

Book Review

"First, Break All the Rules", What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently.

**Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman
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When you come across a book that sets out a framework for success in organisations, that is the result of 25 years work, you generally take notice. This book is based on research, completed by Gallup, that has encompassed over 1,000,000 employees, over 80,000 managers and supervisors, in almost 500 organisations. The principles have been shown to correlate with excellent company performance, including productivity, profit, staff retention, and customer satisfaction; and managers are shown to play a crucial role in the equation.

The studies, which have been integrated through Meta-analysis (well documented in the Appendices) included the views and approaches of exceptional managers, "Those managers you would like to clone if you could". Although these managers were very different in style and approach there were common themes in the ways they managed both their team and the organisation within which they worked. They used principles that cut across the norms of convention, using practical principles that are set out in the book

The core of this belief system is the premise that: -

**"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".**

A Talent is defined as "A recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behaviour that can be productively applied". "Neuroscience is telling us that beyond the mid-teens there is a limit to how much of a character can still be carved". By the time they are twenty years old most people have developed four lane highways in their mind that enable them to do some things seemingly without effort, and to do them extremely well. Doing other things seem to be like struggling across a wasteland, where it is possible to make progress but with much more effort. Everyone has unique qualities, and the first principle is to recruit for Talent so that people are liberated to really say yes to this question: -

"At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?"

An accountant with a Talent for precision will get a tremendous boost every time the books balance. Many accountants get the chance to do this every day. Proven perfection. Every day. Wow !



Some of the differences between the conventional approach and what great managers do is illustrated in this table.

	Conventional Approach (which doesn't work so well)	Great Managers Do This
Select	Experience Intelligence Determination	Unique Talent
Set Expectations	Define the Right Steps	Define the Right Outcomes
Motivate	By helping to identify and Overcome Weaknesses	By helping to identify and Build on Strengths
Develop	By helping to learn and Get Promoted	By helping to find the Right Fit

This inevitably raises questions about competency. Competencies are defined as, "a mixture of skill, knowledge and Talent", yet these qualities are rarely differentiated within organisations' competency frameworks. The accepted approach with these frameworks is to work to try and 'fill in the troughs', to train and develop people to an acceptable minimum standard of competence. If we take competency literally (and this example is not in the book) we would be training the England Football Team so that David Beckham would take alternate free kicks with left and right feet. Oh yes, and we would put Paul Scholes in goal, and have Michael Owen as a defender. We know we would never see this. Beckham's right foot is his Talent, and he always plays to it, Scholes is a superb midfielder, and a high goal scorer, and Owen's pace and finishing is of such a quality that we have seen the whole England team strategy built around it. The team trains, and develops, and plays to its Talents; and the results have been exceptional.

It is clear that standards are obviously required, and training needs to be completed up to a minimum standard in any area that deals with accuracy or safety, or where an individual needs to conform to a company or industry standard. It is important to remember that this, in itself, will not generate excellence. "Excellence is impossible without Talent".

People who have found or developed a good fit between what they do best and what is required in their jobs will be happier at work and very, very much more productive. We all know of people who are playing to their strengths, how the work flows so naturally. Most of us will know someone who struggles at work because they lack this basic fit with the demands of their role.

A lack of Talent is only ever important when it is required in someone's job. This is a weakness because it requires people to work in an area where they are not especially talented. If they are constantly playing to their weaknesses, they get stressed, and they get de-motivated. It becomes obvious that people in this situation are less effective and less productive. If the same people were working in areas where they could build on innate talent the story would be very different.

Many organisational systems focus on papering over the cracks, to build super-supervisors with all round competencies (who can play adequately in any position on the field) rather than tapping into the well of Talent which enables everyone to play to their strengths. Exceptional performance requires Talents that are in alignment with the needs of each role. These need to be redefined and honed, to capitalise on the unique contribution that each individual brings. How can organisations



begin to harness Talent, that cannot be trained, and how does the exceptional manager manage his or her role within the company rules and culture?

Some headlines and principles set out in the book include the following insights and material: -

- ◆ People leave managers, not organisations.
- ◆ How great managers answered key questions.
- ◆ Thirty nine Talents are identified, categorised as Striving Talents, Thinking Talents, and Relating Talents
- ◆ The four questions employees ask
 - What do I get?
 - What do I give?
 - Do I belong here?
 - How can we all grow?
- ◆ Study and work with your best workers.
- ◆ Create heroes in every role

How can a manager best: -

- ◆ Select for Talent
- ◆ Define outcomes, and let each person find his own route towards them.
- ◆ Focus on strengths
- ◆ Drive customer satisfaction
- ◆ Cast people in the right roles
- ◆ Manage around a weakness
- ◆ Justify why they should spend most time with their best people
- ◆ Avoid treating others as they, themselves, like to be treated!
- ◆ Avoid promoting people beyond their level of competence
- ◆ Counsel a mis-cast team member
- ◆ Manage in a performance management system
- ◆ Run a strengths interview

In summary, this book is an easy and worthwhile 'read', which offers a number of useful insights into what powers exceptional performance in organisations, and what needs to be done to begin a process of personal and organisational renewal. The principles are formulated from what is probably the biggest study of its kind, and are set out in easy to follow, practical sections to help anyone get started.

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