

The background of the cover is a blue puzzle. One piece is missing, and a hand is shown in the bottom left corner holding a blue puzzle piece, about to place it into the gap. The missing piece is illuminated from behind, creating a bright white glow.

# NO PEGS, NO HOLES

THE PSYCHOLOGY  
OF ELITE PERFORMANCE

BILL ERICKSON

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Conventional Wisdom**

### ***Why We Hardly Ever Get It Right***

Let's acknowledge something right up front: We're not starting with a blank canvas here.

You've already been subjected to a lot of conventional wisdom with regard to workforce management and performance. Maybe you've read business books or attended seminars. Perhaps you've been involved with job interviews, training programs, and annual reviews—probably from both sides of the table. In fact, by the time you finished high school you already had years of indoctrination into the conventional wisdom about people and how to help them improve.

But, if you're still not getting it right, it's not entirely your fault. Almost everything you've been taught about hiring and managing people is wrong. I'll show you why.

What's more, you're not applying any of this in a vacuum. Maybe you already have a job, a boss, and a team of people you inherited. Much has already been decided, and you've got to work from there.

Before you can use the things you learn in this book, we'll have to do a little housecleaning. So let's get started.

#### **Fixing what's wrong: The Medical Model**

Suppose I wanted to learn about paranoid schizophrenia. Maybe I'd go to a great research library. There, I'd find entire rooms filled with research, analysis, diagnostic criteria and treatment, and if I were a fast reader I'd quickly learn an awful lot about schizophrenia.

This would come in handy if I were managing a team of paranoid schizophrenics in the work place. But in all probability, you and I are managing relatively normal people, aren't we? Our biggest issue isn't how to overcome

unusual challenges like schizophrenia. It is managing a team of people with diverse skill sets in the hope of achieving extraordinary results.

So what we need are books about extraordinary performers. What makes them great? How can we develop that kind of greatness in others? There are superstars in every profession – sales, management, teaching, nursing—so let's just pick one. How about teaching? Let's go back to the library and grab some research about exceptional teachers.

Guess what? You won't find much that's very useful. Instead of books about excellence in teaching, we find shelves full of research on various teaching techniques and how they compare, how people learn and process information, and things like the best way to ask a question.

That's certainly important stuff, but if you've been lucky enough to have one or two really great teachers in your lifetime, you know that it isn't just about the "technique" they chose to use. You know that they somehow got inside your head and heart and made an impact, not because of a particular lesson plan but because of who they were as people, and how they built a connection with you. So, where is the research on that?

The problem is that most of what's been written about managing people falls into what I call the Medical Model—the paradigm of studying sickness so that we can learn how to treat or cure it. This may work for many illnesses, but it really makes us worse when we apply those same kind of principles to the practice of management. Why is that?

For far too long, we've concentrated on *what's wrong* instead of *what's right*. We focus on what we *need to fix*, instead of what we want to *replicate*. Within this model, "health" appears to be defined as the absence of disease. In fact (and most medical scientists wouldn't deny this), *health* is a syndrome unto itself.

One of the first people to turn this idea on its head was my mentor, Dr. Donald O. Clifton. As early as the 1960s,

Don had figured out that people grow through developing their *strengths*, not by “treating” their weaknesses. He was dedicated to using psychology to find out *what’s right about people* – people who are overachieving, people who are outperforming – instead of studying or treating those who are struggling.

One of the fundamental things he learned is that elite performance does not come from simply doing more and more of the things that lead to average performance. *Excellence, like health, is a syndrome unto itself.*

In the years since, the American Psychological Association has recognized Don as the Father of Strengths-Based Psychology, and one of the pioneers of Positive Psychology. These two flourishing schools of thought are the basis for a whole generation of science and more than a few good books.

Psychology may have been the first field to adopt the idea of growing through strengths, but it has been gathering steam elsewhere. Even within the very medical community that fostered the paradigm of treating sickness, the limitations of this approach are slowly giving way to a growing emphasis on *optimizing wellness* rather than diagnosis and treatment.

The business world has been slow to come around, but that’s going to change. You can help drive that change, and reading this book can be a significant step.

## **Competency-Based Development**

This is one of the real sacred cows of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. Maybe you’ve never heard the term, but trust me, you have likely had plenty of experience with it, already.

Competency-based development models are used to address everything from interviewing candidates, to leadership development, to the management of hourly

associates. These models are extremely popular in large organizations.

There's just one problem: There is no credible evidence that these programs can transform organizations or take them to the next level of success and excellence. On the side of anecdotal evidence, there are plenty of mediocre-to-poor companies who employ their competency models religiously. However, it hasn't helped them make the next leap.

I'm not saying this system has never been beneficial. There clearly are situations where it has been helpful. For example, it can be better than nothing in poor-performing organizations where there is disorganization and no system at all. If your sole objective is to go from bad to mediocre, this may be the ticket. More on this later.

In practice, competency-based development typically involves the following elements:

- A thorough investigation of the position in question. This is referred to as the, "job analysis," and should result in defining and validating all of the competencies involved in completing all aspects of the job successfully.
- Development of selection criteria, assessment systems, performance appraisal, and performance management systems around the competencies identified in the previous element.
- Annual evaluation by assessing strengths in each competency, then creating a development plan around areas for improvement, which is just a polite way of saying, "weaknesses."
- A year later, reassess the employee and repeat the process.



- Lather, rinse, repeat.

The fact is, competency-based models are founded on a number of false assumptions. Let's examine the most obvious of those:

- People who perform a job at excellence, **all exhibit the same behavior**; and,
- **Remediation is the best** way to help people grow and improve.

To see how wrong these assumptions can be, let's apply the model outside of academia and corporate environments. Let's try using it in professional basketball.

One thing that's cool about sports is that performance is quite measurable and visible. I spent twelve years assessing top candidates for the NBA draft, so let's take a hypothetical, but telling look at how a competency-based developmental model would work in managing a professional athlete, whose job performance is very visible and measurable.

Here I have to apologize for not keeping current on my knowledge of the NBA. So I'm going back to the era where I was highly involved in the sport. I'll refer back to the NBA renaissance of the 1980s and '90s when some of the all-time greats were playing against each other every night. And for those of you who aren't big on sports analogies, it would be hard to ignore these three individuals, even if you aren't a big fan. Let's take Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, and Dennis Rodman—arguably, each being *the best ever* in at least one important aspect of the game.

If we were using a traditional competency-based model, our first job would be to define and validate all the competencies exhibited by successful NBA basketball players. I imagine the list would be pretty predictable, as most sets of competencies usually are. Certainly the list

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would include such things as shooting, dribbling, passing, blocking out, and all other aspects of both offense and defense.

So far, so good.

Now let's conduct the annual performance review, starting with Larry Bird. We've got to give him some developmental advice so that we can form an action plan for improvement. If we can't check that box, we're not doing our job. I can just hear it now:

*"Great year, Larry. Your strongest areas were scoring, passing, and team leadership. But there's more to basketball than that. You just don't seem to fly through the air and play way above the rim the way that Michael and some of the other players do. Based on your developmental needs, you need to spend this next year working on the competency of jumping. Let's put together a plan that will improve your jumping and playing-above-the-rim skills, since you've already got scoring, passing and team leadership down."*

Next it's Dennis Rodman's turn.

*"Good job, Dennis. Pound for pound, you may be the best rebounder ever to play the game. And you can really intimidate on defense. Those are definitely your two strongest competencies. But if you could just get better at shooting and scoring – like Larry, for example—what an improvement that would be. For the coming year, you need to work on shooting."*

And last, it's time to give some developmental advice to Michael Jordan, based on his Performance Review.

*"Wonderful work, Michael. You've got such a wide range of strengths that you've had more impact on the game than anyone who's stepped on the court in the last fifty years."*

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*The only problem is that you just don't seem to use your body with total abandon to intimidate opposing players the way that, say, Dennis does. This next year you need to work on the competency of physical intimidation."*

Okay, so this is admittedly grossly oversimplified. But do you see how managers who use the traditional competency-based, development process can make people worse instead of better?

You've got your strongest scorer working on jumping and playing above the rim. Your intimidating rebounder is going to practice shooting. Everybody is spending more and more time on *what they don't do well*—not on what made them superstars and helped their team win championships.

In this example the players all get worse and the coaches lose their jobs—and deservedly so. This developmental advice is clearly *not* the best way to maximize the contributions and performances of these three players to the team.

So what went wrong?

We started by figuring out everything it takes to be competent. But do you really want your people to be just *competent*? Then, we worked on getting everyone up to the minimum standard in everything. What we should have done was to recognize that we had people with world-class talents, and focus on strengthening those already-considerable abilities, and getting even more value from them.

As it is most commonly practiced, competency-based development almost always yields these kinds of results. By concentrating on competence instead of excellence, we move everyone and everything towards "average."

But surely we can't just ignore those weaknesses! I mean, somebody has to score points, right? Right, and Michael and Larry can take care of that while Dennis makes it hard for the other team to keep up.

Take strengths and make them stronger. That's how you go from competent to excellent.

Take weaknesses and make them irrelevant. Find someone else whose strengths complement those weaknesses. That's how you build a team.

## **Managing by the Rules**

It takes more than brilliant concepts to create great organizations. It takes great systems. If you can't develop systems that make the concepts practical and applicable on a daily basis, the new ideas and concepts quickly become irrelevant. Systems make the difference in putting concepts into action.

A system is a discipline. It is discipline that should NOT interfere with, or in any way restrict the most productive and successful people.

A good system must allow for insightful choices but contribute to critical insights, behaviors, and the necessary steps to facilitate the monitoring, measuring and refinement of the factors that are most likely to result in success.

But most people would rather rely on rules than systems. Rules tell you what you can and can't do, but ignore the often more critical factor (at least in business) of when to do it. Rules take away choices and they exclude the enormous potential of enlightened insight, creativity, and discovery. When you make a rule, you take away a choice. Do so carefully.

Rules somehow tend to satisfy the need for control that many insecure leaders possess. Rules can give a false sense of security. Some managers believe that if you could just create the right book of rules and have everybody read it, everything would work perfectly.

**This assumption denies human nature.**

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Responsible people need to make choices. Choices are the basis of psychological ownership. Until I have an opportunity to make choices and decisions, it is only "a job" rather than "**my** job," and "the company" is not "my company." To the extent that I am allowed to make choices, I "own" it.

**"If you have ten thousand regulations,  
you destroy all respect for the law."  
- Winston Churchill**

Obviously, every company needs a few absolutes, particularly as they relate to the integrity of the business. Around these issues, the rules should be crystal clear: "We tell the truth, no matter how bad the news." "Our airplanes are completely safe, above all else." "The customer comes first."

Beyond that, rules are at best a poor substitute for having the right people in the right position to do jobs that they can be trusted to responsibly perform. If you select the wrong people in the first place, you are going to need a lot of rules. However, if you have the right person in the right job, you can do away with many of the rules.

Also, the rules that provide needed guidance for one person may create an obstacle for another individual. Over-relying on rules only interferes with the kind of insight and understanding exhibited by the very best managers and leaders.

Put simply, the very essence of effectively selecting, managing, and developing people is **individualization**. Conversely, the very essence of making rules is just the opposite: *standardization*.

This is why great organizations and managers have more systems and fewer rules, while mediocre-to-poor organizations and managers have more rules.

Good systems create that framework within which better choices and decisions can be made. Good systems

can actually facilitate the sense of ownership of employees. Until you have a system, it is very difficult to significantly improve.

You can ask people to “try harder” or “be more careful”, but what if they were already working hard and trying to be careful? What if their level of effort and conscientiousness varies a little from day to day, as they do for most of us? Then what can you do to get better?

Once you have a system in place, you can make adjustments and changes. You can tweak it until you get it right. When the people or needs change, you can adjust the system again.

### **From Theory, To Practice: You Are Still Here**

We’ve done a lot of housecleaning in the past few pages. Cleared out some old ideas that will only get in your way. But as we said before, you’re still not starting with a blank canvas. When you walk in the door tomorrow morning, plenty of things will be in place.

The people who already make up your team will still be there. Then there is the company you work for. The industry you work in. The other teams who are part of your organization—teams with which you must collaborate even as you compete for resources. And finally, there is the larger political and economic landscape in which all of this exists. It hasn’t changed.

There’s room here for a whole *lot* of serenity, courage, and wisdom. But perhaps the most important requirement will be in *how you think* about the problems and opportunities waiting for you tomorrow morning...

**Do not think about finding cures** for what’s wrong with your people. **Think about how to find what’s exceedingly right** about each person, and then think about how you can encourage that with everything you have.

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Think about how you can improve your people's performance by having them **do more of the things they're good at.**

Think how Teams can be made so you can **get your people's strengths in concert** together, while **making their weaknesses irrelevant** through the compensation found in **smart team building.**

Think about what TEAM BUILDING is: An exercise in **building on the STRENGTHS** of your people.

Think about what needs to happen to **remove many of the rules in your organization.**

Think about rules as restrictions not facilitators. To grow and develop people you have to facilitate, not restrict. It's true with your children, and it's also true with the people in your organization.

Think about how **every rule** added to the organization, **removes choices for your people.** Rules and the freedom of choice are almost always mutually exclusive.

Think how **rules** most often **mean, "No! Don't do that,"** but **discipline means, "Yes. Do that again...and again."**

This kind of thinking should challenge and even refute some of the conventional management wisdom with its associated myths. And this kind of thinking will lead you and your people to better workforce performance.





# CHAPTER THREE

## The Oldest Debate With a New Twist

The dispute over the root of human behavior has been raging as long as the field of Psychology has existed. Is our behavior the result of biological forces beyond our control—forces already in place even before our birth? Or, are we the product of our environment and our experiences? Put another way, which is more important: Nature or Nurture?

As an academic argument, this riddle has fueled decades of debate among seasoned researchers and armchair psychologists alike. However, as a tool for recruiting the best candidates and managing them for success, this argument has been a monumental waste of time.

I'm not saying *Nature vs. Nurture* is an unimportant question. On the contrary, I'm saying it is important precisely because of the holistic way we usually look at it. The question, "Which is greater, Nature or Nurture?" is so far off track in that it leaves us doing all our thinking in the wrong place.

We start with the assumption that there is a *yes/no, either/or* proposition between two opposite choices. And we all know what happens when you *assume*, right? So we waste all our time arguing over something that isn't even a reality. To explain what I mean, let's start with a quick refresher of things you learned in Psych 101.

### Two Schools of Thought

Around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Psychology blossomed from a nascent area of inquiry into a full-fledged science. It didn't take long for two opposing schools of thought to emerge, with different theories of human development. The *Determinists*, led by Sigmund Freud,

represented the *Nature* side of the argument. The *Behaviorists*, later led later by B.F. Skinner, emphasized *Nurture*.

Determinists believe that our behavior is mostly the result of inherent or biological forces over which we have no control. They maintain that our unique identities and individual personalities are mostly, if not solely the result of factors that are not influenced by our environments. The exceptions to this would be direct medical intervention or intensive long-term psychotherapy. Freud believed that personality was ultimately a function of a series of unconscious drives and conflicts—the friction between the id, ego, and super-ego. Of particular importance were the epic unconscious struggles between the id and super-ego. The outcomes of the id's butting heads with our super-egos could determine much of our motivation and ultimate action *without us even being aware of it*.

In more recent years, neuro-psychologists have added to the Determinist viewpoint. These scientists maintain that our moods, motivations and behaviors are mostly a function of the chemical and electrical interactions that take place within the neurons of our brain. For them, it is our ***neural/chemical interactions that determines how we act*** and not the other way around.

This brings us to the second group—the *Behaviorists\**, led by B.F. Skinner. ***Behaviorists believe that human behavior is mostly a function of the environment***. Skinner maintained that we come into the world as a blank tablet capable of taking on an almost unlimited range of possible scripts. He believed that our personalities are determined by the sum total of all the reinforcement schedules that we've been exposed to over the course of our development. In other words, conditions in our environment are the ultimate factor that determines who we become and how we act. We can be conditioned to behave and believe in certain ways.

The question for Skinner and the Behaviorists was not, “Do people change?” but rather, “How can we change people most effectively?”

\* Psychology and related areas of research are often referred to as the “Behavioral Sciences.” This terminology may suggest a bias toward Behaviorist rather than Determinist views. This is misleading. Both schools of thought (and others) are represented equally within the field.

There are applications of these concepts in every part of our lives—that is irrefutable. However, what does nature vs. nurture have to do with selecting, hiring, developing, managing, and leading people?

### **My Least Favorite Story**

I’ve already told you my favorite story about studying NHL hockey players. Now, I’ll share one of my most disappointing experiences—a heartbreaking lesson about what we think we can change...but almost never can.

In high school and college, I worked as a Recreational and Work Aid for the Nebraska State Home for Children. The biggest part of the job was to basically act as a parent, mentor and/or big brother for lots of needy kids. At times it was altogether consuming. At that point in my life I was big on the *nurture* side of the debate. Inherently, I really believed that if I cared enough and tried hard, I could help some of these kids lead relatively normal and productive lives. So I poured my heart and soul into trying to change them for the better.

Years later, after finishing college and taking a good bit of time for travel, adventure and general horseplay, I got my first real *adult job*. I became a Parole Counselor in the maximum-security ward of the State Penitentiary.

You may be able to guess what happened. My *projects* from years earlier, who had been the beneficiaries of my blood, sweat, and tears, kept showing up at my door. And I don’t mean as guards.

I can't adequately describe how disappointed I was in the futility of my work. I'd tried so hard with those kids, and yet here they were, before me now, as prisoners. Their situations were uniformly desperate and their behaviors hard to understand or explain. After the second suicide, I left. And I was changed. I'd never be quite as idealistic again.

I don't mean for a minute that the kind of investments that I made in those needy kids never worked. I saw some small successes, and at least one big one—way to go Harlan! And the final chapter had not been written in some of their stories.

But the point is this: It isn't that trying hard to change people NEVER works. Once in a while it does. But if you really want to make a difference—especially in business—you need to figure out **what works MOST of the time**. And then, do more of that.

There is an old saying where I come from in Nebraska:

**"Never try to teach a pig to sing.  
It wastes your time and it annoys the pig."**

I bring this up often when giving presentations because it illustrates my point and it makes the audience at least chuckle. IMPORTANT NOTE: Believe it or not, I have been approached by more than one audience member wanting to set me straight about this *singing pig analogy*.

I've actually had people say to me, "You know, you actually *can* teach a pig to sing. I saw it on the *Tonight Show*. This guy in Arkansas or somewhere..."

When we speak of *the exception that proves the rule*, this is what we're talking about. Some guy with way too much time on his hands, invested years and years getting his pig to emit a few warbling, off-key notes that could maybe just almost be considered singing. So what? Just imagine if he had invested similar efforts in a child who had the talent to create art or save lives or had a savant gift for

singing! What this really proves is that teaching pigs to sing is just this side of impossible, and if you're going to attempt the impossible, why not do something that will at least make a *difference*?

Why did so many of those kids I worked with end up in prison? Was it something deep inside of them that could never be changed, or did a lifetime of abuse, neglect, and hardship warp them into someone unfit for anything else?

We don't ask these questions out of mere academic curiosity. We ask them because when we see people suffering, *we want to know what we can do to help*. But in the end, if all our empathy and investment and sacrifice can't *move the needle*, all of our good intentions are, unfortunately, useless.

And it's no different in business. Almost all of us want to help our people improve, and many of us are willing to work extremely hard to make that happen. But if you try to succeed in business just by changing people, you will die of exhaustion before you ever meet your first payroll.

I'll say it again: Great organizations aren't usually built by working harder in the marginal areas where everyone else has failed. Great organizations are built by finding out what works the best and the most often—doing more of that than any of the competition.

### **So Which Is It?**

As a behavioral scientist, one of my greatest disappointments is how inept we have been at solving real-world problems. Science has taught mankind to build massive bridges, cure smallpox, and put a man on the moon. But when it comes to building great organizations, though we have learned a great deal, we have become masters of that which is *fascinating but irrelevant*.

In the ongoing debate of *Nature vs. Nurture*, I believe that all of us—the theorists, the technologists, and the daily users of that knowledge—have taken our eyes off the ball.

At the end of the day, the debate doesn't matter. What *matters* is what you can use. What matters is what changes...and what doesn't.

So I'd like to put this question behind us, once and for all. I'm not going to come down on either side of this perennial argument, or tell you that the truth is in the middle somewhere. The reality is this: *You can never choose between Nature and Nurture.*

Every real-world situation you ever face will include BOTH Nature *and* Nurture. They're both going to play a part. They ALWAYS interact. It is NEVER one or the other! It is ALWAYS how they interact with one another. So the only question worth asking is, "How do you leverage that interaction to give you the best results?"

If you've raised kids, or watched them closely, you know that each child is different from every other child—and in obvious ways. But kids can and will be influenced by significant people in their lives, and many times in really big ways. It is the interplay between their Nature and Nurture that impacts how it is that they behave.

We're born with certain realities that we simply cannot change. These would include such things as the ability to perceive certain colors, or the need to initiate relationships. These are our **talents** and **traits**—our *Nature*. However, there are other things we *can* change, such as learning to put our clothes in the laundry hamper. We can even develop more complex behaviors such as flying a jet airplane. These acquired capabilities are our **knowledge**, **skills**, and **abilities**, or **KSAs** for short.

We can also add to the *Nurture* side of ourselves through **experiences**. Significant life events, travel, education, and so on, can greatly affect us and how we behave. This, in part, helps to explain why two children from the same home can be so diversely different, yet certain parts of them are inherently consistent, and cannot be changed.

## The Interactive Effect

I said before that Nature and Nurture always interact. This relationship is what is known as an “Interactive Effect.” There are examples of interactive effects throughout science, as well as in daily life. For instance...

Suppose you decide to lose some weight. You learn that if you consistently follow a particular diet, you will lose a pound a week. You then learn that if you follow a given exercise program, you will lose half a pound a week. So if you do both, how much will you lose?

The logic of simple addition and subtraction suggests that you should lose 1.5 pounds in a week. But in reality, the weight-loss answer turns out to be closer to 2 pounds per week. This difference happens because we aren’t simply adding two isolated factors together—we are combining them. They interact. Exercise impacts our metabolism. A healthy diet impacts our energy. The two factors reinforce each other in a tangible, measurable way that is beyond simple addition. That’s what happens when you leverage the interaction of Nature and Nurture.

Here’s another example—this time a workforce application. Let’s say you are managing a team of people and they are, frankly, not very good. On a scale of 1 to 10, they rate a “2.” Let’s also suppose that you’re not doing a very good job of managing them. We’ll give you a “2” on that, as well. When you combine the two factors, here’s what you get:

$$\begin{aligned} (\text{Worker Talent}) \times (\text{Worker Management}) &= \text{Worker} \\ &\text{Performance} \\ 2 \times 2 &= 4 \end{aligned}$$

A “4 rating” is not even mediocre performance. They’re still getting something done, but not much. At this level, you don’t get the benefit of much interactive effect. But if

you take your game up a notch as a manager, it helps some, but not all that much. So, now it may look like this:

$$2 \times 3 = 6$$

But let's say instead, you find a person better suited for the job and you're doing a better job of managing them. Now maybe it looks like this:

$$6 \times 6 = 36$$

You've added only 4 points on each side of the equation, but your total performance improvement isn't just 8 (from adding 4 + 4). It is 32 (from adding 4 to each score, then multiplying them). Even better, increasing your management score by 1 now has a much greater impact:

$$6 \times 7 = 42$$

This time you went up by 6, not just 2. And so it goes...

$$7 \times 7 = 49$$

$$8 \times 8 = 64$$

$$9 \times 9 = 81$$

$$10 \times 10 = 100$$

Perfect scores never happen in reality but you get the point.

As you continue to improve your effectiveness—either in hiring the right people, or in how you manage them once they are on board—each little additional improvement has that much more impact. This could be considered a *Paradox of Human Potential*. As you continue to get better, increasingly smaller improvements will make a bigger difference. To illustrate this paradigm, consider this: Have you ever noticed that it's almost always your best people that *gain the most* benefit from a good idea?

## Your Formula for Success

When you combine Nature and Nurture—and finally stop the nonsense of trying to pit one against the other—you see the *interactive effects* almost immediately. And just as in the previous examples, you aren't simply *adding* worker talent and management performance together. You are multiplying them.



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In other words, it's not simply:

NATURE + NURTURE

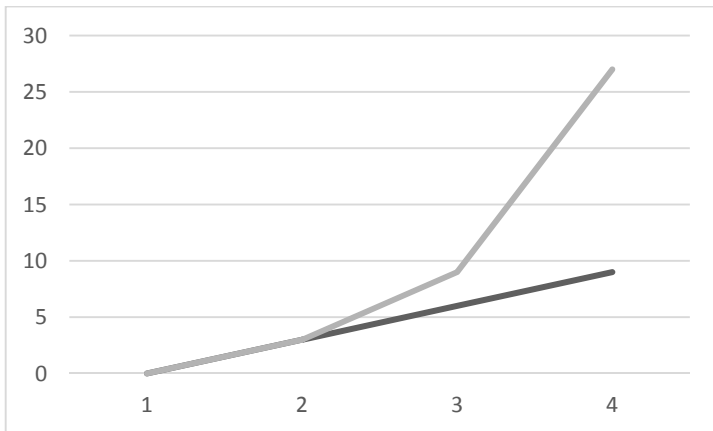
It is *exponentially* better than that. The real equation looks like this:

NATURE X NURTURE

More than likely, when you learned about the effects of these two types of interactions, they had another name: *Arithmetic and Geometric Progression*. Here's how it works, and here's why it's important as we try to increase our workforce performance:

**Arithmetic Geometric**  
**Progression: Progression:**  
 $3 + 3 + 3 = 9$   $3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27$

**Fig. 3-1: Arithmetic vs. Geometric Progression**



There are lots of useful ideas in these pages, but this simple formula is almost certainly the single most powerful concept in the whole book:

## **Nature X Nurture = Performance**

Don't forget it. Geometric progression. Getting better not step by step, but in *orders of magnitude!*

If you question whether these types of gains in performance or learning in the workplace are realistic, I would have you consider reflecting on how people work from both the perspective of workforce nature and workforce nurture. Consider what happens when, an individual finds himself or herself in the following situations...

Every day the demands of the situation cause them to rely on the very best and most dominant parts of their personality. They do things that come to them most instinctively and naturally. This strong and instinctive action provides them with the most intrinsic satisfaction. **This, is NATURE at work.**

Their workplace environment provides them the opportunity to receive the knowledge, practice, support, encouragement, recognition and reinforcement they need to be at their best at work. **This, is NURTURE at work.**

The combination of these—both nature and nurture working together in concert—results in what is frequently referred to as *true genius in whatever area of endeavor.*

In making this one simple, fundamental shift in our thinking away from *Nature vs. Nurture, or even Nature + Nurture* and to *Nature x Nurture, we can realize substantial growth in workforce and organizational performance. But to realize this growth, we must move from one of the great*

## NO PEGS, NO HOLES

*arguments of our age to one of the most powerful, transformational, and high-leverage concepts available to managers in organizations of every kind.*

As the previous graph suggests, the application of NATURE X NURTURE can mean the difference between improving performance incrementally, and doubling or even tripling workforce performance.

However, in order to manage from this human-behavior concept, there is one other thing you need to understand: Every time you meet, talk to, or work with someone in your workforce, you're seeing the end product of their specific Nature x Nurture interaction.

To emphasize this truth, we often depict individual people with an icon that we simply call, "The Donut."

**Fig. 3.2: "The Donut"**



One member of our team describes it this way: Think of each person as an empty vase...

**Nature** is the person's potential—their capacity.  
Nature is how big the vase is—how much it can hold.

**Nurture** is how much has been poured into the vase.  
This determines the person's effective capability—right now.

You may have someone working for you whose nature has its definite limits. However, they have been developed to such an extent that they offer a lot of capability. If you bring on someone who is more talented, they may have greater potential capacity. But until you have *poured in* the effort of training and developing them, they won't match the capability of the person who has already been *nurtured*.

As a manager, you need to understand the potential of both Nature and Nurture and their profound impacts on each other. Both are critical determinants of human behavior, and workforce performance.

Good managers recognize that they're stuck with the realities of Nature and use that fact to their advantage. Lesser managers wear themselves out and frustrate themselves and their employees, trying to change what Nature dictates. Good managers certainly look for people who bring the right KSAs with them. However, they know that KSAs can be nurtured later if needed.

As the formula ***Nature X Nurture = Performance*** suggests, once a person's nature is aligned with the nurturing aspects of the work environment, their potential for performance increases dramatically. You, as a workforce professional or manager, must put their natural tendencies, instincts, and recurring reactive patterns in concert with the expectations and support systems of the environment, as well as the unique culture of the organization. The gains of successfully doing this are geometric in proportion.

How you should consider, and think about Nature, Nurture, and your workforce...

**To most dramatically impact workforce performance, you must be able to create a perfect storm that forges your people's traits and talents with their management, training and workplace.**

**The proper management of workforce Nature and Nurture results in performance growth that is geometric, not arithmetical.**

**When you successfully match and balance a person's traits and talents with their knowledge, skills and life experience, you are poised for astounding growth, both for your people and the organization.**

By paying attention to these concepts of Nature and Nurture, your organization will realize a massive competitive advantage. Having such an advantage will offer a huge step up and forward for the managers and companies who get it right.

In the following chapters of this book, we'll take a lot closer look at and give you a better understanding of what all goes into what makes up a person's nature. By understanding the workings of this within your people, you will learn how to change the way you *nurture*, in order to put each person's *nature* in your favor.

But before we go on to those ideas, let's take a last consideration of how Nature and Nurture works in the workplace, and how it can be used to power growth in our workforce performance.

Success in business is often found, not in having the right answers to a lot of questions. Success is often based in knowing the right question to ask of ourselves.

The question, "Which is more important in human behavior, Nature or Nurture?" is not the right question we

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should be asking. That question is a distraction to us. It has no answer, other than, "Who cares?"

The right question to ask is, "What happens if you successfully combine and apply *Nature in concert with Nurture*—think of it as integrating *Nature X Nurture* in your workforce?"

The answer is, "Astounding, geometrical growth in workforce performance—growth that will dramatically move the needle."