Reaching Stardom: How to Identify and Develop Top Performers
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To succeed in life you need two things: ignorance and confidence.

—Mark Twain

Try not to become a man of success, but rather to become a man of value. He is considered successful in our day who gets more out of life than he puts in. But a man of value will give more than he receives.

—Albert Einstein

I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can’t see from the center.

—Kurt Vonnegut

kōan n. a paradoxical anecdote or riddle without a solution, used in Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and provoke enlightenment.

—Oxford English Dictionary

THE ZEN OF STARDOM

I have always liked kōans—those baffling, challenging, frequently infuriating, thought-provoking, learning tools that in the Zen tradition are the way to enlightenment—perhaps because, in my role as a psychoanalyst, I see parallels between the master-student relationship of Zen Buddhist learning and the process of psychoanalytic intervention. Zen masters use kōans to guide their students toward enlightenment. For example, one of the most famous kōans is ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ The response is obvious. And I use material my clients present to me in a similar way, although I probably direct my clients more overtly. In an intervention, almost anything can be used as a kōan, which—taking the essential meaning of that term- is a puzzle or riddle that contains the key to a deeper reality. In
Zen teaching, kōans are used to open minds to other alternatives than habitual responses to day-to-day reality.

Let’s take an example. A client told me about her problems working with a particular colleague. ‘Just being in the same room as her makes me mad. As soon as she opens her mouth I feel myself seething. Although I’m not the only one who thinks she’s a pain in the ass, I know that my reaction is out of proportion. I feel so mad when I’m around her.’

I started with a straightforward leading question: ‘What does this situation remind you of?’ She revealed that her colleague was ‘lazy’ but ‘gets away with it,’ while her own performance (‘I never miss deadlines, I haven’t taken a day’s vacation in nearly three years’) went unacknowledged. ‘Maybe I’m envious of her,’ she said.

I then asked, ‘Does this remind you of anything else? During your life, what role has anger played? These questions created an insight. It made her realize that her disproportionate anger at her lazy colleague echoed the anger and hurt she felt as a child because of her parents’ apparent favoritism toward her charming but somewhat feckless sister. In this case, I was using the client’s acknowledged feelings of anger and envy as a sort of kōan. Once she could decode her disproportionate anger and follow it to its source, she gained insight into the deeper cause of her current distress.

Some traditional kōans are off-puttingly obtuse. Hence, it can often help to retell the story with an updated context. Here’s a thought-provoking classic dilemma presented as a kōan, adapted into a new scenario. The executive chairman of a company was notorious for being excessively protective of his territory. Trespassing on his turf was a perilous business. Senior executives did so at their own risk; over time, a number of them had tried it, and were fired. However, the chairman had a playful-cum-sadistic side. Trespassers into his territory would either be fired on the spot (without severance pay) or receive a more generous severance package (with benefits)—depending on the kind of statement they chose to make. If they lied in response to his questioning, they would be fired on the spot; if their statement were true, they would be eligible for dismissal with benefits. The most recent victim faced with this choice thought for a while, and then said, ‘I am going to be fired on the spot.’
Faced with one kōan-like riddle, this crafty executive threw down another like a gauntlet. How would the chairman deal with the predicament the executive’s answer presented? If he fired the executive on the spot, his own rule would be broken. But it would also be broken if the executive walked away with benefits. Given the way his damned-if-I-do, damned-if-I-don’t position had rebounded on him, perhaps the most sensible thing the chairman could do would be to hang on to someone who could handle a dilemma with such dexterity. Here was clearly a star in the making.

Over the years I have observed that organizational stars are often a study in paradox. They display many contradictory behavior patterns; without consciously realizing it, they are true masters of the kōan, as their demeanor is always more complex and nuanced than what is perceived at first glance. But their paradoxical behavior is what makes them so successful. The way of the kōan is the royal road to a deep understanding of what these stars are all about.

However, it’s not so easy to spot nascent stars, not least because we can’t always be sure what we’re looking for. Some may first impress us as ‘golden larvae,’ but never turn into butterflies. Others become true butterflies. But what makes those that turn into butterflies so special? What makes them so successful? What are the qualities that turn them into top performers? And are these qualities identifiable? Or are we wasting our time looking for them? Is it luck or their connections that gets them where they are? Or are they just the right people, in the right place, at the right time?

Through the clinical lens I use to study thousands of highly successful executives, I can see that stardom is not merely a matter of luck; it’s a question of choice, and beyond that, of cause and effect. Although chance can be a factor, it is not a sufficient explanation. Indeed, the old saying ‘The harder I work, the luckier I get’ contains more than a grain of truth. The stories I am told by top performers suggest that their ‘luck’ is a combination of preparation and opportunity. The opportunities for luck to intervene are advanced as the consequence of their particular modus operandi, which is to put themselves on the line by seeking more initiatives and taking more chances than others. Top executives usually put in a considerable amount of hard work and preparation to position themselves for grabbing any opportunity that comes their way.
in so increase their chances for stardom. As one star confided to me, ‘It took me 20 years of hard work to become an overnight success.’

Neither is stardom merely a question of having the right connections. It can be very helpful, but many very well connected people turn out to be highly unsuccessful. What these stories show is that success is not something to take for granted or to wait for; it is something to be achieved through effort. Most stars achieve stardom because they know how to make it happen.

I suggest that what differentiates stars is their kōan-like operational mode. They are walking contradictions; they have a knack for dealing with paradoxes and know how to reconcile opposites. Stars have a talent for managing conflicting but necessary ideas or goals. They have the creative ability to manage short-term and long-term orientation, action and reflection, extroversion and introversion, optimism and realism, control and freedom, holistic and atomistic thinking, hard and soft skills. In addition, they are great at visioning, possess a solid dose of emotional intelligence, take calculated risks, are accountable for their actions, have great tenacity, high energy, and make a heroic (although often unsuccessful) effort to attain some form of work-life balance.

Stars seek out the unfamiliar—they are curious, imaginative, insightful, have a wide span of interests, and are open to new experiences. They like to play with new ideas; they find familiarity and routine boring; they have a great tolerance of ambiguity. And they are prepared to take a detour from the tried-and-tested just because it is different. What’s more, their behavior is contagious; others are inspired to follow their example. Given this mindset, stars are more inclined to give people who work for them the opportunity to experiment. They are willing to give others multiple chances and the benefit of the doubt. Above all, they are creative, they want the freedom to explore, to examine and to re-test what they find. Stars can make decisions quickly, but can also be extremely cautious. They are rebellious and conservative, playful and responsible, reflective and proactive. They like to be sociable but also need to be alone; they are highly imaginative but maintain a solid sense of reality. They are both divergent and convergent thinkers.
Convergent thinking involves solving well-defined, rational problems that have one correct answer. Divergent thinking, however, is not focused on solutions. It is geared towards getting out of the comfort zone, leaving comfortable daily routines, and looking for novelty. Both styles of thought are used in problem solving, and each complements the other. The imagination that accompanies divergent thinking is balanced by the selective critique of convergent thinking. Stars have the ability to switch effortlessly from one mode to the other. (See Box 1 for a description of an unusual business leader).

**BOX 1**

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” This may be the Leitmotiv in the life of Narayana Murthy, known not just for building the biggest IT empire in India but also for his humility and simplicity. The Infosys chief mentor and chairman put other business leaders to shame through his refreshing view of what leadership is all about. He is a giant role model for most leaders—a person of many paradoxes. Although he may not like to hear it, he very much fits the definition of a star.

Murthy founded Infosys with six other software professionals, and served as the founder CEO of Infosys for 21 years. Under his leadership, Infosys became the first company in India to make its place in the American stock exchange. But Murthy is everything but another IT nerd. He is a man of many colors. His leadership style has this kōan-like quality. He is an introvert, but can be very passionate if he believes in something. He is a thoughtful risk-taker. He is a man of reflection, but also of action. Holistic and atomistic thinking is not strange to him. Divergent and convergent thinking come naturally. He radiates positivity and realism. As a business leader he is committed to compassionate, not exploitative capitalism. Due to his leadership, Infosys has built up specific values such as hard work, ethical practices, and living up to commitments in high regard.

To create trust in leadership (something that is not quite obvious in contemporary society), Murthy has advocated simple living, human decency, respect, and fairness.
And he is also someone who truly walked the talk. Strongly committed to worthy, exemplary and honorable practices, Infosys became a place where people of different genders, nationalities, races and religious beliefs could work together in an environment of intense competition balanced with utmost harmony, courtesy and dignity.

Murthy has also been unusual and exemplary in his stance on wealth creation. He strongly believed that unless Infosys had a mechanism to make the employees the principal shareholders, it would be difficult for the company to grow. Hence, he distributed the company’s profits among the employees through a stock-option program, and adopted the best corporate governance practices.

Indeed, his ultimate aim has always been to make Infosys India’s most respected company through providing meaningful work, and not just create wealth. To this end, Murthy has been a strong believer in the equation: earning, learning, and returning. He has been very concerned for the greater common good. To him ethical behavior is essential—having faith in the ultimate victory of ethical over unethical actions and truth over untruth. According to him, performance leads to recognition. Recognition brings respect. Respect enhances power. Humility and grace in one’s moments of power enhances the dignity of an organization. Thanks to the efforts of Murthy, these cultural factors are very much part of the DNA at Infosys.

Social responsibility has been very important to Murthy. To Murthy, the real power of money is the power to give it away. Although Murthy can be viewed as one of the wealthiest people in India, he does not own a private jet, nor does he own a yacht. He still lives in the same house that he was living in when Infosys was founded. His wife has been overheard saying, “Murthy and I are very comfortable with our lifestyle and we don’t see the need to change it.” Both of them have also said that most of their wealth is not theirs; most of it will go to worthy causes. Indeed, in 1996, Infosys created the Infosys Foundation, run by his wife, to support and encourage the underprivileged sections of society. Given his Weltanschauung, it is no wonder that Murthy has been the recipient of an incredible number of awards and honors, including holding over 26 honorary doctorates from universities across the world. He
has been an incredible agent for change with his contribution to the information world we live in today.¹

An e-mail Murthy sent to the Infosys staff, May 31, 2008 offers insight into his philosophy of management:

It’s half past 8 in the office but the lights are still on...PCs still running, coffee machines still buzzing...And who’s at work? Some male species of the human race...Look closer... again all or most of them are bachelors...And why are they sitting late? Working hard? Any guesses? Let’s ask one of them...Here’s what he says... ‘What’s there to do after going home...Here we get to surf, phone, food, coffee that is why I am working late...Importantly no bossssssss!’

This is the scene in most research centers and software companies and other off-shore offices. Now what are the consequences... ‘Working’ late hours soon becomes part of the company culture. With bosses more than eager to provide support to those ‘working’ late... They aren’t helping things...Very soon, the boss starts expecting all employees to put in extra working hours. So, my dear bachelors let me tell you, life changes when you get married and start having a family... the office is no longer a priority, family is... and That’s when the problem starts... because you start having commitments at home too. For your boss, the earlier ‘hardworking’ guy suddenly seems to become an ‘early leaver’ even if you leave an hour after regular time... after doing the same amount of work. People leaving on time after doing their tasks for the day are labeled as work-shirkers...So what’s the moral of the story? Very clear, LEAVE ON TIME! Never put in extra time ‘unless really needed.’ Don’t stay late unnecessarily and spoil your company work culture which will in turn cause inconvenience to you and your colleagues. There are hundred other things to do in the evening... Learn music...Learn a foreign language...Try a sport........Most importantly, get a girl friend or a boy friend, take him/her around town...Take a tip from the Smirnoff ad: Life’s calling, where are you?’ PEOPLE WHO REGULARLY SIT LATE IN THE OFFICE DON’T KNOW TO MANAGE THEIR TIME. SIMPLE!

Here we have a business leader who knows something about work-life balance. Here we have a business leader who knows that people work for money but die for a cause. Here we have a business leader who knows how to separate need from greed, not

wanting to be the richest person in the graveyard. Here we also have a business leader—in spite or maybe because of his simplicity—who has been voted by *Time* magazine as one of the Asian heroes bringing about revolutionary changes in Asia in the last 60 years. (The list also includes among others Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa.) Murthy is truly a man who knows that example moves the world more than doctrine.

**THE INNER WORLD OF STARS**

The good news for anyone aspiring to stardom, or those out stargazing, is that top performers can be made. They are not born stars. Many of their psychological factors and behavioral characteristics can be learned. Without discounting nature altogether, nurture plays a very important role. The developmental experiences of top performers weigh heavily in their personal and professional progress. When we are young, our personality is very malleable and early experiences carry much weight. If the right foundation is in place at that stage in life, later developmental activities go a long way toward creating stars.

Our starting point is working out what makes stars different. What are the factors that make them high performers? Knowing these will help us design better developmental learning journeys and make us more effective in selecting, attracting, grooming and retaining future stars.

I have been studying top performers for the past 40 years. In particular, the year-long CEO seminar that I run at INSEAD offers me holistic, in-depth psychological portraits of top performers, provides me with a wealth of data, and gives me the opportunity to observe stars in an intimate setting. In acquiring this information I have also been helped by data obtained about them (and others) derived from a battery of 360-degree feedback instruments (including feedback from collaborators at work as well as family—including children—and friends). These instruments giving me a wealth of information about the seminar participants and other high flyers’ personality and behavioral patterns in multiple contexts.
This kind of knowledge is important, because one 21st-century business challenge is to identify and develop top performers who will not only succeed today, but also will create and lead the world-class organizations of tomorrow. Although many leaders know ‘intuitively’ a number of defining characteristics that differentiate stars, they often assume that stardom is somehow innate. My observations may help tease out some of our common myths about stars and help us recognize their kōan-like qualities, not all of which come naturally. While there will always be some people with stronger talents than others, I believe it is possible to develop anyone and make everyone better.

I should add as a caveat that I am not suggesting that leaders should install a kind of a Procrustean bed for potential stars to fit in. Successful executives come in many different shapes and sizes. Although highly successful people have many qualities in common, context matters. Just as there is no baby without a mother, there is no star without a constellation. Stardom depends very much on the highly complex interface between stars, i.e. the kinds of people they work with and in what context (such as the political situation in a country, the national and organizational culture, the nature of the industry, the life cycle of the organization, the state of the economy).

**Narcissism**

To better understand stars, we need to make an excursion to the subject of narcissism, a concept that lies at the heart of leadership. Here I like to add that, in general, narcissism has been getting a bad press. The question is, however, whether it is always a bad thing. We all need a modicum of narcissism to function. A much more important differentiator is the amount and intensity of our narcissistic predisposition. As with most things in life—narcissism included—it is all a question of degree.

Narcissism is just one spectrum of the human condition, with healthy narcissism at one end and dysfunctional narcissism at the other. Toward the positive end, narcissists are outgoing and secure, the kind of people who function well under pressure. Their sense of self-worth and self-esteem helps them to know their limits, their advantages, their faults, and when to assert themselves. Healthy narcissists maintain a clear distinction between what they are, and what they dream of becoming.
While a certain amount of self-absorption is common among highly motivated individuals, the Greek myth of Narcissus shows us that an infatuation with oneself will most likely have negative repercussions. The clinical diagnosis of unhealthy narcissism elaborates this point, describing it as being extremely self-centered, with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, an exhibitionistic need for attention and admiration, feelings of entitlement, a tendency to exploit interpersonal relationships, and lacking empathy for others.

**Constructive and reactive narcissism**

The development of narcissism in an individual is a complex matter. In many of my other writings, I have made a distinction between constructive (healthy) and reactive (unhealthy) narcissism. ² Healthy narcissism develops in the growing child as the result of parenting that creates a well-calibrated equilibrium between receptivity for others and self-directed attention. As adults, constructive narcissists have the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, accept boundaries, and to empathize with others.

In contrast, reactive forms of narcissism develop from a very different source. Unlike constructive narcissists, reactive narcissists received confusing and inconsistent messages from their parents. When children (and adults for that matter) are told that everything they do is wonderful, we shouldn’t be surprised that they feel wonderful too. But these self-deceptive messages merely contribute to a state of self-delusion. In the same vein, when children are protected from failure and the consequences of their actions, they may come to regard themselves as infallible, with similar negative consequences for reality testing.

Parents who never give their child encouragement (or do so very inconsistently) can also contribute to a reactive narcissistic disposition. The child’s feelings of uncertainty and insecurity can lead to a constant desperation to be noticed or recognized. Their feelings of entitlement may become so intense and pervasive that they turn into very demanding, egotistical, and aggressive people.

To complicate things further, there is a group of reactive narcissists who don’t turn out this way. They succeed in overcoming the faulty parenting they were exposed to when growing up. In an effort to find a more constructive way of dealing with the hurts of childhood, these originally reactive narcissists are able to control their narcissistic needs, adjusting them to more realistic proportions. They are able to master their powerful feelings of envy, jealousy, rage, and vindictiveness, and direct their energy into more constructive behavior.

**Narcissism as a drive**

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between healthy self-esteem and narcissistic dysfunctionality. I have found that a substantial number of stars are constructive narcissists (or reactive narcissists who have learned to modify their behavior). With their positive sense of self-esteem, they feel good in their skin, self-confident, and capable. They have a proper sense of boundaries and a proportionate and realistic appraisal of their own achievements.

So a modest amount of narcissism fuels the motivational engine of top performers: it makes them feel they can overcome any obstacle, and meet any challenges. And in spite of their successes, stars also know how to keep their ego in check; they retain a sense of humility. They are life-long learners, aware that they don’t know what they don’t know. When they receive feedback, they take note and act on it.

**Pseudo-stars**

On the negative side, excessive narcissism may lead to pseudo-stars—self-centered predators, concerned only with satisfying their narcissistic cravings. These reactive narcissists tend to indulge in make-believe, daydreaming, and delusions of grandeur, and are constantly in search of glory and applause. Impulsiveness, narcissistic rage, character assassination, and defenses like projection are some of the overt ways in which they express themselves. The way pseudo-stars fool others is through excellent short-term results. They are oftentimes driven, relentless, tireless, and can be ruthless. And because they can be quite intimidating, they get what they want—at least temporarily. However, their maladaptive and rigid behavior can lead to functional impairment and cause significant distress to others. They are under the illusion that
rules are for others, not for them. As they only hear what they want to hear, they are unable to handle negative feedback or criticism constructively. They surround themselves with yay-sayers. Not surprisingly, most of their relationships are exploitative as their selfishness rules out reciprocity. An important signifier is that pseudo-stars do not develop others. Their mentoring, coaching, and succession planning are ineffective. And their self-absorption may create a toxic organizational culture, which inevitably translates into stressful work conditions, high employee turnover, absenteeism, and other complications that affect the bottom line. The best and the brightest will not stay in the organizations where these types of individuals are in charge.

Human behavior can be compared to a see-saw: humility can lose ground to arrogance and pride, selflessness to selfishness, generosity to greed. When leadership is tipped to the negative side and becomes toxic, the dark side of narcissism comes to the fore, and some stars can, and do, damage the organizations they work in. Their narcissistic disposition (whether constructive or reactive)—originally a key factor in their effectiveness—becomes a serious handicap. Their originally laudable obsession with success turns sour. They intimidate others with their intensity and push people too hard. Paradoxically, in their incessant striving for perfection, they harvest imperfection.

IDENTIFYING STARS

Stars usually come across as secure, self-confident, and self-assured. But what we see may just be a carefully constructed public appearance. The reality can be quite different.

Insecure overachievers and neurotic impostors
Many stars can, in reality, be ‘insecure overachievers,’ or ‘neurotic impostors,’ who, despite grandiose appearances, do not have an equivalent self-image. Although they are unlikely to be rated at the unhealthy extreme on the narcissism scale, they are not
at the other end, either. Many feel like impostors, despite their success. Some even believe they are fakes, and that they do not deserve their success. With each milestone passed and accolade bestowed, they tell themselves, ‘I was lucky, I fooled everyone this time, but will my luck hold?’ ‘When will the others discover that I’m not up to the job?’ ‘When will they realize I am a fake?’

This self-deprecating way of thinking is due to their perfectionism. While perfection can be a great motivator, an obsession with perfection can be self-destructive. In its mild form, perfectionism contributes to great accomplishments. People do ordinary things extraordinary well. Neurotic impostors, however, are seldom benign in their drive for perfection. While their pursuit of excellence can be exhilarating, striving for absolute perfection can be extremely demoralizing. These ‘absolute’ perfectionists set excessively high, unrealistic goals for themselves, and then experience self-defeating thoughts and behavior when they cannot reach them. Although to the outside world they look like stars, what happens in their internal world is another matter altogether. They are a study in contrasts. They are constantly driven by the belief that they are not good enough, and could do so much better if only they worked harder. These people incessantly challenge themselves and push the limits of their experience and skills, reasoning that the greater the handicap, the greater the triumph.

This tendency can mean that work becomes neurotic impostors’ sole preoccupation, sometimes to the point of self-abuse. They seem to be never satisfied with whatever their subordinates, colleagues, or superiors are doing. No one ever seems to be able to reach the esoteric heights they aspire to. Moreover, family, social, and leisure time are sacrificed to the demands of work. Not only do such imposters drive themselves crazy, they are doing the same to those around them.

Often, the only way such people get a guilt-free respite from work is when they are physically incapable of working, i.e. when they are very sick. But encouraging these people to take voluntary breaks can be an uphill struggle—their self-worth is derived too much from doing rather than simply being. Fortunately, as time goes by, there are a few of these neurotic impostors who learn to accept and enjoy their successes and to be less demanding of themselves. Some, however, never reach this stage of self-development.
True stars don’t subscribe to this kind of compulsive work behavior. They pursue harmony between their public and private life. They go through great lengths to maintain a work-life balance. Equally importantly, they realize the power of setting an example for the people who work for or with them. They are well aware of the effect workaholic behavior can have on the work environment. Stars don’t want their people to burn out.

**Pseudo-extroverts**

Surprisingly, many stars are not flamboyant extroverts. On the contrary, test results have demonstrated that top performers tend toward introversion. However, they have learned—again, a paradox—to become of a sort of pseudo-extrovert. They have recognized the importance of reaching out to people and building social networks. After all, social skills are useful, and can be learned like any other skill set.

Real stars feel just as comfortable staying at home with a book as they are going to a social event and introducing themselves to people they have never met. They know how to balance their introvert and extrovert sides. In addition—to dispel the myth that most stars have an ebullient personality—some have a mildly depressive side that they use to their advantage. Depression, like narcissism, shouldn’t be regarded as entirely negative. It can help foster our reflective abilities, a great asset in decision-making.

**High energy**

Stars’ positive mental attitude makes them very stimulating and enthusiastic. They know how to galvanize people with ideas and actions. They get where they are through working long and hard to outperform the rest of the pack. They react to new challenges flexibly and effectively. Stars often believe (and can make others believe) that they can undertake anything, whatever effort it takes. Stars also encourage others to reach for the impossible. And by attempting the apparently impossible, they may actually attain it.

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Self-management
Stars realize that to accomplish great things, they need to go beyond traditional boundaries; they need to dream. They need to find the answers to tomorrow’s questions. Their dreams make them architects of their own destiny, and help them to face their fears of the future.

A question of control
Top performers like to control their own destiny—if they don’t control their life, others will. They don’t want to be at the mercy of events or the victims of circumstances; they believe they have a choice. For obvious reasons, they don’t like to be micro-managed, nor do they like micro-managing others.

Once again, stars juggle various contradictions and paradoxes. They recognize that control is a matter of balance and needs to be carefully calibrated. Too much control stifles people’s creative potential; too little control may end up in chaos. Stars, however, seem to be able to move seamlessly between freedom and control.

A systemic view
As I have suggested, stars are both visualizers and actualizers. But although theirs is a holistic view, they also pay attention to the parts. While they recognize the relevance of detail, they also know its limitations. So not only do stars move effortlessly between freedom and control, they also move seamlessly between holistic and atomistic mind frames—seeing the big picture, without losing sight of the details. Whatever they want to achieve, they align their results with the overall objectives of the bigger picture.

Accountability
Stars feel responsible for their decisions and for the outcome of their actions, positive or negative. They buy into the old-fashioned idea that they are the owners of their own behavior. They don’t blame others and they don’t make personal excuses. Responsibility and accountability are part of their DNA.
Furthermore, accountability means more than merely doing a job. It includes an obligation to make things better, to pursue excellence, and to do things in ways that will further the goals of the organization, not merely their own. This also includes a strong belief in the organization’s social responsibility. At the same time, they also acknowledge others’ accountability. They know that people who psychologically ‘own’ a problem are much more likely to solve it than people who merely acknowledge that a problem exists.

**Intelligence**

Intelligence definitely counts. It helps people to solve problems and make decisions. But IQ is really a measure of cognitive abilities, and although it is important, it is not everything—in-fact, IQ may merely indicate a person’s potential. What they do with this potential is another matter. Indeed, after a certain point, IQ does not seem to be correlated with superior performance in real-life situations. Many people with an extraordinarily high IQ have radically underachieved, in relation to their intellectual potential. We’ve all met some very dumb geniuses and some very smart fools. In my observations of highly successful executives, I have learned that motivation always beats talent. IQ is useful to a certain extent, but beyond that, we need other skills.

**IQ versus EQ**

One very important characteristic of stardom is emotional intelligence. Many intellectually gifted people lack interpersonal skills. Although they may have a great IQ, their emotional intelligence—in particular, their interpersonal intelligence—seems rather limited.

Interpersonal intelligence is especially relevant to working in organizations, where the assessment of others’ emotions, motivations, desires and intentions is a continuous challenge. Stars, with their talent for emotional sense making, are very effective at interacting with others, understanding them, and interpreting their behavior. Real stars have empathy, compassion, assertiveness, and a knack for expressing their needs and wants. Their ability to empathize, to put themselves in others’ places, makes them highly effective in situations of conflict.
But although stars are attuned to their emotions, they are not swayed by them. Here is another example of their talent for managing paradoxes—their ability to combine logic and emotionality. Stars are very astute at reading others, and subsequently critically analyze these feelings, thoughts, and the experience itself. By taking their time to reflect on the information provided, stars arrive at more thoughtful decisions.

**Networking**

Social networking skills are an aspect of emotional intelligence. Close observation shows that stars have more extensive communication networks than most, both within and outside their own organization. Through these networks they create social capital, access to information, support, and knowledge crucial to their long-term effectiveness.

Stars are also great advocates of teamwork. The era of the heroic leader (on whom everyone depends) is long past. Today, running highly complex, highly diverse, matrix-like organizations requires team power. Stars are effective team members and leaders. They recognize and reward others’ contributions. They work collaboratively with others, build positive relationships, create connections, motivate people to work together, and build boundaryless organizations.

Stars also enjoy mentoring and coaching people. One of their strengths is developing the skills and talents of others. To do so, they are generous with their time. They can implement ‘stretch,’ directing and challenging the very best in the people they lead. Nobody ever achieves success by simply doing what is required of them; it is the amount and excellence of what is done over and above what is required that distinguishes the great.

**Reflection**

A reflective mindset helps top performers recognize the assumptions, beliefs, and values that underlie their decision-making processes as they tackle problems, anticipate outcomes, and justify their actions. Reflection helps them to remain open to changing their perspectives, and to use their information about the competitive landscape to create winning business propositions.

*Reflection and action*
Stars not only need the capacity for reflection, but also for action. They know how to juggle these two conflicting orientations. They know that there will always be a number of unknowns in dealing with challenges, and that there are no perfect solutions. They recognize the point at which information gathering produces diminishing returns. They know when the time has come to ‘call’ it.

Stars are well aware that action is the foundation of success—and they also know that success will not come to them; they have to go to it. They are always prepared to develop new opportunities. They take personal responsibility for making things happen and are very results-oriented.

**Tenacity**

We have all met people with only modest talents who achieve outstanding success because they don’t know when to quit. Tenacity, persistence, perseverance, and determination will almost always beat out raw talent. Real success comes to those who persevere whatever the obstacles in their way. Many stars can be regarded as ordinary people with extraordinary determination. As the old saying goes, in the battle between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins.

It is easy to be successful when things are going well. The measure of success becomes significant only when things are really difficult. Stars remain courageous, tenacious and determined in the midst of obstacles. They can act and move forward even in the presence of their own fears. As Winston Churchill once said: ‘Never give in! Never give in! Never, never, never, never—in nothing great or small, large or petty.’ Stars have this level of determination, and we can only imagine the kind of success top performers will have if they manage to inspire a group to follow their lead.

**Optimism**

The writer Robert Louis Stevenson advised, ‘Keep your fears to yourself, but share your courage with others.’ Setbacks, negative feedback, and new obstacles can be discouraging, but they are an inevitable part of life and it is a significant asset to be able to reframe such difficult situations. Stars are masters at positive reframing, seeing obstacles as exciting challenges and opportunities. They are very talented at
translating others’ negative attitudes into positives. And by seeing the best in every situation, stars disseminate a positive attitude to those around them.

This positive attitude notwithstanding, they have very little patience with negative, counterproductive thoughts. Far too many people become stuck in vicious circles of negative ideas or prejudices, missing out on great opportunities. Top performers—through their efforts at positive reframing—stress the qualities and skills that their people have that will enable them to succeed. But at the same time they retain a realistic outlook on the challenges they encounter, addressing emerging concerns honestly. Positive reframing is fine, but not at the expense of reality. Once again, stars demonstrate how they manage paradoxes—in this case positivity and negativity.

**Risk-taking**

There is a lot of negativity associated with the word ‘risk’—it implies danger, loss, damage, or misfortune. As a result, many of us are afraid to take risks because we are scared of loss. But attempting to remove risk from our lives is a futile activity. We need to remind ourselves that although risk-taking may be feared, it also has its positive aspects. Taking risks means new experiences, encounters with new people, new places, new learning. Many of us need to take risks if we are to succeed in knowing ourselves and what we are capable of.

Stars rise naturally above the crowd by taking risks. However, they know that the only risks worth taking are calculated ones. They like to take the kind of risk that has been given thoughtful consideration and for which the potential costs and benefits have been weighted and considered. Taking the counsel of others (but keeping their own counsel), they carefully consider whether the upside to a decision outweighs the downside, preparing escape routes should things go wrong. They study others who have taken similar risks and examine how they succeeded or failed.

As a rule, stars are more willing than others to go out on a limb and, if they fail, have the capacity to bounce back and start over. Listening to their stories, it is clear that those who pursued their dreams and failed lived a much more fulfilling life than those who put their dreams on a shelf for fear of failure.
DEVELOPING NASCENT STARS

So the stars I have identified—these embodied koans—are either naturally or have learned to be comfortable with ambiguities. They are not fazed by conflict, contradiction, or inconsistency. Their talent for empathy and positive framing enables them to turn difficult situations into creative opportunities. Their worlds are not polarized by oppositional factions or ideas; they like fluidity in their environment, and actively respond to diversity. Unsurprisingly, quite a few of them have culturally diverse backgrounds, perhaps parents of different nationalities, the experience of living in a number of different countries, or of working in many different areas. They belong to multiple worlds and carry those worlds with them; they are defined by ambivalence and complexity; they are leading the world in important new ways. Kim Smith, CEO of the venture philanthropy firm NewSchools Venture Fund, describes the kind of hybrid leaders she looks for in her organization: ‘We joke on our team that we know we’ve the right candidate when we hire because they’re so excited that we think their resume looks great because everybody else thinks that they look schizophrenic.’

Supporting nascent stars

But having identified potential stars, how can we make the most of them? My experience is that to develop stars, the most effective strategy is to engage in self-assessment, action learning, and shadowing. The best approach is to use all three types of intervention. Let me say something about each of them.

Creating self-awareness

In my experience, the journey to stardom begins inwardly. Self-awareness is one of the most important factors in building self-esteem and confidence. Self-awareness helps us understand what drives us, what turns us off, what makes us happy, and what we are passionate about. It helps us clarify what we need to do to improve as a person.

As these stars in the making grow in self-awareness, they will understand better why they feel what they feel and behave as they behave. They will acquire a more realistic sense of their capabilities. They will realize when they are not using their full potential. They will gain awareness of how they are caught up in their own internal dramas and beliefs, allowing out-of-awareness thought processes to determine their feelings and actions. With greater self-awareness, they will be able to expand their imagination, creativity, intuition, will, and purpose.

Unfortunately, the road to self-awareness is not always easy. As Leo Tolstoy once wrote, ‘Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.’ Frequently, defensive processes take over when embarking on inner journeys. So how can these stars in the making be made aware of areas in need of development? How can we confront them with their blind spots?

An ideal method to get this process on its way is the use of 360-degree, multi-source feedback, a method of systematically collecting and rating perceptions of an executive’s performance from different vantage points. Sources typically include peers, direct reports, supervisors, and multiple stakeholders outside the organization (e.g., customers and suppliers). It can also be extremely beneficial to include feedback from an executive’s private life (friends, family members—including grown-up children). Feedback from this group will be particularly powerful.

I have found that multi-party feedback—especially in a team setting—is unsurpassed as a means of setting developmental processes in motion. Group interventions, supported by one-to-one coaching, can facilitate the exploration of people’s strengths and weaknesses and help create personal development action plans signed off by multiple stakeholders.

Action learning

Action learning is a process of bringing together a group of people with different levels of skills and experience to analyze an actual work problem and develop an action plan, using their jobs as the basis for learning. This is a reversal of the traditional model of learning, which takes people off the job for courses and external instruction. Action learning is learning by doing, or learning on the job. Through this
kind of learning process, executives learn more about their own and others’ way of solving problems, with a group dimension added.

Action learning is a great way for high performers to practice working with important real-world problems as a basis for learning. What makes the impact of this learning even greater is that it is anything but an academic exercise and is not without risk. Typically, top management will identify real, relevant, and critical organizational concerns and sponsor a selected team to work on them. This is an ideal opportunity for management to observe how well their selected executives perform and assess the quality of their output. As for the future stars, they are taken out of their comfort zone and given the chance to work and learn collaboratively with other high potentials.

Many organizations solicit the help of a coach to support action learning, building time into the process for team members to reflect on the total learning experience. Guidance from a coach can be accompanied by peer coaching—many of the participants’ meetings will take the form of individual members taking turns to present updates on their work, and then being questioned on it by their peers. In this way, participants in the learning process act as consultants and mentors to each other.

Apprenticeship/shadowing

Most of us learn by example, and learn most from our earliest job experiences. Our bosses at this period in our life are those we will remember best. While it is obviously more attractive to learn from good bosses than bad, many future stars have also learned from the bad ones. These less than happy experiences may teach them how not to approach leadership—what things they should avoid doing to others. Some organizations make a great effort to manage this kind of apprenticeship process by giving high potentials deep insight in how to handle various aspects of the business under the guidance of a senior executive.

Shadowing is closely related to the apprenticeship system but here a person observes an executive in action with the aim of learning something about how that role is performed. The time frame, however, will be much shorter than an apprenticeship. Shadowing is exactly that—following and watching an executive for developmental purposes. It can provide an excellent opportunity for potential stars to increase their
knowledge and understanding of a particular career field by allowing them to observe, at first hand, someone working in that field or a related area. By observing experienced executives tackling their day-to-day duties, these stars in the making can ‘look and learn,’ asking questions as they go along and bringing their professional studies to life. The executive being shadowed can also stimulate the learning process by regularly taking time out to explain his or her decisions.

THE ZEN OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

Many of the psychological and behavioral characteristics I have described here can be developed and used by anyone wanting to become a top performer and interested in maximizing their potential for long-term success. Most of us will find that we already possess at least some of these behavior patterns, but may need to develop others. High on the list will be our capacity for managing uncertainty, contradiction, and ambiguity—all features of an environment characterized by constant change. We need to develop a form of organizational Zen.

Over the years, I have listened to the narratives of many stars and I have learned that the only true failure is not having attempted a developmental journey. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the unknown. Excellence is not an event—it needs to become a mindset. It is doing common things in uncommon ways. It is the desire always to do things better. To be successful, we must break out of our comfort zone and learn to become comfortable with the unfamiliar and the unknown—like the executive in my final, contemporized koan.

One day, a CEO was holding a champagne reception in the board room, a beautiful space with large windows that opened onto equally beautiful gardens, with woods and valleys beyond. The room was thronging with noisy, happy people. The CEO noticed one of her younger executives outside and stepped up to the window. ‘Hey,’ she called, ‘why don’t you get in here?’ ‘Thank you,’ replied the executive, ‘but I don’t actually see myself as outside. Why come in?’