# Contents

**List of Figures and Tables** x

**Preface** xi

## Introduction 1

- A walk in the woods 37
- Aberrant self-promotion at work 40
- All the questions and all the answers 43
- Appraisal systems 46

- Beware of creatives 49
- Blamestorming 52

## Career success 55
- The catch-phrase technique 58
- Change 61
- Charlatan detection 64
- Child support 67
- The content of job advertisements 70
- Could do better 73

## The dangers of forecasting 76
- Different perspectives 79
- Does coaching work? 82
- The drive for money 85

## The emotional contract at work 88
- Esthetics at work 91
- Evidence at work 94
- Expansion 97
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faking it</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-ism and shape-ism at work</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food at work</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and job satisfaction</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossip is good for you</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hating HR</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How management style leads directly to profit and loss</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hyper-moral obsessive</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving references</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive schemes</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational teachers</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview techniques</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The leader profit chain</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The legacy problem</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lie detectors</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loafers, suckers and free-riders</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market research</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring at work</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money as a motivator</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The narcissistic manager</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutters at work</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The obsolescent CEO</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peanuts and monkeys</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and status in organizations</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes, profit and people</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting vulnerable customers</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant Jocks and qual jills</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition programs that don't work</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion at work</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience and hardiness</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to change</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scientific understanding of the public</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven lessons for appraisal</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing off the CEO</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smarts</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality at work</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striving for power</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance at work</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care and taking charge</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking offense</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do a Ph.D.</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is conscientiousness?</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whistle-blowing at work</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wit at work</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The work ethic</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing as therapy</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing your own obituary</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain; ten years, grow trees; one hundred years, grow people.

Chinese proverb

You can’t have escaped noticing that “talent management” has become a fashionable, Human Resource (HR) buzzword (Gladwell 2002; Martin and Schmidt 2010) – well, “new-ish”: buzzwords don’t last for ever, and this one may be nearing its sell-by date. Is there anything new in the idea (Silzer and Church 2009)?

In some organizations the Personnel Department (which then became the HR Department) has been renamed the “Talent Management Department” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2006). Does that mean everyone is talented, thus making the concept redundant; or is there an equivalent Talentless Management Department who have, of course, a much more difficult task?

With bull markets there is a war for talent. Many assumed that there was an under-supply of talented people at all levels, and thus organizations were in a competitive battle to attract and retain, as well as develop, these special, but crucial, people who would ensure, they hoped, that the organization prospered. They were thought of as the new generation, who would be required to lead the organization into the future and ensure its survival.

At the time of writing, in a bear market, there is a surfeit of talent; an over-supply; and wasted talent. Yet it remains unclear what talent actually is; whether it needs special nurturing to last; and what it predicts. If talent is not merely a new name for an old construct or set of constructs, what does it comprise? And how does one develop a person into a talented manager?

There are various specific questions for those who are trying to assess and evaluate talent. Here are some issues and questions to ponder:

1. Write down all the synonyms and antonyms you can think of for “talent.”
2. Have you ever worked with, or for, a really talented person? How did you know that person was talented? Describe your observations.
3. What are the lessons from the turnover of talented people? Why do talented people leave? Is this good or bad for them and/or your organization?

4. What processes would you put in place to recruit and select high flyers for your organization?

5. Should the list of those who are judged to be talented (or talentless) be kept secret? Indeed, could it ever become secret?

6. Under what circumstances should people who are labelled or nominated as talented be taken off the list and others brought into the talent group? That is, what should be the nature of mobility for talented (and less talented) people?

7. Should you invest more or less time and money into the talent group than those not in this group? If the talented are in some way gifted, should employers not invest more in those who, for whatever reason, are seen to have less talent?

8. Imagine you have a budget of £5,000/$6,000 and three weeks in total (21 days) to develop your high flyers; what would you do?

9. Do you think it is a sign of being a really talented person that you could trust them to plan their own training and use your budget to realize their full potential?

10. What, in your view, are the three easiest and the three hardest things involved with talent management?

Which of these issues are you the most/least interested in or vexed by?

Nine-box nonsense

Despite all the hype, the courses and the research-lite business books, most organizations still struggle with the most fundamental of questions: what is talent? How do you define talent, and therefore spot it? Can talent fade? Can ordinary people suddenly become talented?

It is seriously good to be in the talented group because the philosophy of most organizations seems to be “to him who hath, shall more be given.” The talented receive more attention and more opportunities; in short, more time and money is spent on them. That is why people fight to get into the talent group: they are spoiled.

The talented also have one crucial advantage: reputational head-starts. These are sometimes, but not always, deserved. The fact that people know
who you are, “one of the chosen,” means many attribute to you positive features that lesser mortals don’t receive.

There are, however, a number of problems attached to having a talent group or talent policy. The *first* is what to call those who are not gifted, talented or special. Are they second-rate, talentless or ordinary? Of course not; but what, then, are they to be labelled? This is why organizations choose names of colors or adopt metaphors for the haloed talent group. They are known as the “Gold Group” or “the Eagles.” This approach never quite overcomes the problem, though. In airlines you fly first, business or traveller: not first, second and third class.

The *second* problem is the stability of talent: can it “go away,” get used up, burnt out? This might mean the chosen ones who were once classified as talented later become reclassified, downgraded. Difficult for everybody, because it could imply an error of classification in the first place. So, it’s rare. Once in, you stay there.

But it is the *third* issue that is probably the most problematic but not perceived to be so. Once the talented people have been found and deployed, the question then is about appraisal and promotion. What do you do with a talented engineer, finance manager or salesperson? Perhaps those whom the gods would destroy are first called talented?

The most common solution is the *nine-box category scheme*. This is based on two ratings: one of *performance* and the other of *potential* (see Figure I.1). The worst outcome is 1–1 (Box 1) – low performance and low potential; and the best is 3–3 (Box 9) – high on both ratings.

There are those most curious of mavericks, of course: the 1–3s or the 3–1s. The former are low on performance but high on potential. But why? Lazy folk? Badly managed? Not found their feet? A desert plant waiting for the wet season? Or what about great performance but no potential? Reached their level of incompetence? Stuck in a rut? Possessing a skill set that isn’t needed any more?

There are numerous issues with the deployment of the nine-box grid. But without a doubt the most important is who does the rating and on what *database*. For more senior personnel the scoring is usually carried out by a senior HR manager and some board level management who meet to discuss the merits of the candidate for classification. They may be well-intentioned, but the problems are enormous.

Take the easier of the two ratings: performance. Performance on what? Delivering revenue targets, staff engagement or a change in management ability? All their competencies on a sort of aggregated score, or just their...
### The performance / promotability matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td><strong>Highly promotable</strong>, has significant leadership potential. Exceptional performer – exceeds talented requirements.</td>
<td><strong>Promotable</strong> – at least one level. Exceptional talented performer – exceeds requirements.</td>
<td><strong>At appropriate level</strong>. Exceptional performer – exceeds requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td><strong>Very promotable</strong>, significant potential. Very effective performer – fully meets requirements.</td>
<td><strong>Promotable</strong> – probably at least one level. Very effective performer – fully meets requirements.</td>
<td><strong>At appropriate level</strong>. Effective performer – meets requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td><strong>Has potential to be highly promotable</strong>. Partially meets requirements but needs training, mentoring, coaching.</td>
<td><strong>Has potential to be promoted</strong> – at least one level. Partially meets requirements. Needs improvement (new in current position).</td>
<td><strong>Somewhat over promoted</strong>. Partially meets requirements. Needs significant improvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure I.1** Performance/promotability matrix
targets for this year? And who does the rating: boss, peers, subordinates or the individuals themselves? The boss has less information, and of a different type than the subordinates.

Frequently bosses have only two types of evidence: reputational data and productivity data. Staff know about competence, emotional intelligence and the like, while peers know about ambition, values and so on.

So the question is, who rates performance? Easy, of course, if there is something measureable, like money, but so much work is less tangible and team-based that it is very difficult to count, so measure ratings have to be made.

Performance ratings need to be conducted by the people who have the data. They need to be trained in rating. And they need to be trained in giving feedback.

But what about rating a person’s potential? Potential for what? The next-level job? Strategic thinking? Ability to lead change? Innovation? Even if you were to rate all the above, and more, what are the data like?

What is a high potential person? There must be some simple, ubiquitous, but fundamentally important criteria. They need to be bright enough to learn new things and master increasingly technical briefs. They need to be ambitious and confident enough to want promotion. They need to be tough and resilient enough to cope with the stress that the job will bring. They need to be hard-working, conscientious and driven enough to take on the added burden. And perhaps they need to be persuasive, diplomatic and charming too.

At least the above unpacks the slippery “potential” category. It should encourage more reliable and more valid ratings, but again only by those who have the data.

The nine-box category system is crude and clumsy. As things operate at the time of writing, it benefits those who spend more effort on managing up and “reputation management” than on doing a good job.

The fundamental questions

From a management perspective there seem to be a number of important questions:

- Attracting talent: This involves the recruitment of talented people, identifying the best methods to assess it and finding ways to persuade
talented people to join the organization. This is essentially a recruiting and selection task. This may mean trying to attract people from universities as well as various firms. The aim is to make these especially (and perhaps unusually) talented people favorably disposed to your organization so that they apply for advertised positions. You have to ask (and answer) this question: why would any talented person want to come and work for you?

- **Developing talent:** One of the concepts associated with talent is the idea of the potential to rise up the organization to ever more important and challenging jobs. For this, it is thought (even) talented people require particular training, coaching or mentoring. This can, and should, be done on an individual basis as well as on a corporate level through leadership development, succession planning to new job integration and an assimilation initiative.

- **Retaining talent:** This involves keeping talented people once they have been selected. It involves understanding their particular and specific “package” and training needs. They might be motivated differently than less talented groups, and the task is to find how to keep them both happy and productive. This question addresses whether they need anything different compared to good management practices and equitable rewards to ensure they stay working for the organization. The issue is one of return on investment: on knowing how to turn a talented employee, into a talented manager, into a talented director and then, even a talented CEO.

- **Transferring talent:** Inevitably, talented people move – they move up the organization (almost by definition); they move to sister companies; they may head up overseas divisions of the company. Furthermore, they leave the organization. It is important to ensure that all issues associated with out-placement, relocation and retirement are done well.

These are all related to the management of talent. Robinson *et al.* (2009) suggest asking some simple questions:

- Does this person consistently exhibit our company values, support our mission, and enhance our culture?
- Does this person’s performance consistently exceed expectations?
- Does this person’s current behavior consistently align with the High Potential Indicators?
If the answer is affirmative, create an action plan to accelerate readiness for advancement, and identify challenging opportunities to test and develop capabilities.

**Definitions**

Talent management, however, follows talent-spotting and selection. It is therefore extremely important to have a clear, specific and evidence-based definition of the concept of talent so as to know what to look for. Yet, despite the increasing number of books written about this topic, the concept remains unclear.

Talent is, quite simply, not a psychological concept. One approach is to list possible synonyms for talent and talented. These include: blessed; exceptional; experienced; flair; genius; giftedness; high potential; precocious; prodigy; superstar; wonderkid or *Wunderkind*. It is really only “giftedness” that has had any serious academic investigation.

Talent implies the possibility of people becoming more than they are. Silzer and Church (2009) argue that the concept of potential (talent) is all about something existing only in the realm of possibility. It is singular, immutable and context independent, or defined by and brought out only in certain situations. They note that high potential can be defined by role, level, breadth, record, strategic position or strategic area. The two authors analyzed 11 companies’ definitions of talent/high potential and found evidence of six categories, variously defined:

- **Cognitive**: Cognitive ability/complexity, intelligence, navigates ambiguity, breadth of perspective, judgment, insightful, strategic reasoning, tactical problem solving.
- **Personality**: Dominance, sociability, stability, interpersonal, emotionally intelligent, authentic, optimistic, personal maturity, respect for people, self-aware, integrity.
- **Learning**: Adaptability, versatility, learning agility, receptive to feedback, eager to learn, flexible, seeks feedback, learns from mistakes.
- **Leadership**: Competent, inspiring, develops others, brings out the best in people, influential, challenges the status quo.
- **Motivation**: Drive, aspiration, engagement, initiative, energy, risk-taking, power/control, tenacity, passion for results, courage to take risks, commitment to company/impact.
• **Performance**: Leadership experience.
• **Other things**: Technical skills, culture fit, promotability, business knowledge/acumen.

They rather cleverly divide these groups into three categories: foundational dimensions (cognitive and personality); growth dimensions (learning and motivation); and career dimensions (leadership, performance and knowledge values). But, they argue, many questions remain to be answered regarding building a comprehensive model of potential that works for all organizations; deciding on clear criteria to enable people to reach their potential; and the problems of self-fulfilling prophesies in this area.

**Development**

There are many ways to develop talent. Talented leaders provide much the same narrative of the factors that influenced them the most. Studies across organizations in different sectors as well as those within big corporations and across different corporate and national cultures, or even different historical time zones, reveal a similar story. Talented leaders mention six powerful learning experiences.

**Early work experience**

This may be a “part-time” job while at school; a relatively unskilled summer holiday job during time at university; or one of the first jobs they ever had. For some it was the unadulterated tedium or monotony that motivated them powerfully never to repeat the experience. For others it was a particular work style or process that they had retained all their lives. This is something to look out for in the selection process.

**Working with other people**

It is nearly always an immediate boss, but may be a colleague or one of the serious grown-ups; this person is almost always remembered as either very bad or very good, but both teach lessons. The message from this form of development perspective is to find a series of excellent role-model, mentor-type bosses for the talent group.

**Short-term assignments**

Project work, standing in for another, or interim management. Because this takes people out of their comfort zone and exposes them to issues and
problems they have never previously confronted, they learn quickly. For some it is the lucky break: serendipity provides an opportunity to discover a new skill or passion.

**First major line assignment**

This is often the first promotion, foreign posting or departmental move to a higher position. It is frequently cited, because suddenly the stakes had become higher, everything was more complex, novel and ambiguous. There were more pressures; the buck stopped here. Suddenly the difficulties of management became real, and you were accountable. The idea, then, is to develop appropriate “stretch assignments” for talented people as soon as they are appointed.

**Hardships of various kinds**

This is about attempting to cope in a crisis, which may be professional or personal. It teaches the real value of things – technology, loyal staff, a supportive head office. The experiences are those of battle-hardened soldiers, or the “been there, done that” brigade. Hardship teaches many lessons: how resourceful and robust some people can be, and how others panic and cave in. It teaches some to admire a fit and happy organization when they see it. It teaches them to distinguish needs and wants. It teaches a little about minor forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the virtues of stoicism, hardiness and a tough mental attitude.

**Management development**

Some remember and quote their MBA experience; far fewer mention some specific (albeit fiendishly expensive) course. One or two quote the experience of receiving 360° feedback. More recall a coach, either because that person was so good, or so awful. This is bad news for trainers, business school teachers and coaches.

To the extent that leadership is acquired, developed and learned, rather than “gifted,” it is achieved mainly through experiences at work. Inevitably some experiences are better than others because they teach different lessons in different ways. Some people apparently acquire these valuable experiences despite, rather than as a result of, company policy. Experiential learning takes time, but timing is important. It’s not a steady, planned accumulation of insights and skills. Some experiences teach very little, or even inculcate bad habits.
But three factors conspire to defeat the experiential model. First, both young managers and their bosses want to short-circuit experience: learn faster, cheaper, better. Hence the appeal of the one-minute manager, the one-day MBA and the short course. Second, many HR professionals see this approach as disempowering them, because they are “in charge” of the leadership development programme. Third, some see experience as a test, not a developmental exercise.

Perhaps leadership potential and talent should be defined as *the ability to learn from experience*. Equally, every move, promotion or challenge should also be assessed from the point of view of its learning potential.

Approaching the issue somewhat differently, Martin and Schmidt (2010) offer various suggestions of ways to develop talent: emphasize future competencies; place people on “intense assignments” (not functional and business rotations); assign rising stars to the riskiest and most challenging jobs; create a development plan for each of them; re-evaluate top talent annually; give them special recognition programmes; monitor their progress; and have open, honest discussions and emphasize how their plans fit in with company plans.

**Retention**

One important current concern is talent retention. Martin and Schmidt (2010) argue that as many as a quarter of high-potential people in big American companies intend to “jump ship” within a year, and a fifth believe their personal aspirations are different from what the company has planned for them. They think that companies make six common mistakes in trying to manage the “talented”:

1. Assuming they are all engaged when they are not, if they are not challenged, rewarded and recognized enough.
2. Mistaking current performance for high performance: not all are able to, or want to, step up to tougher roles.
3. Delegating talent development to line managers who may not be qualified to do the job.
4. Shielding talent from more difficult assignments where they will learn more.
5. Not offering them differentiated compensation and recognition from that offered to colleagues.
6. Keeping them in the dark with respect to what is planned for them.
Bad management, Martin and Schmidt (2010) argue, leads to three problem types: engaged dreamers (people with aspirations, but who don’t quite have the required ability); disengaged stars (people not really committed to the organization); and misaligned stars (who aren’t prepared to make the real sacrifices required).

**Giftedness in children**

There is an extensive literature on gifted children, which is consistent in what it highlights (Brody 2005; Brody and Mills 2005; Gagne 2004; Heller et al. 1993; Shavinina 2004). This, therefore, is a good place to begin to define talent. Research on gifted children tends to highlight the following characteristics:

- Excel at memory activities beyond what one would expect at the given age level.
- Demonstrate unusually mature thinking on tasks that are complicated; learn very quickly new information or ways of doing things, or perceive hidden meanings.
- Show advanced understanding or precocious development of a specific skill area – for example, early reading or mathematics – without having been directly instructed, or rapid development when provided the opportunity in the arts.
- Show self-management of their own learning.
- Have a high need for a variety of experiences; seek new and different opportunities to investigate and seem to delight in novel problems to solve.
- Seek older children as playmates and engage in especially creative imaginative play scenarios.
- Have an advanced vocabulary and enjoy playing with words or other means of symbolically representing in their world.
- Demonstrate notable variability between very sophisticated thinking and behavior in other ways that indicates they are still young children.

There seem to be three or four distinct clusters of characteristics. The first is both general and specific ability. Thus gifted children are described as being observant, inquisitive, smart. They learn quickly, have a big vocabulary and
enjoy intellectual challenges. They are also well co-ordinated, dextrous, athletic and energetic (that is, have advanced psychomotor skills). They can also show impressive visual, spatial and auditory skills. Perhaps it is their advanced vocabulary that most clearly marks them out as different.

Second, gifted children are known for their creative thinking. They are innovators, improvisers, independent and original thinkers. They enjoy coming up with several solutions to standard problems. They also do not mind standing out from a crowd. Unlike adults, they are uninhibited about their creative products and express interest and confidence in the process.

Third, highly gifted children appear to have higher levels of social intelligence. They are expressive, self-confident, popular and able. They show good social judgment and are able to foresee the consequences and implications of their judgments. They often assume responsibility in social settings, which is accepted by others. In this sense they get elected to positions of leadership by both their peers and their teachers.

Finally, they tend to have higher levels of task commitment. They are able to concentrate easily. Often they also show other characteristics, such as assuming task leadership roles in situations as well as demonstrating advanced psychomotor coordination and visual perception.

Not all gifted children grow up to be talented adults and vice versa, but it does seem that this is a rich source of hypotheses from which to consider the dimension of talent in adults.

There is in the gifted child literature one other important theme: the cost of giftedness. As well as the immense benefits of being gifted, researchers have pointed to disadvantages and drawbacks. Three are often mentioned:

- Raised expectations of others – it is clear why this occurs, but can put pressure on gifted children always to excel, everywhere and in every task. Lack of achievement can be seen erroneously as laziness. This has implications as to whether organizations are wise to “anoint” people into a “high flyer” group.
- Perfectionism – it has been noticed that some gifted children show signs of perfectionistic obsessionality. This trait can slow down the rate of their performance and leads to both anxiety and depression. Perfectionists set themselves too high a target in all they do, but often fail to achieve such targets and hence feel dejected because of their failure.
Self-doubt – it is indeed paradoxical that gifted children can show considerable self-doubt. This may be caused by the implicit and explicit expectations others (especially parents and teachers) have of them, and which they feel they cannot easily fulfil. It may also be caused by the feeling that they always have to excel at everything that is demanding.

There is an “adult version” of these problems in successful (if not gifted, then talented) adults that can be described as the impostor syndrome. The characteristics of this are that the successful person, often suddenly propelled into the limelight in the arts or business, feels like a fake – an impostor not worthy of the accolade or deserving of success. As a result, the person tends to discount his or her success by attributing it to luck, chance and circumstances. Indeed they tend to become fearful of success, because they see it as causing problems for themselves. The strategy many apply is self-handicapping, which prevents them from failing, perhaps through drink, drugs or illegal activities. They feel strongly the need to reduce the pressure not to fail. This is the dark side of giftedness and talent.

It seems, then, that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists may have overlooked the gifted child literature, which offers considerable empirical and theoretical insight into the concept of talent.

However interesting these definitions are, there is a fundamental problem with relying too heavily on the gifted children literature. The issue is both a surprise and a disappointment. It is quite simply that studies that have traced gifted children from their early identification and thence through into adulthood have shown that a surprisingly large number lead very ordinary, not particularly successful or outstanding lives.

This raises the question of the role of ability over other things, such as personality, and particularly motivation. While it is not that difficult to measure personality, the measurement of motivation (to do well, succeed, be a CEO) remains seriously problematic.

The requirements of leaders

Every organization understands that it needs to recruit and retain talented leaders for the future. This is particularly true for managers of a multicultural workforce in an age of globalization (Vijver 2008). A central
question of this quest is to know what one is looking for, and second, how to assess or measure it. Five factors come up repeatedly.

**Cognitive ability**

The single best predictor of leadership/management success is intelligence, particularly at higher levels of management. This is not to be confused with formal education, though they are modestly related. Managers need to be bright enough; that is, they require some minimum level of intelligence to do the job well. As one goes up the organizational hierarchy jobs become more complex. Further, things can change or need to be changed, and leaders have to understand those issues. They need to spot future trends. Bright people are curious.

Followers like, respect and support brighter leaders. Brighter leaders are both seen as, and are, more effective than less bright leaders. Brighter leaders are better at transforming organizations and managing change. Brighter managers have more (intellectual) self-confidence and suffer less stress. Brighter leaders learn faster, are more positive about personal growth, and are more adaptable. The present-day fear of IQ testing has made intelligence a taboo topic, but it remains fundamentally important.

**Emotional adjustment and stability**

Senior management and leadership positions always involve stress. Amen. People have to make hard decisions, take risks, face criticism and setbacks. They need to be hardy and resilient to take the pace and challenges of modern business life.

Less stable people are, in essence, prone to neuroses. Unstable people tend to be tense, touchy and thin-skinned. They can have rapidly fluctuating moods, and be very brittle. Unstable, less hardy people are prone to anxiety and depression. They are particularly vulnerable to stress and stress-related illness. Neurosis is related to absenteeism. Unstable people can be self-pitying, self-defeating and prone to a depressive, gloomy outlook. Followers report having considerable difficulty with the moodiness and vulnerability of unstable managers.

Stable, well-adjusted managers, by contrast, cope well under inevitable periods of stress. Stable leaders tend to have healthy, adaptable coping strategies, whereas the opposite is true for their less able colleagues. Stable managers are also more optimistic.
The work ethic and conscientiousness

Talented managers need to be hard-working and self-disciplined. They have to be dependable, reliable and responsible. They need to be responsive to various stakeholders – their staff, colleagues, customers and shareholders. They have to be efficient and organized. They need to understand the need to plan ahead and to ensure that things are always done to the required standard.

Conscientiousness is closely related to competence, which is one of the highest-rated virtues followers want in their managers. Conscientiousness is also related to dedication, deliberation and dutifulness. Conscientious managers are hard-working, but they learn to work smart as well as to put in long hours. They understand when and why they need to go the extra mile. Conscientious leaders tend to be achievement-oriented and aspirational for themselves and others.

Conscientious managers deliver on their promises, which are realistic, and they tend to follow ethical rules sensibly and sensitively. They are true to their word: they “pitch up and pitch in”; they pull their weight; they don’t shirk responsibility. That is important. Hard work can make up for a lot of sins.

Emotional intelligence, social skills and charm

Management is a social activity: a participant and contact sport. Leaders have to inspire and support their staff. They are in the motivation business. In essence, emotional intelligence involves understanding and the ability to influence other people. But it also involves self-understanding or awareness and the knowledge of how to deal with people’s mood and frailties. Emotional intelligence is essentially about having social skills, charm and insight. Emotionally intelligent managers understand the importance and power of emotions in everyday life. They are good at the emotional regulation of daily life.

We know that emotionally intelligent leaders are liked, trusted and admired by their staff. Managers with high emotional quotient (EQ) always get the best out of their staff and are hence highly productive. High EQ leaders are particularly successful in difficult times, when organizations are under considerable pressure. High EQ leaders understand the psychological needs of their key staff members and excel at getting the best out of them. Emotional intelligence is linked to being more assertive, empathic, optimistic and self-motivated.
Motivation, drive, the need to achieve

Motivation is the engine of managerial success, but it needs direction. People are quite clearly motivated by different things – power, influence, control, recognition. The great problem with the concept of motivation is that it appears at the same time to be all-encompassing, yet very vague.

People are motivated to achieve a goal: the more motivated they are, the more time, effort and energy they will be willing to put into achieving that goal. More important, most of these goals are not easily satisfied, and this motivation does not stop once they have been achieved. This is true of both psychological goals, such as recognition, and more objective goals such as monetary reward.

We know that all employees are motivated to seek recognition and reward from those they work for, to boost their self-esteem. Motivated leaders are often particularly sensitive to issues around fairness – that is, that reward is directly related to effort, that input and output are closely linked. Motivated leaders have realistic expectations, and set for themselves and others attainable but stretching goals. Motivated leaders are less distracted by setbacks. They learn from their mistakes and direct their efforts most efficiently.

Reviews and speculations

The expectations and lifestyle of people in the West is changing, and businesses have to take that into consideration in both talent-spotting and management. There is the perception of a marketplace of talent: a limited pool of individuals whose talent is portable and transferable across corporate and national boundaries. Further, those talented people are seen as having specific characteristics (creativity, drive, energy, insight) to help companies both survive and thrive.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2006) produced a case study report that showed that chief executive officers (CEOs) as well as HR managers are spending more of their time (around 25 percent) engaged with talent management, because this is believed to drive corporate performance, even though its impact is hard to measure. The CEOs see this process as identifying and grooming talented individuals at all levels to enable them to rise more quickly up the corporate ladder. Performance evaluations and assessment/developmental center reports provide the data to decide on
programs, projects and relocations which provide the experience to test and train (and unleash) the talent.

Many believe that talent management is a source, often a major source, of competitive advantage. Talented leaders enhance productivity, supposedly through a high performance culture. It needs little more than getting the right people in the top places. It is seen inevitably as both a selector/assessment and a training/mentoring activity, and is inevitably caught up with all the issues around successful management. It is often seen as carrying out accelerated leadership development with highly selected individuals. In short, it is identifying the CEOs of the future.

_The Economist_ report notes that “a rigorous approach to obtaining reliable performance data is essential” (p. 11), but, as ever, there is little indication of _what_ to measure and _how_. Far too much reliance appears to be put on company appraisal scheme data and not enough on psychometrically proven assessment and developmental centre data.

A Deloitte Research Study on talent by Athey (2008) also covers much of this ground. Thus, she argues, CEOs are worried about the dwindling supply of talent, the problem of their “star talent” being poached by the opposition, and (paradoxically) that when they poach others, the newcomers rarely perform as hoped. The demographic time-bomb worries them, as do education systems and evidence of growing employee disengagement.

Athey (2008) presented a fairly standard four-stage model – acquire, deploy, develop and retain talent. Curiously, relatively little is said about acquiring talent, which seems to be the fundamental process. Much more is said about the developmental process – to give talented people educational experiences. The “deploy” part is particularly interesting and important. It has three components: (i) identify the “deep-rooted” skills, interests and knowledge of the individual; (ii) find their best fit in the organization; and (iii) craft the job design and conditions that help them to perform. This is a particularly interesting idea, though not fully explored. It is the notion of not only finding the super-adaptive and flexible individual, but also making sure the organization is adaptive enough to match the profile of the individual.

Part of this plan is to ensure that the corporate culture helps the process. Thus _command and control_ should be replaced by _trust and respect_. Win–lose must be replaced by a connected and collaborative culture. The concept is that talented people are attracted to companies where employees are aligned, and capable and committed, and therefore (one hopes!) productive.
The psychology of high flyers

Usually, the definition of a high flyer is a talented individual capable of taking on increasingly senior and more responsible jobs. High flyers’ talent is shown in their ability to adapt, learn fast and cope with complex tasks, whether in the public or private sector. When people are asked to evaluate and assess young (or not so young) people at an assessment centre for selection, promotion or succession management reasons, the “top” category usually refers to a small group of high flyers who supposedly can “make it to the top”, implying that they can reach board or CEO level.

Naturally, there has been a great deal of speculation over a long period of time as to the characteristics these very special people manifest. Cox and Cooper (1988) identified “key personal characteristics” that were related to success. These were:

- **Determination**: a characteristic often derived from childhood experiences where they had to take personal responsibility for themselves.
- **Learning from adversity**: using adversity and setbacks to develop better coping strategies and learn new skills.
- **Seizing chances**: not the same as opportunism, but enthusiastically taking very difficult decisions early in life.
- **Being achievement oriented**: being ambitious and positive, and seeking long-term big prizes.
- **Internal locus of control**: being a self-confident instrumentalist, not a passive fatalist.
- **Having a well-integrated value system**: having a clear, integrated and lived-by value system (valuing integrity, independence, initiative and so on).
- **Effective risk management**: moderate, but calculated, risk takers.
- **Having clear objectives**: having both long- and short-term objectives and striving constantly to reach them.
- **Dedication to the job**: feeling the job was the most important aspect of life yet not being a workaholic.
- **Intrinsic motivation**: finding energy and enthusiasm in the job itself; not simply being motivated by extrinsic reward.
- **Well-organized lifestyle**: this prevents conflicts between work and home life.
- **A pragmatic rather than an intellectual approach**: having practical interests and pursuits rather than intellectual ones.
Analytic and problem-solving skills: perhaps seeming intuitive rather than rational.

Exemplary people skills: being socially skilled, open and consultative; but also being authoritative.

Being innovative: not being constrained by procedures, current systems and assumptions.

Having a competitive, hard-driving lifestyle: sometimes called the type A lifestyle.

Cox and Cooper noted:

One quality which does seem to be universal among high flyers is resilience and the ability not only to cope with but also to learn from adversity. This characteristic is a function of their strong internal locus of control, aided by a clear value system and strong self concept. In other words, people who reach the top are clear about who they are and what they believe in. This aspect of personality is strongly influenced by early experience, and so, probably has to be considered as a quality required at the selection stage, rather than as something which can be trained by the organisation. Even so, some development can possibly be offered through the medium of such activities as ‘outward bound’ programmes, which certainly aid in the development of the capacity to overcome adversity, and do often force individuals to confront their assumptions about themselves and their values. Sensitive and skilled mentoring can also aid this process. (1988, p. 147)

McCall and colleagues have attempted to identify executive potential, or executive competences, also known as end state skills (McCall 1998; McCall et al. 1990; Spreitzer et al. 1997). To a large extent this team argues that the ability to learn from experience is the fundamental key to managerial potential. They argue that a review of the diverse literature on the early identification of executive success through the assessment centre literature indicates five themes or areas of importance:

1. General intelligence: simple IQ or cognitive ability has a clear connection to business-related issues such as analytical agility, reasoning, incisiveness, and synthetic and visionary thinking.

2. Business knowledge: this is an understanding of the company’s and sector’s products, markets and policies as well as a breadth of awareness and interest in trends across the market as a whole.
3. **Interpersonal skills**: social skills are important in handling relationships, team building, the capacity to motivate and inspire, as well as to align people behind particular strategies.

4. **Commitment**: this can be expressed in various ways – for example, a passion for success, personal drive and perseverance. They all refer to extreme interest in, and commitment to, work.

5. **Courage**: to a large extent this means being non-risk-averse and willing to take action to ensure that things happen. It is related to self-confidence, but not arrogance.

A theme identified strongly by this team is the ability to learn from experience. Those with potential take a proactive approach to learning, they learn from their mistakes and adapt well to difficult circumstances as well as seeking and using feedback to make sense of their work environment.

In later work, McCall et al. (1995) identified eleven dimensions he believes relate to being a high flyer:

1. **Seeks opportunities to learn.** Has demonstrated a pattern of learning over time. Seeks out experiences that may change perspective or provide an opportunity to learn new things. Takes advantage of opportunities to do new things when such opportunities come along. Has developed new skills and has changed over time.

2. **Acts with integrity.** Tells the truth and is described by others as honest. Is not self-promoting, and consistently takes responsibility for his or her actions.

3. **Adapts to cultural differences.** Enjoys the challenge of working in and experiencing cultures different from his or her own. Is sensitive to cultural differences, works hard to understand them, and changes behavior in response to them.

4. **Is committed to making a difference.** Demonstrates a strong commitment to the success of the organisation and is willing to make personal sacrifices to contribute to that success. Seeks to have a positive impact on the business. Shows passion and commitment through a strong drive for results.

5. **Seeks broad business knowledge.** Has an understanding of the business that goes beyond his or her own limited area. Seeks to understand both the products or services and the financial aspects of the business. Seeks to understand how the various parts of the business fit together.
6. **Brings out the best in people.** Has a special talent with people that is evident in his or her ability to pull people together into highly effective teams. Is able to work with a wide variety of people, drawing the best out of them and achieving consensus in the face of disagreement.

7. **Is insightful: sees things from new angles.** Other people admire this person's intelligence, particularly his or her ability to ask insightful questions, identify the most important part of a problem or issue, and see things from a different perspective.

8. **Has the courage to take risks.** Will take a stand when others disagree, go against the status quo, persevere in the face of opposition. Has the courage to act when others hesitate and will take both personal and business risks.

9. **Seeks and uses feedback.** Pursues, responds to, and uses feedback. Actively asks for information on his or her impact and has changed as a result of such feedback.

10. **Learns from mistakes.** Is able to learn from mistakes. Changes direction when the current path isn’t working, responds to data without getting defensive, and starts over after setbacks.

11. **Is open to criticism.** Handles criticism effectively: does not act threatened or get overly defensive when others (especially superiors) are critical.

The high flyer approach, however, has fundamental problems, the greatest of which is the identification of such people in the first place. The criteria for being considered a high flyer are rarely explicit or agreed upon consensually. Worse still, it is not unusual for an identified high flyer to have a serious “fall to earth” not long after a study is complete. Given that the whole approach attempts to find out what is unique to the psyche of the high flyer, this is a fundamental issue.

Locke (1997) also devised a list of what can be called predictors of success:

- **Cognition:** reality focus; honesty; independence and self-confidence; active mind; competence/ability; vision.
- **Motivation:** egotistic passion for the work; commitment to action; ambition; effort and tenacity.
- **Attitude toward employees:** respect for ability; commitment to justice; rewarding merit.
Yet another opinion, as opposed to research, based list is set out in Table I.1.

While the lists are impressively long and fairly commonsensical they have the traditional drawbacks of such an approach. The data is based on self-report (interviews and questionnaires) and it may be that beliefs and behavior patterns are ignored or “repacked” to make them seem more attractive. Certainly many high flyers have a reputation for being egotistical, ruthless and amoral, though this is not how they present themselves to the world.

The lists are long, but not rank ordered. Are some characteristics more important than others? And if so, which? And what is the relationship between these different characteristics? How are they related? Can they be reduced to a more parsimonious and clearer list? Indeed, this is why the early trait approach to leadership failed: there was no agreement about, or good empirical evidence in support of, a parsimonious list of identical traits.

Jennings _et al._ (1994) reported numerous famous “elite entrepreneurs” (people who built and control companies) and “special entrepreneurs” (people who have worked their way up to the CEO position in organizations). These individuals may or may not be classified as talented or high flying.

### Table I.1 Most and least important skills and attributes for effective leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten most important characteristics of great leaders</th>
<th>Ten least important characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honesty and integrity at all times</td>
<td>Committed to all personal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly communicates expectations to all concerned</td>
<td>Thinks analytically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognises and rewards achievements</td>
<td>Always sensitive to others’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapts to all important changes</td>
<td>Has perseverance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspires others to work smarter and harder</td>
<td>Creates clear work plans and timetables for self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puts the right people in the right positions at the right time</td>
<td>Breaks down all projects into manageable components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has the passion to succeed</td>
<td>Has a strong commitment to people diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and articulates long-term vision for future for self and others</td>
<td>Properly manages relationships with third parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuades and encourages others to move in desirable direction</td>
<td>Has years of experience in positions of management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts personal responsibility for success or failure</td>
<td>Is original and creative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Adapted from Corporate Leadership Council (2001).
Jennings et al. examined early childhood experiences; socio-demographic origins; education; specific support from others; their approach to work and their work ethic; their personality traits and their philanthropic interests. The authors focused on three spheres of life/work – education and work history; personality with developmental history; and non-work/family environment. Their results were surprisingly similar to the earlier study (Cox and Cooper 1988).

The method was retrospective and biographical. This is often the approach of historians. Borrowing heavily from other explanatory systems, Cox and Cooper (1988) also present a developmental model for managerial success. First, they note the importance both of parental attitudes and values but also early trauma associated with separation of one kind or another. Next, they did not find schooling at a primary, secondary or tertiary level was particularly influential or important. Indeed, the choice of institution may well reflect parental values, which are the really important issue. Early experience at work is seen to be most important, particularly having a helpful early mentor or model and succeeding when early “make-or-break” opportunities presented themselves. Their model is given in Table I.2.

According to Gunter and Furnham (2001), there are three major problems with the high flyer biographical method. The first is specifying what constitutes a high flyer. No single criterion suffices. Inevitably, luck and chance play a part, hence the particular characteristics that high

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES</th>
<th>THE INDIVIDUAL</th>
<th>DETERMINANTS OF PERFORMANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EARLY EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>PARENT</strong></td>
<td><strong>MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops reliance on own</td>
<td>Well integrated value system passed on to the child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resources, is achievement oriented, postpones gratification</td>
<td></td>
<td>Balanced work–life issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tendency to be strict but fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EDUCATION</strong></td>
<td><strong>ADULT</strong></td>
<td><strong>MANAGEMENT SKILLS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps develop cognitive,</td>
<td>Very effective analysis and problem solving skills →</td>
<td>Big picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional and social skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>People skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAREER EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>CHILD</strong></td>
<td><strong>MOTIVATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful response to</td>
<td>Shows enthusiasm, energy, commitment and focus</td>
<td>Intrinsic rather than extrinsic leadership potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenge, seek out and use opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Cox and Cooper (1988).*
flyers have may be little more than opportunity-spotting and exploiting entrepreneurial openings faster and more successfully than others. The business of defining a high flyer or a member of a successful business elite is by no means simple. Ideally, researchers would specify, objectively and explicitly, a range of criteria that would explain the principle by which certain people are included and others excluded from the sample.

The second problem is actually getting the nominated high flyers to take part in the study by agreeing to an interview or completing a survey. High flyers soon become “over-researched,” and receive little personal benefit from participating. Hence many of those who have been carefully selected refuse to take part, which forces the researchers to weaken their criteria and indeed the study as a whole.

Third, these sorts of studies almost never have a control group of those matched on a number of criteria who simply did not “make it.” Thus it is not really possible to say whether the special characteristics of high flyers identified by researchers are unique to them, or indeed played any part in their success.

Talent derailment

Furnham (2003) spelled out a theory as to why talented people derail. He argued that the story of Icarus was a good example to help in understanding the syndrome. In Greek mythology, Icarus was the son of the inventor, Daedalus. Cretan King Minos locked the father and son up in a high tower. The talented Daedalus made two sets of wings out of feathers and wax, which they would use to escape; he told his son that the only “design fault” was that the wax might melt if they flew too close to the sun. Icarus ignored the good advice of his wise father, flew too high, melted his wings, crashed into the sea and drowned.

It is not clear from the myth precisely why Icarus disobeyed his father. Was he a sensation seeker prone to accidents? Did he do it out of boredom? Was he a disobedient, rebellious child? Was he simply beguiled by his own hubris?

We don’t know the answers. Indeed, it is the function of myths and case studies that they allow for multiple interpretations. We do know that the modern derailed high-flier bears an uncanny resemblance to Icarus.
But how and why were they chosen? What did the assessors miss? Or did the problem arise in the way they were managed? There is a growing literature on management derailment and why it occurs, particularly in those once labelled as talented:

- **Aberrant (leaders)** This emphasizes abnormality, atypicality and deviance from the right or normal type. It has two themes: unusualness but also a departure from acceptable standards. That is, it has a statistical and a moral side to it.

- **Anti-social (leaders)** This echoes the immoral nature of leaders who can be anti-social in the way selfish people may be, but more likely in the way that delinquents are anti-social. And, more importantly, because perhaps it echoes the new term for a psychopathic condition: having an anti-social personality disorder.

- **Dark side (triad) (leaders)** This is to contrast the bright and the dark; the outside, the obvious and the straightforward with the inside, the obscure and the devious. Dark implies something that is evil, dismal and menacing. The triad suggests three separable constituents of evil.

- **Derailed (leaders)** This emphasizes the idea of being thrown off course. Trains derail from tracks. Leaders that were set fair in a particular direction deviate from the path and are unable to move forward. It is sometimes hyphenated with *deranged*, which implies not only a breakdown in performance but also into insanity.

- **Despotic (leaders)** This is taken from the historical literature emphasizing the misuse and abuse of power by oppressive, absolutist leaders. It highlights the autocratic type or style of leadership.

- **Destructive (leaders)** This is used by historians in this context to look at a particular leadership style; it speaks of the ruining, spoiling or neutralizing of a group or force led by a particular person.

- **Incompetent (leaders)** This is used to suggest inadequate, ineffective or unqualified. It implies the absence of something required rather than the presence of something not required. Incompetent leaders are ineffective because they are lacking in particular qualities.

- **Malignant (leaders)** These are leaders who spread malevolence, the opposite of benevolence. Malevolence is misconduct, doing harm such as maliciously causing pain or damage. Malignant leaders, like cancer, grow fast and are deadly.
• **Toxic (leaders)** This refers to the poisonous effect leaders have on all they touch. Toxic substances kill rather than repel. Again this refers to the consequences of a particular leadership style.

• **Tyrannical (leaders)** This refers to tyrants who show arbitrary, oppressive and unjust behavior. Tyrants tend to usurp power and then brutally oppress those they command.

Later Furnham (2007) argued that three categories or types of personality disorders and traits are most commonly implicated in management derailment: antisocial (psychopathic), narcissistic and histrionic. Machiavellianism (which is not strictly a personality disorder) has been considered as another dimension. These have been variously described as the dark triad of personality (Paulus and Williams 2002), though there is some disagreement about all the dimensions. In lay terms, psychopaths are selfish, callous, superficially charming, lacking empathy and remorse; narcissists are attention-seeking, vain, self-focused and exploitative; while Machiavellians are deceptive, manipulative and deeply self-interested.

Paradoxically, these disorders often prove to be an asset in acquiring and temporarily holding down senior management positions. The charm of the psychopath, the self-confidence of the narcissist, the clever deceptiveness of the Machiavellian and the emotional openness of the histrionic may be, in many instances, useful business traits. When candidates are physically attractive, well-educated, intelligent and have a dark triad profile it is not difficult to see why they are selected for senior positions in management. In this sense, assessors and selectors must bear part of the blame for not selecting out those who so often later derail so spectacularly. They do not recognize in the biography of the individual the crucial indicators of the disorder. Alternatively, the biography as portrayed in the CV might easily be a work of fiction.

The lay persons’ image of a psychopath is often one of a dangerous mass murderer or perhaps an amazingly successful confidence trickster. Similarly, many would admire the self-confidence of the person with a narcissistic personality disorder. Further, the emotional lability and showiness of the histrionic personality-disordered manager in a creative job may result in them being rated as creative rather than disturbed. The clever deviousness of the Machiavellian may also be admired as an indication of toughness. In this sense, “mild” forms of these pathologies could appear generally or at specific times, which could be very advantageous to the manager.
Strengths and weaknesses

Positive psychology in business has a new and beguiling message. The old-style, puritanical, work-on-your-weakness message is rejected. The reason is that this is a mistaken misallocation of energy and focus. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to “correct,” eliminate or conquer personal weaknesses, particularly among those who are older. The message is that you are let off the hook for your weaknesses – put them aside; ignore them. Rather, find and explore your strengths. Focus on what you are good at.

The “strengths” school urges you to find your strengths first. Next, to use those strengths; play to them. But could this lead to problems? Could the charismatic, inspirational leader rely too much on presentation and not enough on substance? People with great strengths may overuse them, misapply them or rely on them too much. Could determination become obstinacy? Integrity become zealotry and thoughtful analysis turn into paralysis? Celebrating one’s new-found strengths may also make people less exploratory, change-oriented or eager to learn alternative approaches. They may focus on the past.

Should one really ignore one’s weaknesses? Is there no point in working on them at all? What about learning and development? Surely the strengths-based philosophy suggests assigning people to tasks and areas of responsibility that allow them to use their strengths? They would be robbed of learning something new: developmental opportunities, a bigger picture, diversity of experience.

Working one’s way to the top is about learning new ideas, approaches and skills as one “moves” through complexity. Ignoring weaknesses can excuse one from tackling necessary and important work. Big jobs require many skills and strengths. You can’t just ignore the skills you don’t have! The strengths approach can sound egocentric, self-indulgent and delusionally optimistic. Bizarrely, for such an upbeat creed it doesn’t emphasize growth but use of what is already there.

Weaknesses left unchecked do damage. More important, it can seem simplistic to divide the world into these clear categories. Are there not many examples of people who have turned weaknesses (such as a physical handicap) into their greatest strength – stutterers who become great orators; the Helen Kellers of this world?

But more of the many studies on management derailment show that great strengths overused, misapplied but over-abundant, can in fact be great weaknesses. Where is the line between high self-esteem and
self-confidence and clinical narcissism? Where is the line between careful, rule-following meticulousness and perfectionistic obsessive compulsiveness? Where is the line between colorful, dynamic and vivacious and having a narcissistic personality disorder?

Certainly, the strengths-based message about maximizing your innate gifts is correct. But a few if’s here: if you have a number of strengths relevant to your job; if you are prepared to learn new skills; if you also work on those things you have to do which you are not so good at; and if you do not become an arrogant over-user of the talents you have. Hubris leads to nemesis. Few great leaders have not known what they are good at, but they have also learned to put in the necessary work and effort to develop other skills and techniques that did not “come as easily.”

Consider the list in Table I.3.

Which of these strengths are most important in a talented leader? Which can easily be overused to reveal a weakness? Which are most desirable to have but will not do you any good in the business world?

**Management failure**

It is said that a psychologist going through a famous university library in the late 1980s found 400 books on depression and only two on happiness which provoked him into trying to fill the gap. Psychologists seemed to assume that if you didn’t have depression you were happy, and that this seemingly trivial subject did not merit research time and effort.

This was all before the positive psychology revolution and the shocking discovery to economists that wealth was very weakly related to health, happiness and well-being. Today, happiness is a serious topic for research.

Now, if you look at the more than 50,000 publications with leadership in their title, there is an equal conspiracy of neglect. There are autobiographical and biographical studies of leaders, there are “how to” books in droves, and there are scholarly works developing theories about the topic. There are studies of wicked, evil leaders, often written by historians and occasionally psychiatrists, but almost nothing on Wunderkinder. It appears to be a taboo subject akin to mental and physical illness in the nineteenth century, and homosexuality in the twentieth century. It is not that we refuse to admit that it happens, but nobody is prepared to talk about it.
Table I.3 Personal strengths

1. **Curiosity**: interest in, intrigued by many things
2. **Love of learning**: knowing more, reading, understanding
3. **Good judgment**: critical thinking, rationality, open-mindedness
4. **Ingenuity**: originality, practical intelligence, street-smart
5. **Social intelligence**: emotional/personal intelligence, good with feelings
6. **Wisdom**: seeing the big picture, having perspective
7. **Bravery**: courage, valor, fearlessness
8. **Persistence**: perseverance, diligence, industriousness
9. **Integrity**: honesty, genuineness, truthful
10. **Kindness**: generosity, empathetic, helpful
11. **Loving**: able to love and be loved; deep sustained feelings
12. **Citizenship**: team worker, loyalty, duty to others
13. **Fairness**: moral valuation, equality and equity
14. **Leadership**: able to motivate groups, inclusive, focused
15. **Self-control**: able to regulate emotions, non-impulsive
16. **Prudence**: cautious, far-sighted, deliberative, discreet
17. **Humility**: modest, unpretentious, humble
18. **Appreciative of beauty**: seeking excellence, experience of awe/wonder
19. **Gratitude**: thankful, grateful
20. **Optimism**: helpfulness, future-mindedness, positive
21. **Spirituality**: faith, philosophy, sense of purpose/calling
22. **Forgiveness**: merciful, benevolent, kind
23. **Playfulness**: humour, amusing, childlike
24. **Enthusiasm**: passion, zest, infectious, engaged.

*Source: Furnham and Lester (2012).*

This would all be understandable if derailment was rare. But the statistics provide evidence otherwise. There have been 12 papers published over the last 25 years that have made good estimates of management failure. The average of these estimates is 47 percent. Yes, they are estimates, and yes, there are different definitions of failure. Suffice to say that failure extends from imprisonment (for corruption and so on) through sacking to resignation long before the employment contract ended. Management failure occurs when the person appointed to the job fails to deliver the set objectives, often with dire consequences. In short, derailment and disappointment are as common as success.

There are observable and hidden costs to all this. The share price tumbles or starts a long decline but it is the hidden costs that are greater.
They include demoralised, disengaged, less productive staff; the loss of intellectual and social capital as turnover of good people increases; and missed business opportunities.

The paradox is that most failures have previously had very successful careers. The derailed were once the high flyers. Indeed, what helped them to climb to the top also led to their demise. Yet, for many (especially those who appointed them), their failure comes as a great surprise. However, retrospectively, going through the “case history,” the clues are all there. Alas, it is only hindsight that is 20/20.

One of the “lessons” from all this is to make someone responsible for selecting out CEOs. The way that most appointments are made is to look for evidence of certain attributes or competencies. Usually, more is better: you can’t be too creative or too customer focused; it is impossible to be too analytic or have too much integrity … or even to be too “good with people.” But the evidence suggests the opposite. It is called the spectrum hypothesis and suggests that extremes of normality are abnormality. There is no clear dividing line between normality and pathology as it is a spectrum. Thus, very high self-esteem may be seen as clinical narcissism.

It is perhaps just as important to have selectors look for evidence of characteristics that they do not want. A good list is:

- **Arrogance**: They are right and everybody else is wrong.
- **Melodrama**: They want to be the centre of attention.
- **Volutility**: Their mood swings create business swings.
- **Excessive caution**: They can’t make important decisions.
- **Habitual distrust**: They focus on the negatives all the time.
- **Aloofness**: They disengage and disconnect from staff.
- **Eccentricity**: They think it is fun to be different just for the sake of it.
- **Passive resistance**: Their silence is misinterpreted as agreement.
- **Perfectionism**: They seem to get the little things right even if the big things go wrong.
- **Eagerness to please**: They stress that being popular matters most.

The evidence suggests that derailment is a function of three things: very particular personality traits; naïve followers; and particular situations that mean poorly regulated and governed businesses.

We look, first, at potentially derailing leaders. Researchers in this area now talk of the dark triad of subclinical psychopathy. These individuals score high on anti-social and narcissistic personality disorder while having
Machiavellian beliefs and behaviors. The three interrelated features of the dark side are:

- arrogance, self-centredness, self-enhancement;
- duplicity, cynicism, manipulativeness; and
- emotional coldness, impulsive thrill-seeking and frequent engagement in illegal, dangerous and anti-social behavior.

The argument is this. Dark triad traits facilitate the exploitation of others in short-term social contexts because:

- narcissists are agentic, dominant, eager for power;
- Machiavellians can be exploitative charmers; and
- psychopaths have an exploitative nature.

“People of the dark triad” are high in self-interest but low in empathy. They are therefore not interested in, well suited to, or good at, long-term relationships where a degree of reciprocity is called for. They are often found out, so prefer a “hit-and-run” strategy.

But if they are articulate, bright and educated, as well as good-looking, the behaviors associated with the dark triad probably help them to climb the greasy pole of business life. The bright ones do well in the city. The less talented individuals with the dark triad are more likely to turn out to be confidence tricksters, petty criminals and imposters.

People of the dark triad gain a reputation for boldness and self-confidence, pushing through change, cutting back dead wood. They are thought to be adventurous and often mischievous, sometimes bullies. Any names come to mind?

We look next at the types of people who allow derailing leaders to thrive. We get the politicians and leaders we deserve. It has been said that there are toxic followers. Many have attempted to categorize these into different groups such as bystanders, acolytes, true believers or, more simply, conformers and colluders. Conformers tend to be immature with a negative self-concept, while colluders are more selfish, ambitious, destructive and openly supportive of toxic tyrants.

What are they like, these toxic board members who even encourage derailing leaders? First, most have low self-esteem, which they hope the leader will be able to improve. They also tend to be helpless and fatalistic, expecting the leader to give them power and influence. Toxic leaders
reinforce these board members’ sense of passivity while giving them a hope of escape.

Second, toxic followers also tend to be morally immature: their sense of right and wrong is weak, and conformity to immoral behavior dictated by the leader occurs. Vulnerable, immature, impressionable adults make good followers of strong but destructive leaders. Under-socialized or morally undeveloped people are happy to endorse the violence of toxic leaders.

Third, toxic followers yearn for rank, status and power: people ambitious for status and land/Lebensraum make better followers. The more they see that there is psychological and material profit to be gained by following, the more quickly and happily they follow.

Fourth, they share the values and beliefs of their leaders, who are often fundamentalists and based on some in-group superiority. Simply, followers who share world views with those of the destructive leader are naturally more likely to follow them.

But the social, economic and legal climate can help or hinder the dark-triad leader. They do best in situations of flux and instability. Political, economic and social instability are very frightening. Toxic leaders exploit fluidity, advocating radical means of restoring peace, harmony and progress. They are granted excessive authority and power that they are reluctant to relinquish. Next, the more people feel personally threatened, the more internal and external enemies they see around them, and the happier they are to follow toxic leaders who promise them security. Third, dark-triad leaders do best in cultures that are uncomfortable around ambiguity and uncertainty; those that have elaborate rules and rituals offering easy solutions to complex problems are easier to control. Further, the more there is a disparity between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, high and low status, the more the toxic leader thrives.

But the most important factor is where corporate governance is weak: where power is centralized and those monitoring authority and responsibility are silenced. This is like removing the internal audit from the organization. It means the end of constraint and monitoring.

The issue is always an appropriate balance between over- versus under-regulation. There is a cost to supplying the information required for good corporate governance. It may be that paying too much attention to internal auditing and the supply of accounting information taxes the organization too heavily.

Some leaders feel quite rightly that they are handicapped, even trapped, by the requirements of corporate governance. They feel they cannot act
quickly or boldly enough to do what has to be done. They see governance not as a wise system of checks and balances but as a suffocating system of bureaucracy that leads to long-term failure.

Often business and political leaders have significant decisional and behavioral latitude. But can this discretion, this latitude, be a significant derailer? Discretion is freedom, freedom is power, and power can corrupt. Some senior jobs involve a great deal of responsibility but not much discretion. Rules and regulations, ever-watchful shareholders and the media, in addition to financial and other constraints, simply reduce the opportunities of the grown-ups to misbehave, make mistakes or simply to “lose the plot.”

Good managers are characterized by various phenomena. Often they tend pro-actively to seek feedback from trusted, honest observers throughout their career to monitor how they are doing. Next, they seek out opportunities to grow, develop, learn or upgrade important skills. They also seek a formal or informal coach or mentor to help them through times of acute change or transition. In short, they seek out sources of assessment, challenge and support.

Those prone to derailment do not do this. Through hubris, anxiety or lack of insight, they have to be given “developmental” assignments and coerced to go on. They might go on short, taught, leadership programs, but few later cite such events as crucial ingredients in their development. They need opportunities to examine their style, strengths and weaknesses with intensive and honest feedback. Paradoxically, perhaps an early career failure or mishap can be an excellent learning experience to ensure that mistakes are not repeated.

Coaching for executives can help a great deal. Some organizations have prescribed mentoring where every manager at a certain level is mentored by a person above him or her.

Despite putting in place such support, not all derailment can be prevented. However, much can be done to help the stressed leader who is crossing the thin line between poor management and pathology.

The cost of derailment is high for the individual manager and his/her family, peers and subordinates, and for the company as a whole. Often derailment is quite unexpected. Yet nearly always a more careful and critical review of derailed leaders’ biographies contain all the cues that derailment might occur. By then it is too late.

Organizations can reduce, rather than prevent or eliminate, the prospect of their senior leaders and managers derailing, by ensuring good
governance and strong management processes. Leaders need enough freedom to manoeuvre but not unlimited power.

All leaders work with “top teams” called boards, cabinets or something of the sort. These groups can easily become highly dysfunctional and themselves be a cause of management derailment. It is desirable to have someone monitor the health of boards from time to time.

There are many stages when derailment may be addressed. The most obvious are recruitment and selection. There is now much more interest in this issue, and excellent psychometrically validated tests to evaluate the dark side of personality. These can indicate possible areas of concern about the behavior of leaders when put under pressure, which they inevitably are.

Coaching and mentoring can help. Paradoxically, those who need it the most also resist it most and benefit from it least. It takes a highly skilled coach to confront a very senior manager/leader and help him/her to avoid derailment.

A simple selection model is shown in Figure I.2. Everyone is concerned with getting A but nobody wants D. The question is: ‘Who does the selecting out: What do they look for?’

**Conclusion**

It is alas true that we are not all talented. Talent to succeed at work, like everything else, is normally distributed in a bell curve. It is sad to see

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure I.2* A simple selection model
talent not explored and wasted, and tragic to see the less talented stumble and fall in the workplace.

There are certain “course requirements” to be included within the talent/potential group. But they are necessary and not sufficient. Experience and education bring out talent.

References


