

Chapter 2 - What Great Managers Do

1. Chapter Overview

The transition from an average manager to a truly great one requires a fundamental pivot in strategic focus: the movement away from a desire for uniformity and toward an obsession with individuality. While the average manager attempts to mold employees into a preset, standardized version of a role, the great manager understands that organizational excellence is found in the sophisticated coordination of unique talents. This pivot is driven by what we call a "controlling insight"—a concept that serves as the best explanation for the greatest number of events. To qualify as a controlling insight, a principle must pass three rigorous tests: **Applicability** (it must hold true across a wide range of situations), the **Multiplier Effect** (it must produce exponential improvement rather than merely additive gains), and **Action-Guidance** (it must point to precise, tactical steps). In management, that insight is the realization that management is about *release*, not *transformation*. While leaders look for universals to rally a group toward a shared future, managers look for uniqueness to turn individual talent into measurable performance. This distinction is the catalyst that allows a manager to stop playing "Checkers" and start playing "Chess."**Learning Objectives**

- **Differentiate** between the universal focus of leadership and the individual, idiosyncratic focus of management.
- **Capitalize** on the specific "moves" and eccentricities of team members to drive store-level or department-level performance.
- **Identify** authentic strengths by distinguishing between technical proficiency and the psychological "pull" of a task.
- **Neutralize** employee weaknesses using the four-step strategic framework (Training, Partnering, Discipline, and Environment).
- **Calibrate** developmental interventions based on the distinct cognitive needs of Analyzers, Doers, and Watchers.
- **Deploy** personalized recognition "triggers" that align with an employee's specific valued audience.

2. Core Concepts and Definitions

In the arena of human capital, precise definitions are not academic exercises; they are the foundation of effective intervention. To manage talent, one must first be able to see it with high resolution. **The Chess vs. Checkers Metaphor** The mental model a manager uses to view their team determines the ceiling of that team's performance. | Mindset | View of Employees | Operational Method || ----- | ----- | ----- || **Checkers** | Uniform and interchangeable; pieces are perceived to move in the same way. |

Coordination of movements on parallel paths; expecting everyone to move at the same pace. || **Chess** | Each piece is unique, possessing specific, non-negotiable "moves." | Integrating disparate abilities into a coordinated, sophisticated plan of attack. |

Defining Strengths and Weaknesses Buckingham's research deviates from traditional HR definitions by focusing on energy rather than just current output:

- **Strength: A predilection** . It is an activity that provides an intrinsic "pull." Crucially, a strength might be something an individual is **not good at yet** , but they find it so satisfying that they look forward to doing it repeatedly to achieve mastery. Technical proficiency is secondary to this psychological appetite.
- **Weakness: An energy drain** . It is an activity that an employee never looks forward to and finds draining while performing. One can be technically competent at a task and still have it function as a weakness if it leaves them depleted.**Self-Assurance (Self-Efficacy)** Drawing on the research of Albert Bandura, great managers prioritize an employee's **self-assurance** over their self-awareness. While conventional wisdom suggests people should know their limits, self-efficacy is actually the strongest predictor of the ability to set high goals and persist through obstacles. A manager's tactical responsibility is to foster an **"unrealistically optimistic"** belief in the employee. When an employee fails, the manager should strategically frame the failure as a **lack of effort** (which is adjustable) rather than a lack of talent, thereby preserving the employee's self-assurance for the next challenge.

3. Detailed Conceptual Explanation: The Philosophy of Uniqueness

The manager's primary responsibility is to act as a catalyst, converting individual talent into a performance record. This requires more than just "people skills"; it requires a deep investment in the philosophy of uniqueness.**Manager vs. Leader Roles** High-level practitioners must understand that leadership and management are distinct disciplines. Leaders must cut through differences to find **universals** —shared needs and stories that rally people toward a better future. Managers, conversely, are **"Romantics"** in the literary tradition of Keats and Shelley. They are fascinated by the "fine shadings of personality" that others might find frustrating. They value individuality for its own sake, realizing that the very eccentricities that make a person "difficult" are often the keys to their highest performance.**The Power of Individuality in Action**

- **Michelle Miller (Walgreens):** Michelle demonstrated "chess-like" thinking by observing that her employee Jeffrey excelled at "resets and revisions" (analytical, accurate tasks) but struggled with customer interaction. Rather than coaching him to be more "sociable," she made resets his full-time role across the store. When Jeffrey's confidence grew, she "thought a couple of moves ahead,"

planning his move into management while identifying another employee, Genoa, as a "double threat." Genoa had the neatness required for merchandise arrangement and the social grace for customers, so Michelle split the role to maximize both Jeffrey and Genoa simultaneously.

- **Jim Kawashima (Walgreens):** Jim resuscitated his store by identifying the specific trigger for his top performer, Manjit. Recognizing her background as a competitive athlete, he translated her role into a series of "measured performances," circling her wins in red on public charts. By valuing her individual need for public recognition, he galvanized the entire team to achieve a #1 national ranking.

4. Framework: The Three Levers of Performance

To release potential rather than attempt to transform it, a manager must master three specific tactical levers.

Lever 1: Capitalizing on Strengths

Identification begins with the "**Best Day/Worst Day**" technique. By asking, "What was the best day you've had at work in the last three months?" a manager probes for predilection. The "Worst Day" question identifies the energy drains that constitute weaknesses. When a weakness interferes with a role, managers use a four-step neutralization strategy:

1. **Training:** Address simple gaps in skill or knowledge.
2. **Partnering:** Pair the employee with a complementary talent. Example: **Judi Langley** (Ann Taylor) neutralized **Claudia's** obsessive "need to know" by becoming her "information partner," providing daily voice mail updates to satisfy Claudia's analytical mind.
3. **Discipline Techniques:** Help the employee create a mental bypass. Example: A successful **screenwriter** who struggled to give critical feedback used the "**God of Art**" mental trick, imagining an authoritative third party was demanding the changes.
4. **Rearranging the World:** Change the environment or role to make the weakness irrelevant, as Michelle Miller did for Jeffrey.

Lever 2: Pulling the Triggers

Performance is dormant until the correct trigger is squeezed. Triggers are highly individualized:

- **Time and Independence:** Some employees are "night owls" whose strengths only activate after 3:00 p.m.; others may require daily "check-ins" to feel valued, while some view a weekly check-in as micromanagement.
- **Recognition Styles:** This is the most powerful trigger, but it must be matched to the **valued audience** :
 - **Peers:** Public celebration.
 - **Manager:** A quiet, vivid one-on-one conversation.
 - **Experts:** Professional/technical awards.
 - **Customers:** Feedback or letters directly from the client.

Lever 3: Tailoring to Learning Styles

Coaching must be calibrated to how the adult brain processes new information:

- **Analyzers:** They understand by taking things apart. They **hate mistakes** and prepare diligently to minimize them. **Directive:** Give them ample classroom time and prep time; do not ask them to "wing it."
- **Doers:** They learn *during* the performance. For them, **mistakes are the raw material for learning**. **Directive:** Give them simple, real-world tasks immediately and increase complexity gradually.
- **Watchers:** They need to see the "total performance" to grasp how the pixels form the picture. **Directive:** Remove them from the classroom and have them "ride shotgun" with an experienced performer.

5. Applications and Implications: The "So What?" Layer

Capitalizing on uniqueness is not a "soft skill"; it is a hard-edged strategy to optimize an organization's most expensive and volatile resource: human talent. **Strategic Impacts**

1. **Time Efficiency:** Coaching for "well-roundedness" is a waste of a manager's most precious resource. It is more efficient to "tweak" a role than to cajole a person into a style that is not in their nature.
2. **Accountability:** By challenging an employee to take ownership of their specific, unique talent, the manager fosters deep personal responsibility for mastery.
3. **Team Interdependency:** Valuing differences creates a team that actually *needs* one another. It builds a functional appreciation for how one person's strengths fill another's gaps.

4. **Healthy Disruption:** Promoting individual expertise allows an organization to challenge its own orthodoxies. This inquisitiveness allows a company, regardless of size, to **"duck and weave into the future."**

6. Common Misunderstandings and Professional Blind Spots

Great managers resist the urge to conform to the "mediocre manager" trap of standardization.

- **The Myth of the Well-Rounded Employee:** Mediocre managers view their job as "molding" or "transforming" people into a preset role. Great managers know that well-roundedness is a myth and that trying to fix every gap results only in a team of average performers.
- **The Self-Awareness Trap:** While HR often prizes "knowing your limits," the research-backed reality is that **self-assurance** is what drives persistence and goal-attainment. Great managers would rather an employee be "unrealistically optimistic" than perfectly aware of their liabilities.

7. Chapter Summary: Key Takeaways

The Manager's Mindset

- **Play Chess, Not Checkers:** Focus on the non-negotiable, unique "moves" of each individual.
- **Management is Release:** Your job is to tweak the environment so talent can have free rein, not to transform people's fundamental styles.
- **The Romantic Pursuit:** Adopt a fascination for the fine shadings of personality, seeing them as the intellectual capital of the firm.
- **The Tactical Levers**
- **Define Strengths by Predilection:** A strength is a psychological "pull," regardless of current proficiency.
- **Neutralize Weaknesses Strategically:** Use the four-step framework (Partnering, Discipline, etc.) to make a weakness irrelevant to the role.
- **Target the Right Audience:** Recognition only works if it is delivered to the audience the employee values most.
- **Calibrate to Learning Styles:** Recognize that Analyzers, Doers, and Watchers require vastly different coaching environments.
- **The Organizational Payoff**
- **Exponential Efficiency:** Investing in natural talent creates a multiplier effect that standardized training can never match.
- **Ducking and Weaving:** Individualized expertise creates a "healthy disruption" that keeps the organization vital and adaptive.

8. Reflection / Discussion Questions

Conceptual Questions

1. How does the "Chess" metaphor change your view of a "difficult" or "eccentric" employee?
2. Why does Buckingham argue that "Management is about release, not transformation"? What are the strategic risks of attempting to transform a person's nature?
3. Evaluate your current team: Are you spending more time in the "Leader" role (rallying toward universals) or the "Manager" role (deploying uniqueness)?
4. Explain the Bandura research: Why might "unrealistic optimism" be a more valuable asset than "self-awareness" in a high-stakes environment?
5. How do the three tests of a "Controlling Insight" (Applicability, Multiplier, Action-Guidance) prove that "capitalizing on uniqueness" is the most important thing a manager does?

Application-Based Questions

6. Identify one "Doer" on your team. How will you change your coaching this week to provide "real-world" tasks rather than role-playing or manuals?
7. Think of a direct report with a performance-hindering weakness. Which of the four strategies—Training, Partnering (like the Judi Langley example), Discipline (like the "God of Art" trick), or Rearranging the World—will you apply?
8. Identify an employee who is a "Night Owl" or who values "Independence" over "Time with the Boss." How will you adjust your "triggers" to activate their strengths more effectively?