, that goal is a never-ending one. You must understand that success is achieved through a never-ending pursuit of improvement — personally, professionally, financially, and spiritually. Like it or not, that is what is involved, and that is the commitment you made to yourself when you accepted the challenge to be the best.
>
> Remember, stay focused. Never lose your commitment to your own standard of excellence. Push a little every day, and a lot over time.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Jeff
>
> P.S. You are the best the company has and the best I have ever had the privilege of managing.

Jeff is fortunate. With his sincere personal appeals and his mantra that each person should “push a little every day, and a lot over time,” Jeff has managed to break through the restraints of the quota system. He has found a way to keep everyone focused on excellence. Despite the limits imposed by quotas, Jeff has now led his region to the company’s top spot four years in a row.

Other great managers, with their unique talents and styles, will have devised their own routes to excellence. But despite their success, it is still a shame that they have had to waste so much creativity maneuvering around performance evaluation schemes that unwittingly place a ceiling on performance. It is still a shame that they have had to exert so much energy railing against “average thinking.” This energy and creativity would be much more valuable in the unfettered pursuit of excellence.

However, if you face the same “average thinking,” you should rail against it just as energetically. Define excellence vividly, quantitatively. Paint a picture for your most talented employees of what excellence looks like. Keep everyone pushing and pushing toward that right-hand edge of the bell curve. It’s fairer. It’s more productive. And, most of all, it’s much more fun.

How to Manage Around a Weakness

"How do great managers turn a harmful weakness into an irrelevant nontalent?"

Of course, none of this means that great managers ignore nonperformance. They don't. Focus on strengths is not another name for the power of positive thinking. Bad things happen. Some people fail. Some people struggle. And even your star performers have their faults. Poor performance must be confronted head-on, if it is not to degenerate into a dangerously unproductive situation. And it must be confronted quickly — as with all degenerative diseases, procrastination in the face of poor performance is a fool's remedy.

The most straightforward causes of an employee's poor performance are the "mechanical" causes — perhaps the company is not providing him with the tools or the information he needs; and the "personal" causes — perhaps she is still grieving from a recent death in the family. As a manager, if you are confronted with poor performance, look first to these two causes. Both are relatively easy to identify. Both also happen to be rather difficult to solve — the former will almost certainly require some careful job redesign and better cooperation between individuals or departments; the latter will demand understanding and patience. But at least you will know what is causing the performance problems.

However, many performance problems have subtler causes. Causes like this are more difficult to identify, but fortunately, with the right mind-set, their solutions are all within a manager's control.

The great manager begins by asking two questions.

First, is the poor performance trainable? If the employee is struggling because he doesn't have the necessary skills or knowledge, then it almost certainly *is* trainable. Jan B., a manager in an advertising agency, gives us a simple example:

"One associate was supposed to turn all of my handwritten notes into killer presentations. But it wasn't happening. Her turnaround was slow, and the finished product wasn't that great. I sat her down and subjected her to one of my heart-to-hearts, during which she confessed that she had never learned PowerPoint properly. She was a brilliant art student, but no one had taught her the detailed mechanics of putting that brilliance onto a computer. Well, that's easy. I just set her up with some intensive PowerPoint training and now she's a star."

Laurie T., a manager in a petrochemical company, describes a slightly more subtle approach to imparting knowledge:

"Jim was a young man, very talented, who always used to come in late. We talked about it, and he said that he was just terrible at organizing himself to arrive on time. Every morning something would happen to throw him off. He said I shouldn't worry because he always stayed late and completed his assignments. I told him that I *was* worried. I was worried about how others were perceiving him. I asked him what he imagined other people's perceptions of him were. He confessed that they probably associated his lateness with laziness, a lack of responsibility, a poor team player. 'But that's not me,' he said. '*I* know that's not you,' I replied. 'But *they* don't. I'm not saying that you must come in on time from now on. I *am* saying that you must manage your teammates' perceptions better. Otherwise they won't trust you, you'll drag the team down, and I'll have to ask you to leave.'

"Jim now comes in on time 95 percent of the time. *I* didn't change his behavior. What changed his behavior was his knowledge of how negatively others were perceiving him and his awareness that he didn't like that."

These examples are probably familiar to you. You may have faced the salesperson who didn't know the product well enough. Or the secretary who didn't know how to process expenses. Or the recently hired business school graduate who hadn't yet learned how to prepare a report for the real business world. All of these cases of nonperformance can be traced to the employee's lack of certain skills or knowledge. Whether it's as simple as teaching someone a computer program, or as delicate as helping someone gain a perspective on himself, all of these skills and knowledge can and should be trained.

The second question great managers ask is this: Is the nonperformance caused by the manager himself tripping the wrong trigger? Each employee is motivated differently. If the manager forgets this, if he is trying to motivate a noncompetitive person with contests, or a shy person with public praise, then the solution to the nonperformance might well lie in *his* hands. If he can find the right trigger and trip it, perhaps the employee's true talent will burst out.

John F., a general insurance agent, needed a very public misstep to help him understand this. His most productive agent was an individual called Mark D. A repeat winner of the Agent of the Year award, Mark let it be known that he hated the banal plaques that accompanied the

award. If he was going to be recognized, he said, he would prefer something other than another meaningless plaque to shove in a drawer along with the others. John listened patiently, but believed he knew better. All salespeople love plaques, he thought.

At the awards banquet, John announced Mark as the winner yet again, ushered him up onto the stage, and proudly presented him with his plaque. Mark took one look at it, turned to the audience, made an obscene gesture, and stalked off the stage, vowing to leave the company. The banquet was a disaster.

John F. spoke to some of Mark's colleagues to see if he could learn anything that would help recover the situation. Apparently on car journeys, in the hallways, and over lunches, or whenever the conversation inched toward life outside the office, Mark would bring up his two daughters. He and his wife thought they could never have children, so these two little girls were a particularly precious gift. Mark would describe their exploits and their triumphs and the funny little things they would say to him. He was so proud of them. They were his life.

As quick as he could, John called up Mark's wife and explained the situation. Mark's wife had an idea. She brought the two girls into a photographic studio. A beautiful portrait was taken of them and mounted in a frame. Mark's plaque was embossed on the frame.

Two weeks later John held a luncheon. In front of all his agents and the guests of honor, Mark's wife and daughters, John unveiled the portrait and presented it to Mark. The same prima donna who had flipped off the crowd now started to cry. Mark's trigger was his two daughters.

This would not have worked if Mark had felt that John didn't genuinely care about him. But fortunately, over the years, trust had developed between the two of them. The only aspect that had been missing from their relationship was a full understanding, on John's part, of what was truly important to Mark. Guided by the clues from Mark's colleagues, John filled that gap. From now on he would respect, and play to, Mark's unique motivational trigger.

All managers can learn from John's example. If an employee's performance goes awry, perhaps you have misread what motivates him. Perhaps if you tripped a different trigger, the employee's true talents would reengage. Perhaps you are to blame for his poor performance. Before you do anything else, consider this possibility.

However, if you can genuinely answer “No” to both of these initial questions — “No,” it’s not a skills/knowledge issue, and “No,” it’s not a trigger issue — then by default the nonperformance is probably a talent issue. The person is struggling because she doesn’t have the specific talents needed to perform. In this case, training is not an option. Given the enduring nature of talent, it is highly unlikely that the person will ever be able to acquire the necessary talent. She is who she is, and left to her own devices, she will always be hamstrung by those few areas where she lacks talent.

This situation seems bleak. But it’s actually rather commonplace. After all, no one’s perfect. No one possesses all of the talents needed to excel in a particular role. Each of us is a couple of talent cards short of a full deck.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A NONTALENT AND A WEAKNESS

As you might expect, great managers take a welcomingly pragmatic view of our innate imperfection. They begin with an important distinction, a distinction between weaknesses and nontalents. A nontalent is a mental wasteland. It is a behavior that always seems to be a struggle. It is a thrill that is never felt. It is an insight recurrently missed. In isolation, nontalents are harmless. You might have a nontalent for remembering names, being empathetic, or thinking strategically. Who cares? You have many more nontalents than you do talents, but most of them are irrelevant. You should ignore them.

However, a nontalent can mutate into a weakness. A nontalent becomes a weakness when you find yourself in a role where success depends on your excelling in an area that is a nontalent. If you are a server in a restaurant, your nontalent for remembering names becomes a weakness because regulars want you to recognize them. If you are a salesperson, your nontalent for empathy becomes a weakness because your prospects need to feel understood. If you are an executive, your nontalent for strategic thinking becomes a weakness because your company needs to know what traps or opportunities lie hidden over the horizon. You would be wise not to ignore your weaknesses.

Great managers don’t. As soon as they realize that a weakness is causing the poor performance, they switch their approach. They know that there are only three possible routes to helping the person succeed.

Devise a support system. Find a complementary partner. Or find an alternative role. Great managers quickly bear down, weigh these options, and choose the best route.

DEVISE A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Approximately 147 million Americans are incapable of seeing with twenty-twenty vision. Seven hundred years ago anyone cursed with farsightedness, shortsightedness, or astigmatism would have been seriously handicapped. But as the science of optics developed, it became possible to grind lenses that could correct for these conditions. These lenses were then mounted in frames to make spectacles or glasses. And with this one invention, the weakness of imperfect vision was reduced to an irrelevant nontalent. Millions of Americans still suffer from imperfect vision, but armed with the support system of glasses or contact lenses, nobody cares.

The speediest cure for a debilitating weakness is a support system. If one employee finds it difficult to remember names, buy him a Rolodex. If another is an appalling speller, make sure she always runs spell check before she prints. Mandy M., the manager of the design department, describes one effective consultant who undermined her own credibility by always wearing trendy coveralls. Mandy took her shopping and made sure she had at least one presentable business suit that could be worn in front of clients. Jeff B., the sales manager for the computer software company, saw one of his salespeople's performance slipping because of pressures at home — the salesperson's wife was upset that he was receiving so many business calls on their personal line. Jeff bought him a second line and told him to designate one room in his house as an office, to define set hours when the office door would be shut, and to turn off the ringer during those hours.

Marie S., a general insurance agent, had to contend with a superbly productive agent who not only wielded a huge ego, but also spread negativity around him every time he was back in the office. Her solution? Cut a new door in his office wall that opened directly onto the elevator hallway and then mount a plaque over the door announcing the agent's name in classic gold lettering. With one stroke she not only fulfilled his ego needs, she also diverted him directly into his office and away from his negative wanderings.

This solution may seem a little extreme, but whether they are cutting holes in walls or simply buying Rolodexes, these managers are all doing

the same thing: they are managing around the employee's weakness so that they can spend time focusing on his strengths. As with all focus on strength strategies, devising a support system is more productive and more fun than trying to fix the weakness.

Occasionally a support system can serve a different purpose. A large restaurant chain had made a commitment to hiring a certain number of mentally retarded employees, believing that they could find these individuals some simple yet meaningful work. Their altruism occasionally proved rather difficult to execute in the real world. The president describes one individual, Janice, who was employed to unpack chicken, place each piece carefully in the fryer, and then lift them all out once the timer had sounded. Janice was fully capable of understanding the responsibilities of the role and performed its mechanics perfectly. But she couldn't count. And unfortunately the fryer could hold only six pieces of chicken. More often than not Janice would overfill the fryer, leaving each piece of chicken dangerously undercooked.

The company could have easily given up on Janice because of her inability to count. But they chose not to. Instead they devised a simple support system to manage around her weakness: they asked their chicken supplier to send the chicken in packages of six. This way Janice wouldn't have to count. She could just empty each packet into the fryer, and the chicken would be cooked to perfection every time. The supplier refused the request. "It will be too much work on our end," they complained.

So the company fired the supplier and engaged another that was willing to ship chicken in packets of six. Now nobody cares that Janice can't count. Her weakness is irrelevant; it is now a nontalent.

FIND A COMPLEMENTARY PARTNER

Each year, buoyed by the hope that leaders are made, not born, tens of thousands of budding executives traipse off to leadership development courses. Here they discover the many different traits and competencies that constitute the model leader. They receive feedback from their peers and direct reports, feedback that reveals their unique leadership profile. Finally, after all the learning and reflection is complete, the hard work begins. Each willing participant is asked to craft a plan to fill in those valleys, so that he can reshape himself into the model leader, smooth and well-rounded.

That last step, according to great managers, is an unfortunate mistake. They agree that leaders should know all the roles that need to be played. They agree that leaders should look in the mirror and learn how they come across to peers and direct reports. But that last step, crafting a plan to become more well-rounded, is in their view woefully naive. If the individual comes to the training class a poor public speaker, he will leave a poor public speaker. If he is nonconfrontational, he will always be tempted to shy away from battle. If he is impractical, he will forever struggle with bringing his ideas down to land. A training class might help him learn why certain talents are important and how they work. But no matter how earnest he is, a training class will not help him acquire them.

This isn't a depressing revelation. The most renowned leaders in the history of corporate America have always known it. As they struggled to carve out their success, the last thing on their mind was to become well-rounded. They may have been aware of their own shortcomings, but none of them worked at turning these shortcomings into strengths. They knew what a hopeless waste of time that would be. So they did something else instead: they looked for a partner.

Walt Disney didn't have to look far to find his brother, Roy. Through the good graces of their Stanford professor, William Hewlett found David Packard. Bill Gates and Paul Allen were fortunate enough to bump into each other in their high school computer club. None of these extraordinarily successful leaders were well-rounded. They may have had a broad knowledge of their respective businesses, but in terms of talent, each one was sharp in one or two key areas and blunt in many others. Each partnership was effective precisely because where one partner was blunt, the other was sharp. The partnerships were well-rounded, not the individuals.

Even leaders who appeared to stand alone usually balanced their act with a complementary partner. At Disney the massively intelligent, insatiably competitive Michael Eisner benefited from the more practical, down-to-earth Frank Wells. And at Electronic Data Systems, behind the impetuous, inspirational Ross Perot you would have found the wise, guiding hand of the president, Mitch Hart.

The lesson from these leaders is quite clear. You succeed by finding ways to capitalize on who you are, not by trying to fix who you aren't. If you are blunt in one or two important areas, try to find a partner whose

peaks match your valleys. Balanced by this partner, you are then free to hone your talents to a sharper point.

This lesson is applicable across virtually all roles and professions. Since few people are a perfect fit for their role, the great manager will always be looking for ways to match up one person's valleys with another person's peaks.

Jan B. had a highly creative researcher, Diane, who seemed to be congenitally incapable of turning in her expense reports on time. Instead of wasting time berating her for her constant failure, Jan simply told her: "Every time you get back from a trip, drop your expenses into an envelope and hand them to Larry. He'll figure them out." Larry isn't an assistant; he's a researcher like Diane. But he's the most organized person on the small team, so he gets to handle his peer's expenses. It may be unconventional. It certainly requires trust and respect between Larry and Diane. But in Jan's mind, it is the only way to capitalize on Larry's talent and simultaneously release Diane from her weakness.

Jeff B., the software sales manager, is not only a sincere, passionate, and conceptual man, he is also, it turns out, a rotten planner. "I've never been good at tactics," he confesses. "I am excellent at ground zero, building trust face-to-face. And I am excellent at twenty thousand feet, finding patterns, playing out scenarios. But I'm terrible in between. That's where Tony's so good. When we look at a situation he asks different questions than me. I'll ask, 'What if?' or, 'Why not?' He'll ask, 'How many?' or, 'When?' or, 'Prove it.' If I went to the board with my half-baked ideas, I'd get shot down every time. But with the two of us working on the same idea, our case ends up looking so convincing, they haven't been able to turn us down once. As I say to Tony, individually we're not much, but together we have a brain."

When you interview great managers, you are bombarded with examples like these. After a while the partnerships they describe begin to seem almost archetypal. Of course the creative but impractical thinker wound up partnered with the streetwise, business-savvy operator. Of course the administratively impaired salesperson teamed up with the "no detail too small" office manager. And of course the cocky, needy highflier found a mentor in the tough-loving veteran. It was inevitable. These things just happen.

But they don't. The partnerships great managers describe are not archetypes. There is nothing inevitable about them at all. Each partnership is, in fact, an anomaly, a surprisingly rare example of one

manager bucking the system and figuring out how to make the most of uniquely imperfect people. Great managers talk about these partnerships so nonchalantly, it is easy to forget just how difficult they are to forge in the real world.

HOW COMPANIES PREVENT PARTNERSHIPS

A healthy partnership is based on one crucial understanding: Neither partner is perfect. If potential partners are afraid to admit their imperfections, or are trying diligently to correct them, or are reluctant to ask for help, neither will be on the lookout for a productive partnership. They will be nervous of confessing to too many faults and suspicious of anyone who offers.

Strangely, most companies actively encourage this kind of behavior. Job descriptions, for even the simplest roles, run to two or three pages, presumably in hopes of capturing every minute task that the perfect incumbent should be able to perform. Training classes and development plans target those few behaviors where you consistently struggle. Everyone talks of the need to "broaden your skill set."

Perhaps the most pervasive example of "partnership prevention," however, can be found in the conventional wisdom on teams and teamwork. Conventional wisdom's most frequently quoted line on teams is "There is no 'I' in team." The point here seems to be that teams are built on collaboration and mutual support. The whole is, apparently, more important than its individual parts.

On the surface this appears to be eminently right-minded. Taking these sentiments as their starting point, many companies have dedicated themselves to creating self-managed teams. Here team members are encouraged to rotate into different roles on the team. The more roles they learn, the more they are paid. And everyone is supposed to focus on the team's goals and performance, not his own.

However, conventional wisdom's view of teamwork is dangerously misleading. Great managers do not believe that a productive team has camaraderie as its cornerstone and team members who can play all roles equally well. On the contrary, they define a productive team as one where each person knows which role he plays best and where he is cast in that role most of the time.

The founding principle here is that excellent teams are built around *individual excellence*. Therefore the manager's first responsibility is to make sure each person is positioned in the right role. Her second

responsibility is to balance the strengths and weaknesses of each individual so that they complement one another. Then, and only then, should she turn her attention to broader issues like “camaraderie” or “team spirit.” One team member might occasionally have to step out of his role to support another, but this kind of pinch-hitting should be a rarity on great teams, not their very essence.

Jim K., a full bird colonel in the army — an organization that might be forgiven for emphasizing flexibility and camaraderie over individual excellence — gives this description of team building:

“When I first assemble the platoon I ask each person to tell me what activities he is mostly drawn to. One will say sharpshooting. One will say radio. One will say explosives. And so on. I’ll go around the whole group, taking notes. Then, when I build each squad, I try to assign each person to the role he said he was drawn to. Obviously you won’t get a perfect match. And obviously every soldier will be required to learn every role on the platoon — we might lose a man in battle, and every soldier must be able to step in. But you’ve got to start by assigning the right duties to the right soldier. If you get that wrong, your platoon will falter in combat.”

Whereas conventional wisdom views individual specialization as the antithesis of teamwork, great managers see it as the founding principle.

If individual positioning is so important, then at the heart of a great team there must be an I. There must be lots of strong, distinct I’s. There must be individuals who know themselves well enough to pick the right roles and to feel comfortable in them most of the time. If one individual joins the team with little understanding of his own strengths and weaknesses, then he will drag the entire team down with his poor performance and his vague yearnings to switch roles. Self-aware individuals — strong I’s — are the building blocks of great teams.

FIND AN ALTERNATIVE ROLE

There are some people for whom nothing works. You trip every trigger imaginable. You train. You find partners. You buy Rolodexes, teach spell check, and cut through office walls. But nothing works.

Faced with this situation, you have little choice. You have to find this employee an alternative role. You have to move him out. Sometimes the only way to cure a bad relationship is to get out of it. Similarly, sometimes the only way to cure poor performance is to get the performer out of that role.

How do you know if you are at that point? You will never know for sure. But the best managers offer this advice:

You will have to manage around the weaknesses of each and every employee. But if, with one particular employee, you find yourself spending *most* of your time managing around weaknesses, then know that you have made a *casting error*. At this point it is time to fix the casting error and to stop trying to fix the person.

CHAPTER 6: The Fourth Key: Find the Right Fit

- The Blind, Breathless Climb
- One Rung Doesn’t Necessarily Lead to Another
- Create Heroes in Every Role
- Three Stories and a New Career
- The Art of Tough Love

The Blind, Breathless Climb

"What's wrong with the old career path?"

Sooner or later every manager is asked the question "Where do I go from here?" The employee wants to grow. He wants to earn more money, to gain more prestige. He is bored, underutilized, deserves more responsibility. Whatever his reasons, the employee wants to move up and wants you to help.

What should you tell him? Should you help him get promoted? Should you tell him to talk to Human Resources? Should you say that all you can do is put in a good word for him? What is the right answer?

There is no *right* answer — any one of these answers might be the right one, depending on the situation. However, there is a *right way* to approach this question — namely, *help each person find the right fit*. Help each person find roles that ask him to do more and more of what he is naturally wired to do. Help each person find roles where her unique combination of strengths — her skills, knowledge, *and* talents — match the distinct demands of the role.

For one employee, this might mean promotion to a supervisor role. For another employee, this might mean termination. For another, it might mean encouraging him to grow within his current role. For yet another, it might mean moving her back into her previous role. These are very different answers, some of which might be decidedly unpopular with the employee. Nonetheless, no matter how bitter the pill, great managers stick to their goal: Regardless of what the employee wants, the manager's responsibility is to steer the employee toward roles where the employee has the greatest chance of success.

On paper this sounds straightforward; but as you can imagine, it proves to be a great deal more challenging in the real world. This is primarily because, in the real world, conventional wisdom persuades most of us that the right answer to the question "Where do I go from here?" is "Up."

Careers, conventional wisdom advises, should follow a prescribed path: You begin in a lowly individual contributor role. You gain some expertise and so are promoted to a slightly more stretching, slightly less menial individual contributor role. Next you are promoted to supervise other individual contributors. Then, blessed with good performance,

good fortune, and good contacts, you climb up and up, until you can barely remember what the individual contributors do at all.

In 1969, in his book, *The Peter Principle*, Laurence Peter warned us that if we followed this path without question, we would wind up promoting each person to his level of incompetence. It was true then. It is true now. Unfortunately, in the intervening years we haven't succeeded in changing very much. We still think that the most creative way to reward excellence in a role is to promote the person out of it. We still tie pay, perks, and titles to a rung on the ladder: the higher the rung, the greater the pay, the better the perks, the grander the title. Every signal we send tells the employee to look onward and upward. "Don't stay in your current role for too long," we advise. "It looks bad on the résumé. Keep pressing, pushing, stretching to take that next step. It's the only way to get ahead. It's the only way to get respect."

These signals, although well-intended, place every employee in an extremely precarious position. To earn respect, he knows he must climb. And as he takes each step, he sees that the company is burning the rungs behind him. He cannot retrace his steps, not without being tarred with the failure brush. So he continues his blind, breathless climb to the top, and sooner or later he overreaches. Sooner or later he steps into the wrong role. And there he is trapped. Unwilling to go back, unable to climb up, he clings to his rung until, finally, the company pushes him off.

A RUNG TOO FAR

Marc C. was pushed. He was pushed off, down, and out. Standing on Pennsylvania Avenue, Marc gazed up at the White House and tried to piece together what had happened.

Two years earlier he had still been living out of his suitcase. As the leading foreign correspondent for a European television station, one week he would find himself in Zaire covering the fall of a dictator, and the next week he would turn up in Chechnya to record the retreat of rebel insurgents. Wherever he went, everyone acknowledged Marc as the master. Somehow he was able to find the center of all the anger and the confusion and extract some meaning from the madness. When armies shelled marketplaces, or snipers picked off civilians on their walk to work, Marc would be found at the scene explaining what happened, why it happened, and what it all meant. To his viewers he was a calming, authoritative presence. They trusted him. So no one was surprised when he was posted to Jerusalem.

On the foreign correspondents' ladder, Washington is the top rung. It has the most prestige, the most money, and, important, the most air time. It is the posting everyone wants. But if Washington is number one, then Jerusalem runs a close second. More interesting than the European parliament in Brussels, more important than post-cold war Moscow, Jerusalem is one of the few places where local clashes have such global significance. It is a foreign correspondent's dream.

In Jerusalem Marc refined his talents. Israel is a small country, and Marc was able to report live from the scene no matter where the action erupted. Israeli settlers protesting the latest peace accords? Marc would be in their midst, marching with them, shouting his report over the noise of the crowd. Palestinian youths hurling paving stones at Israeli troops? Marc would be filmed in one of the narrow side streets, explaining the reasons for their anger simply and clearly. In the overheated climate of the Middle East, Marc became the cool voice of reason.

A year later his European managers offered him the top rung. They offered him the money, the prestige, and the exposure of Washington. Marc loved what he was doing, but there was no way he was going to turn this down. It was the plum job of all reporting assignments. He willingly unpacked his suitcases for the last time and settled in to become the newest, best Washington bureau chief. And very quickly things started to fall apart.

Outside of the occasional titillating scandal, not much happens in Washington — at least not during his tenure. Yes, there might be a presidential veto one week and a filibuster the next, but back in Europe few understand these events and even fewer care. Most of the action is dry and repetitious, important but uninteresting. The Washington bureau chief's role is to take the tedious business of politics and inject it with heroes and villains, daring triumphs and crushing defeats. His job is to spice things up.

And Marc couldn't do it. He was brilliant at giving real-life drama a political context. But he was terrible at giving politics the sheen of real-life drama. Marc was surefooted in the aftermath of a mortar attack. But in a town where a State of the Union address was big news, he didn't know what to do. The stories went begging. His reporting became bland. He was lost.

Back in Europe, his audience turned away. His European managers couldn't put their finger on it, but they noticed the difference. They stuck with him for a while — he deserved that much — and then they pulled

the plug. In six months the hero of Jerusalem had shriveled into the embarrassment in Washington. He was removed.

Marc's role might seem quite exotic, but his fate is commonplace. In his desire to grow and to please his managers, he kept climbing the ladder until, one day, he climbed one rung too far. Sadly, this happens all the time. In order to gain money, title, and respect, teachers must become administrators. Managers must reach for leadership. Nurses must aspire to be nurse supervisors. Craftsmen must yearn to be managers of other craftsmen. And reporters must yearn to be bureau chiefs. In most companies Marc's fate awaits us all.

Laurence Peter was right. Most employees *are* promoted to their level of incompetence. It's inevitable. It's built into the system.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

This system is flawed, for it is built on three false assumptions.

The first fallacy is that each rung on the ladder represents a slightly more complex version of the previous rung. Consequently, if a person excelled on one rung on the ladder, it is a sure sign that with just a little more training, he will be able to repeat his success on the rung above. The best managers reject this. They know that *one rung doesn't necessarily lead to another.*

Second, the conventional career path is condemned to create conflict. By limiting prestige to those few rungs high up on the ladder, it tempts every employee, even the most self-aware, to try to clamber onto the next rung. Each rung is a competition, and since there are fewer rungs than there are employees, each competition generates many more losers than winners. Great managers have a better idea. Why not resolve the conflict by making prestige more available? Why not carve out alternative career paths by conveying meaningful prestige on every role performed at excellence? *Why not create heroes in every role?*

The third, and most devastating, flaw in the system is its assumption that varied experiences make the employee more attractive. This assumption focuses the employee on hunting for marketable skills and experiences. With these skills and experiences proudly displayed on his résumé, the employee then meekly waits — or aggressively lobbies — to be chosen for the next rung. In this scenario the employee is the supplicant. The manager is the gatekeeper, pushing back the hordes and selecting the attractive ones — the ones with the most skills and the best experiences — for advancement. Great managers know that this

whole scenario is awry. In their view the hunt for marketable skills and experiences should not be the force driving the employee's career. They envision a different driving force. They have a *new career* in mind.

One Rung Doesn't Necessarily Lead to Another

"Why do we keep promoting people to their level of incompetence?"

Why do we continue to assume that a person's success on one rung will have any relevance to his or her likelihood to succeed on the rung above? More than likely we have been confused about what is trainable and what is not. We have made no distinction among skills, knowledge, and talents, and this clumsy language has made it easier for us to say, "If John has shown himself to be a good salesperson, then I am sure we can just train him to be a good manager." Or, "Since Jan has proven herself a solid manager, I am confident that we can teach her the strategic thinking and the vision needed to be a great leader."

As we noted earlier, we now know that excellence in every role requires distinct talents, and that these talents, unlike skills and knowledge, are extraordinarily difficult to train. Armed with this knowledge, we can dismantle some long-standing career paths. We know that the talents needed to sell and the talents needed to manage, while not mutually exclusive, *are* different — if you excel at one, it does not tell us very much about whether you will excel at the other. We can say the same about the talents needed to manage, as compared to the talents needed to lead. In fact, we can say the same about all roles — even roles that, at first glance, seem to be very similar.

Consider, for example, the conventional information technology career path. If you work in information technology, you will tend to begin your career as a computer programmer — writing code — and then progress to a systems analyst role — designing integrated systems. Programmer to systems analyst: these are the first two rungs on the conventional IT career path. And given their superficial similarity, this would seem to be a sensible way to structure things.

In fact, these two roles are quite different. Great programmers possess a thinking talent called problem solving. The best programmers want to be given *all of the pieces* to the puzzle. Once they are armed with all the pieces, their particular talent is the ability to rearrange the pieces so that they all fit together perfectly. In their personal life this talent often draws them toward crossword puzzles or brainteasers, like

the ones in chapter 3. In their professional life this talent enables them to write thousands of lines of computer code and arrange them in the most effective and efficient order.

While this talent is nice for a systems analyst to possess, it is not particularly relevant to success on the job. By contrast, their most important thinking talent is called formulation. They revel in situations where they are faced with *incomplete data*. Lacking some of the most important facts, they can then do what they love: play out alternative scenarios, hypothesize, test out their theories. On the job this talent enables them to construct highly intricate systems and then test these systems for bugs. If one system has a glitch, they then play out different scenarios, narrowing the range of possible solutions until they have identified exactly what needs to be changed and where and why.

The talents of problem solving and formulation are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible for an employee to possess both. But if you are blessed with problem solving, it does not *necessarily* mean that you are similarly blessed with formulation. To promote programmers to systems analysts simply because the conventional career path dictates that you should is to take a blind roll of the dice. You are just as likely to wind up with a team of misfits as you are a team of talented systems analysts.

Before you promote someone, look closely at the talents needed to excel in the role — the striving, thinking, and relating talents necessary for success. After scrutinizing the person and the role, you may still choose promotion. And since each person is highly complex, you may still end up promoting your employee into a position where he struggles — no manager finds the perfect fit every time. But at least you will have taken the time to weigh the fit between the demands of the role and the talent of the person.

If Marc's managers had bothered to think this through, perhaps they would have seen the poor fit between the Washington job, which required a reporter who loved to spice things up, and Marc, whose dominant talent was an ability to calm things down.

Create Heroes in Every Role

"How to solve the shortage of respect."

Even if you thoughtfully examine the match between the employee and the role, you've still got a problem. No matter what conclusion *you* come to, the employee will invariably want to move up. The employee will want to be promoted. Every signal sent by the company tells him that higher is better. A larger salary, a more impressive title, more generous stock options, a roomier office with a couch and a coffee table, all this and more awaits the lucky employee on the next rung on the ladder. No wonder he wants to move up.

These blazing neon lights are a damaging distraction. They not only tempt employees to jump from excellence on one rung to mediocrity on another, they also create a bottleneck — legions of employees all trying to scramble onto increasingly fewer rungs. Conflict and disappointment are inevitable. There has to be a way to redirect employees' driving ambition and to channel it more productively.

There is. *Create heroes in every role.* Make every role, performed at excellence, a respected profession. Many employees will still choose to climb the conventional ladder, and for those with the talent to manage others or to lead, this will be the right choice. However, guided by meaty incentives, many other employees will decide to redirect their energies toward growth within their current role. Great managers envision a company where there are multiple routes toward respect and prestige, a company where the best secretaries carry a vice president title, where the best housekeepers earn twice as much as their supervisors, and where anyone performing at excellence is recognized publicly.

If this sounds fanciful, here are a few techniques that great managers are already using to build such a company.

LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT

How long does it take to become excellent in a chosen field? In a study called the Development of Talent Project, Dr. Benjamin Bloom of Northwestern University scrutinized the careers of world-class sculptors, pianists, chess masters, tennis players, swimmers, mathematicians, and neurologists. He discovered that across these diverse professions, it takes between ten and eighteen years before world-class competency is reached. If you show some interest, he

becomes even more specific. He will tell you, for example, that it takes 17.14 years from your first piano lessons to your victory at the Van Cliburn, Tchaikovsky, or Chopin piano competitions. While figures like this can feel a little too precise, Dr. Bloom's general point is nevertheless well-taken: The exact length of time will vary by person and profession, but whether you are a teacher, a nurse, a salesperson, an engineer, a pilot, a waiter, or a neurosurgeon, it still takes years to become the world's best. As Hippocrates, the philosopher and founder of modern medicine, observed: "Life is short. The art is long."

If a company wants some employees in every role to approach world-class performance, it *must* find ways to encourage them to stay focused on developing their expertise. Defining graded levels of achievement, for every role, is an extremely effective way of doing just that.

Lawyers figured this out a long time ago. The young lawyer, fresh out of law school, selects his field of expertise — corporate law, criminal law, tax law — is hired into that field by a law firm and joins as a junior associate. Over the next four or five years he will be promoted to associate and then to senior associate. As a senior associate he will still be practicing law in his chosen field. He will simply be more accomplished. Over the next five years he will, hopefully, be promoted to some kind of equity position within the firm, where he will start as a junior partner, move up to partner, and then be promoted to senior partner. As a senior partner in the firm he will garner a tremendous amount of respect and earn a very generous salary, yet he will still be practicing the same kind of law as he was back in his junior associate days. The work will be more complex, and he will have his pick of the most interesting and most lucrative work. The only difference is that, by now, he will be one of the world experts in his chosen field.

Law firms are rarely considered cutting-edge organizations, but with their use of graded levels of achievement, they are far ahead of most companies. Although all lawyers are free to choose more conventional career paths — moving into the management of other lawyers, perhaps, or becoming a legal generalist for a corporation — these levels of achievement provide lawyers with an alternative, but equally respected, path to growth. It is a path that offers them both the opportunity to become experts and a simple way to track their progress.

Lawyers aren't the only ones to realize the power of these levels of achievement. In medicine the levels build from intern all the way to senior consultant over a period of, at minimum, fifteen years. In

professional sports you can measure your expertise as you progress from rookie to second string to starter to all-star. In sales the entry grade might be the Million Dollar Roundtable, an important first step for the fledgling salesperson, but the pinnacle is the Presidents Club, where the criteria for membership are ten million dollars in sales and perfect client-service scores. And in music you track your progress not by whether you are promoted from the violin to the conductor, but rather by your journey from the most junior third-chair violinist to concertmaster or first-chair associate.

In fact, anywhere individual excellence is revered, you will find these graded levels of achievement. Conversely, if you cannot find them, it means that, either overtly or accidentally, the company does not value excellence in that role. And by this standard, companies don't value excellence in most roles.

As we stated earlier, great managers rebel against this. They believe instead that every role performed at a level of excellence is valuable, that there is virtuosity in every role. So no matter how menial the role appears, they work hard to define meaningful criteria that can help a dedicated employee track his or her progress toward world-class performance.

- AT&T provides help desk solutions to hundreds of companies. AT&T managers decided to organize each help desk according to the complexity of the client's question. Level one deals with simple queries like "How can I turn on my computer?" Level two addresses slightly more difficult issues. Level three handles the panicked "What do I do? I think I've just crashed our entire intranet!" inquiries. These three distinct levels are not only the most efficient way to structure the operation — each level has a different pace, a different call volume, and so on — but they also provide a genuine career path for employees who want to grow into superior technicians rather than into supervisors.
- At Phillips Petroleum, managers provide employees with a well-respected engineer career track. If the employee can show proficiency in the required procedures, then she can gradually progress through the different levels of this career path, all the way up to a director-level position, where she will be recognized as one of the most accomplished engineers in the firm.

- In the mid-eighties Gallup worked with Allied Breweries to measure the performance of bartenders in pubs. One of the signs of greatness in bartending is an ability to remember not only the names of regulars, but also the drinks that go with them. We devised a program called the One Hundred Club. Any bartender who could prove that he knew one hundred names, and the drinks to match, would be awarded a button and a cash prize. The levels progressed up to the world-class Five Hundred Club, which brought better prizes and bigger bonuses.

  When we started the One Hundred Club with Allied Breweries, few managers believed that any bartender would ever reach the Five Hundred Club level. But by 1990 Janice K., a bartender in a pub in the north of England, became the first member of the Three Thousand Club. She knew the names of three thousand regulars *and* their favorite beverage. From this angle Janice was the best bartender in the world.

It just goes to show: In most cases, no matter what it is, if you measure it and reward it, people will try to excel at it.

These are just a few examples of managers guiding employees with a series of levels that lead to world-class performance. Levels of achievement like these are invaluable for a manager. When confronted by that thorny question “Where do I go from here?” the manager is now able to offer a specific and respected alternative to the blind, breathless climb up.

BROADBANDING

These levels of achievement will certainly help redirect an employee’s focus toward becoming world-class. However, the manager’s efforts at career redirection will be forever hindered if all of the *pay* signals are telling the employee to look upward.

Although each of us is motivated by money in different ways, the fact of the matter is that few of us are repelled by money. All of us may not hunger for it, but only a tiny minority of us find money positively distasteful. Therefore the simple truth is that it will be much easier for managers to redirect employees toward alternative career paths if some of those paths involve a raise in pay.

The ideal pay plan would allow the company to compensate the person in direct proportion to the amount of expertise she showed in her

current role — the more she excelled, the more she would earn. In practice this ideal plan is complicated by the fact that some roles are simply more valuable than others. On balance, a pilot is probably more valuable than a flight attendant. A principal is more valuable than a teacher. A restaurant manager is more valuable than a waiter. Any pay plan must take these value differentials into account.

But before we design our plan, there is one final twist to consider. Some roles performed excellently are more valuable than roles higher up the ladder performed averagely. An excellent flight attendant is probably more valuable than an average pilot. A brilliant teacher is more valuable than a novice principal. A superstar waiter is more valuable than a mediocre restaurant manager. The perfect pay plan must be sophisticated enough to reflect this overlap.

Simple and effective, it is called broadbanding. For each role, you define pay in broad bands, or ranges, with the top end of the lower-level role overlapping the bottom end of the role above.

For example, at Merrill Lynch the top end of the pay band for financial consultants is over $500,000 a year. In contrast, the bottom end of the branch manager pay band is $150,000 a year. This means that if you are a successful financial consultant and you want to move into a manager role, you might have to endure a 70 percent pay cut. The upside for the novice manager is that the top end of the manager pay band runs into the millions. So while you may have to stomach the 70 percent pay cut initially, if you prove yourself to be excellent at managing others, then in the end you will reap significant financial rewards.

The Walt Disney Company takes a similar approach. As a brilliant server in one of their fine-dining restaurants, you might earn over $60,000 a year. If you choose to climb onto the manager career path, your starting salary will be $25,000 a year. Again, once you start to excel as a manager and are promoted up and through the various supervisory levels, your total compensation package can take you far above $60,000. But, initially, your pay packet will be sliced in half.

Even traditional, hierarchical organizations are starting to experiment with broadbanding. Martin P., the chief of police for a state capital in the Midwest, describes the conventional career path from police officer to police sergeant — the front-line supervisor role — to police captain (he removed the lieutenant role a couple of years ago) to assistant chief to police chief. “Time was,” he says, “when the only way to earn more money was to move into management — to go from officer to sergeant.

Now all my pay grades overlap. If you are a superb police officer, you don't need to get promoted to sergeant to earn more. The fact is, my very best police officers earn more than their captain does."

On the surface, broadbanding appears disorienting. Front-line employees earning two or three times what their managers earn? This is a world turned upside-down. On closer scrutiny, however, broadbanding makes sense.

First, with its *broad* bands of pay, it provides a way to value world-class performance in a particular role very differently from average performance in that role. As with levels of achievement, wherever individual excellence is revered, we see broadbanding. In professional sports, no matter what the position, the superstars at that position earn multiples greater than the average players in the same position. This also applies to actors, musicians, artists, singers, and writers. In all of these professions the broad range in pay encourages the person to refine his talents and so become world-class. Great managers advise us to apply the same logic to all roles.

Second, with its *overlapping* bands of pay, broadbanding slows the blind, breathless climb up. It forces the employee to open her eyes and ask, "Why am I angling for this next promotion? Why am I pushing so hard to climb onto the next rung?" Without broadbanding, the answer to these questions is clouded by her knowledge that the next rung brings more money. With broadbanding the employee can answer only by examining the *content* of the role and weighing the match between its responsibilities and her strengths. Her answers will be more honest and more accurate. She will make her career choices based at least as much upon fit as upon finances.

Some companies take broadbanding to its limits. At Stryker, a $2 billion medical device manufacturer, the pay band for salespeople ranges from $40,000 for a novice to $250,000 for the best of the best. If you decide to move into the manager ranks, you have to take a 60 percent pay cut — the starting salary for a new regional manager is just under $100,000 a year. What is intriguing is that the top end of the manager band — about $200,000 in total compensation — is lower than the top end for salespeople. The best regional manager in the company can never earn as much as the best salesperson. Why would Stryker choose to do this? All manner of reasons: They value their best salespeople very highly; they want to entice their best salespeople to stay close to the customer for as long as possible; they want each

employee to think long and hard before climbing onto the manager ladder. Whatever their reasons, their pay plan has proven very successful. Powered by the best salespeople and the best managers in the business, Stryker has achieved 20 percent annual growth in sales and profit for the last twenty years.

Broadbanding is a vital weapon in the arsenal of great managers. It gives teeth to their commitment that every role, performed at excellence, will be valued. And if the Stryker example appears a little extreme, remember this: During Gallup's interviews with great managers, we found a consistent willingness to hire employees who, the managers knew, might soon earn significantly more than they did.

CREATIVE ACTS OF REVOLT

Great managers have to survive in a hostile world. Most companies do not value excellence in every role. They do not provide alternative career paths for their employees. And they do not give their managers the leeway to design graded levels of achievement or broadbanded pay plans. If you find yourself living in this restricted world, what can you do?

Brian J. can tell you. His advice: Revolt, quietly and creatively. Brian manages artists in a large media company. His company has seen fit to construct an intricate hierarchy comprising over thirty distinct pay grades, each with clearly defined benefits and perks. One of the rules within this elaborate structure is that you cannot be promoted to a director-level position unless you manage other people. Another rule is that only directors are granted such perks as stock options and first-class seating when traveling.

"I was caught between a rock and a hard place," Brian says. "I wanted to show some of my best graphic artists how valuable they were, but rules are rules. I couldn't reward them with a director-level promotion without promoting them to a manager role. But I didn't want to promote them to a manager role because that's not their talent. So instead I asked each of them to become mentors for junior graphic artists — they wouldn't manage these people, they would just be expected to pass on their expertise. I then went to Human Resources and said that, as far as I was concerned, a mentor was the equivalent of a manager and so I had a right to promote them to a director-level position. HR took some convincing, but I got my way in the end."

Garth P. tells a similar story. Garth runs an applied technology division in an aeronautics company. In his production facilities he employs

hundreds of technical specialists.

"The best engineer I had was a guy called Michael B. We've got a pretty rigid structure here, so whenever we wanted to reward Michael we had to promote him up the ladder. After ten years of promotions, he found himself doing less and less of the engineering he loved and more and more people management, which, to be frank, he struggled at. So together we decided to create a new position: master engineer. Michael would be a roving genius, getting involved in only the most complex projects. He would also be the main resource, and the last word, on all engineering problems any of the other teams faced. *And* he would be freed from any manager responsibilities at all. I decreed that this was a vice president-level job, got the okay from personnel, and then promoted him. I can't think of when I've made an employee happier."

Laura T., an executive in a Texas-based petrochemical company, faced a similar situation but solved it in a slightly different way:

"I have lots of people who want to grow and who deserve to be recognized, but since we aren't growing right now, new positions aren't opening up. So I take my top performers and assign them to special projects. These projects are ad hoc. They have a specific objective, with a specific timeline. Once the objective is met, the project team disbands. Special projects like this work really well for me, because they give my talented employees a chance to grow, and at the same time they give me a chance to recognize each of them for excellent work — I got permission from HR to reward each successful team member with a gift certificate for a weekend in Dallas and seats to a Cowboys game. Recognition like that might not sound like a big deal to you, but for a traditional petrochemical company like ours, it's a whole new way of thinking."

Each of these managers, in his or her own way, is providing alternative routes toward growth *and* prestige. Each of them, maneuvering within a restricted world, is devising innovative ways to reward employees for excellent performance, without necessarily promoting these employees out of their current role. Each of them is trying to create heroes in every role.

Three Stories and a New Career

"What is the force driving the New Career?"

Today's unpredictable business climate has undoubtedly caused a shift in the employer-employee relationship. Employers, acutely aware of the need to be nimble, can no longer guarantee lifelong employment. All they are willing to offer the employee is lifelong employability: "We will provide you with marketable experiences that will make you attractive to other employers, should we ever need to cut back our labor costs." This is certainly a shift from twenty years ago, but great managers contend it is merely a superficial shift. Very little of substance has changed. Conventional wisdom's core assumption about careers remains the same, and it remains wrong.

It assumes that the energy for a career should emanate from the employee's desire to better herself, to fill herself out with attractive experiences. She should not linger long in one particular role. Instead she should skip from one role to the next every couple of years so that, over time, her résumé becomes impressively varied. Under the terms of lifelong employment, the employees with the most impressive résumés were the most likely to be selected for the next rung on the internal ladder. Under the terms of lifelong employability, the employees with these attractive résumés are the most likely to be snapped up, externally, by a new company. The location may be different, but the assumption is the same: Varied experiences make an employee attractive. Therefore, from conventional wisdom's perspective, a career can be best understood as the employee's focused search for interesting and marketable experiences.

Great managers disagree. Acquiring varied experiences is important but peripheral to a healthy career. It is an accessory, not the driving force. The true source of energy for a healthy career, they say, is generated elsewhere. Listen to enough of their stories and you can start to figure out where. They tell stories of people who took a step, looked in the mirror, and discovered something about themselves. In some cases the person looked in the mirror spontaneously. In others he had to be coaxed to turn his head before seeing himself clearly. There are stories where the discovery was a confirmation to stay the course. There are stories, like the three that follow, where the discovery prompts a change

in direction. But whatever the details of the story, it is always the same story.

Their recurring story reveals that *self-discovery is the driving, guiding force for a healthy career.* The energy for a healthy career is generated from discovering the talents that are already there, not from filling oneself up with marketable experiences. Self-discovery is a long process, never fully achieved. Nonetheless, great managers know that it is this search for a full understanding of your talents and nontalents that serves as the source of energy powering your career.

#1: Dr. No's Story

George H. was the vice president of development in a large real estate development company. He had risen through the ranks as a project manager, and now, midway through his career, he found himself second in command to a creative, articulate risk taker called Howard P. George was perfectly suited to his role. While Howard dreamed up wildly elaborate and expensive schemes, George identified all of the impediments, all of the pitfalls, that could derail Howard's plan. George called this his "parade of horribles." Everyone called George "Dr. No."

Dr. No was respected and admired. He was honorable and courageous and detail oriented. And the whole company knew that every plan was strengthened by exposure to Dr. No's refining fire. He was a most valuable executive.

Then Howard left, and Dr. No was promoted, and quite soon he lost the admiration of his colleagues. You see, Dr. No's particular talent was to make small things out of big things. This talent had enabled him to take Howard's crazy ideas and break them down into manageable projects, each of which could then be analyzed for costs, benefits, and risks. But this talent was rendered useless without raw material, without a dreamer to dream up the humongous, outrageous idea. And the dreamer had moved on.

There were others within the company who would now present Dr. No with an Everest of an idea, but he would immediately slice it up into a series of middling hillocks, small projects, low risk. And, thus dismantled, the idea lost its impact. It was no longer worth the effort. By the middle of his first year Dr. No had red-lighted every single project.

Dr. No knew what he was doing, but, strangely, he couldn't prevent it. When he imagined the sheer size of the risk, so many variables, all out of his control, he would feel his throat begin to constrict. As he played

out the project in greater and greater detail, his throat would close so tightly that he could barely breathe. It happened every time and a little worse each time. At work he now felt physical pain and the attack of panic.

Panicky feelings like this can sometimes bring clarity. As the year progressed, Dr. No came to understand what everyone else already knew: He would *never* get anything going. The talents that had served him so well as the dreamer's partner would forever strangle the organization. Left to his own devices, he would always kill big ideas.

So Dr. No removed himself from the position. He set himself up as an independent contractor, where he would be paid to conceive, design, and execute lots and lots of small ideas. He can breathe more easily now.

#2: A Touching Story

Mary G. has fingers that are as strong and as firm as they appear, and powerful forearms. Standing up straight above you, she has shoulders that seem to stretch from wall to wall, and as she reaches back to twist her hair out of the way, you notice that her elbows are surprisingly rounded. Later, when she bears down on them, they feel as though they must be six inches across. It is a good feeling.

Mary is a massage therapist, and she was born to touch. "Other people's bodies fascinate me. When someone is lying in front of me, it's like their skin is transparent. I can see the bands of muscle stretched up and around their shoulder blades, across their back, and down their legs. I can see where the muscles are pulled taut and where they are all scrunched up in an angry little knot. I can almost see the nerves, too. I sense that with one person they might like long strokes that pump the muscle and get the blood going. With someone else they might prefer shiatsu. That's a technique where you use pressure points on the body to stimulate the nerve endings and open up the whole nervous system. Everyone is different."

Three years after finishing her training, Mary found herself the most sought-after therapist at the exclusive Arizona health spa where she worked. The word had spread. If you want a massage that pummels and loosens and opens you up, but with no pain, you must schedule with Mary.

Soon her employer decided to promote her to manage all of the massage therapists at the resort. This meant more money, more

security, better benefits, and fewer appointments of her own. And she was miserable.

"I missed the intimacy. As a massage therapist, I stand in a room with another person for an hour or more, in silence, and look through their skin and see their pain and ease their pain. I come to love each one, just a little bit. I love the immediate gratification of releasing someone's stress. They look different afterward, immediately afterward. Their skin looks brighter, their eyes are clearer. And I know it will last. It is a great feeling for me and, I hope, for them."

Mary wanted to get that feeling back. So she quit her job, moved to Los Angeles, and set up her own practice. Her appointment book is filled up, and once again Mary gets to touch people every single day.

#3: Mandy's Designer Story

We met Mandy back in chapter 5. She is the manager of a department that designs logos and other images to drive a product's brand identity. She tells this story:

"I inherited this woman, a design consultant, called Janet. A design consultant has two responsibilities — first, to interact with the clients and find out their needs; and second, to manage the designers so that they deliver what the client wanted. Janet was very ambitious, very talented, but she wasn't performing either of these roles very well. She wasn't failing, but she wasn't a star, either. And she was the kind of person who needed to be a star.

"She realized pretty quickly that I thought she was mediocre, so her attitude took a dive. She wouldn't tell me directly, but I got word from her best friend in the office that she wanted me to fire her so that she could collect unemployment. It pissed me off that she wouldn't come clean with me, but I was damned if I was going to let her manipulate me into firing her. I wanted her to be honest with herself about her feelings and her intentions. I wanted her to understand that, in the end, she would be rewarded for her honesty.

"So I waited her out. And over a period of about four months, we started to talk. We discussed her performance, her strengths, her weaknesses, likes, dislikes, that kind of thing. I told her that it wasn't her fault she wasn't excelling in this role, but that, together, we would have to find a solution.

"Then one day it occurred to me that she should go back to school and become a designer herself. She was very curious about the

business, very creative, and much preferred to do a job by herself. She played with the idea for a while, and then she acted on it. She enrolled at New York University, got her degree, and is now at a large advertising agency as a designer. And very successful.

"Janet wasn't a bad person. She had just picked the wrong career, and having started it, she didn't want to admit to herself that she had made a mistake. I helped her."

With self-discovery as its energy source, great managers now paint this picture of a healthy career. Guided perhaps by her choice of college major, perhaps by her family, perhaps by necessity, the employee selects her first role and jumps into the fray. In this first role she is unsure of herself. She is unsure of her ability to perform, unsure of her talents and her nontalents. As she achieves certain levels of performance, she might then move into different roles, or she might simply grow within that first role. Either way it is now her responsibility to look in the mirror and ask, "Do I thrill to this role? Did I seem to learn this role quickly? Am I good in this role? Does this role bring me strength and satisfaction?" It is her responsibility to listen for the clues that this role plays to her talents.

She might have started in sales, then moved into marketing — in this new role does she like being further removed from the customer? Does she love dealing with the patterns and concepts inherent in marketing, or does she miss the direct interaction and the knowledge that she, and she alone, made that sale? She might have started as a flight attendant and then moved into the training department — does she like helping novice flight attendants grow, or does she yearn for the drama and the challenge of winning over tired, nervous passengers?

As she looks in the mirror, she learns. Each step is the chance to discover a little more about her talents and her nontalents. These discoveries guide her next step and her next and her next. Her career is no longer a blind hunt for marketable experiences and a breathless climb upward. It has become an increasingly refined series of choices, as she narrows her focus toward that role, or roles, where her strengths — her skills, her knowledge, and her talents — converge and resound.

Deep down, most people probably know that self-discovery is important to the building of a healthy career. The difference lies in the way great managers use self-discovery.

First, they give self-discovery a central role, making it an explicit expectation for each employee. Mike C., a manager in a courier

company, describes how he turns self-discovery from a theoretical concept into a simple, practical demand:

"When someone joins the team, I tell him that one of our major goals in working together is to help him figure out who he is. I tell him to look in the mirror. And if he doesn't know how to do that, I tell him to use the Sunday night blues test. If he doesn't feel that little stab of depression on Sunday night, if he actually finds himself looking forward to the week, then he should stop and ask himself, 'Why?' What is it about the role that he loves so much? Whatever he answers, he should scribble it down and make sure that he keeps it in mind when he chooses another role.

"If he does feel those Sunday night blues coming on every weekend, then it's not necessarily his fault. It's not some failing in him. But he does need to ask the same question, 'Why?' What does he need that his current role is not giving him? Again, he should bear his answer in mind as he looks for other places to work."

Managers like Mike C. aren't suggesting that gaining varied experiences is a bad idea, simply that it is insufficient. They know that an employee will fail to find the roles that fit him if he spends his career gorging himself on skills and experiences, while neglecting to look in the mirror — an approach to career building that is as likely to succeed as is trying to build a healthy body by popping vitamins and diet pills while neglecting to exercise.

Second, these exemplary managers emphasize that the point of self-discovery is not to fix your nontalents. The point is not to "identify and then fill in your skill gaps," as many human resources departments euphemistically describe it. In the spirit of the insight that "you cannot put in what was left out, you can only draw out what was left in," the point of self-discovery is to learn about yourself so that you can capitalize on who you are. The point is to take control of your career, to make more informed decisions, and to gradually select roles that represent an increasingly good fit for your natural talents.

THE MANAGER AND THE NEW CAREER

How can the manager help? In the new career, the employee is the star. It is his responsibility to take control of his career. It is his responsibility to look in the mirror and make sound choices based upon what he discovers. But what role should the manager play? She is no longer the gatekeeper, picking and choosing from among the most

attractive, the most skilled, the most experienced supplicants. What is her role?

One could make a case for saying that since the employee is the star and since companies can no longer guarantee lifelong employment, the manager's role has become less significant. She should focus her people on performance today, but not concern herself with where they are headed tomorrow. The employee should figure that out for himself. Besides, if the manager invests too much in her people, she might soon be disappointed. Given the speed of change today, she might well end up having to terminate the people she has nurtured so carefully.

The best managers reject this perspective. They know that in this new career they can play some significant roles. They can *level the playing field.* They can be the ones to *hold up the mirror.* And they can *create a safety net.*

GREAT MANAGERS LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

This is why creating new heroes, designing graded levels of achievement, and establishing broadbanded pay plans are all so important. These techniques provide an environment where money and prestige are spread throughout the organization. Since the employee now knows he can acquire them through a variety of different paths, money and prestige become less of a factor in his decision making. He is free to choose his path based upon his current understanding of his talents and nontalents. He may still make the occasional misstep, but he is much more likely to focus not only toward roles where he excels, but toward roles that bring him lasting satisfaction and roles that he yearns to play for a very long time.

On this leveled playing field, you hear conversations that you never thought you would hear. Conversations like the one Jeff H., the computer software sales manager, had with his supervisor:

"I love my role. I'm the best in the company at it. I am making a lot of money doing it. And I am having more of an impact than I ever thought was possible in my life. So I said to my boss, I said, 'Your one objective with me is to see to it that I am never promoted again. If you can do that, you have me for life.'"

GREAT MANAGERS HOLD UP THE MIRROR

Great managers excel at “holding up the mirror.” They excel at giving performance feedback. Don’t confuse this with the once-a-year performance appraisal chore, with its labyrinthine form filling and remedial focus; or with the empty, arbitrary employee-of-the-month feedback. The feedback given by great managers is quite different.

It is the kind of feedback that Laura T., the petrochemical executive, gives to her people. She describes a program called Excel, where she meets with each of her twenty-two direct reports once every quarter. “In these meetings we quickly review the last three months. And then it’s on to the good stuff — the next three months. What are their plans, their goals, what measurements will we use? With each of them, we talk about what they enjoy doing and how we can structure things so that they get to do more of that.”

Martin P., the police chief, is less structured but has the same kinds of conversations. “I have sixteen direct reports, and with each of them I probably spend about twenty minutes each week talking about their performance, the project they are working on, how they can improve, and what I can do to help. These discussions happen all the time. With one of my guys, we went to a convention together last month. We accomplished nothing at the convention. But we did on the plane, and in the rental car, and over dinner, and in the lobby of the hotel.”

Jeff H. simply schedules time to travel on sales calls with each of his salespeople once or twice a quarter. “I try to not play the role of the knight on the white horse, riding in and saving the day. Instead I just travel with them, listen to their challenges, watch them with clients. I need to get a granular look at them at work. Back at the office, I replay what I saw for them. We then talk about plans and goals, and together we figure out the best way forward. My role isn’t to correct or fix. My role is to keep them aware of their style and to keep them realistic about what is possible, given that style.”

Other great managers make use of 360-degree feedback techniques or psychological profiles or employee opinion surveys or customer comment cards. Whatever their style, whatever their tools of choice, they are all trying to do the same thing: to hold up the mirror so that the employee has a chance to discover a little more about who he is, how he works, and the footprint he leaves on the world.

Although each manager employed his or her own approach to feedback, in the study of great managers Gallup found that their approaches did share three characteristics.

First, *their feedback was constant.* They varied the frequency according to the preferences or the needs of the individual employee. But whether the meetings happened for twenty minutes every month or for an hour every quarter, these performance feedback meetings were, nonetheless, a constant part of their interaction with each employee throughout the year. How much of a time commitment did this represent? According to the managers in Gallup's study, the total time spent discussing each employee's style and performance was roughly four hours per employee per year. And as one front-line supervisor said, "If you can't spend four hours a year with each of your people, then you've either got too many people, or you shouldn't be a manager."

Second, *each session began with a brief review of past performance.* The purpose of this was not to evaluate, "You should do less of that. You should fix this." Rather, the purpose was to help the employee think in detail about her style and to spark a conversation about the talents and nontalents that created this style. After this review, *the focus always shifted to the future and how the employee could use her style to be productive.* Sometimes they would work together to identify the employee's path of least resistance toward her goals, but often the discussion would revolve around partnership. What talents did the manager bring that could complement the nontalents of the employee?

During that convention trip, most of Martin P.'s conversations dealt with partnership. "This guy is incredibly driven, incredibly goal oriented, but he lacks strategic thinking — he has a hard time imagining what obstacles might get in his way as he plows ahead. I can help him here. I can play out alternative scenarios for him, and then we can put together contingency plans should any of these scenarios actually happen."

Jeff H. gives a similar description. "One of my salespeople knows all the tricks for getting her foot in the door and asking the right questions, but lacks creativity when it comes to pricing the deal. I'm pretty good at that. So when we meet, she tells me the players and the situation, and I tell her whether she should present a leasing option, a buy-back option, a volume discount deal, or whatever."

Third, *great managers made a point of giving their feedback in private, one on one.* The purpose of feedback is to help each individual to understand and build upon his natural strengths. You cannot do this in a group setting.

This sounds obvious, but given today's preoccupation with teamwork, it is surprising how many managers forget the importance of spending time *alone* with each of their people. As Phil Jackson, the extraordinarily successful coach of the Chicago Bulls, observes:

"I prefer to deal with [the players] on an individual basis. This helps strengthen my one-on-one connection with the players, who sometimes get neglected because we spend so much of our time together en masse. Meeting with players privately helps me stay in touch with who they are out of uniform. During the 1995 playoffs, for instance, Toni Kukoc was troubled by reports that Split, Croatia, where his parents live, had been hit by a barrage of artillery fire. It took several days for him to get through on the phone and learn that his family was all right. The war in his homeland is a painful reality of Toni's life. If I ignored that, I probably wouldn't be able to relate to him on any but the most superficial level."

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

With descriptions like this, Phil helps provide an answer to the manager's age-old question "Should you build close personal relationships with your employees, or does familiarity breed contempt?" The most effective managers say yes, you should build personal relationships with your people, and no, familiarity does not breed contempt.

This does not mean that you should necessarily become best friends with those who report to you — although if that is your style, and if you keep them focused on performance outcomes, there is nothing wrong with doing so. The same applies to socializing with your people — if that is not your style, don't do it. If it is your style, then there is nothing damaging about having dinner or a drink with them, as long as you still evaluate them on performance outcomes.

When great managers like Phil Jackson say they build close relationships with their people, when they say that familiarity does not breed contempt, they simply mean that a great manager must get to know his employees. And "getting to know someone" extends beyond a detailed understanding of an employee's talents and nontalents. It extends all the way to the practicalities and dramas of his personal life. The great manager does not necessarily have to intervene in the employee's life — although some do — but she does have to know about it. And she does have to care about it.

During Gallup's eighty thousand manager interviews we asked this question: "You have a talented employee who consistently shows up late for work. What would you say to this employee?" The answers ranged from the authoritarian to the laissez-faire:

"I would fire him; we don't tolerate lateness here."

"I would give him a verbal warning, then a written warning, then fire him."

"I would lock the door to the office and tell him that, from now on, even if you are two seconds late, you won't be allowed in."

"That's fine. I don't care what time they come in as long as they stay late and get their work done."

Each of these responses is defensible. Each has its merits. But these were not the answers of great managers. When told that an employee was consistently showing up late for work, the great managers gave this one reply, which sums up their attitude toward manager-employee relationships:

"I would ask why."

Maybe it has something to do with a bus schedule. Maybe he has to wait for a nanny to arrive. Maybe there is trouble at home. Once they had understood the employee's personal situation, they might take any number of different actions — ranging from changing the employee's hours to ten to six to telling him to get the situation sorted out, fast. But no matter what the next step, their *first* step was always to get to know the employee: "Ask why."

Phil Jackson's comments about personal relationships end with this line:

"Athletes are not the most verbal breed. That's why bare attention and listening without judgment are so important."

GREAT MANAGERS CREATE A SAFETY NET

The conventional career path lacks forgiveness. As the employee climbs from rung to rung, the rungs are burned behind him. If he climbs onto a rung and struggles, he knows that his reputation will suffer and his job will be in jeopardy. There is no turning back. By punishing career missteps so severely, this path discourages everyone from taking bold career steps. In conventional wisdom's world, taking bold career steps in order to discover a latent talent or to refine an existing one is almost as foolhardy as volunteering to learn the trapeze without a safety net. No

wonder people are so protective of their careers, so closed to their own feedback, so reluctant to change their career track based upon what they have discovered about themselves. This career path kills learning.

Great managers want to encourage career learning. They want to promote active self-discovery. So they have devised their own makeshift career safety net: trial periods.

Ellen P., the manager of in-flight training at Southwest Airlines, describes the safety net she built:

"It is a big step for a flight attendant to move out of the planes and into the training room. Some people want to become a trainer because they will get to travel less — we knock those people out right away. But others talk about wanting to teach, wanting to pass on the tradition of Southwest. If we think they have the talent, and if we think they are seeking the job for the right reasons, then we bring them in for a six-month trial period.

"We are very explicit that this is a time for them, and for us, to decide if this is really something that they will love to do, for a long time. People don't realize that teaching is hard. We do teach ideas for having fun with the guests and playing games and telling jokes. But there is a lot of boring detail to communicate and a lot of rules for the students to learn. This trial period is a way for them to get a sense of how they like this kind of work.

"During the trial period, we sit down with them once a month and discuss their performance, what they are really enjoying, where they are struggling. We send other trainers in to evaluate them and give them feedback. And at the end of the six months they have to pass certain tests to show that they have learned all the necessary information.

"Most do exactly that — and we now have a really talented group of trainers. But all of our trainees knew that if, during the trial period, either they or the company felt that they were not a fit, they would have been able to go back to the planes and resume their flight attendant role. And that's happened a couple of times over the last few years. There was no shame in that, no failure. These people wanted to experiment, to learn if they could be a trainer. They took the step and learned that teaching was not for them.

"It worked out great for us, too. They are back on the planes now, focused on our guests, and undistracted by vague thoughts of moving into training. They have closed that door. They can move on."

Trial periods are tricky. You must not use them as a substitute for selection. Like Ellen, you should use them only with people who have already shown some talent and some genuine interest in the role. After all, your main focus as a manager is not to help every employee play around within the company in the hope of finding something they like to do. Your main focus is to drive performance by matching the talent to the role. Even if an employee begs and pleads for a chance to discover a new talent, if you know he doesn't have it, don't offer him the trial period.

Furthermore, if you use trial periods, then, like Ellen, you must be very clear about the details. How long will it last? What criteria will you use to assess fit? How often, if at all, will you meet during the trial period to discuss performance? Where will the employee go if she does not stay in the new role? You must answer all of these questions explicitly if the trial period is to be a success.

Finally, and most significant, you must make it clear that the employee will be moved back into his previous role *if either you or he* is unhappy with the fit. This will avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings. The trial period is not just for his benefit; it is also for yours. If, after the trial period is over, *he* loves the role but *you* perceive a misfit, your assessment wins. He may not be happy with this, but at least he will not feel ambushed.

The Art of Tough Love

"How do great managers terminate someone and still keep the relationship intact?"

Whether the employee is at the end of a trial period, or whether he is just struggling along in his current role, it is still difficult to bring him bad news. It is still difficult to tell him that he needs to move out of his role. During Gallup's interviews, many managers, both great and average, confessed that they were physically sick before each conversation of this kind. No matter how you approach it, no matter how accomplished you are as a manager, removing someone from his role is never easy.

Here we are not referring to situations where the employee has committed some heinous or unethical act — with their quasi-legal or legal nature, these dramas are more clear-cut. Rather, we are referring to those unfortunate times when it becomes obvious that a particular employee is consistently failing to perform.

Situations like this are much less well-defined. As a manager, you have many decisions to make: What level of performance is unacceptable? How long is too long at that level? Have you done enough to help, with training, motivation, support systems, or complementary partnering? Should you break the news all at once, or should you give them a probationary period? When the final conversation happens, what words will you use?

Some managers are so overwhelmed by these questions that they avoid the issue altogether. They take the easy way out and "layer over" the problem employee with a new hire. In the short run this can appear to be a painless and convenient solution. But in the long run, like wrapping pristine bandages around an infected wound, it is deadly for the company.

Some managers solve the problem by deciding to keep all their employees at arm's length. With this neat trick they hope to diminish the tension and the pain inherent in giving bad news to a friend. Unfortunately, as Phil Jackson pointed out, by refusing to get to know their employees, they also diminish the likelihood that they will ever be able to help any of these employees excel.

The best managers do not resort to either of these evasive maneuvers. They don't have to. They employ tough love, which is not a technique, or sequence of action steps, but a mind-set, one that

reconciles an uncompromising focus on excellence with a genuine need to care. It is a mind-set that forces great managers to confront poor performance early and directly. Yet it allows them to keep their relationship with the employee intact.

So what is tough love? How does it work?

The "tough" part is easy to explain. Because great managers use excellence as their frame of reference when assessing performance, *tough* love simply implies that they do not compromise on this standard. So in answer to the question "What level of performance is unacceptable?" these managers reply, "Any level that hovers around average with no trend upward." In answer to the question "How long at that level is too long?" great managers reply, "Not very long."

It was this uncompromising standard of excellence that drove Harry D., a successful manager of two car dealerships. "We opened a second car dealership, much larger than the first. I wanted to create what I called a total service culture, where the customers received a seamless quality experience whether they were dealing with the sales department, the financing department, or the service department. I was looking for total integration of systems and total cooperation from my department heads. Big plans, right? It got off to a rocky start, let me tell you.

"My biggest mistake was the guy I promoted to head up the sales department, Simon. He came from my smaller dealership, where he was sales manager, very successful. But when he moved into the new spot, he couldn't get into the cooperation thing at all. He wouldn't communicate with the other department heads. He wouldn't show up for meetings. He wouldn't sit down with the other department heads and work out how to integrate the systems and ease the interdepartmental handoffs so that the customer wouldn't feel a jolt. He was just interested in *his* guys and *his* numbers.

"At the same time, back at the other dealership, I had stupidly promoted one of the salespeople to sales manager, and he was struggling, too. So I had grown from one success to two failures. Not bad going.

"I knew I had to move quickly. I had talked with Simon about my concerns a couple of times but saw no improvement at all. So, five months in, I pulled him into my office and told him that I wanted him back in the other dealership. I told him that in this new dealership I was not interested simply in sales numbers, that I wanted to build this integrated, total service experience, and that he wasn't helping. I told him that he

was a loner and that, back in the other dealership, he could narrow his focus all he wanted, but here, in the new world, it wouldn't fly. I'm sending you back, I said.

"He was so pissed off, he looked like he was going to punch me. 'You haven't given me enough time. You got to let me have another shot.' All that kind of stuff. But I know my people, sometimes better than they know themselves. I knew that Simon wasn't a team person. I knew that he would never be able to build the total experience I wanted. Better to pull the trigger now, I thought, rather than letting things drag on, with him beginning to feel more invested and me getting more disappointed.

"Now he's doing extremely well back at the smaller place, and I managed to find a collaborative sales manager for this place. My brave new world is coming along nicely."

Harry is universally loved by his employees. He is a pushover when employees need to change their hours, take a day off, or short-cut a process for the sake of the customer. But he is rock solid when it comes to excellence. As he says, "Excellence is my thing. If you don't like it, that's fine. Just don't come to work here."

The "love" element of tough love is a little subtler. This element still forces managers to confront poor performance early but allows them to do so in such a way that much of the bitterness and the ill will disappear. And it all springs from the concept of talent. An understanding of talent, an understanding that each person possesses enduring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, is incredibly liberating when managers have to confront poor performance. Why? Because *it frees the manager from blaming the employee.*

Consider the manager who believes that with enough willpower and determination, virtually all behaviors can be changed. For this manager, every case of poor performance is the employee's fault. The employee has been warned, repeatedly, and still he has not improved his performance. If he had more drive, more spirit, more willingness to learn, he would have changed his behavior as required, and the poor performance would have disappeared. But it hasn't disappeared. He must not be trying hard enough. It is his fault.

This seductive logic puts this manager in a very awkward position. Since she told the employee what to do, and since it wasn't done, then the employee must be weak-willed, stupid, disobedient, or disrespectful.

How can you have a constructive conversation with someone when beneath the surface politeness this is what you are compelled to think of him? It's hard. If you are, by nature, an emotional manager, you fear you might lose your temper and let your anger show. If you are, by nature, a caring and supportive manager, you worry that he might see through your soothing words and realize how deeply disappointed you are in him. Whatever your style, a conversation where you have to mask your true feelings is a stressful conversation, particularly when your feelings are so negative. No wonder so many managers try to avoid it.

But great managers don't have to hide their true feelings. They understand that a person's talent and nontalent constitute an enduring pattern. They know that if, after pulling out all the stops to manage around his nontalents, an employee still underperforms, the most likely explanation is that his talents do not match his role. In the minds of great managers, consistent poor performance is not primarily a matter of weakness, stupidity, disobedience, or disrespect. It is a matter of miscasting.

If there is blame here, it is evenly spread. Perhaps the employee should have been more self-aware. Perhaps the manager should have been more perceptive. Perhaps. But this is just hindsight pointing the finger. No employee will ever be completely self-aware. No manager will ever know each of his people perfectly, even if he has selected very carefully for talent. So casting errors are not cause for anger or recrimination. Casting errors are inevitable.

When an employee is obviously miscast, great managers hold up the mirror. They encourage the employee to use this misstep to learn a little more about his unique combination of talents and nontalents. They use language like "This isn't a fit for you, let's talk about why" or "You need to find a role that plays more to your natural strengths. What do you think that role might be?" They use this language not because it is polite, not because it softens the bad news, but because it is true.

This is the "love" element of tough love. The most effective managers do genuinely care about each of their people. But they imbue "care" with a distinct meaning. In their minds, to "care" means to *set the person up for success.* They truly want each person to find roles where he has a chance to excel, and they know that this is possible only in roles that play to his talents.

By this definition, if the person is struggling, it is actively uncaring to allow him to keep playing a part that doesn't fit. By this definition, firing

the person is a caring act. This definition explains not only why great managers move fast to confront poor performance, but also why they are adept at keeping the relationship intact while doing so.

All in all, the tough love mind-set enables a great manager to keep two contradictory thoughts in mind at the same time — the need to maintain high performance standards and the need to care — and still function effectively. Tough love enables Mike H., an IT executive, to say in the same breath, "I've never fired someone too early," and, "I truly care about helping my people be successful."

Tough love allows John F., a manufacturing supervisor, to reminisce, "I have fired a few people in my time. But I've stayed close to them. Now that I think about it, each of the best men at my two weddings was someone I had previously fired."

Tough love explains the incongruous nature of Gary L.'s conversation. Gary, an enormously successful entrepreneur, six-time winner of the Queens Award for Industry, brought in one of his factory managers one evening and told him, "Come in, sit down, I love you; you're fired; I still love you. Now, get a drink and let's talk this through."

"MANAGER-ASSISTED CAREER SUICIDE"

Tough love is a powerful mind-set, providing a coherent rationale and a simple language for handling a delicate situation. But if you choose to incorporate it into your own management style, remember: Counseling a person out of a role is, and will always be, a delicate situation. Tough love is helpful but will never make it easy.

Harry D., the car dealer, captures one of the constant difficulties perfectly with his comment "But I know my people, sometimes better than they know themselves." In the tough love approach, the manager often has to confront the employee with truths that the employee may not be ready to hear. This will always be a subtle negotiation. That is why you need to get to know your people so well, why you need to meet with them so regularly, why your rationale needs to be clear and your language consistent.

Some may complain that even if you do all of these things, you still don't have the right to believe that you know the person better than he does himself. Great managers disagree. When Gallup asked, "Would you rather get employees what they want, or would you rather get them what is right for them?" the great managers consistently replied, "Get them what is right for them."

This sounds authoritarian, even arrogant, but Martin P., the police chief, makes a compelling point:

"I believe that, deep down, the poor performer knows he is struggling before you do. Maybe he can't find the words, or maybe his pride won't let him say it, but he knows. On some level he wants your help. And so, subconsciously, he puts himself in situations where his weaknesses are exposed. He is daring you, pushing you to fire him. I call this manager-assisted career suicide. If you suspect that this is happening, the best thing you can do is help put him out of his misery.

"I had one police officer, Max, who couldn't handle confrontation. Imagine, as an officer you meet the worst people, and you meet the best people on their worst days. You get shouted at, verbally, and sometimes physically abused. You have to keep your cool under all of these conditions.

"Max couldn't. He would become frustrated, angry, rude. We had reports of an occasional use of profanity. These are low-level disciplinary matters that are brought before a tribunal. I would sit in on these meetings and read the reports and Max would deny them, vigorously. Very vigorously. I saw exactly the kinds of behaviors in these meetings that citizens were complaining about.

"We gave him behavioral counseling, and he worked on it. But it was such a basic part of his personality. He kept going out on patrol, he kept losing his cool, and he kept denying it in the tribunals. He was committing manager-assisted career suicide. He *wanted* me to fire him. It was his only way out.

"So I did. I removed him from the department. He was a good person with the wrong demeanor for a police officer. Through our outplacement service he found a role as a claims adjuster for an insurance agency here in town, which fits his character so much better. I am still in touch with him, still friendly, and more important, he is doing very well."

Many of the great managers we interviewed echoed the themes in Martin's story: The employee refused to confront the truth of his situation and so was angry at the time, but months, and sometimes years later, the employee would make a call, or write a letter, or walk up to the manager in an airport, to tell him, "Thank you. I didn't realize it then, but moving me out of that job was one of the best things anyone has ever done for me."

It doesn’t always happen this way. Some employees remain bitter to the end. But tough love does provide a way for the manager and the employee to handle this delicate situation with dignity. Tough love keeps everyone whole.