FIRST, Break all the Rules
What the world’s greatest managers do differently
By Marcus Buckingham & Curt Coffman

Introduction

I first received this book during a Human Resource Management workshop focused on developing and facilitating employee development.

The example development plan asked us to identify goals, outline the activities required and resources available to meet those goals, and provide a reasonable timeline.

One limitation of this exercise was that the activities could not include taking a course, workshop or seminar to help achieve those goals. This initially seemed rather absurd given all the participants were university managers participating in a workshop to help achieve the goals. It was months after receiving the book until I read it in order to provide this summary and review.

As a previously identified ‘Type A Personality’, the title naturally attracted me to this book. I believe that rules need to be broken and the flexibility to do things differently on a case by case basis is needed in order to succeed as a manager, especially in a hierarchical organization such as a university.

The layout, use of chapters, and headings made for a well organized and easy to follow text. This book is an easy to follow and understand guide to great management practices.

The book also includes many practical tools such as example interview questions which can be incorporated into any managers toolkit. I would recommend this book to others and am looking forward to reading more work from the authors.
Break the Rules of conventional wisdom:

- Become close friends with employees
- Manage expectations
- Treat each person differently
- Never pass the buck
- Spend the most time with your best people
- know that people cannot be changed
- Managers cannot control employees

Summary

Balancing the priorities of individual talents, wishes and expectations with the goals and strategy of organizations summarizes a role of the manager. This book lays out the foundation to achieve an engaged and productive workforce. It is a road map to good management practice based on research (interviews) conducted with some of the world’s greatest managers which contributed to the findings of the Gallop Study.

The purpose of the Gallop study was to determine the relationship between employee satisfactions, customer satisfaction and productively. The results take into consideration interviews from over 1 million employees over a period of 25 years. In ‘First, Break all the rules’, Buckingham and Coffman (1999) aim to provide answers to the question: “How do the world’s best managers find, focus, and keep talented employees” (P. 12).

They found that the best managers break all the conventional rules of management. Because employee opinion is linked to business unit performance, how managers are able to engage employees through attracting and retaining good employees has been determined to be important.

After describing the four keys or the main areas in which managers should focus, the book provides a guide on how to achieve managers’ ultimate goal: to turn each employee’s talent into performance. This section is entitled ‘Turning the keys’ which describes what managers can do to turn each of the keys.

While Buckingham and Coffman do not offer a step by step set of instructions on how to be a great manager, they offer a way of thinking consistent with that of great managers. All managers have a different style of management and they believe this should be harvested. Managing with the four keys in mind allows employees to be systematically autonomous resulting in mastery of their talents with a common goal of organizational performance.

The path of great managers “demands discipline, focus, trust, and, perhaps most important, a willingness to individualize” (p. 12).
Mountain Climbing

Buckingham and Coffman (1999) define the phrase ‘mountain climbing’ as the “psychological climb you make from the moment you take on a new role to the moment you feel fully engaged in that role” (p. 42). Various steps or stages of mountain climbing are outlined in the text and are linked to the relevant measurement tools and the 12 questions used in the Gallup study, known as ‘The Big 12’.

Base Camp: “What do I get?”
1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?

Camp 1: “What do I give?”
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?

Camp 2: “Do I belong here?”
7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission / purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?

Camp 3: “How can we all grow?”
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
12. This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

The Summit
Only after one has answered positively to the 12 questions, have they reached the summit and are a fully engaged employee.

The ‘Big 12’ correlate to business outcomes: productivity, profitability, employee retention, customer satisfaction.

Focus on the base and first camps!
Managers are not just Leaders-in-waiting: There are differences between leaders and managers. If we look at a SWOT analysis the managers will look to the strengths and weaknesses, and the leaders to the opportunities and threats. That is, managers look inward, and leaders outward.

Great Managers Four Core Activities

Conventional Wisdom says:
1. Select the person based on his experience, intelligence, and determination.
2. Set expectations by defining the right steps.
3. Motivate the person by helping him identify and overcome his weaknesses.
4. Develop the person by helping him learn and get promoted.

Great Managers:
1. Select for talent.
2. Define the right outcomes.
3. Focus on strengths.
4. Find the right fit.

Source: www.slideshare.net
1) Select for Talent

Great managers define talent as “a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (p. 71). Conventional selection criteria do not take into consideration the individual filter and recruit based on experience, intelligence and determination. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) suggested that individuals filter is the main factor in selecting talent. Our filters help us know what to notice and what to ignore, what to love and hate, what motivates you, how do you think, what is your attitude. Essentially the source of your talents is your filter. This is what makes us individuals. It is inherent and cannot be learned nor can it be changed.

Great managers understand that filters are individualistic and employee motivation varies because of these filters. They view the job as a stage with many actors (employees) all contributing to the overall performance.

“In the minds of great managers, every role performed at excellence deserves respect. Every role has its own nobility” (p. 98).

To turn talent into performance, managers must first select the right talent. The selection process is difficult because the employee and the manager are not always clear on the talents for which they are selecting.

The text outlines some tips to help with this process. The first is to know for what talents you are selecting, taking into consideration the culture of the organization and work environment. These talents should be clearly identified and included in the job profile. The second ‘tip’ is to study the best employees in that particular role.

Many managers focus on learning from the worst in organizations, and Buckingham and Coffman (1999) stated that learning from your best will provide better results.
2) Define the Right Outcomes

Great managers realize they have little control over what employees will do. Employees can choose what to do and what not to do. The role of the manager is to “influence, motivate, berate, or cajole in the hope that most people will do what you ask of them” (p. 109). Buckingham and Coffman (1999) refer to this as ‘managing by remote control’. Great managers know they are performing in a balancing act; the fine line between allowing employees autonomy and knowing that his or her role is towards firm performance. Great managers are able to retain enough control in order to focus employees on the goals of the firm. Once this is done, they allow employees to use the path most comfortable to them to achieve the goals.

The main temptation of managers, outlined in the text, is control over employees. This can occur when experts enter management roles and try to dictate a best approach to achieve a goal. The temptation of control causes faulty managers to develop manuals to aid in policing of activities of employees. Employees under this regime are not trusted to be capable of making the right decisions.

There are four rules of thumb outlined in the text, or steps to drive performance. These help managers determine which parts of a particular job should be standardized and which have room for flexibility.

**RULES OF THUMB**

Don’t break the bank – certain steps related to accuracy and safety must be established and followed  
Standards rule – steps must be followed when they form a part of the company or industry standard.  
Don’t let the creed overshadow the message – the end is always more important than the means to the end  
There are no steps leading to customer satisfaction (accuracy, availability, partnership, advice) – “Required steps only prevent dissatisfaction. They cannot drive customer satisfaction.” (p. 128)
3) Focus on Strengths

Individuals are not perfect and therefore, great managers do not try to perfect them. According to the views of the great managers who were interviewed, focusing on the strengths of individuals is “the most efficient way to help people achieve their goals” (p. 143). Buckingham and Coffman (1999) compare human resource management to casting actors for particular roles. The major difference is that casting for talent takes into consideration what is inside the person, and not the physical appearance. In addition to breaking the Golden Rule and managing by exception, great managers spend the most time with their best people. This is seen as fair by great managers because they are treating people as they deserve to be treated rather than treating everyone the same. Also, great managers learn which attributes to look for in others from spending time with the best employees. Investing in the best people is seen as the only way to achieve excellence.

When faced with an employee who is not performing well, great managers first question the reason. This could be because of lack of training or the use of insufficient motivational techniques. The goal is to determine whether the poor performance stems from a nontalent or a weakness. There are only three possible routes to helping the person succeed when a weakness is identified: devise a support system, find a complementary partner, or find an alternative role.
Helping employees find the best fit for them can be a very difficult role for the manager. Where the employee can find the greatest success is not always where they wish to go. Employees may feel they should be promoted. The 1969 book by Laurence Peter, *The Peter Principle*, warned “if we followed this path without question; we would wind up promoting each person to his level of incompetence” (p. 178). Without the wisdom of great managers, this is unfortunately inevitable.

Hero’s at every level within the organization should be recognized for the essential value they provide for all. In order to excel at a position, Dr. Benjamin Bloom argued that it takes between ten and eighteen years to reach the necessary level of competency. Therefore, in order to have the best, managers must be able to retain the best employees long enough to allow them to excel in their role.

One technique companies are using to help curve the appetite to climb the corporate ladder is to offer a pay scale based on expertise the individual provides to the position rather than the position itself. This is known as ‘broadbording’. An example would be a company that offers early career managers a lower salary, thereby making it unattractive for employees to want to jump to another position within the company before they have been able to fully experience their current role.

---

**Broadbarding:**
when organizations offer pay scales based on experience rather than on the position profile.
Buckingham and Coffman (1999) argued that the interview process should include a separate interview specifically for talent. The focus of this interview is to listen to the candidate’s interpretation of the question and assessing their filter, after asking some open ended questions.

One technique is to search for predictive answers. During interviews, questions encouraging answers relaying past experiences helps managers better predict future behavior. Managers should also be prepared for the interview with effective questions which help to identify talent such as indicators of rapid learning and motivators.

Poor performance should be confronted early and a tough love approach to termination which focuses on the employee’s talents and the lack of fit with the particular role.

In the new career, the employee is the star.

Four characteristics or routines of great managers as it relates to effective performance management:

- simple routine
- force frequent interaction
- focused on the future
- employees track their own performance (self-tracking)
Performance Management

Four characteristics or routines of great managers as it relates to effective performance management:
- simple routine
- force frequent interaction
- focused on the future
- employees track their own performance (self-tracking)

Managers are catalysts. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) argued that the great managers “can speed up the reaction between the talent of the employee and the needs of the customer / company” (p. 230). There is a level of expectation that great managers have of their employees. Employees are expected to be reflective as well as responsible and accountable for their own development.

The Master Key

The four Master Keys:

a) Keep the focus on outcomes
b) Value world-class performance in every role
c) Study your best
d) Teach the language of great managers

When these Master Keys are used by senior management, it helps to shift organizational culture to be more friendly and accepting of great managers resulting in exceptional productive employees. As with any employee, in order to attract and retain great managers, the senior management team needs to provide a culture to allow them to flourish.
MARCUS BUCKINGHAM &
CURT COFFMAN

FIRST, BREAK ALL THE RULES
WHAT THE WORLD’S GREATEST MANAGERS DO DIFFERENTLY

COPYRIGHT © 1999
BY THE GALLOP ORGANIZATION
272 PP. $39.99 CND
ISBN-10: 0-684-85286-1

About the Authors

‘First, Break all the Rules’ was the first of many bestsellers for Marcus Buckingham. He wears many hats as an author, independent consultant and professional speaker. During almost 20 years with The Gallup Organization, Marcus Buckingham had led their research into the world’s best managers, leaders and workplaces. During his employment with the Gallup Company, Buckingham studied the world’s best managers and organizations to investigate what drives great performance. He graduated with a Master’s Degree in Social and Political Science from Cambridge University. And he is a member of the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Leadership and Management.

Now an independent researcher, author, speaker and consultant, Curt Coffman spent 22 years at The Gallup Organization and served as its global practice leader for employee and customer engagement consulting. His mission is to help organizations understand the key characteristics of a positive, productive, customer-oriented work environment. Coffman has given thousands of presentations on creating great places to work and the impact this has on individuals, families, organizational growth and creating engaged customers. (source: http://www.seuleadershipforum.com/)

References: