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 talents into performance. Only then could you help each one live out 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 anything 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 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 revelled 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.

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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.”

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**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 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 health care 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 health care 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 far-sightedness, 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 trapse 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 the peaks and valleys of 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 perfor-
mance and his vague yearnings to switch roles. Self-aware individuals—strong 1s—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.