

# Lighting the Fuse

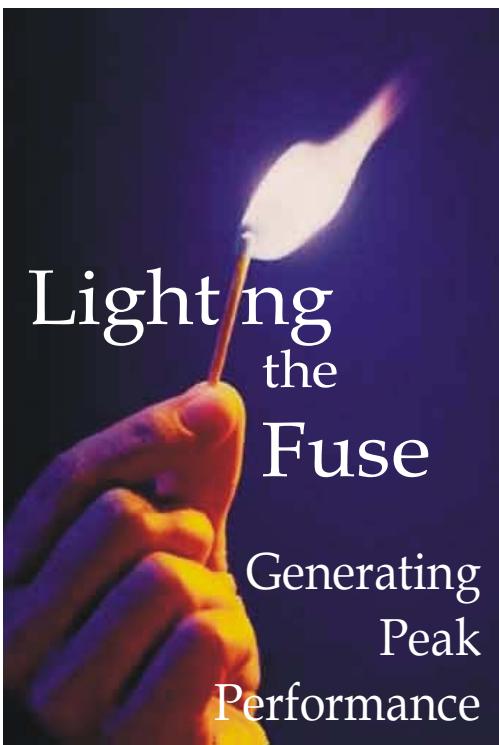
## Generating Peak Performance

A practical guide

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## A practical guide

The great actor, Sir Laurence Olivier, gave many celebrated performances of Othello. On tour one evening in Moscow, something special happened. As usual, the audience showed their appreciation with rapturous

applause. But both cast and crew knew that it had been no ordinary performance.

Even this recognised and accomplished actor had gone beyond excellence, reaching his peak that evening. Surely it was something to celebrate? However, in his dressing room, Olivier was despondent. Asked why he was so low, he replied: "I know something special happened this evening, but I don't know how I did it!"



Think of a time when you were at your absolute best. Now recall one when you knew you were falling short. What was the difference between these two situations?

Almost certainly you will remember how you felt, particularly when you were excelling. Sports people talk of being "in the zone" when delivering peak performance. Psychologists talk about the ability of those who hit a particularly golden patch of "going with the flow" or what one expert calls:

*"the state of being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away, time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is"*

*involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." Paradoxically, when it happens, exceptional performance feels easy, as if everything is going right."*<sup>1</sup>

For millennia, leaders have struggled with the challenge of how to trigger superlative performance from their people. Generals, tyrants, sports coaches, popes, captains of industry, philosophers and others have speculated on and experimented with what generates peak performance, and ways to sustain it.

Peak performance though, can prove a chimera, an extraordinary, uncontrollable moment never to be repeated.

For example, Isaac Newton's revelation about gravity from an apple falling on his head, August Kekule waking from a dream and realising the structure of benzene, Enrico Fermi discovering slow neutrons by 'randomly' substituting a block of paraffin for a tabletop, Alexander Fleming 'accidentally' discovering the action of a famous mould on bacteria, and Werner Heisenberg discovering the awesome structure of the quantum world after an all-night session on the island of Heligoland in the North Sea.



Such extraordinary moments may be peaks, yet realistically we cannot expect them to happen often. Nor can an individual, team or company permanently remain at peak performance. In this sense, even the notion of peak performance becomes questionable.

Instead, what organisations usually value more is sustained excellence. Through careful support and other means it may prove possible to extend the length of time someone performs at their best.

*"Only the mediocre are always at their best"*  
– Jean Giradoux (playwright)

This paper is a practical guide for managers who seriously want to help their people to perform at their best.

## WHAT'S CHANGED?

How do you light the fuse that results in an explosion of high-end performance? This is an increasingly urgent question facing managers and leaders in all kinds of organisation, both public and private.

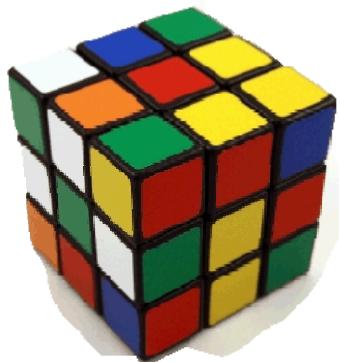
Since around the start of the previous century when Frederick Taylor extolled the benefits of scientific management, the idea of extracting peak performance from someone has undergone a series of re-thinks.

Taylorism for instance, rather than unleashing individual peak performance concentrated more on putting work onto a rational, scientific basis, and completing jobs.



Several decades of this narrow approach produced highly centralised bureaucracies. The resulting rigid, top-down management styles are less relevant in the 21st Century. They are widely seen by workers and managers alike as controlling, conformist, and monolithic. Consequently, they seldom fully engage people, without which peak performance simply does not occur.

Highly successful organisations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also mainly relied on scale for their success. So, the focus was usually on how to build the organisation by taking advantage of being large. But in the face of rapidly changing technologies, people's expectations and trends, such as outsourcing, the advantages of sheer scale have started disappearing.



Rather than creating scalable efficiencies, today's organisations increasingly succeed through being able to solve problems in flexible, adaptive ways. This applies whether you are a head teacher of a big school with scores of employees, or manager of a business unit of just a dozen people.

With the weakening of the benefits of scale, organisations and their leaders must now rely on the talents of all their people, and getting the best from them. In short, they are becoming talent-driven.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of its growing importance to organisational success the very idea of talent is undergoing a re-think. Where once companies regarded talent as confined to a gifted few, there is realisation that talent is made rather than born.

Interpreting talent as restricted to a narrow band of high level performers, or assuming that only a small elite can deliver peak performance is a sure way to damage a company. It will stifle innovation, deter the taking of personal responsibility, antagonise a vast swathe of employees and lose market momentum.

Simply, talent and peak performance are central to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century organisation, and we can increasingly talk of ones that are talent-driven. They provide conditions in which people can learn to collaborate and make decisions—that is, to scale learning.

Many organisations want the value that peak performers contribute but are reluctant to invest in understanding what motivates and engages them.

Too many leaders and managers try to trigger peak performance by focusing almost exclusively on output. That is, they focus on what those individuals can do for the organisation, rather than what the organisation might do for the individual and what each person actually needs in order to excel.

A survey of global high potentials—people who could be most expected to reach peak performance—found that over one third left their organisation because they did not feel they were being developed in the way they needed.

Finally, does your talent management system seek to fit square pegs into round holes, or does it genuinely seek to identify talent and then create opportunities for that talent to excel and add value?



## IMPLICATIONS

Generally, even mediocre organisations seem to know who their peak performers are. However, they are often far less aware of how to trigger excellence, to lead people to go beyond their previous personal best.

This requires support for the right combination of mental, emotional and practical behaviour.



Putting it slightly differently, to promote peak performance you will need some kind of structure, an organised approach that supports and shapes the direction in which your peak performers move. We will explore each of these crucial areas in turn.



### Encouraging Peak Performance Thinking

Charles Garfield,<sup>3</sup> one of the earliest investigators into peak performers during the 1980s, explored how they produced their exceptional results. A key observation to emerge from his researches was:

- Peak performers make a conscious decision to excel.

Consider briefly what this means. Each person decides for themselves that they will excel. Since you cannot make the decision for them what can you do?

First, you can help them realise that the decision is theirs to make. This is about taking responsibility for their peak performance. Rather than waiting for someone else to push them towards their peak, instead they make the conscious decision to do it for themselves.

Secondly, along with making a conscious decision to excel you can support their performance by encouraging each person to identify a personal, motivating vision or mission.

*"Champions aren't made in the gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them -- a desire, a dream, a vision."*

- Muhammad Ali.

More simply you ask them: "What would your peak performance look like?"

The answer may take time to clarify and it is your job to help this process with patience, encouragement and information about what the organisation considers peak performance to be.

Thirdly, you need to ensure that they realise that peak performance requires a significant and sustained personal investment. Only this will ensure they master their chosen area of skill. It also means a willingness to keep adapting and to learn from how they perform (see below, Experimenting).

Again you can support this but cannot make the investment for them.

Peak performers therefore tend to be highly disciplined, with a large vision or purpose including:

- Clear tactical goals;
- A strong mental focus;
- Persistence; and
- A hunger for knowledge and feedback.

Peak performers are supremely organised around their chosen aim. Having identified a vision, a big goal that helps define everything they do, they will often break this down into smaller aims that cumulatively contribute to the broader vision.

For example, Greg Mortenson, famous for his one-man mission to promote peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan, establishes one school at a time in places where they will make a real difference.<sup>4</sup>

Within your own organisation, help your people grasp the importance of having a personal vision by discussing it, and offering guidance or coaching to enable them to arrive at what this might be. Another positive action is to ensure that their chosen goals, while challenging, are potentially achievable and aligned to the business aims.

Timothy Gallwey, an early advocate for understanding the mind of the peak performer, observed that: "Most tennis players are talking to themselves on the court all the time. 'Keep your eye on the ball, bend your knees,' the commands are endless."<sup>5</sup>

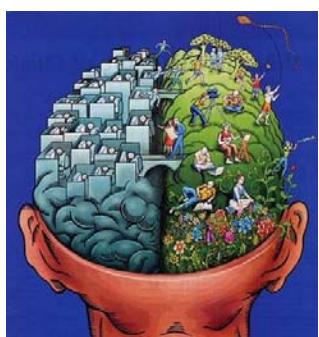


He stressed the mental side of exceptional performance, the need to understand why peak performers get nervous. He concluded that better tennis stemmed from improving the relationship between the conscious self and the unconscious, automatic doer.

This does not mean you have to become a trained psychologist, but it does require you to share your own understanding of the important role of the inner domain. Draw on your personal experience. For instance, explore issues such as attitude, resilience, self awareness, self-confidence, persistence, alertness and presence.

Share stories, experiences, successes and failures so the other person comes to realise the importance of their inner selves.

### *Thinking Logically and Thinking Creatively*



Peak performers learn to use both their left and right brain. If you spend time with your people solving problems together, you create an opportunity to develop both areas of their thinking. Breaking problems down into logical and sequential reasoning can be a great way of simplifying complex problems.



Equally, encouraging people to think in pictures and work with mental images allows the right brain to develop to its full capacity. For example, rather than saying what you think the person should do, try using an image that brings the end result to life.



Peak performers also work with their inner monologue – the voice that speaks to us all the time and commentates on our life. This constant internal commentary can be distracting, destructive and potentially damaging.

However, peak performers need to be able to exploit their inner monologue, often referred to as “self talk”. They learn how to make it support them, using it to generate original thought, rather than repeatedly replaying the same old record.

*“Few people think more than two or three times a year. I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.”*

- George Bernard Shaw (Writer)

Encourage your potential peak performer to tap into what is going on inside them. Explain that this can help them both practise and envisage successful outcomes.

Creating a sort of inner rehearsal space allows the person to think through problems, anticipate challenges and practise difficult conversations. So peak performers prepare themselves to deal with difficulties by using this powerful internal thinking capability.

Help your people appreciate the importance of this inner voice and how to cultivate ways to direct and control it. Use coaching as a means of developing these mental abilities.

## MAKING INNER DIALOGUE WORK

- Monitor your inner dialogue and check for any habitual statements that do not support the attempt to reach peak performance.
- Convert thinking that creates worry or anxiety – for example, mentally reject statements of doubt, fear or letting others down – into a more positive form.
- Switch thinking about past failures into a focus on positive outcomes—for example, direct the mind away from replaying previous setbacks and towards positive imagery of success.
- Close down any inner dialogue that suggests poor performance equates to having less self worth—for example, “if I screw up this presentation I really am no good”.
- Challenge adverse odds in any inner statement about the chances of success—for example, reject inner dialogue statements that focus on the likelihood or difficulty of success of the chances of failure as this creates stress and an expectation of doing badly.
- Notice internal negative statements and convert them into positive ones. For example, rather than “I mustn’t mess up this interview” create a positive version such as “I am fully prepared and ready for this interview.”

### *Feedback*

“Feedback is the breakfast of champions” explains leadership expert Ken Blanchard, and most peak performers are hungry for information about how they are doing. They need this information to support their efforts of continuous improvement. “How am I doing?” is therefore a constant question that peak performers tend to keep asking.

Again, you can support your peak performers through regular feedback, ensuring they recognise its importance and the need to constantly seek it out.



## IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Discuss the mental side of things with your people.
- Highlight the importance of attitude and mind-set.
- Discuss issues and problems so that they practise their thinking skills.
- Coach people to clarify their purpose and vision.
- Identify their skills and any areas for development.
- Set clear goals.
- Break big goals down into smaller, step-by-step ones.
- Provide constructive feedback.

## Encouraging Peak Performance Feeling



To anyone who thrives on numbers and metrics, being concerned with how a person *feels* about their performance may sound deplorably vague and unscientific. Yet it can make a fundamental difference to whether you successfully light the fuse to trigger peak performance.

Feelings in this context include:

- Passion;
- Engagement;
- Emotional Intelligence;
- Emotional Expression; and
- Confidence.

### **Passion**

Across a wide range of activity, peak performers demonstrate a passion for their mission. It literally drives them to excel; it's when they feel most alive and

engaged at full throttle. In some ways it is a form of addiction, a burning desire to create oneself through work.

Various private and public-sector organisations have built passion into their business strategies. These include companies such as Ben & Jerry's Homemade, Southwest Airlines, Google and Semco.

They do it through communication, education, the environment they create, their policies and practices. This commitment stems not from altruism but from realising that passion generates a constant stream of new ideas, innovation and builds huge personal commitment and loyalty.

For peak performers, passion is a creative journey in which they discover themselves and their potential. It's the "sweet spot" in which everything comes together—what they like doing, what they are good at and what they want to achieve.

However, liking what they do is a bonus rather than essential for peak performance.

Marlon Brandon famously hated acting and did less and less of it as he got older and more successful. In sport, Agassi's avowed hatred for tennis is far from unique.

British cyclists Chris Boardman, the former Olympic pursuit champion, and Tour de France star David Millar have both admitted to disliking cycling. "*In Boardman's case,*" says William Fotheringham, the Guardian's cycling correspondent, "*He liked the winning not the cycling itself, and he drove himself to win.*"



Within organisations, if passion becomes an obsession, a miserable addiction to success, it is more likely to end in tears. In contrast, a healthy passion fills people with energy and enables them to feel excited about reaching for their best.

To uncover the passion of your people, be willing to use direct questions such as: "What turns you on", "What excites you", "What can I do to help you

succeed”, “What’s getting in the way of you being a star?” In other words, focus on the forces that motivate each person.

### ***Engagement***

It is almost impossible to underestimate the importance that engagement plays in generating peak performance. Engaged people go the extra mile, that is, they put in discretionary effort.

You can play a vital role in generating engagement, both in emotional and highly practical terms. When your people become engaged you see it in their eyes, in how they talk and how they behave.

You cannot force someone to become engaged, but you can create the most favourable circumstances for it to occur:



In each of these four areas, as a manager you will be able to affect how the other person feels, both from your attitude and through the practical support you provide.

For example, people feel valued when their work has meaning, or they feel developed when they have a career plan or planned path for new learning.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for leaders and managers is how to inspire their people so that they want to reach for peak performance. Leaders can learn to do this; it is not simply an innate skill which you have to be born with.

An essential starting point in this area of lighting the fuse is: If you want to inspire someone, first inspire yourself.

Most leaders, like other human beings, prefer to remain in their comfort zone for much of the time. Yet this is not the place from which to unleash their own peak performance where they excel and inspire others.

So spend some time identifying what lights your own fuse that triggers peak performance. Try to discover what produces variations in your own performance and produces gains that differ from the day-to-day and instead reaches a new, if temporary state of excellence.

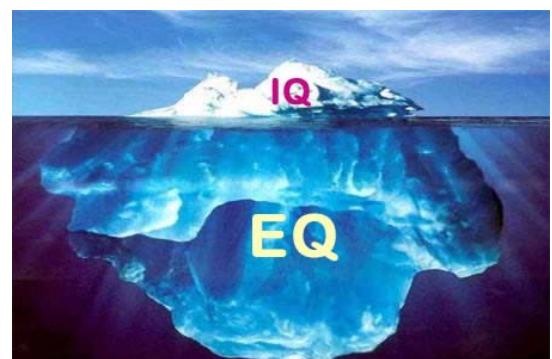
When leaders operate at their peak they become transformative, that is they radiate energy, and fundamentally affect others and how they see the world.

### *Emotional intelligence*

Another way of describing emotional intelligence is being highly self aware, in touch with one's emotions and able to manage them appropriately. Many managers shy away from talking about or confronting feelings, but this is no way to promote peak performance.

In fact, one reason why employers do such a poor job in supporting their most talented workers is this reluctance to talk about feelings.

Because the brightest and most talented workers are the most passionate about what they do, they are most likely to engage in open communication, including how they feel about what they are attempting to achieve.



Emotional intelligence is now widely regarded as a major factor separating "the stars" from lesser performers in various kinds of work. Today's outstanding leaders for example, understand and have mastered the use of emotional intelligence and failure to do so can prove severely career limiting.

For example, Tony Hayward, BP's CEO at the time of the Gulf oil disaster was widely criticised for his insensitive remarks including "wanting my life back", which undermined his long term prospects with the company.

Since so much of peak performance depends on feelings—about success, failure and everything in between—you can actively help your people get to grips with the part that feelings play in achieving their best. This can be through discussions and by being willing to ask questions such as "How do you feel about that?"

### **Emotional Expression:**

The great tennis player, John McEnroe, can now reflect on his youthful emotional explosions with a wry smile. He has matured and no longer behaves like the precocious young brat he was in his youth, screaming at umpires. His outbursts were an essential expression of his passion for the game, part of his fierce competitiveness. The only issue is whether they were appropriate.



Research shows that expressing our emotions is generally good for us. Pent-up feelings can lead to disease, whether ulcers, tension, stress and mental illness – perhaps even worse. So, people who can identify their feelings in the moment and then express them appropriately are likely to be more effective.

You can play a powerful role here by coaching your people to identify their feelings and speak about them as a natural part of pursuing peak performance. It is also vital that they bring passion to their communication and speak from the heart.

*"Anyone can be angry – that is easy.  
To be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose  
and in the right way – that is not easy."*

- Aristotle

### **Confidence**

"The more I practise, the luckier I get" explained one legendary golfer about his repeated success. Peak performers see themselves as a natural resource,



capable of so much more. This approach surfaces as confidence - a positive attitude to being able to excel.



Since confidence is essentially a feeling, where exactly does it come from? Some people undoubtedly exhibit natural, in-built confidence. Others, including most peak performers, must work at it. There is a two-stage process in which solid practice gradually builds competence, which in turn creates confidence.

It is pointless trying to take a taking a short cut by insisting that someone *becomes* confident. Concentrate instead on creating the conditions in which their confidence can flourish.

This includes ensuring the peak performer puts in solid practise and testing to ensure there is a steady increase in competence. (See Act below)

### *IDEAS FOR ACTION*

- Start with the heart: uncover what drives this person, excites and energises them
- Clarify purpose: explore where the passion is leading and how it relates to the goals of the organisation
- Concretise: determine how the passion will be applied, what will be attempted
- Encourage performance: ensure the person pursues their chosen path
- Communicate: help share the excitement, gain attention and promote a sense of achievement
- Persist: make sure the passion remains focused on the agreed goal, and drives peak performance
- Distinguish: ensure the person sees the difference between being obsessed by the job, which can be dispiriting and hard to gratify, and pursuing their passion which can give them satisfaction and fulfilment.



## Encouraging Peak Performance Action

If having a mission is a starting point for peak performance, then those who go for it need to take the vital step of responding with action—“the click” that starts things moving. Follow through by helping them:

- Develop their skills;
- Promote their physicality;
- Experiment;
- Deliver on commitments; and
- Persist.

### *Develop skills*

A keen pianist went to watch a master player. At the end of the concert he approached the pianist saying “I would give my life to play like this”, to which the master replied, “That’s what I did”.



Absolute mastery of any skill is said to takes at least 10,000 hours practice and there seem virtually no exceptions. Most people though, can probably become reasonably good at a skill with a more limited investment of 3,000 hours.

What matters more than the number of hours though, is having plenty of opportunity to exercise skills and to receive regular feedback about the quality of one's performance.

Sufficient practice is like an actor having adequate rehearsal time. Rehearsals are not merely to learn the lines, but to explore different routes to peak performance. They provide the opportunity to learn through failure, discovering what works and what does not.

Do your people have sufficient space and opportunity to develop their skills?  
What could you do to encourage them in their quest for skill mastery?

### *Promote physicality*

Even sedentary chess players do better when they exercise in preparation for tournaments. There is strong evidence that physicality—staying fit and having a balanced life style—plays an important role in reaching peak performance.

Focus your peak performers' attention on the value of fitness and having a commitment to well-being. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain. It requires rich amounts of oxygen and glucose to fuel it and operate at peak efficiency. This leads to increased productivity, improved memory, better learning, more balanced moods and more focused will power.

Helping people at work reach their peak performance therefore means making them aware of the role that health and well-being play in reaching for their best. As some experts put it: "The equation is very simple: strong body, strong mind"

### *Experiment*

Nobody constantly hits peak performance without making mistakes. You may not agree with the philosopher and scientist Aristotle that "It is possible to fail in many ways...while to succeed is possible only in one way", but failure plays an important part in any attempt at peak performance.

Peak performers constantly experiment, take risks to discover what works for them and what does not. To light the fuse of someone's peak performance, encourage them to keep exploring new ways of performing.  
Above all, make it acceptable for them to make mistakes.

*ever tried  
ever failed  
no matter  
try again  
fail again  
fail better*

**Samuel Becket (Writer)**

Failure attracts such an emotional charge that it is hard to stay objective about it for long. For example, peak performers readily blame themselves for failure and even talking about it can sometimes be destructive or demoralising. Yet failure often opens up a new route to peak performance if people can learn from their mistakes.



## *Deliver on commitments*

No matter what field you investigate, peak performers know how to translate their mission into reality. They dismiss the non-essential to focus on the essence of their commitment. For peak performers, delivering on their commitment is what it is all about.

People often undermine their performance through over-promising and under-delivering. This is not the route to peak behaviour. We develop trust in ourselves by continually keeping to our agreements. If we say we are going to do something and then we always do it, we start trusting our ability.

Delivering on commitments is therefore a foundation for excellence. Without it peak performance is an aspiration not a reality. Support your peak performers by explaining the role that commitment plays in attempting to be at their best and that.

- Commitment needs to become a habit.

The habit of commitment affects all aspects of performance. The sort of person who always keeps their word is unlikely to commit to unrealistic goals – choosing peaks that cannot be reached.

Commitment, therefore, makes peak performers more realistic in setting stretching aims and ends up developing belief in themselves and their abilities.

There may be several routes to triggering commitment, not just one. For example, in his book on Peak Performance,<sup>6</sup> Jon Katzenbach identified mission, values and pride; process and metrics; entrepreneurial spirit; and recognition and responsibility, as some of the ways that commitment can occur.

## *Persistence*

Nearly every well-known author, including Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, John Grisham, and many more had their work rejected numerous times before being published. Rowling's famed first Harry Potter novel was rejected eight times before finally being published and making her the richest writer in history.



The sheer persistence of peak performers can be both inspiring and daunting. Long after others would have abandoned the chase they keep going, often against seemingly enormous odds.

Almost single-handed, Robert Kearns, inventor of the intermittent windshield wiper, who sued Ford and Chrysler for stealing his idea, pursued them relentlessly from 1969 until 1990 when he won stunning court victories and damages running into millions of dollars.



James Dyson believed in his vacuum cleaner so much that, even though he was turned down by every major appliance maker he simply refused to take "no" for an answer. Persistence also implies a willingness to learn from mistakes, being willing to adapt and change in the light of changing circumstances and a readiness to make course corrections.

For example, Traf-O-Data was the first company Bill Gates and Paul Allen started, back in 1972. They ran it for several years before realising this was not going to work. They corrected course and did rather better with Microsoft.

You may not be dealing with a James Dyson or Bill Gates in your organisation, but you can pass on some of the lessons of persistence to your potential peak performers. For example, make sure they understand the difference between being persistent and being too obstinate to change.

#### *IDEAS FOR ACTION*

- Support people by providing them with opportunities to develop and practise their skills.
- Create a culture where delivering on commitments is the norm
- Encourage experimentation and treat mistakes and failure as opportunities to learn
- When people are getting exhausted or downhearted, encourage them to stick with it. Show your belief in their potential success.
- Provide constant feedback on people's actions.

If lighting the fuse and triggering peak performance in your people was easy, then everyone would be doing it. So, here are some of the things that can get in the way:

## **OBSTACLES TO PEAK PERFORMANCE**

- A command and control approach to managing people.
- Demanding 9 to 5 hours, so people travel inefficiently in peak time.
- Presenteeism—insisting on seeing people in the office every day.
- Embroiling people in office politics and bureaucracy.
- Forcing attendance at lengthy corporate meetings.
- Giving one-size fits all cubicles, regardless of needs or work styles.
- A hard to concentrate environment, where interruptions are easy.
- Not equipping people for optimal mobility and connectivity.
- Not using technology to best advantage.
- Distrusting people to make smart decisions about their best time and place to work.
- Negative or adversarial relationships that drain energy and creativity.
- Over-praising group performance and giving insufficient praise to individual achievement.

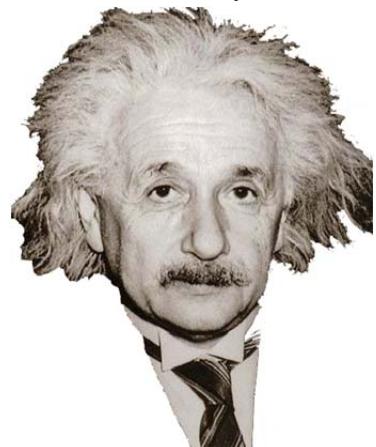
## **NURTURING THE LONE RANGER AND OTHER TRICKY TALENTS**

One of the toughest talent challenges you may face in extracting peak performance from people, is how to steer the lone rangers towards their personal best.

These are the mavericks, rebels, prima donnas and stars who, without proper care, may limit their best work to weekends.



The most famous lone ranger was Albert Einstein, who perfected his theory of relativity while working as a clerk in the patent office in Bern, Switzerland. Are any of your people lone rangers, engaged as weekend creatives? If so, how will you recapture these energies?



More than most peak performers, lone rangers like to see the novelty in their work; they strongly trust their own self-competence and self-direction. When flying high, they do not feel at work at all, but engaging in play.

Pay, bonuses and stock options are less important to the lone rangers who particularly need a sense that they are working for self-satisfaction on a self-discovered problem, not one clumsily imposed on them.

Your lone rangers will flourish when they feel able to use their natural curiosity and interest. Focus their attention on the daily enjoyment, novelty and challenges of the work. Offer them as many choices as you can, especially of how to do the job.

Encourage risk taking which is the core of creative and innovative enterprise at work. Above all, make sure they are protected from the weight of the bureaucracy and ensure they have job stability.

Because of their often intense focus, lone rangers easily become isolated, and lose a sense of work balance. You may need to help them switch off. This means ensuring they make time for play, and that it is not simply an extension of work.

One manager who knew how to excite and enthuse his lone rangers used to greet them with "Are you having fun today?" If they answered yes, he would ask them to share their fun with him. If they said no, he would ask what he could do to help them have fun. This approach helps people focus on their internal motivators—personal satisfaction, a sense of achievement—rather than external motivators such as financial rewards.

## IDEAS FOR ACTION

### 5 WAYS TO HANDLE DIFFICULT TALENT

- Distinguish between stars, rebels, mavericks and prima donnas.
- Devote time to discovering what each talent needs to succeed.
- Analyse the balance between the cost of replacing and recruiting versus the cost of managing the person.
- Review your own responses to the difficult talent, what's underneath, what's being triggered in you, and what exactly is triggering it?
- Separate the person's behaviour from the person, so you can react appropriately.

## Managing Difficult Talent

	<b>Prima-donnas</b>	<b>Rebels</b>	<b>Mavericks</b>	<b>Stars</b>
<b>FIT</b>	The organisation has to fit itself to them.	They won't fit in but need the organisation to have a strong identity in order to kick against it.	Will disregard the organisation if processes get in the way. Not kicking against like rebels.	They are able to adjust to their surrounding and bring their talents to the situation.
<b>FOCUS</b>	On themselves and the enterprise.	On themselves and their values.	On themselves and getting results or making a difference.	On both themselves and others. And on the enterprise.
<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>	Take responsibility for themselves and those who serve them.	Don't take any (except perhaps to their personal cause).	Take responsibility for getting results.	Tend to take responsibility for everything.
<b>LOYALTY</b>	To themselves.	To their ideals.	Themselves and outcomes.	To others and the enterprise.

*Converting non-performers into performers*

Lighting the fuse of the non-performer may sound like an oxymoron, a straight contradiction of reality. “It’s fine giving all this attention to those wanting to excel, but what about the one in my team who hardly delivers at all?” This is a typical response from managers who face colleagues almost laughably far from good, let alone peak performance.

Non-performers though, might be peak performers in disguise! It may sound absurd, but nearly always when you take time to unravel what is going on, you find square pegs in round holes, people fearful of change, and individuals not used to taking the responsibility required to reach high levels of performance.

### **Step 1: Re-frame**

**1**

Start by making your own mental leap. Re-frame the situation by assuming people who want to succeed do not come to work to screw up.

Uncovering what will switch these people on, to light their fuse, is a real journey of self-discovery, for both of you. For example, you may have to abandon any accumulated animosity, drop assumptions about their inadequacies and avoid any tendency to seek retribution or to punish.

### **Step 2: Dialogue**

**2**

For the non-performer, the journey begins by acknowledging a difficult, perhaps unsettling realisation: they are almost certainly not happy or inspired by their present situation.

You need to be willing to say how you experience the other person and their approach to delivering acceptable, not yet peak, performance. Once you begin the dialogue there can be no retreat.

### **Step 3: Diagnose**

**3**

Unravel what is stopping the person performing to the best of their ability. What do *they* see as the reason, what do *they* feel is making them so uncomfortable, unhappy, aggressive, rude or whatever?

Listen hard, without imposing your own solutions. Make space for the other person to talk about what stops them performing well.

**4**

#### **Step 4: Small Beginnings**

Do not expect to light the fuse and see someone leap instantly from non-delivery to peak performance. Instead, identify a series of small changes and try to gain acceptance for the change through dialogue.

Try to make the change mutual-- what the other person will do and what you will do to support it.

**5**

#### **Step 5: Notice and reward**

Having agreed small beginnings, watch for any evidence of the person moving in the right direction. Just about any positive sign will do, just so long as it is towards the agreed aim.

If you spot them doing something right, grab it. Give encouragement, praise and acknowledgement. Offer the non-performer some public recognition or say privately what you have noticed.

**6**

#### **Step 6: Demand more**

Continue the dialogue and return to exploring together yet another level of performance.

It may take many steps before the non-performer starts delivering an acceptable result, but at least there is movement. You may be able to light the person's fuse gradually, triggering a higher level of engagement than before.

**7**

#### **Step 7: Offer alternatives**

Sometimes, no matter what you do you cannot light their fuse. They remain unhappy, complacent or rebellious and never deliver the level of performance needed. Be willing to take the final step.

Invite them to discuss other roles, either inside or outside the organisation. Often just talking openly about their present role, how you perceive it and what else might appeal can trigger peak performance.

## CONCLUSION

Lighting the fuse of someone's talent and guiding them to peak performance is seldom routine. You are never safe in following traditional rules, strict schedules, generic methods and materials, or standard ways of assessing situations.

Reaching peak performance involves continuous experiment, even when everything seems to be working well.

Finally, if you remain entirely wrapped up in reaching your own peak performance, you are unlikely to be able to offer much support to someone else on the same road.

Talent managing peak performance requires you to make space for the other person to excel, and to see your own success as arising directly from theirs.

### PEAK PERFORMANCE POINTERS

- Know what is driving you towards wanting to reach a peak.
- Make the personal decision to excel—that is, make the commitment.
- Define the vision in as concrete terms as possible.
- Evolve a structure or framework for tackling peak performance.
- Contact personal passion through: practice, competence, confidence, appreciation.
- Discover what allows the juices to flow and energy levels to rise.
- Create conditions so that a person can be in their zone, where they can excel.
- Welcome feedback: permanently build this into an approach to constant improvement.
- Think success: if you think you can't succeed then you can't.
- Focus on the chosen goals and the detailed task, and ditch any urge for instant gratification.
- Assess the pain threshold: what will it take to succeed and can you really bear it?



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