

Volume

3

# LeaderSHOP

Workplace, Career, and Life Advice from  
Today's Top Thought Leaders



Exclusive interviews  
by Rodger Dean Duncan,  
bestselling author of  
***CHANGE-friendly LEADERSHIP***

# LeaderSHOP

- Volume 3 -

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Exclusive conversation with  
**John Spence**

## Mediocrity Out, Excellence In: Awesomely Simple?



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

Good leaders always bring about transformation. Poor leaders only maintain and preserve long-standing mediocrity.

Harsh words, it might seem. But in this age of sound bites and image control, true and sustainable performance excellence seems to be the exception, not the norm. Many businesspeople appear satisfied with managing the status quo. Many up-and-comers seem to have a sense of entitlement rather than a passion for earning their way.



As the saying goes, only mediocrity can be trusted to be always at its best.

Fortunately, there are some excellent leadership practitioners out there who are willing and able to challenge mediocrity head-on.

One of those practitioners is John Spence, author of several well-received business books including *Awesomely Simple*. John is a coach and consultant for companies ranging from Microsoft, IBM, GE, and Abbott, to Merrill Lynch, AT&T, and Verizon. He's also lectured at more than 90 colleges and universities, including Harvard, Cornell, Stanford, and the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

To provide a taste of John's counsel to businesspeople, I asked him several questions on common performance issues.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** You say some leaders inadvertently "enable mediocrity." What does that typically look like, what are the implications, and what is the best cure?

**John Spence:** There are two major ways that leaders enable mediocrity. The first is hiring and retaining mediocre employees either because they are intimidated by people who are more talented than they are or because they fail to invest enough time in searching out better talent, so they are held hostage by their mediocre.

The other way leaders enable mediocrity is by not setting clear expectations and standards of performance. Ambiguity breeds mediocrity.

**Duncan:** A clear "vision" of the desired future is of course important in any change effort. How can a leader breathe life into the organization's vision so people can genuinely internalize and embrace it?

**Spence:** I believe there are three ways. The first is for the leader to show true passion and commitment to the vision. If the leader is not clearly engaged and excited, no one else in the organization will be.

The second way is to involve people in helping to shape and craft the vision. When people have a say in the outcome, they also have a stake in the outcome.

Lastly, for some companies the leader has the ability to bring people face-to-face with the problem they are solving and the people they are serving to show their team just how important the vision is and how it will impact others in a positive way.

**Duncan:** You rightfully suggest that leaders should dream big dreams. What advice do you offer for making those dreams clear and actionable?



John Spence

**Spence:** I'm not a process guy, but I know that if you want repeatable success you must have process. A big dream (vision) becomes a reality when it's broken down into clear, specific, measurable and binary goals and objectives. People have to know exactly where they are going, what is expected of them, and how success will be measured. The next step is to put all of the key indicators onto a dashboard so that everyone knows precisely where they and the entire company currently stand against the goals. That way, action and results become a continuous focus throughout the organization.

**Duncan:** A lot of people seem to talk about "alignment" as though it's the magic elixir of organizational performance. What does "alignment" mean to you, and what are some keys to moving it from buzzword to reality?

“A big dream (vision) becomes a reality when it's broken down into clear, specific, measurable and binary goals and objectives.

**Spence:** To me, alignment means the entire company is pulling in the same direction and headed for the same goal. There is no turf-guarding or hoarding of resources, no division or departments working at cross-purposes, no political in-fighting. This is accomplished through a well-communicated vision and strategy for growth and the courage to say "NO" to anything that does not add value to the effort to achieve that vision.

**Duncan:** Good decision-making is one of the ingredients of effective leadership. To the extent possible, good leaders tend to involve others in key decisions. What best practices do you suggest?

**Spence:** I believe the best tool for making great decisions is to create a list of key questions you ask yourself and the team as you go through the decision-making process. A few questions that should be on that list include:

- What is the REAL timeframe for this decision?
- Should I delegate this decision, make it myself or should this be a team decision?
- If it is a team decision who are the right people to be involved in the decision?
- Do we have all of the information necessary to make this decision?
- Are we sure the information is accurate and reliable?
- Who else will be impacted by this decision?
- Who will be responsible for implementing this decision?

It truly amazes me how often I have seen leaders make HUGE decisions without asking any of these questions. Another thing I look at in decision-making is probability and impact:

what is the probability that something could go wrong and what would be the impact if it did?

- Low probability/low impact = delegate
- High probability/low impact = delegate as learning opportunity
- Medium probability/medium impact = team decision
- Low probability/high impact = team decision with strong input from leader
- High probability/high impact = team input, leader makes the decision

**Duncan:** What's the single biggest issue you see right now with your clients worldwide?

**Spence:** It's crystal clear—lack of accountability and lack of disciplined execution. There's no lack of cool, innovative, and bold strategies. But taking those ideas and turning them into action is without question the largest roadblock to organizational success. To me, the answer is to create a culture of accountability where people have an "ownership mentality" and consistently deliver the required business results. The five-step process I teach to increase accountability is:

1. Establish 100% clarity on the desired outcome and give the appropriate authority to achieve that outcome.
2. Gain 100% agreement from the people who will be held accountable that they agree to deliver the desired outcome and fully accept accountability.
3. Track and post progress so they know exactly where they stand against their goals.
4. If they fall behind or falter, step in immediately with the coaching, mentoring, training, and resources necessary to get them back on track.
5. Reward and celebrate success. Deal decisively with mediocrity.

It amazes me how few organizations follow these five steps with discipline. But without these steps it's impossible to achieve a high level of accountability and execution.



### **Personal application:**

- In what ways might you be inadvertently enabling mediocrity in your organization?
- Do you have genuine passion and commitment for the vision of your organization? If not, why not? If so, what do that passion and commitment “look like” in your observable behaviors?
- How can you use the decision-making questions suggested by John Spence?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Jill Lublin**

## ROK (Return on Kindness): It's More Than Just Being Nice



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

During 40 years of consulting and executive coaching, I've worked with hundreds of leaders. The ones who are world-class, who produce consistently great results, have some characteristics in common—smarts, a sense of vision, a deep understanding of their business, willingness to make tough decisions.

These are textbook qualities of great leadership. But one quality demonstrated by the best leaders I've known is seldom recognized: kindness.



Yes, kindness. Some people still seem to regard kindness as a nice- to-have-but-unnecessary personality trait. In fact, some prominent businesspeople have been practically deified in their reputations for harsh and even barbarous treatment of others.

Finally, we have an opposing view. Business coach Jill Lublin has written *The Profit of Kindness: How to Influence Others, Establish Trust, and Build Lasting Business Relationships*. This is not a soft-and-cuddly treatise on good manners. It's a guide to using kindness currency to get great results, loaded with specific examples of how and why kindness really works.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** In a world of tough-minded executives, why do so many people still seem to reject the notion that it's easier to attract flies with honey than with vinegar?

**Jill Lublin:** As Berny Dohrmann, founder of CEO Space International, puts it: "Competitive thought is the source of every problem in relationships." We've been indoctrinated that if we don't protect our turf, someone will invade it. Even the economy is based on competition. If you want to have more clients, sell more products or services, gain profits, you have to top any other business offering the same. Our end-goal inevitably becomes domination, monopoly.



Jill Lublin

But the same network, CEO Space International, shows us that success can also be achieved through compassion and connection. In this network are executives who might be in the same line of businesses. But instead of stabbing each other in the back, they share their struggles and, in return, hear "I have a solution for you and it will save you time and money." Through this collaboration, these people offer better customer experience that eventually leads them to profits.

**Duncan:** How can a person practice kindness so it becomes an automatic, default behavior?

**Lublin:** Kindness and good character go hand-in-hand. When you have good character, you possess the characteristics of kindness that let people know that you are caring, respectful, responsible, trustworthy, etc. Fred Kiel, founder of KRL International, published research that demonstrates how the moral principles of integrity, responsibility, forgiveness and compassion produce life-affirming inner change. Make a conscious effort to tap these four as you act or decide.

When communicating, ask yourself if you're displaying integrity. Are you telling straight facts or are you misleading? When you have made an error, ask yourself if you are being responsible. Are you going to own and correct the mistake or are you going to blame somebody else? Practice touching the core of your humanity and not reacting impulsively. As you make it a habit, you will notice inner change gradually. Soon enough, it will be second nature.

**Duncan:** Attachment and engagement are essential to high performance in organizations. What role does kindness play?

**Lublin:** Workforce engagement is the outcome organizations achieve when they connect employees both professionally and emotionally with the organization, the people in it, and the work they do. And what does kindness do? Kindness produces positive social connections. Kind organizations have kind leaders who drive the flow of positivity within the workplace.

Suzy Welch says leaders must serve as Chief Meaning Officers who show employees how their work connects with the company's mission, and what's in it for them. They keep people challenged, they give people their attention, they foster autonomy, and they set aside time for their team. With kindness around them, people feel appreciated and valued. They perform better and stay loyal.

“Kind organizations have kind leaders who drive the flow of positivity within the workplace.”

In one Gallup study, engagement dropped to 2% among teams with neglectful managers. On the other hand, Businessolver, an employee benefits company, found that 33% of employees would change to more emphatic employers for equal pay while 20% would switch for less.

**Duncan:** Having “an attitude of gratitude” sounds like an empty cliché to some. But how does an atmosphere of gratitude inspire people to do better and be better?

**Lublin:** Lindon Crow, President of Productive Learning, once reminded me of the “spheres of influence.” We cannot influence without positivity. He says, “As a leader, the way in which I walk into the door has an ability of leaving a trail of carnage or a trail of inspiration and motivation.” By living out his own values, he believes that he can foster his employees' mission of kindness, and, in turn, the employees will positively impact their clients. That will start a cycle of growth and the cycle of a currency of kindness. Gallup reported that 67% of employees are happier and more productive when managers focus on the positive aspects of their performance. It's also an example of upstream reciprocity—people with a high propensity toward gratitude are likely to act in a similar helpful way both to their benefactors and to others.

**Duncan:** In today's highly competitive business environment, “compassion” doesn't seem to be a behavior at the top of many people's to-do lists. What are they missing?

**Lublin:** A lot. For one, free advertising.

Are you familiar with the viral story of Panera Bread? Brandon Cook's grandmother wished for a clam chowder when she got hospitalized. Brandon called Panera Bread only to find out that they serve clam chowder only on Fridays. Still, Brandon talked to the Store Manager, Susanne Fortier, who not only prepared the soup but also gave a box of cookies for Brandon's grandma. That post garnered more than 500,000 “likes” and

22,000 comments. When genuine acts of compassion are seen, it's hard not to be shared.

This occurred back in 2012. Even today, it's being shared. People will come across this, they will search for Panera Bread and, perhaps, visit their store. Without any effort, Panera Bread will gain another customer. No money, no strategy, just pure kindness.



### **Personal application:**

- In what specific ways can you demonstrate integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion?
- How can you focus on the positive results produced in your organization without ignoring things that need improvement?
- Think of a time someone showed genuine kindness to you. How did it make you feel about that person? How did it make you feel about yourself?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Drew Dudley**

## For Best Results, Live Your Life 'Day One' at a Time



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

More than 30 years ago I wrote a personal mission statement. It's a relatively brief and straightforward document (less than half a page), focusing on six roles that I identified for my life. I use it as a daily, forward-looking reminder of my commitments, vision, and purpose.

As my friend Stephen Covey used to say, when you live out of memory you focus on the past. When you live out of your imagination you focus on the future.

Of course, there's also value in living in the present. After decades of observing and studying effective people, I've noticed one characteristic that sets them all apart: they have a single-minded devotion to what they want to *be*. Not just what they want to do, but what they want to *be*.

That's the emphasis in Drew Dudley's book *This is DAY ONE: A Practical Guide to Leadership That Matters*.

This is a leadership book with a different twist. It's not about leadership involving position, titles, organization charts or corner office privileges. It's about the day after day behaviors that enable influence and making a positive difference.

Dudley suggests six key values and accompanying questions that will immediately stimulate personal leadership behaviors:

- **Impact**—What have I done today to recognize some- one else's leadership?
- **Courage**—What did I try today that might not work, but I tried it anyway?
- **Empowerment**—What did I do today to move some- one else closer to a goal?
- **Growth**—What did I do today to make it more likely someone will learn something?
- **Class**—What did I “elevate instead of escalate” today?
- **Self-Respect**—What did I do today to be good to myself?

Using questions like these, Dudley advises, can help people discover, define, and consistently deliver on their foundational leadership values. Dudley is the former director of the leadership development program at the University of Toronto and coaches for organizations ranging from JP Morgan Chase to Proctor & Gamble. His TED talk was voted “one of the 15 most inspirational TED talks of all time.”

I tracked him down for a conversation to explore his thinking on personal leadership.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** In a nutshell, the Day One approach treats leadership as a daily choice, not as a title or accolade earned over time. What are some first steps to adopting this paradigm as an actual practice?

**Drew Dudley:** First, don't be dismissive of its simplicity. Simple doesn't mean easy. It's not unusual for high performers, when presented with the Day One approach, to assume they've already moved beyond what it teaches ... until they actually try it. That's when they realize they haven't moved beyond its principles—they've skipped over them.

That's not unusual for most people. The approach focuses on the foundational building blocks of personal leadership, so it's not glitzy. It's the miles of running in the rain



before the marathon, or the hours in the gym before stepping into the ring: unglamorous and essential. However, the more committed you are to reinforcing the foundations of your personal leadership each day the more you raise your capacity for high performance.

Second, you must embrace the idea that who you want to be each day should be prioritized over what you have to do. You must be willing to identify and commit to specific personal leadership behaviors that are non-negotiable each day. These behaviors can't be put aside in the name of your to-do list. It's not an either/or situation. A significant tenet of this approach is identifying how you can engage in those behaviors through your work, so it doesn't involve compromising your commitment to your career.

Finally, recognize what the approach does not promise to do. It's not trying to lay out how to become a senior executive or CEO, build high-performing teams, or acquire wealth, power, and prominence— at least not directly. It's designed to embed the behaviors necessary to be the type of person who is consistently great at those things.

**Duncan:** Leadership, you say, is making your life less about living up to the expectations of others and more about a disciplined commitment to acting on your core values each day. What's a good approach to clarifying what those personal core values really are?



**Drew Dudley**

**Dudley:** Your key values are indicated by how you behave, not what you say. As such, it's important to surface these values through reflective activities rather than simply asking yourself what they are. I cover this in detail in the book, but the key piece is an assessment of your decisions and behaviors—good and bad—and what values were reflected through those actions.

Our focus often falls on the consequences and outcomes of our decisions rather than the values that drove them. My goal is to help people shift that focus, and in doing so reveal potential inconsistencies between the values you believe drive you and those that actually do.

**Duncan:** You suggest that each core value a person identifies for himself should be accompanied by a question. That clearly serves as a daily call to action. Any other reasons for the questions?

**Dudley:** The questions are what set the Day One approach apart. The book doesn't necessarily aim to teach you things you don't know about leadership. It's intended to lay out a practical process to translate your knowledge of what makes a good leader into actual *actions*. The questions are an essential part of that for three key reasons:

1. They demand specificity—the questions outlined in the book are constructed in a very particular way: they cannot be answered yes or no, but demand you are specific in the what, when and how you engaged in certain behaviors.
2. They draw on psychological research that leverages unconscious drivers of human behavior, supporting your conscious efforts to deliver on your personal leadership commitments.
3. They allow for a daily assessment of your personal leadership—a daily “leadership test” that speaks to your success at aligning your key leadership values with your behavior.

**Duncan:** What role does courage play in living a Day One life?

**Dudley:** Courage is essential for growth, innovation, and resilience. However, we may not realize how our daily commitment to courage is eroded as we move through an education system that villainizes mistakes and stresses compliance over courage. The Day One process aims to re-embed courage as a daily practice—ensuring you consistently challenge the status quo in ways that benefit you and your organization.

Leaders are often afraid. But they don’t let fear lead to inaction. The Day One approach frames courage as a commitment to taking action when there is the possibility of loss. It recognizes that while the potential loss may be something tangible—money, a job, or an opportunity—it’s more often than not a perceived loss—a loss of face, of respect or prestige in the eyes of others. The Day One approach doesn’t ask you to simply “get over” that fear, but rather offers specific strategies to challenge that fear daily.

**Duncan:** Many people seem to view life as a zero-sum game with winners and losers. How does the Day One approach help replace that scarcity mentality with something better?

**Dudley:** The scarcity mindset focuses on money, titles, and influence as goals. The Day One approach positions them not as goals but as the *natural by-products* of consistent value-based behavior. Most importantly, it provides a process for ensuring that consistency.

“**Courage is essential for growth, innovation, and resilience.**

The Day One approach fully embraces an important reality: you’re not always in charge of what you have to do every day, but you’re always in charge of *who you are*. It doesn’t deny that winning and losing is a fundamental part of our lives and careers or ask you to simply reframe losses as “wins because you learned something.” It provides clear daily goals over which you *do* have complete control—goals that can provide momentum even on the days where everything outside of your control personally and professionally blows up in your face.

**Duncan:** What happens when we challenge traditional definitions and redefine what leadership really is?

**Dudley:** We ruffle some feathers. People who have worked 90 hours per week and sacrificed their relationships for a corner office or dropped 150 grand on a degree sometimes see a broader definition of leadership as inferring “you’re not so special after all,” and push back. I’m not trying to devalue traditional definitions of leadership or tell any- one who’s worked hard to get ahead or set themselves apart that they are any less impressive or deserving of what they’ve achieved.

What I am arguing is that there is a form of leadership to which everyone can and should aspire, and that many individuals who are considered “successful” have dismissed as unimportant.

By defining leadership so narrowly for so long, we’ve ensured that the majority of people in our organizations minimize their potential impact on the organization, clients, and colleagues. At the same time, many people who occupy C-Suites can’t define their core leadership values or identify a single act they undertook today to live up to those values.

When we reframe leadership as being evaluated on a daily basis—determined solely by how any one person is behaving *today*, not what they’ve accomplished over time—we reinforce the idea that everyone starts at the same place each day: with an obligation (and the ability) to positively impact the people, organizations, and communities around them.



### **Personal application:**

- Have you written a personal mission statement? It can help clarify your values.
- What behaviors seem to produce the results you want? How can you practice those behaviors more consistently?
- At the end of each day, how do you honestly evaluate how you’ve lived the past 24 hours?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Jodi Glickman**

## How to Boost Your Value in the Workplace



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

With unemployment rates at record lows, some people may get lulled into complacency about their marketability. After all, they may reason, jobs are so plentiful it's easy to pick and choose among opportunities.

That shortsighted perspective can be deadly for their futures.

Regardless of the current state of the economy, it's always a good idea to regard every day as another chance to hone your skills and make your best practices even better.

That's the view of Jodi Glickman, an expert in training people how to be *Great on the Job*. In fact, that's the title of her bestselling book.

In addition to training, coaching, and consulting, Glickman has been a regular blogger for Harvard Business Review and has appeared on MSNBC. Her career advice has been featured in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *BusinessWeek*, *WSJ Finance*, *CNN Money*, *Woman's Day* and many other media outlets. She's a former Peace Corp volunteer (Southern Chile) turned investment banker (Goldman Sachs) turned communication expert. She earned her MBA at Cornell University.

I visited with Jodi about workplace issues that affect everyone in most every kind of job.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** What are the two or three most common communication mistakes in a business environment—and what advice do you offer for solving them.

**Jodi Glickman:** The first one is failing to manage expectations. We make a lot of assumptions that people know what we're thinking, what we want a finished product to look like, when we want to see the final sales numbers. The antidote is explicit communication. If you give me an assignment and I have 20 other things on my plate, I should respond immediately and communicate to you when I'll be able to handle your request. This builds trust and demonstrates that you're on top of things. Let people know their needs are on your radar and that you'll follow up at a specific time.

If you're handing off work, clarify *your* expectations. Clearly communicate how you want the finished product to look and when you need to have it.

Mistake number two: failing to ask for help. Many people are afraid of looking dumb, so they set themselves up for failure because they don't ask for the resources and guidance they need to meet expectations. Asking for help doesn't mean saying, "I have no idea what to do." Asking for help means saying, "Okay, this is the way I understand it. Is this what you have in mind?" You may want to put together a plan of action, then get your manager's buy-in to ensure that you're moving in the right direction. An agreement on direction, project steps, and milestones can be helpful to all parties.

Mistake number three: failing to use face-to-face communication when it's needed. Many people use email as a crutch when they don't want to have a difficult conversation with someone, or they don't feel comfortable delivering bad news. If you fail to address an issue head-on, there's a good chance it will blow up to become an even greater problem. Tone and tenor get lost in email. In business, most decisions don't get made via email. It's through face-to-face communication.



Jodi Glickman



**Duncan:** Why do some people seem to ignore—or resist—the need to get help with their relationships at work?

**Glickman:** People tend to focus on technical skills. Technical and financial skills are sometimes easier to deal with because we can measure output. Relationship issues are often more difficult (though not impossible) to measure. The easy way is to simply ignore problems. If we promote people to management positions because they have good technical skills, and then just hope that they will automatically develop people skills, we're headed for trouble. Similarly, some people resist coaching with a comment like, "You know, I don't really need help. Things will take care of themselves." People often avoid confronting a colleague who genuinely needs help with relationships.

Self-awareness is one of the common denominators of great leaders. Leadership is not just drive, ambition, intelligence, or vision. It comes down to knowing what you're good at and knowing what you're not yet good at. Self-awareness enables you to capitalize on your strengths and outsource or compensate for your weaknesses and get better at those things in which you need improvement.

**Duncan:** What tips can you offer on the best ways to give—and receive— feedback on the job?

**Glickman:** The most important thing in giving feedback is to be specific. Don't just tell someone they need to get better. Offer specific examples and tips. Otherwise, you're giving frustration, not help. Be prepared to tell the person what you think he should do differently, or what he should stop doing, or what he should *start* doing. Jason Garrett, coach of the Dallas Cowboys, says the coaches he appreciated most in his playing days were those who were very explicit in telling him how he could improve.

We should not look at feedback as something to make us feel good or bad about ourselves. We should regard feedback as developmental. It's sometimes like medicine. It may not taste good, but it can help us get better. If I really care about becoming the best professional I can be, then I should welcome your constructive criticism.

“Self-awareness is one of the common denominators of great leaders.

People need to ask for feedback explicitly. You can't safely assume that people will automatically give you feedback. You should plant the seed in advance. You don't want to put anyone on the spot and say, "How did I do in that presentation?" Tell

them in advance that you will ask for feedback. This enables them to be thinking about how they can offer feedback that will be helpful.

**Duncan:** In today's super competitive environment, how can good communication skills help a person stand out from the crowd?

**Glickman:** The reality is that when you meet someone, you're sizing them up within 30 seconds. That might not seem fair, but it's reality. You're either impressed by their poise

and maturity and confidence, or you're not. And it all comes across in the way they're able to communicate to you in that first half minute.

Let's assume you're sharp and on the ball and have what it takes to back up a good first impression. Still, the only way you're going to get the job is to impress the potential employer that you have something valuable to offer. No matter how smart you are, if you can't talk it's very hard to compete for the best job.



### **Personal application:**

- What can you do to improve the way you manage expectations—whether you're giving or receiving a work assignment?
- How can you improve the way you solicit—and receive—feedback on your performance?
- How can you do a better job of offering feedback to others?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Tim Irwin**

## Feedback: Reach the Heart Through the Brain



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

Never turn down a breath mint. Feedback is a gift. Of course, the gift's presentation can make a big difference.

Performance accountability is among the most important parts of a leader's role. Yet many leaders are simply inept at providing feedback and coaching that helps more than hurts. In fact, implicit (or explicit) blame is a prominent ingredient in many of the "coaching" messages leaders send. Unfortunately, blame is the water in which dreams and relationships drown.

Dr. Tim Irwin, an organizational psychologist and executive coach, believes there's a better way. His research shows the right kind of positive affirmation has a profound effect on a person's brain—an effect that promotes a sense of personal well-being which leads to better performance. Criticism, he says, produces the opposite effect.

Dr. Irwin has invested a career in advising, studying, and learning from thousands of leaders around the world. He's consulted for a wide range of U.S. companies including SunTrust Banks, Chick-fil-A, IBM, Gerber, Coca-Cola and Ritz Carlton.

He details a fresh approach to feedback in *Extraordinary Influence: How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Others*.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** You report on brain research that highlights “affirmation” as a powerful influencer. In layman's terms, what is affirmation and how does it differ from a pat on the back?

**Tim Irwin:** Who doesn't like a sincere compliment? My wife wore a new Spring outfit this morning, and as she left for work, I told her she looked nice. She smiled, said thank you and then immediately made sure I remembered we were having dinner with neighbors tonight. A compliment goes skin deep. It conveys esteem and appreciation, but a compliment is not a deep affirmation of who we are.

The word affirmation originates from the Latin *affirmationem*, which means to make steady, to confirm and to strengthen. The deepest form of affirmation strengthens our core—our very sense of self.



Dr. Tim Irwin

Brain research strongly supports the dramatic benefits of deep affirmation. Affirmation helps people feel more optimistic and work more productively.

**Duncan:** What role should affirmation play in a leader's day-to-day interaction with others?

**Irwin:** In a work context, it's important to affirm someone's competence. “You did an excellent job of presenting the budget update at the Executive Team meeting. Everyone agreed that the clarity you created with the new report really helped our decision-making process.” This type of affirmation should be routine and frequent.

Occasionally, an opportunity presents itself to go deeper—to reach the core of another person. The language that speaks to our core affirms who we are—the person inside us. This type of deeper affirmation is called “Words of Life.”

What is the common thread in Words of Life? These powerful words speak about our character—the unassailability of our inner person. Words of Life address the dimensions of our core and speak the vocabulary of our core, such as integrity, courage, resilience,

judgment and authenticity. When spoken authentically, these words can actually transform someone we lead.

**Duncan:** You say performance appraisals often involve a “negativity bias.” If that’s true, how can a leader hold people accountable for good results without unintentionally demotivating or discouraging them?

**Irwin:** Even the brains of the most confident among us are constantly scanning the environment and asking, “Am I safe?” We do not typically face physical threats in our work settings, but we constantly face “emotional threats”—criticism from our boss, sniping from our rivals and the ever-present political maneuvering that goes on even in healthy organizations.

The workplace is filled with “Words of Death,” those expressions that say, “No, I’m not safe.” Favorite unthinking phrases of some leaders employ even “violent” language to convey they are in control, such as, “I’m going to hold your feet to the fire”—a favorite torture method in the Middle Ages, designed to get heretics to convert.

Our brains are hypersensitive to criticism or anything else that feeds the brain’s “negativity bias”—the tendency to react defensively to anything we view as a threat,

“Even the brains of the most confident among us are constantly scanning the environment and asking, ‘Am I safe?’

physical or emotional. Our brain’s amygdala engages and tends to shut down the prefrontal cortex and other parts of our brain that’s responsible for innovation and problem solving. To drive this home, I’ve started a petition to ban the phrase “Constructive Criticism.” This phrase is truly an oxymoron.

It’s for these reasons that the typical performance appraisal session is the most hated event in corporate life, by both the recipients and the givers. We

typically go into these sessions with our negativity bias fully operational. The interpersonal clumsiness with which most performance appraisals are administered justifies this wariness.

**Duncan:** What conclusions (and recommended practices) should we draw from studies that highlight the negative effects of criticism?

**Irwin:** I interviewed a large number of CEOs of large and highly successful companies. Almost every one of them described a former boss instrumental in their development who was very tough on them. The bosses they described were hard-nosed, exacting and had unrelenting expectations of excellence in their performance.

Regardless of how these expectations were conveyed, the common denominator of everyone I interviewed was the constantly reinforced underpinning that, “I’m for you.” The clear indication, in every case, was that, “I want you to be and expect you to be successful, and I have great confidence in your abilities and your character.”



**Duncan:** What are the most effective ways to bring out the best in some- one who is clearly underperforming?

**Irwin:** The need for “contrary feedback” is ever present. We all make mistakes and are in need of improvements in how we handle tasks and the relationships in our work life.

The question that should be on the forefront of every leader’s mind is “how do we effectively help the underperformer?” Brain research indicates that contrary feedback engages the receptive parts of the brain by linking the needed “course correction” to the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the recipient and/or the mission, strategy, goals and values of the organization.

While some individuals simply do not belong in a given role or even in a particular organization, the narrative that is implanted into the collective psyche of an organization when an underperforming worker grows and realizes their potential is of paramount value to the health of any organization’s culture. This redemptive outcome is far more likely when we engage the right parts of the brain.



### **Personal application:**

- Under what circumstances could you put affirmation to good use?
- Based on what you’ve learned here, what can you do to help someone who’s underperforming?
- How can you help people feel “safe” when you’re giving them honest correction and coaching?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Jocelyn Davis**

## No Title? No Problem. The Art of Quiet Influence



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

As we all try to endure the scorched earth rhetoric of politicians, an age-old question continues to beg for an answer: What's the most effective way to win the hearts and minds of people?

I can't speak for you, but I don't respond well to "shame talk"— as in "Shame on you for holding that particular view." I also reject name-calling and other forms of incivility.

Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer polite logic and reasoning, backed up by verifiable information, seasoned by a dash of empathy. For me, shallow slogans and in-your-face sound bites are a total turn off.

Most people can smell manipulation, and they don't respond well to the aroma. Influence and persuasion, on the other hand, often have more subtle nuances.

A thoughtful exploration of the subject can be found in the work of Jocelyn Davis, an internationally known consultant and former head of R&D for The Forum Corporation, a global leadership development firm. She's author of *The Art of Quiet Influence: Wisdom and Mindfulness for Work and Life*.

Drawing on the enduring wisdom of Buddha, Confucius, Rumi, Gandhi and others, Jocelyn shows how anyone—not just people with titles—can get important things done by using influence with- out authority.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** How do you differentiate between influence and persuasion?

**Jocelyn Davis:** *Persuasion* is pressuring someone to do what you want them to do—never mind what they want. It's about getting your way. *Influence*, as I define it, is about working with others to co-create a new way, our way.

One of my favorite examples of influence comes from the tennis world. At a tournament in 1979, the champions Björn Borg and John McEnroe were facing off against each other. McEnroe was already infamous for his on-court tantrums, and he was acting up as usual: flinging his racket, yelling, abusing the officials. It was 5-5 in the final set when Borg beckoned him to the net. McEnroe thought Borg was going to rebuke him, but instead Borg put an arm around his shoulders and said, "It's OK. Just relax. It's OK. It's a great match."

McEnroe later said it was a turning point in his career. At that moment, he said, he realized "if we could keep lifting our games, I didn't have to worry about the crowd or the linesmen or anything." To this day he refers to Borg as his "great" rival.

Great influencers don't push or pull or manipulate. Instead, they help all of us lift our game.

**Duncan:** Authority is clearly not the same as power. How can someone without authority or title exert influence with other people?



Jocelyn Davis

**Davis:** Authority and power often overlap, but they're two different things. Some leaders have lots of formal authority—a big title—but little real power, because they're unable to mobilize people. Other leaders have real power despite a lack of formal authority; they know how to get things done with and through others, title or no title.

Carin Gendell, a colleague who teaches influence workshops, says too many team leaders obsess over their lack of authority. They spend all their time trying to get someone to grant them decision rights, or the right to control who's on the team, or a bigger budget. She tells them, "Stop arguing for positional authority and instead start making things happen on the team. Because when the team performs, you're more likely to win the authority."

And that's really the key to influence: shift your focus away from the authority you may or may not have and toward making things happen. But "making things happen" isn't the best way to put it, because it's not about cracking the whip. I talk about three core influence practices: *invite participation*, *share power*, and *aid progress*. These three practices are the key to exerting influence without authority.

**Duncan:** One influence behavior you recommend is to encourage others to express objections and doubts. Why do many people seem to miss that lesson, and what do you think is the cost to their relationships?

**Davis:** Most of us, when we hear an objection—someone says, "I don't agree," or "I don't want to," or "I hate that idea"—immediately get busy explaining why we're right and they're wrong. We want to overcome the objection, to beat it down. It's our reptilian brain responding to a perceived attack. And, the other person usually responds in kind: they fight back, dig in their heels, or simply withdraw. Once both parties are in fight-or-flight mode, influence is impossible. Even a relationship can be impossible.

The way to counteract the reptile-brain response is to see objections not as pushback, but as a sign of engagement. It's a precept taught in every sales training class: the customer who sits there nodding and smiling—"Sure, sounds good"—is less likely to buy than the customer who says, "The price is too high, I don't like the color, what if it breaks?" The second customer is engaged. The first doesn't care.

"Objections mean engagement" is the basic belief that can help us overcome our natural defensiveness in these situations. Thinking, "Oh, good, they want to play" makes it easier to be open to the concerns.

**Duncan:** Another influence practice you suggest is to take time to develop a shared outlook. That seems to fly in the face of today's highly partisan approaches to public discourse. What are some good models of developing a shared outlook that you've seen, and what can be learned from those models?

**Davis:** Influence practices—please note!—won't work with strangers on the Internet. If you want an influence relationship, you need a relationship. With strangers or crowds, you can use rhetoric. When it comes to getting stuff done with associates, over time—that's when you use influence.

My favorite model for developing a shared outlook is called the Hassle Graph (the brainchild of my colleague Andre Alphonso). On the vertical axis is hassle; on the horizontal axis is time. Typically a project starts off low on hassle—everyone's into it, things hum—but later, when you really want to be making progress, hassle increases.

The answer is to move some of the hassle up front, by discussing roles, ground rules, and simply getting to know one another. In other words, you need to front-load the hassle so the line goes down over time instead of up.

Frankly, it doesn't matter which specific techniques you use. What's important is the time and effort you invest early on to create a real group: one where people feel welcomed and integral rather than overlooked and dispensable. That investment, though it feels like a hassle, has huge payoffs in performance down the road.

**Duncan:** One problem in our modern society is that people learn about those who hold different views but they seldom make the effort to learn from them. Many people then become information rich but understanding impoverished. How can that trap be avoided?

**Davis:** This is a typically Western trap, because Western science sees the world as a collection of objects to be dissected and examined. Eastern philosophies, in contrast, tend to see fields of phenomena that flow together and partake of both subjectivity and objectivity. Objects can be learned *about*.

“... see objections not as pushback, but as a sign of engagement.” Subjects can be learned *about and from*. So, the first step is to appreciate that the other person has something to teach you. There's an old saying: To influence, we must be willing to be influenced.

Learning *about* sounds like this: “Tell me about you! .... How interesting. Now that I know all that, here's my advice for you.” Learning *from* sounds like this: “Let me tell you a little about me and how I like to work ... Now that you know all that, what advice do you have for me?”

A balance of the two approaches is needed, of course. Yammering on about me-me-me and never asking a question is no good. It's almost as bad, though, to grill someone in an effort to “understand” them so you can then tell them what they ought to be doing. For a true master, the learning always goes both ways.

**Duncan:** People of influence often convert adversaries to allies by aligning interests. What are some mindsets and behaviors that help in establishing alliances?

**Davis:** Mindset is crucial here. Most of us think of our relationships as falling along a continuum from friend to enemy: if I get along well with someone, I label her a friend, but that other person, the one who's so difficult and talks behind my back—if she's not an enemy, well, she's certainly no friend.

Influencers see it differently. They know there are four, not two, main relationship types: friends, foes, allies, and adversaries. Friends and foes are unconditionally with or against you, based on bonds of love or duty. Allies and adversaries, however, are *conditional* in their stance: they support or don't support you based on interests, which are changeable. The good news is, most of our imagined enemies are really just

adversaries, and many adversaries are allies-in-waiting. Figure out how to align your interests with your adversary's, and bam—you've got a new ally.

Three behaviors that can help: Seek to understand your adversary's values, preferences, and assumptions. Early in a dispute, find a point on which you can both agree. And, talk in terms of interests ("we both want this project to succeed") rather than positions ("I need 70% of the budget").

**Duncan:** The headlines are full of stories about people using power imbalances to exercise dominion over others. What are some good strategies for having influence in the face of aggression?

**Davis:** I think we have to accept that unfair power imbalances exist and aren't going away. Bosses can hire and fire. Organizations have in- groups and out-groups. Implicit bias is pervasive and stubborn.

Certainly we can pressure the big and strong to respect the rights of the small and weak, but utopia isn't arriving anytime soon, and utopian thinking is much less helpful, in my view, than learning the art of jujitsu—or "fighting softly"—for those times when we're at a disadvantage. Here are three strategies:

First, if you're bent on systemic change, find others to ally with. If you have a complaint and no one's listening, don't shout louder; join forces with peers to make a united case to those in charge.

Second, use the "social style" to communicate: consistently friendly and animated, with a forward lean. This is particularly helpful for women, who risk being thought incompetent if they're too submissive and dislikeable if they're too dominant.

Third, act to serve your interests, not your ego. It feels good to rail against injustice, but this rarely furthers your goals. Better to spend your energy seeking a way forward—or, if all else fails, a way out.

“If you're bent on systemic change, find others to ally with.

**Duncan:** The most effective leaders, you say, focus on three "people factors." You identify those three factors as clarity, unity, and agility. What are some best practices in embedding those factors in an organization's culture?

**Davis:** Most business leaders get that attending to people factors is important, but whenever there's a need for speed (which of course is always), they think there's no time for it. In fact, research shows that fast-moving, innovative teams pay more attention to the "soft stuff"—creating alignment, building morale, fostering learning—than the laggards do.

But it's not about just being nice. Thinking long-term is essential. Mencius (one of my twelve sages) tells the story of Lord Ch'an, a prime minister who had two rivers in his



territory across which he would ferry passengers himself. “He was certainly kind,” Mencius says, “but he didn’t know how to govern.” Instead of serving as ferryman, he should have arranged for footbridges and cart bridges to be built. Then travelers could have moved about easily, and he would have had time to run the country.

Mencius says, “It’s impossible to govern by making people happy one at a time. There aren’t enough hours in the day.” I would add that it’s impossible to influence by focusing on immediate results alone. You have to understand and cultivate the upstream sources or drivers of results. You have to build footbridges.



### **Personal application:**

- How can you be more influential with people by encouraging them to express their honest objections and doubts?
- In what circumstances could you—and should you—take the time to develop a shared outlook with others?
- In your important relationships, how can you develop your “people factors” of clarity, unity and ability?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Hugh Blane**

## Transform Your Mindset, Transform Your Results



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

A balancing act faced by many leaders involves transactional and transformational leadership. It's a balancing act worthy of effort.

Many leaders have an abundance of good *transactional* skills. What they often need is more *transformational* skills—the ability to create a psychological case for action as well as a technical and business case for action.

So, what's the difference?

A *transactional* leader focuses on routine and regimented activities. He invests most of his energy in making sure meetings run on time, that administrative details are properly handled, and that completed tasks are noted on checklists. A *transformational* leader focuses primarily on initiating and “managing” change. He influences people to improve, to stretch, and to redefine what’s possible.

Transactional things involve making sure the train runs on time. Transformational things involve ensuring that the train is on the right track, that it’s headed in the right direction, and that everyone who wants to make the trip has a ticket.

All that may sound like academic gobbledygook. But in the real world of real work, it matters.

Business strategist Hugh Blane lends helpful perspective to the topic. His book is *Principles of Transformational Leadership: Create a Mindset of Passion, Innovation, and Growth*.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** You write about a mindset you call JD TM— Just Doing the Minimum. What contributes to that perspective among individual workers and in a workplace culture?

**Hugh Blane:** The number one contributor is lack of purpose. For employees or leaders to engage in doing their very best work they must have fallen in love with a hope, dream or aspiration that, when done well, creates value for customers. When they do, they are more enthusiastic, exert more energy, and are vastly more persistent in overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers to underperformance. These are the employees who are running *to* work in the morning because of the contribution they want to make.



Hugh Blane

There are also employees who are running *from* work at the end of the day. They run from work because they are not passionate about their work, so the demands of their job become a burden. These employees don’t have a purpose that’s compelling so they do only enough work to keep their jobs and not get fired. But, there is no fire in the belly and they are simply going through the motions of work.

**Duncan:** What are a leader’s most productive tools in combating a JD TM mindset?

**Blane:** Leaders must have a leadership purpose that is noble, uplifting and that enables employee flourishing. This eradicates the JD TM mindset and converts an employee’s mindset away from accepting the minimum to encouraging the maximum.

**Duncan:** Many people simply feel overwhelmed in the workplace. What contributes to that and what can leaders do to help relieve the pressure without compromising productivity?

**Blane:** There are three contributors to feeling overwhelmed. A negative mindset, an indifferent heartset, and a poor skillset. A negative mindset says “this isn’t fair,” an indifferent heartset says “I’m really not committed to my company and my work,” and a poor skillset says “I don’t know how to do this.” When all three are present the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed is guaranteed.

Leaders can relieve these feelings as well as improve productivity by clearly communicating their leadership purpose and enabling employees to find theirs. When employees have a clear purpose, they’re no longer concerned about fairness, they’re concerned with doing their best work. Their mindset then shifts to the belief that work has the potential to make the lives of other employees or customers easier or better. When employees experience such a mindset shift, they embrace continual learning and growth. This leads to both a reduced sense of being overwhelmed as well as increased skillset and productivity.

**Duncan:** In many work environments, everything is a priority, so nothing is truly a priority. How can leaders identify and focus on the two or three priorities that provide the greatest leverage to sustainable success?

**Blane:** The number one priority of most leaders is accomplishing their to-do list. For many, they have become “a human doing” as opposed to a “human being.” The good news about priority-setting is that increased effort isn’t the answer. The answer is a

“When employees have a clear purpose, they’re no longer concerned about fairness, they’re concerned with doing their best work.”

ruthless determination to take one action every day that is aligned with their purpose and their promises.

How does a leader do this? One simple exercise is to create a to-be list. This is a list of the top three to five traits, attributes or values that are non-negotiable. This list helps prioritize the type of day a leader wants and directs their energies beyond their ever-expanding list of priorities on their to-do list. Every leader has a finite amount of time and resources. It’s only by crafting the

type of day a leader wants to create that they can prioritize their day and take action to create it.

**Duncan:** What role does praising play in effective leadership, and what are the key ingredients?

**Blane:** Praising is rooted in one essential leadership imperative. Praising builds the confidence employees have in themselves as well as in you as a leader worthy of being followed. Praising also encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and learning while also infusing hope and optimism into the workplace.

Praising becomes invaluable when it comes to enabling employees to flourish. The three ingredients of effective praising are: be sincere, be timely, be specific.

Praise must be sincere. Praise that is mechanical, obligatory, and/or delivered in a rote manner is seen as artificial and contrived and fosters a relationship gap that undermines giving full effort to performance.

Praise must be timely. The most potent form of praise is the type that's delivered in real time. Catching employees doing something noteworthy and commenting on it immediately raises the well-being not only of the person receiving the praise, but creates a culture in which appreciation and continued growth become strategic assets.

Praise must also be specific. Generalized praise such as, "Good job!" pales in comparison to specific praise such as, "Your project management work on the Carson project was incredibly helpful. You lived out our strategic goal of improving our customer experience and let the client feel confident and at ease with your performance. They said they loved working with us. That was really good work."



### **Personal application:**

- Be honest with yourself. Do you ever have a JD TM (Just Doing the Minimum) mindset? If so, what seems to trigger it? What can you do to replace that mindset with one that's more purpose-driven?
- In addition to your typical daily to-do list, what would (should) you put on your daily to-be list?
- What could be the result if you faithfully pursue each day's to-be list?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Mary Camuto**

## Chaos at Work? You Can Learn to Manage It



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

We seem to be surrounded by rah rah on the virtues of “smart” work and how to manage that finite resource called time. Yet there’s dangerous irony involved. While technology is supposed to make our lives simpler, billions of hours are wasted every day by people staring at their “smart” phones.



But that's a subject for another day. (Or, you may simply refer to the chapters in the Balance section of this book.)

A challenge that seems to be universal involves how to deal with workplace chaos. Regardless of good intentions, many people struggle with workday overload: too many emails, too many meetings, competing deadlines, office drama. Some can't recall the last time they looked forward to Monday.

Mary Camuto feels your pain. She's a leadership and organization development consultant who's "been there." And she offers some sound advice in her book *Make the Most of Your Workday: Be More Productive, Engaged, and Satisfied As You Conquer the Chaos at Work*.

The word "chaos" caught my attention. So, I talked with Mary to explore her thinking on how to regroup, reframe, and bounce back from common challenges in the workplace.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** Your approach to sanity in the workplace makes good use of Stephen Covey's model of the Circle of Influence versus the Circle of Concern. How can understanding that difference help someone deal with chaos at work?

**Mary Camuto:** We all need some control and influence over aspects of workday challenges and chaos. Covey's model separates problems into three categories—our direct control, indirect control, or no control. Regardless of the problem category, we have a circle of influence. This is the exciting core of workday sanity.

Despite some serious workday concerns—a supervisor leaving; workload increasing; number of emails and meetings; priorities that keep changing—Stephen Covey's work gives us hope because we can adopt a proactive mindset to help reduce our circle of concern.



Mary Camuto

"What can I do about this?" is a great question. "What can I do to manage my worries about the new supervisor" or "Which tool could I propose to the team to reduce emails?" The larger our circle of influence, the greater chance for sanity.

**Duncan:** You write about negative drama on the job. What can people do to keep someone else's drama from encroaching on their own peace of mind and productivity?

**Camuto:** First, recognize that drama can be seductive and even a distraction from "work." Become aware of this and then assess how much time and energy you give over to being part of someone else's drama—listening, giving your opinions and then spreading the drama story to others. We are human, after all, and some drama is part of working together. However, we need to recognize how much time we spend in workday drama. Keep an informal

“drama log” similar to an interruption log. Figure out how much time you give to your own drama or someone else’s conflict.

Next, assess the impact of your drama participation. Ask yourself if someone’s drama is hurting the quality of your workday?

Here’s what I mean: Is your own work focus/quality in jeopardy because of people popping in to vent, debrief, or ask for help? We make choices. You can be there for someone all the time but there is a cost. You may lose your own focus and positive energy and end up staying later at work as a result.

Another important cost is that we may not be aware that we have formed negative beliefs from stories about other people. We need to balance being there for people with our own workday needs.

**Duncan:** What are some steps to increasing self-awareness, and what role does self-awareness play in a person’s satisfaction at work?

**Camuto:**

**Step 1.** Know your mood, mindset, physical energy and emotional level as you get ready for your workday. Pay attention to your feelings, thoughts, beliefs, schedule, reactions, and enthusiasm. What are the day’s most important priorities, challenges (such as back-to-back meetings), and bright spots? What triggers do you know of so you can anticipate possible responses that will be in your best interests? Recognize your body language. Do you tap your foot when annoyed? Do you get short-tempered when hungry, or need to see a friendly face? Do you need a mindset change first thing in your workday? Even mindset checks throughout the day can be good to help us tap into our self-awareness.

**Step 2.** Ask for feedback. For example, how did you come across in the meeting? Did your tension show in your voice tone, body posture or responses to questions?

**Step 3.** Identify and regularly revisit both your short- and long-term needs, goals, and dreams. We can work toward fulfillment and even reframe setbacks as advantages if we are aware of what we want and where we want to go.

“We may not be aware that we have formed negative beliefs from stories about other people.

**Duncan:** For years there’s been a lot of talk about “work-life balance.” What does that really mean, and what questions should people ask themselves to honestly assess their own balance?

**Camuto:** This term means different things for different people and that is

partly why it's so challenging for organizations, leaders, and employees to make work-life balance a reality.

What do individuals need for their engagement at work and happiness outside of work? Here are some sample guiding questions:

- Am I giving enough time, energy and focus to my family, work, and myself at this point in my life?
- Do I bring work home because it's interesting or because I'm overloaded?
- Does balance require leaving by 6 pm each day and not responding to texts and email 24 hours a day?
- Is there a part of me that's happy with the long work hours, promotion track, and adrenalin rush?
- Does balance require working from home? How flexible does my work schedule really need to be?
- What will traveling five days a week for six months mean for me and my family?

The challenge is determining the balance between what you need and want with your organization's culture, values, expectations, rewards and policies. Like any relationship, sometimes we have a good match, often we compromise, and sometimes we decide to search for some- thing different.

People's needs, motivations and desires change throughout their lives. This makes a regular work-life balance assessment helpful.

**Duncan:** Prioritizing work tasks is a common difficulty, especially in an unreasonable atmosphere where "everything is a priority." How can people productively deal with such a challenge?

**Camuto:** There are many unreasonable work atmospheres out there and we have to remain calm. We must understand prioritization and communicate strategically.

Here's what I mean:

1. Remain calm and steady so you can focus. This is first line of defense when facing "everything is a priority" thinking. The truth is that not everything is the highest priority. There are many priorities. Some may be urgent, but many are in reality less so.
2. Prioritization requires both short- and long-term thinking— asking questions, posing alternatives, thinking about risks associated with trying to do too many things at once. I like matrix tools because they are visual, fast and can be used to pull people together for quick discussion. If everything needs to get done, ask to

what level of quality, time and at what cost? Use the answers to the questions to prioritize.

3. On a personal level, each person needs to be a confident, assertive and strategic communicator:
  - We can pilot your idea with the next class and here are the advantages versus the risks of redoing the current design.
  - I can put this current project on the back burner and start your new request right now.
  - Let's do a quick assessment of both projects and deadlines.

**Duncan:** How can clarity of purpose help people deal with chaos at work?

**Camuto:** Consider purpose as a driving force and framework for satisfaction at work and in our personal lives. Let's start at the workday level. To prioritize at work, I need to understand my role, goals, team and overall organization. That means when I'm confronted with multiple and conflicting priorities, I can use these to help me decide among pressing requests and demands. Is my purpose to always complete your work or to focus on my major tasks and responsibilities? This may lead me to the choice to turn down your incomplete deliverable so I can remain focused on my work.

**Duncan:** What's a good way to "just say no" when the workload becomes unmanageable on the job?

**Camuto:** My best tip is to have a plan ready and say "no" before you reach your breaking point. Saying no is necessary at times for quality, focus, work-life balance, compliance, and better work relationships.

Here are some language examples:

- "I'll be unable to attend the meeting and will follow-up with Joe so that I don't miss anything."
- "I need to spend more time on the design since it's so complex and needs concentration; I'll respond to your question this afternoon."
- "Your request has some risks. Here are your options, and I can refer to you to the safety manual for more detail behind the policy."
- "I can take this on next month or I can suggest some alternatives from another department."



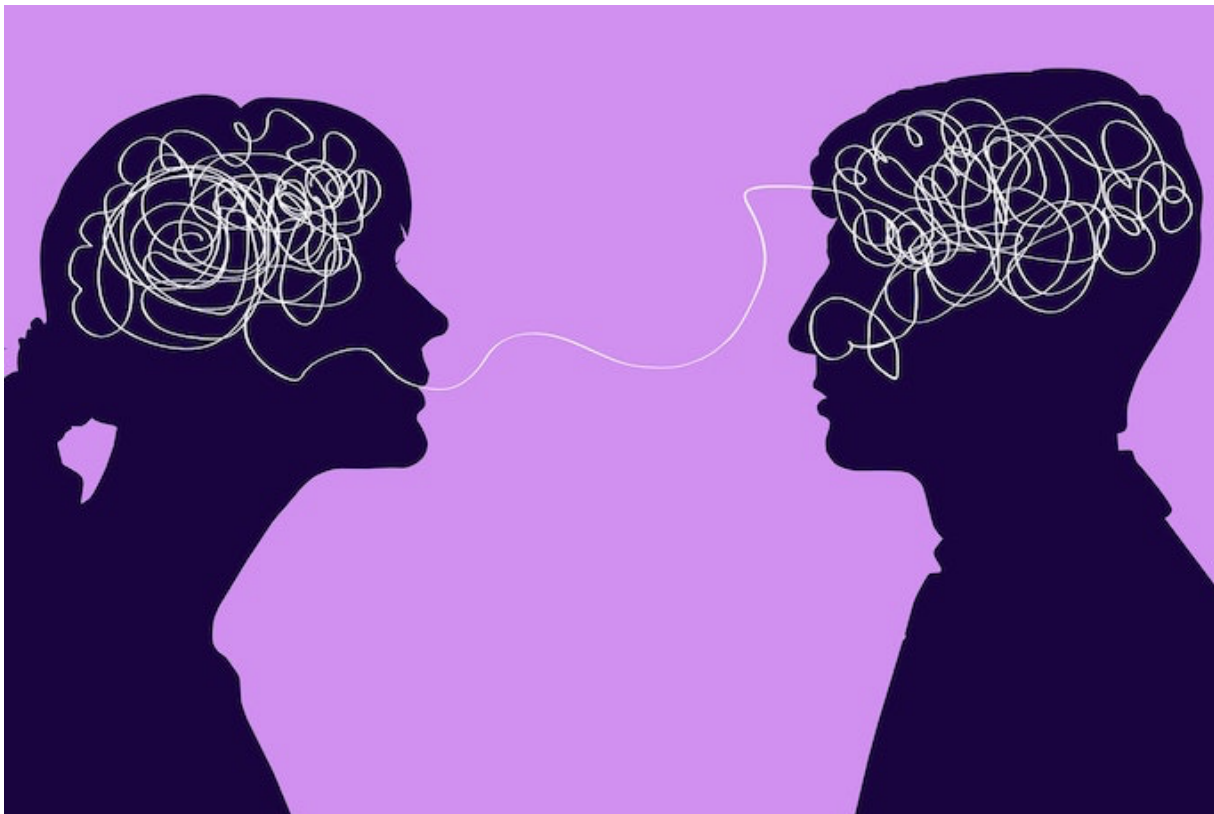
### **Personal application:**

- How can the Circle of Influence vs. Circle of Concern model help you in handling chaos in your workplace?
- Which of your habits could be making you more susceptible to the effect of workplace drama? What can you do to ensure that other people's drama doesn't disrupt your peace of mind or the quality of your work?
- Which of Mary's suggestions regarding self-awareness and clarity of purpose can be most helpful to you?



Exclusive conversation with  
**John Stoker**

## Overcoming Fake Talk: Put Your Best Voice Forward



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

If you want to maximize your impact at work, you must put your best voice forward.

Why? Because even if you have excellent credentials and technical skills, you add your greatest value by interacting well with other people.



We live in an interdependent world. Trouble is, a lot of people in this age of texting and email haven't mastered the art of good conversation. I'm not referring to the ability to chat somebody up about the weather or last weekend's ballgame. A lot of people can do that. I'm referring to truly meaningful interaction between people.

True dialogue is not pie-in-the-sky, let's all-hold-hands-and-sing stuff. Neither is it a touch-feely, warm-and-fuzzy, soft-headed approach to thinking and interacting. Open and honest dialogue is a key ingredient of high performance and strong results.

To learn more about the what, why, and how of effective conversations, I talked with John Stoker. He's author of the book *Overcoming Fake Talk: How to Hold REAL Conversations That Create Respect, Build Relationships, and Get Results*. John provides coaching for many top companies including Lockheed Martin, Turner Broadcasting, Eastman Kodak, AT&T, and Cigna Health.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** A lot of people think they're pretty good at talking, yet they don't get the results they want. What's the most common cause of this disconnect?

**John Stoker:** Many people engage in what I call fake talk. That can include explanations that are vague or unclear, representations that are intentionally misleading, or even a conscious or unconscious withholding of all or part of a person's meaning. Unfortunately, the person often doesn't find out that they've been engaging in fake talk until it becomes clear that they're getting results they don't want or didn't expect.

**Duncan:** Why does this disconnect occur?

**Stoker:** Because people think the words they use are the communication. In reality, the actual words we use comprise only a small percentage of the meaning we communicate. Much more information is communicated by tone, non-verbal behaviors, individual styles, the context of the conversation, and the nature of the relationships.



John Stoker

**Duncan:** What's an example?

**Stoker:** Someone recently told me that when her director stands and speaks to the team for 30 minutes, afterwards no one in the room can explain what the director meant or what he wanted from the team. Consequently, the director's message is subject to a whole spectrum of interpretations. Adding to the disconnect, of course, is the fact that none of his employees is willing to ask for clarification for fear of appearing stupid or incompetent,

or of causing offense. As you can see, there's little likelihood that this director will get what he really wants.

**Duncan:** What are some of the keys to holding a conversation that produces the results you want while maintaining mutual respect?

**Stoker:** Everyone wants respect. What they often fail to consider is the impact that respect and the quality of the relationship have on results. I recently received an email from a man who had read my book, *Overcoming Fake Talk*. He had a great story to tell. Originally, he was skeptical about my claim that respect and relationship have a huge impact on results. Then he had an eye-opening experience at a car dealership where he had gone to get his windshield replaced.

An unfortunate misunderstanding resulted in an altercation with the service manager, and this customer stormed out of the dealership. Sitting in his vehicle, he remembered what I had written about respect, relationship, and results, and decided to test it out. He went back to the manager and apologized. By the end of the interaction, not only had his windshield been repaired with complementary labor, but had also made a connection with a fellow customer in the waiting room—who coincidentally turned out to be someone he had been trying to make a business connection with for over six months. Because he took action to improve the respect and the relationship in this encounter, his results improved exponentially.

**Duncan:** Many people tend to judge others by their behavior while they want others to judge them by their intentions. How can effective conversation help build and maintain trust?

**Stoker:** First, have you ever met a person that you immediately knew you could trust the first time you saw them? There was just “something” about them or something they exuded that made you feel safe to some degree.

You might ask yourself whether you could be or become that kind of person—are you *trustworthy*? Do you speak and act as if you genuinely have people’s best interest at heart? Or might people accurately sense that you have another agenda?

Second, the underlying assumption behind this question is that people tend to judge and think negatively about others. This can be addressed by a skills I refer to as the ability to “Recognize and Suspend” one’s own thinking. When I suspend my thinking, I consciously set aside my preconceived judgments, assessments, and opinions about another person and their behavior in order to understand what they’re trying to express. I operate from the assumption that the person is rational and has something of value to contribute (even if I have to dig for it). This means that I deliberately ask questions and listen to what the person is saying.

The bottom line is that there’s a genuine attitude of respect in the interaction, which is the necessary basis for establishing and developing trust.

Think of trust as an oak tree. You have to plant the acorn, then nurture the seedling until the tree develops a sturdy trunk. Trust is developed over time. Respect is the seed you have to plant.

**Duncan:** Because talking is one of the most visible things a leader does, what advice do you offer for making the most of their conversations?

**Stoker:** Occasionally leaders are required to hold important and/or difficult conversations. But an effective leader holds seemingly “inconsequential” conversations at any given time of any given day.

When it comes to important or difficult conversations, any leader who fails to prepare really does prepare to fail. Here are skills for holding any conversation and a process for using those skills. They can all be distilled into three points that should become second nature to leaders:

**Become aware of your assumptions.** Most of us are unaware our assumptions about other people and the situations in which we encounter them. Take the time to clarify your assumptions about people and their performance. This will help you

“Do you speak and act as if you genuinely have people’s best interest at heart?”

determine whether your thinking is even accurate—and it will become more accurate if you can identify evidence or specific facts that support your assumptions.

For example, let’s say an employee consistently turns in reports late. You may assume this person is lazy, an assumption that would

naturally color your interactions with them. However, if you ask yourself whether you have data that *absolutely* supports the “lazy” label, you might realize that you do not. If you look objectively, you may find that the person is always waiting for missing or late information, which in turn affects their production of the report. Or perhaps you have an internal IT problem that gets in the way of delivering the report. The bottom line is that if you do not take time to explore the evidence you have, your thinking may be wildly inaccurate and sabotage the entire working relationship.

**Keep your end goal in mind.** Ask yourself, “What is the purpose for holding this conversation?” I often say that effective leaders think about their own thoughts. If you don’t know what you want, then it doesn’t matter much what you say, because you are unlikely to get any effective results. You need to be very specific and clear about your intent for holding the conversation.

Once you have clarified your assumptions and identified your intent, then you’re ready to hold the conversation.

I recommend a four-step process for holding any difficult conversation: Initiate, Discover, Connect, and Build. These four steps allow you to describe the current situation, gain understanding, connect with the individual’s perspective, and build accountability in creating the outcome you desire.

**Duncan:** What can leaders do to help make the principles and practices you advocate become the “default” or automatic behaviors in their organizations?

**Stoker:** First you have to learn and internalize the skills and processes for holding real conversations.

Second, you need to teach those same skills and processes to members of your team.

Finally, you need to work together to create a culture where you deliberately demonstrate and practice the skills that lead to increased candor, collaboration, and contribution in achieving results.

Then practice, practice, practice to make it permanent.



### **Personal application:**

- Be honest—how often do you allow “fake talk” to masquerade as real conversation?
- In what circumstances could you benefit from honestly challenging your own assumptions about someone else’s intentions?
- What important conversations do you need to have in which you can use the skills outlined here?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Liane Davey**

## Morphing Teamwork: From Buzzword to Reality



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

Nearly everyone talks about teamwork, perhaps because the word conjures up feel-good images of cooperation and locked arms. But honestly, “teamwork” rarely seems to produce Kumbaya moments. In fact, getting the most out of a team is often as hard as pushing water uphill with a rake: lots of activity, but only marginal results.

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be that way, especially if you follow the counsel of team effectiveness expert Liane Davey.

With a Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology (University of Waterloo), Liane is highly sought by key executives at some of North America's leading financial services, consumer good, high tech, and healthcare organizations. Which goes to prove that teamwork issues are universal.

Regardless of your business, my bet is that you can get a boatload of valuable takeaways from this conversation with Liane.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** In many organizations, “teamwork” seems to be more common as a buzzword than as an actual practice. What’s the key to making genuine teamwork a reality?

**Liane Davey:** It sure is. Every time I see one of those trite teamwork posters with the rowers hanging on the wall, I want to rip it down. Teamwork is hard work, and it takes a lot more than nice posters on the wall.

The first thing that’s usually missing is a clear mandate for each team. Each and every team should be able to articulate why they are a team and to describe the unique value they add together. This mandate should focus on the things they can only do together. It should strip away individual work and accountabilities and focus solely on team outputs.



Liane Davey

Just creating clarity around why the individuals need to work together and what they need to accomplish goes a long way. Once the mandate of the team is spelled out, most teams have a rude awakening about how much time they’ve been wasting just going around the table giving updates. So, then there’s work to do to remove individual work from the team table to make room for the added value discussions, debates, and decisions that haven’t been happening.

Once the team is clear on its purpose, there are many skills and deliberate practices the team needs to adopt to make sure they create a whole that’s greater than the sum of the parts. Common issues are poor listening, drowning out minority perspectives, diluting energy with too many priorities, and shying away from conflict. All of those can be fixed in a team that’s motivated.

**Duncan:** What are some of the warning signs that “teamwork” is little more than a hopeful slogan in an organization?

**Davey:** In my work I talk about different categories of toxic teams and the warning signs that your team might be getting into trouble. You’d be surprised how varied the issues are. Let me give you a quick idea of each of them.

**Crisis Junkies:** If your team has started to use crises as the way of forcing alignment and silencing different perspectives, that’s a problem. Although we often



see these teams at award ceremonies receiving adoration and praise for pulling something out of the fire, it's time to recognize that they are the ones who ignored the smoke in the first place.

**Spectators:** You might not think of this team as toxic, but groups that are just a collection of relationships with the boss aren't teams at all. When everyone just shows up, reports in, and tunes out, they miss the chance to get anything more from the team than they would have got from the individuals working in isolation.

**Bobble Heads:** Bobble heads are even scarier than Spectator teams because they introduce the risky behavior and bad decision making that's associated with groupthink. Whether it's an overly controlling boss or just too many team members who think too much alike, if no one ever rocks the boat, you should be very worried. But you might look at a Bobble Head team and hold them up as the paragon of virtue ("look, just like the happy people on the poster!")

**Bleeding Backs:** Sure, these teams look great when you peer in through the window because everyone is nodding—but wait until you talk to team members behind closed doors. Passive-aggressive gossip and back-channel decision making mean no decision ever sticks and no plan gets implemented.

**Duncan:** What are some best practices for replacing a silo mentality with a spirit of collaboration?

**Davey:** First, do the work of defining the things that the team can only do together. Once people see the mission critical mandate of the team and their role in achieving it, the silo is pretty clearly insufficient. Making people realize they need the team isn't too difficult.

The harder part is getting people to change their mindset. In *You First*, I talk about the ugly, biased assumptions we make about people's intent. This baggage prevents us from being open to collaboration. I share a simple approach to help you short circuit those negative assumptions and to replace them with the kind of curiosity that promotes effective communication and collaboration.

**Duncan:** Some leaders claim that "too much" teamwork merely slows down decision making. Do you agree?

**Davey:** Yes! Too much teamwork, just like too much collaboration, can be over-doing it. There are plenty of tasks that we do more effectively and efficiently as individuals than as teams. That's why I put so much attention on defining the very small set of things the group can accomplish only as a team. Then we don't have to put all the energy into staying open minded, communicating effectively, listening intently, for every task; because those things take huge amounts of energy. So first, only use teamwork only where it's fit for purpose.

Second, many team leaders abdicate their responsibility to match the decision-making approach to the decision at hand. I see way too many situations where leaders default to consensus-based decision making. That should be used only in very rare cases where

complete buy-in is needed. In many situations, we could go faster with team input and then a single decision maker. The same team leaders who are whining about how slow teamwork is are usually the ones who aren't willing to say, "thanks for your input, now I'm going to make the decision."

**Duncan:** A lot of people seem to do back flips to avoid conflict. What role do you think conflict plays in practicing effective teamwork?

**Davey:** Productive conflict—the uncomfortable friction between differing points of view—is absolutely essential to effective teamwork. I'm much more likely to help a team *increase* the amount of conflict they are having than to decrease it. Really vigorously wrestling with different perspectives, contradictory data, paradoxical realities—that's the sweet spot for teams. If the issue doesn't require that, it's probably better resolved by an individual.

“Many team leaders abdicate their responsibility to match the decision-making approach to the decision at hand.

Now, conflict doesn't mean screaming and vicious, personal attacks. I spend a lot of time teaching people how to have *productive* conflict. That requires focusing on what I call the “two truths,” which asks people to add their reality to the reality of others instead of trying to trump someone's ideas.

I also recommend asking about hypotheticals or playing out scenarios to help the person see your perspective. There are lots of ways for nice people to have conflict. The most important thing is to try disagreeing and to see that it's not so bad: you probably don't get your head ripped off; you probably don't get fired. But there is a mythology built up in organizations that says disagreeing or challenging isn't acceptable. It's usually groundless, but the fear endures.

**Duncan:** Because honest self-evaluation can be so helpful, what are the three or four top questions you encourage leaders to ask themselves regarding teamwork?

**Davey:** Rodger, I'm going to cheat and give you five sets of questions.

1. Start with a Positive Assumption: What are the assumptions you're making about people? How do those detract from your ability to hear them and get value from them?
2. Add your Full Value: What is your unique contribution to the team? How do your experiences, your relationships, your style, your traits all offer something as unique as your fingerprint to the team?
3. Amplify Other Voices: How do I react to a perspective that's different from mine? How can I amplify minority perspectives instead of drowning them out?

4. Know When to Say No: What am I saying 'yes' to that is diluting my attention and making me a less reliable member of the team? As a leader, how am I diluting the attention of my team members?
5. Embrace Productive Conflict: What more could I do to get the benefit of productive conflict working for my team? How can I model healthy, open, vigorous disagreement?



### **Personal application:**

- Of the “toxic teams” listed here, which ones (if any) exist in your organization? What can you personally do to help get things back on the right track?
- Which of your own assumptions could be contributing to weak teamwork?
- How can you make good use of the self-evaluation questions suggested here?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Geoffrey Colvin**

## Afraid You'll Be Replaced by a Robot? Relax



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

Even the most ardent pacifist can learn a few things from today's military warriors.

In past generations, much of military training involved movie-like activities such as hand-to-hand combat and lobbing grenades. While such instruction is still relevant, much of today's warfare requires a different kind of coaching. And it doesn't involve guns and explosives.

In places like Afghanistan and Iraq, American military personnel have often faced insurgents who appear to be civilians. Many engagements occur not on battlefields but

in villages. Success often hinges on the kind of human interactions most of us experience every day: conversations, negotiations, even idle chitchat. Living, breathing people—not technology—are needed to judge trustworthiness, intentions, and values based on the most subtle details of someone’s behavior.

It’s all about empathy, something even the smartest robot can’t duplicate.

Ours is an age of brilliant machines and rapid changes in the nature of work. Computers can drive cars, scurry helpfully around offices and factories, and even perform some surgeries. But fear not. Regardless of advances in technology, there will always be a need for skills that only people can provide.

Bestselling author Geoff Colvin digs artfully into this issue in *Humans Are Underrated: What High Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will*. Senior editor at large for *Fortune*, Colvin is one of America’s most respected journalists. He lectures widely and appears daily on the CBS Radio Network, reaching seven million listeners each week.

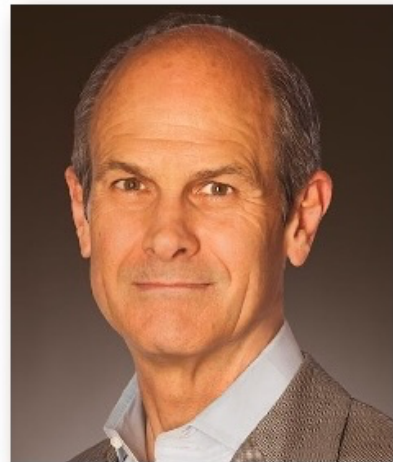
**Rodger Dean Duncan:** Despite the impressive things computers can do, what are some of the activities humans will insist be performed by other humans?

**Geoffrey Colvin:** As long as humans are in charge of the world, we can identify three categories of humans-only work.

First is work for which we’ll demand that some identifiable person or persons be accountable—making court decisions, commanding troops, leading organizations. Technology is making strides in all those areas and more, but in many roles we insist on human accountability.

Second is work that involves constituencies with differing and maybe conflicting perspectives; that includes virtually all decision-making and problem-solving in organizations.

The third category is work that we will require from humans simply because it’s in our deepest nature. We will insist on hearing the diagnosis from a human doctor, for example, even if technology made the diagnosis, because we want to talk about it—perhaps just to talk and know we’re being heard by a human being.



**Geoffrey Colvin**

**Duncan:** The term “knowledge worker” was in vogue for decades. But today, you suggest, “relationship worker” better defines the greatest value people can bring to the workplace. Give us some examples.

**Colvin:** Consider the work of a financial adviser. For decades he or she interviewed the client for basic information, gathered data, analyzed it, and generated a plan. Today,

software does all of those things faster, cheaper, and better than humans. But personal finance is deeply emotional. When the stock market crashes and a client calls the adviser in a panic, wanting to sell everything, the adviser performs a hugely valuable service by calming the client and explaining how a different course would be better. That service can't be performed without a personal relationship.

Similarly, research shows that patients who believe their doctor really cares about them have better outcomes. This same theme—the value of the relationship—also applies in job functions that are entirely within the organization, not just in roles that interact with customers.

**Duncan:** You say there's a rising demand for social skills in today's marketplace, but there's a shrinking supply of those skills. Why are social skills more needed, and why do few people seem to possess them?

**Colvin:** Technology is rapidly taking over more work from humans—not just the middle-skill jobs of factory and clerical work, as in the past, but also lower-skill work like restaurant jobs and higher-skill work done by lawyers and accountants, for example.

In that environment, social skills are becoming more economically valuable, as I've explained. Yet the supply of those skills is declining as we spend more time with technology and less time with each other.

**Duncan:** Various studies show that empathy is on the decline. To what extent can this decline be attributed to the rise in social media use?

**Colvin:** Research shows that increased screen time in general is correlated with reduced empathy, and social media in particular seems to be a significant factor. It's ironic—this technology that connects people is actually diminishing our ability to empathize with other humans. Facebook friends are not friends as that word has been under- stood up to now.

**Duncan:** You suggest that true empathy is a skill, not a trait. How can people rebuild their “empathy muscle” so they're better able (and more inclined) to be empathic?

**Colvin:** The best way is simply to practice. Make an effort to interact in person. Face the other person squarely and look them in the eye—those things are important. Listen more than you talk, and listen without even thinking about what you might say in response (which can be difficult); just immerse yourself in what the other person is saying.

Do this every day. After a week you'll be amazed by the experiences you've had, I promise.

**Duncan:** Many business people hail the advent of online teams that use email, texting, and social media. What dangers do you see in too much reliance on such technology?



**Colvin:** Remote teams are not going away, and there are good reasons for them. But if the team members never interact in person, face to face, they will eventually cease to be a team in any normal sense of the word. It's vital that they get together physically, even if only once or twice a year, to rebuild the relationships that can be nourished only in that way. Such teams are much more effective.

**Duncan:** You tell how the World Bank discovered its vast trove of data was not available to people who really needed it. From this example, what can we learn about the power of a good story in connecting people?

**Colvin:** This was an experience reported by Stephen Denning, a World Bank official who went on to a new career as an expert on the power of storytelling. He found that telling the right story could change people's minds and inspire people to action in a way that charts and graphs cannot.

“Increased screen time in general is correlated with reduced empathy.

As we're increasingly inundated by data, that reality is more valuable than ever. Storytelling is being recognized as one of the most important human skills—which it actually has been for thousands of years.

**Duncan:** There seems to be plenty of evidence supporting the notion that “If you want innovation, you need interaction.” But as Marissa Mayer and her colleagues at Yahoo discovered, that philosophy can be a challenge to implement. What are the keys to making “interaction” work?

**Colvin:** The evidence is overwhelming that people are more creative and innovative when they're physically together. Marissa Mayer made headlines in 2013 when she required that Yahoo employees stop working at home and come to the office, because the company needed more innovative ideas. It wasn't enough to save the company, but she was right to do what she did.

Just remember that physical proximity alone is not enough. Research shows that creative collaboration also demands deep trust between those involved, and trust isn't built overnight.

**Duncan:** What can people and companies do to build the high-value human skills that are so critical to success in today's workplace? And how can they best position themselves for the future?

**Colvin:** There are many specific things.

- Model the right behaviors—communicating in the richest possible way (talking face-to-face is best, texting is worst).

- “Running toward” the human problems in your life and work rather than running away from them.
- Being candid in talking about problems.
- Defending your organization’s human values ferociously. More broadly, embrace the reality that high-value human skills are fundamentally different from the high-value skills of the past 200 years.

You don’t learn these things in a classroom or from a book. But they are trainable, and they are being trained today in companies, business schools, hospitals, and, believe it or not, the U.S. military, which trains these skills better than any other institution I know.

Success is becoming less about what you know and more about what you’re like. Celebrate that fact—that we’re being asked to become more essentially human, to be the creatures we once were and were always meant to be. Ultimately, it’s wonderful news.



### **Personal application:**

- What specific steps are you taking to enhance your relationship-building skills?
- Who are your role models? What behaviors do you see in them that you could emulate to boost your value in the workplace?
- How can you—in a genuine way—increase your empathy toward others?



Exclusive conversation with  
**Kelly Palmer and David Blake**

## Are You Ready for Prime Time? Reinvent How You Learn



**By Rodger Dean Duncan**

Mark Twain said he never let his schooling interfere with his education. That sentiment feels especially relevant today.

In an age when information access enables companies to blossom (or disappear) seemingly overnight, there's more need than ever to re-examine our approaches to education.

Does a university degree automatically open the doors it once did? Is trade school the best bet for many tech-savvy up-and-comers? What role do e-learning and tools like audiobooks and podcasts play in not only preparing people for the workplace but helping them keep pace with rapid change?

These and many related questions are addressed in *The Expertise Economy: How the Smartest Companies Use Learning to Engage, Compete and Succeed*.

Authors Kelly Palmer and David Blake represent a rising generation of smart disrupters who are making a mark in multiple industries. Kelly, former Chief Learning Officer at LinkedIn, is regarded as one of the world's top experts on adult learning. David is co-founder and CEO of Degreed, an online learning platform helping individuals and businesses build the skills needed to invent the future. In addition to helping more than three million individuals "learn smarter," Degreed is now working with dozens of companies ranging from Gap, Caterpillar and General Mills to Harley-Davidson, Intel and Cisco.

Kelly and David talked about the implications of change in the world of learning.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** With regard to preparing themselves to succeed in the real world of real work, many graduates seem to be asleep at the switch. What will it take to persuade the upcoming generation—and their educators—that fresh (and disruptive) approaches to learning are imperative?

**Kelly Palmer:** Students *want* to be prepared for the real world of work and expect that spending 4-5 years learning at a university is going to help them do that. Unfortunately, the university system isn't generally preparing graduates for the real world of work. So, employers are finding that new graduates don't have the basics to succeed in their new jobs.

There's a huge gap between what universities are teaching and what employers expect. Employers were historically left with filling the gaps, but increasingly it's falling to the new graduates to take it upon themselves to learn the skills they need to succeed.

Some universities are using new, fresh approaches to learning and helping students get prepared. The public relations program at the University of Oregon is a great example of how universities can partner with companies to help new graduates prepare for the workforce. Seniors spend their final year working with real companies as clients. Students build a portfolio of their work and present it to a panel of not only PR professors at the university, but also PR professionals in the industry. By the time they've finished the year, the seniors have had exposure working on a real project for an actual company, practiced presenting in a high-pressure situation, and received valuable feedback on their work. This provides them with some of the experience they need to be prepared for the real world of work.



Kelly Palmer

**Duncan:** "Continuous learning" has been a catch phrase for decades. What can business organizations do to make it a reality for their people?

**David Blake:** It's funny how these phrases come in and out of vogue. However, the world has shifted in new and meaningful ways that necessitate continuous learning. It used to be that information was scarce and we relied on large, formal organizations, namely universities and employers to aggregate and administer learning. Today, information is abundant. This has shifted the majority of learning directly to individuals. You add to that these trends in the workforce, specifically acceleration, automation, and digitization, and it results in a world that's forcing both employers and employees to try to keep up. That means continuously learning to build skills for the future.



David Blake

As a rule of thumb, people should be spending 10% of their professional time learning. You've seen the market home in on that requirement. In an interview with the *New York Times*, AT&T's CEO Randall Stephenson said those who aren't spending 5-10 hours learning per week will "obsolete themselves." Simple daily tasks like listening to a podcast or audiobook, reading an article, watching a video, etc. all can help workers gain new skills and insights.

If managers encourage this kind of behavior in their employees, this promotes a culture of continuous learning. It's important to make a habit of learning and to have learning in the flow of work when people really need it. This kind of culture is good for both businesses and employees as workers gain valuable knowledge, or skills and employers gain in efficiency.

**Duncan:** What role do meaning and purpose play in a person's learning?

**Palmer:** People are motivated to learn when they care. People care about learning when they see their work tied to a bigger vision and believe the work they are doing will actually make a difference. Many employees want to see their work connected to a larger purpose. They want to feel that they're making a valuable contribution to themselves, their company, and society. As a result, the best employees are often drawn to companies that are mission-driven and want to have a positive impact on society.

Merging purposeful employees with goal-oriented organizations is a powerful mix. Employees become motivated to learn when they have a bigger sense of purpose and can see how their work ties to the company's mission. They can look beyond immediate tasks and set learning goals that can be a real and significant inspiration for learning. Statistically, employees who have a wider perspective around learning and work find meaning and purpose in learning and focus their career development to contribute positively to society. These employees are more engaged at work and are more likely to persist and barrel through challenges.

**Duncan:** How can companies with large numbers of remote workers (a growing trend) best manage a culture that values learning?

**Blake:** Keeping remote workers engaged and involved in the company learning culture is a challenge but it's far from an impossible one. Degreed is a company with a lot of remote workers (more remote than not) and we model a culture that values learning using our own platform.

The reality today is that employees need to own their own learning and not see learning as a top-down, push activity. Employees are motivated when they get support, encouragement, and guidance from managers and peers as well as setting their own learning goals. Employees can focus on learning goals that help them both get better at their current job and/or get ready for future roles.

“Employees need to own their own learning and not see learning as a top-down, push activity.

Technology can really help, whether it's in the form of learning platforms like Degreed, communication platforms like Slack, or video platforms like Zoom. You can use all of these technologies to help people feel connected even though they may be across the world. Some viable options include promoting self-directed online learning platforms, setting employee-specific learning objectives, or even just asking remote workers how they learn best. These

are steps any employer could take that help keep remote workers involved in the learning culture of a company despite the physical distance.

**Duncan:** One-size-fits-all training clearly has its drawbacks. What do you see as the future of personalized learning?

**Palmer:** If the goal in corporate education is to move away from a one-size-fits-all mentality, we should embrace personalization in learning. This means we should provide learning that's customized for individuals based on their skills and knowledge gaps, their personal and professional goals, their milestones, and their specific interests. That type of learning helps people succeed. The future of learning has to be personalized because we're all at different places in our knowledge and skills. To think otherwise perpetuates the classroom model of lectures that we now know is so ineffective.

Three things can help companies get their employees started on a personalized learning journey. First, employees must be able to assess themselves against the skills they have versus the skills they need. We call that the Skills Quotient. Next, have employees create personalized learning plans where they can track the learning and skills they are building. Third, it's crucial to provide an environment where employees feel safe to both fail and succeed when taking on their new challenges. This means encouraging your employees to learn on-the-job and give people the time they need to develop the skills they've identified.

If you know what skills your employees are trying to build, you can give them assignments that will stretch and challenge them personally and professionally.

**Duncan:** As the size of the digital universe continues to expand at breath-taking rates, how can people deal with content overload?



**Blake:** Content overload can have a particularly pernicious impact on our time. With all the information and content being thrown at us on a daily basis, it's important to know how to deal with it all without burning out. But that's one of the crucial skills of being a good learner today. Information used to be scarce, so you had to be good at pursuing it. Today, information is abundant, so the best learners are those who are disciplined and good at curating the best resources from the noise.

The best way to help overwhelmed learners is to curate content. This gives an employee only the best and most relevant pieces of content for that subject area. It means narrowing down the choices. Content can be curated manually by subject matter experts. For example, if you want to learn about Java, a pathway provides perhaps a video, a podcast, and online course, and an article, plus practice exercises to help someone learn Java.

Another way is to use a technology platform that employs machine learning to serve up content that is most relevant to you, much like what Netflix does for movies or what Spotify does for music. Degreed does this for learning. Once the technology “knows” what you like and what topics you're most interested in, it can continue to personalize your learning experience to give you the content that you need.



### **Personal application:**

- In what ways can you participate in the fast-changing world of learning?
- What resources are available to you for career-focused learning? What is your plan for using those resources?
- How can you stay focused on learning content that will benefit you the most?