



"Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is."

~ Will Rogers

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Book Corner

How to Grow a Backbone by Susan Marshall
How to Grow a Backbone: 10 Strategies for Gaining Power and Influence at Work is a very practical book for anyone working today. Susan Marshall reminds us that those with a “backbone” demonstrate character, integrity and boldness.

Susan specifically says that backbone is composed of:

- Competence (what you are able to do)
- Confidence (directed toward something)
- Risk Taking (taking purposeful risks)

When our backbone is missing or weak, ideas get lost, thoughts go unspoken and frustrations pile up. And, we often demonstrate unintended consequences: avoidance, shuffling the deck, marking time, and rationalization.

The book has a chapter for each of the ten strategies for growing a backbone:

1. Get the Big Picture
2. Turn Meetings into Discovery Sessions
3. Become a Jotter
4. Get Eyes Wide
5. Expand and Contract: Your Thinking Must Change
6. Associate on Purpose
7. Play Columbo
8. Determine the Power Sources
9. Lose the Excuses
10. Decide What You Think and Say So

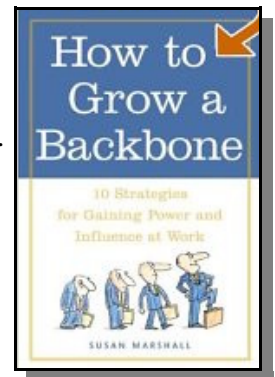
Each strategy is clearly explained and is highlighted with excellent examples. Each chapter concludes with backbone building exercises.

You may find her concepts useful as you lead or coach others who need backbone, or if you want to improve yourself!

I Could Do That

Question: *In observing my bosses higher in the organization, I am not sure what they really do. I am convinced that I could do it – and do it better! Am I missing something here?*

Collaborations response: We often hear employees give little value to the work of their bosses. Sometimes their observations of their bosses worth are downright disparaging. Monitoring others work, coordinating efforts across departments and divisions, recruiting for more senior positions, working with the board of directors, strategic planning retreats... that’s not doing “real work.” The implication is that the work of bosses is not really essential, certainly not on a par with the work being done by... say, *me*, for example.



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I Could Do That

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Coincidentally, we also observe, and hear, senior people working long hours, seemingly always on call, dealing with very complex issues, and frustrated by trying to “herd cats.” A recent article in *Leadership and Change*, an electronic newsletter from the Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania, might shed a little light on the subject and give leaders some insight into what may be partially under their control.

The article points out that athletes and entertainers receive salaries and perks as generous as any CEO, yet only the CEOs seem to be criticized and sometimes ridiculed in the business media and shows.

According to several Wharton scholars this is because of the clear and tangible evidence of the athlete’s performance (touchdowns scored, strikeouts pitched) or the actor’s performance (Academy Award nominations, movies released.) There is, however, little that we see or understand of what the CEO does to earn his or her pay. Also, while very few of us would take on Tiger Woods on the golf course, or play one-on-one with Kobe Bryant, we look at someone like Richard Grasso (former CEO of the NY stock exchange) and say “I could do that.”

It is rather common when talking with more senior people about how they came to the positions they hold to hear them say, “After watching my former boss, I thought, ‘I could do that job.’” Some go so far as to say, “I could do that job better.” Most will also quickly say that the job turned out to be more complicated and more difficult than they had ever imagined.

The gap between perception from a distance and the reality within rarely occurs in sports or entertainment. Most people tend to view the job of quarterbacking in the NFL as extremely difficult and beyond their abilities. (The Wharton researchers say that baseball in the US comes closest to getting a similar resentment of high salaries. Maybe that’s because so many Americans have played baseball as children. Perhaps it is the same with soccer in Europe.)

Some of this is typical of attribution theory and the errors that show up in our explanations of events. One type of fundamental attribution error is that we falsely attribute the negative behavior of others to their character – internal causative factors, (i.e. motivation, personal agendas, hidden motives, back room deals, etc.) while we attribute our own negative behavior to external causative factors, (i.e. organizational politics, inadequate resources, system’s limitations, etc.)

An example of this type of attribution error occurs when the CEO cuts department “Y’s” budget while at the same time purchasing new office equipment for headquarters. Despite whatever compelling business reasons for these actions, many will infer that the CEO is more interested in his or her personal ease (negative internal attribution about others) than in finding the resources to better facilitate our work (positive attribution about our selves.)

So what are we to learn from this discussion?

For bosses, we would say expect a certain amount of disregard for what you do, it’s normal. Thick skin is a useful leadership attribute. Leadership and management always look easier to do from the outside, so there will always be folks who think they can do your job – better.

Manage perceptions

At the same time, try to find ways to give subordinates a glimpse of what you do and how this connects with people’s lives. People make up what they don’t know and often it is much more negative than reality. When subordinates – and bosses for that matter – don’t know what you do and how you add value they will most often leap to wrong conclusions. *Managing perceptions* is a critical, and often ignored, part of any position.

One Wharton scholar notes that the stock holding public has little problem with a CEO who is building a very successful company; think Bill Gates and Microsoft. It is the well-paid CEO who *seems like* he is not doing so much that finds himself in trouble with the stock-holding public.

Managing the perceptions of others is a delicate balancing act. Overdone, it is viewed as bragging or self-aggrandizement. Underdone, people may miss it altogether.

What do you bring to the table?

How exactly would you answer that question? What is it you do to add value – and can you articulate that clearly and succinctly?

If you believe you are on the receiving end of leadership that adds little value...

We suggest you look a lot more closely behind the scenes before assuming the negative. Consider your initial motives (re: attribution theory above) to be merely hypotheses. Then look for empirical proof that supports them – or disproves them.

ON THE WEB ~ Visit www.susangerke.com and www.davecarey.com

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Interviewing

A client was recently preparing to interview for a particular job and was trying to figure out how to use an assessment (like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®) as part of her interviewing process. Those of you who are qualified to administer it, know that the MBTI® (and many other instruments) don't measure skill, but rather preference. And, sometimes people answer assessments as they wish to be rather than how they really are, so they aren't always an accurate assessment, even of preference.

In my client's situation, she had a bad experience with a person she had hired and she wanted to increase the chances of finding the right person this time. While the person she hired had the job skills needed, other critical characteristics of the person just didn't fit the work environment.

The real goal when interviewing is to find someone with a particular set of strengths or talents -- beyond just job skills. The key, as described in *Now Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. (review in Spring '01 Collaborations), is to determine what characteristics you are looking for and to interview specifically for those strengths.

I took my client through a process from the *Strengths* book to prepare for the interviews.

1) Determine the Desired Characteristics

She brainstormed characteristics (including those in the *Strengths* book)

In this situation, my client needed an operations person -- a key role in the organization.

2) Prioritize the Characteristics

She identified each characteristic as critical (***) or important (**) or desirable (*).

Her list turned out like this:

- *** Can-Do Attitude
- *** Activator -- Make Things Happen
- *** Respond to Challenges
- ** Organizing Skills
- ** Demonstrate Initiative
- ** Prioritizing Skills
- ** Self-confidence
- * Flexibility
- * Not Afraid to Speak Up

3) Create Interview Questions

We created questions in three categories:

a) Looking for specific talents. These are questions to specifically tap into the characteristics you are looking for.

They start with *Tell me about a time when*

... you worked for a manager who often wasn't available (initiative)

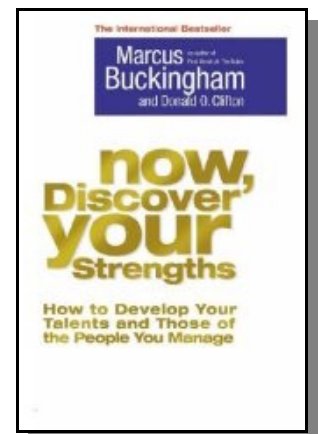
... you had 3 key problems of equal importance to deal with (activator and prioritizing)

b) Looking for rapid learning. This indicates natural talents. Ask:

- What kinds of roles have you been able to learn quickly?
- What activities come easily to you now?

c) Look for satisfactions. This indicates what they will keep doing week after week.

- What is your greatest personal satisfaction?
- What kind of situations give you strength?
- What do you find fulfilling?



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Interviewing

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4) Create Scenarios to Tap into Strengths

We created 3 scenarios that would tap into the desired characteristics. An example of one follows:

Your assistant dropped the ball on an order -- the vendor is calling for artwork. Your assistant has left for the day. What would you do?
(indicates activator)

We also set up a role play situation where the person and her assistant have both just arrived at work for the day. The situation describes 3 important voice mails and checks in the mail that need to be deposited. This would help look for prioritizing.

The story for my client has a happy ending. She found an excellent person who has the key desired characteristics and is doing a great job!

You too can have a happy ending to your interviewing. Invest the time to go through the process of determining what characteristics are critical. Use the *Strengths* book to help you think beyond the standard characteristics. Then write good questions and scenarios that really tap into the desired characteristics. You can train someone how to do a job -- you can't change their personal characteristics!

We'd Like to Hear From You

If you'd like to contribute to Collaborations or if you have a question or topic for us, we'd love to hear from you. Send an e-mail to sgerke@sbcglobal.net with your ideas or questions. We will respond based on topics of most interest.