



The One Thing You Need to Know: A Personal Interview with Marcus Buckingham
By Cinda Daly

First, Marcus Buckingham told you to break all the rules. Next, he predicted that a strengths revolution would change the way organizations work and prosper. And in his latest book, *The One Thing You Need to Know About Great Managing, Great Leading and Sustained Individual Success*, he dispenses some pretty revolutionary advice: find out what you don't like doing and stop doing it. It sounds simple enough. . . .



Daly. It's a rather radical notion: breaking all the rules. What's the context behind your call to action?

Buckingham. For many years I have studied and talked with the world's best managers to find out what they do differently from average managers. I learned that great managers don't do what everyone else thinks they do, like don't get too close to your people. Be fair and treat everyone the same. Follow the "Golden Rule." Help people identify and overcome their weaknesses so they don't undermine themselves by things they can't do. For every rule you can think of – from playing favorites to treating people differently – great managers break it.

Daly. How about the Golden Rule? In terms of treating people with values like respect and honesty, certainly the golden rule applies universally. What's different with great managers?

Buckingham. Rather than adhere literally to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," great managers follow the platinum rule: "Treat other people how they want to be treated." Some people want praise in private. Some people love pressure and tight time lines. Some people need daily encouragement. Treat everyone differently based upon who they are and how they interact with the world around them.

Daly. What does this approach suggest about the fairness rule and the general practice of treating all the employees in the same way?

Buckingham. Average managers make generalizations about people: sales people all are ego driven; IT people are inward looking and like projects; all entrepreneurs are risk takers. So, average managers play checkers. In checkers, all of the pieces move in the same, homogeneous way. Great managers play chess where each piece moves differently. They understand the differences in each piece and coordinate the team to take advantage of the individual strengths.

Unfortunately, most managers spend most of their time with the people who are struggling in their jobs and not enough time with the people that are doing well. The underlying belief is that you don't have to fix good people. But, it's not about fixing. The challenge is not to transform a "C" player into a "B" player. The challenge is to take an "A" player and blow the ceiling off.

It is counterintuitive, but great managers play favorites and spend the most time with their best people – coaching, challenging, offering new tricks and techniques and new skills. They know that their best

people will grow the most, not the least. They focus on building upon a person's strengths and manage around the weaknesses.

Daly. What's the best thing great managers can do for low performing employees?

Buckingham. If the people simply lack the necessary talent, even after coaching and skills training, don't let them languish in their jobs. If you really care about your people, you will confront their weak performances really early. The worst thing you can do is let them flounder in a job they can't do. Let them go, and tell them specifically why you are firing them.

Daly. You raise another rule that great managers turn upside down – don't get too close to your people.

Buckingham. Yes, on the contrary, get really close to your people. Get to know them really well, even if you learn that someone doesn't like to get too close to anyone. Genuinely care about them. Regardless of the mission statement or goals of the company, performance and job satisfaction come down to who the employee's manager is and how that manager works. When people leave their company – physically or psychologically – they leave managers, not companies. There's great truth in the adage that people join a company and quit their boss.

Daly. What is the one thing great managers do?

Buckingham. Great managers are catalysts for individual performance. They individualize for each and every employee – how they set expectations for them, how they define their job, how they praise them, how they challenge them. Employees who work for great managers can confidently say, "I know what's expected of me. I have an opportunity to do my best every day. And my manager genuinely cares about me."

Daly. Many people use "manager" and "leader" interchangeably, perhaps feeling that part of being a good manager is being a good leader. You make a very clear distinction, however, between managing and leading. What are the key distinctions?

Buckingham. The qualities of each are not mutually exclusive; however, having the qualities of one role does not suggest that you have the qualities of the other. The distinctions are found in the job roles. The key skill of a manager is individualization. It is the manager's job to find out what is unique about each person and capitalize upon each individual's strengths. Simply stated, great managers know how to turn one person's unique talents into performance.

Great leaders do the exact opposite of what managers do. The leader's job is to uncover what is universal, what we share as human beings – love of family, freedom, fear of the unknown – and capitalize upon that. Great leaders tap into higher order truths, create a vision of the future, and rally people around that better future.

Daly. What are the key characteristics of a great leader?

Buckingham. Most people would say great leaders have creativity, integrity, courage. These are really good qualities, and if you have them, you are a formidable human being. But, those qualities do not make you a leader; you could just be living on the courage of your convictions. Leadership implies that one has a large band of followers, people rallying around the big picture and getting things done with fervor.

Daly. How do great leaders take people through the legitimate fear of the unknown and turn it into confidence and spiritedness?

Buckingham. The best leaders know that clarity is the antidote for anxiety. Leaders don't need to tell us to embrace change or tell us change is a force for good. Fear is an adaptive human trait that is a sensible response to the unknown. It is right and human to be fearful of change.

Because most of their conversations are about the future, leaders traffic in this fear of the unknown. The best way you calm people's fear is by being clear. Great leaders pick one value, one organizational strength, one great cause, and talk about it vividly.

For example, one reason George W. Bush won the presidential election is because he defined vividly who he wanted to serve – Americans who want to be free – and he described vividly what America's core strengths are.

John Kerry had plans, many plans. Leaders don't need plans. Managers need plans. Bush is struggling today because he can't vividly describe victory. He can't vividly describe the future.

Daly. What about corporate leaders? Give an example of clarity in action.

Buckingham. Companies are forever saying that their people are their greatest asset. That's entirely too general. Competitors have people, too. Rather than being vague or all-inclusive, leaders talk specifically about which people are their strength and specifically what they are doing. They pick one thing – their innovation, their values, their integrity, their actions – and describe it vividly. They fulfill the followers' needs to have a clear understanding of whom they serve, what their advantages are, how they will win, and what they need to do today.

Daly. In your best seller, Now, Discover Your Strengths, you conclude that as we examine our own roles and duties, we'll discover that the key to maximizing our strengths is based upon our ability to cut out the activities and responsibilities that get in the way of our success. Not all corporate cultures facilitate – or even permit – such assertive behaviors.

Buckingham. Companies have as many cultures as they have managers. And the range of cultures is broad. It's an entire waste of time to pump up the corporate culture, because that mantra will get filtered by each manager. The culture is defined in terms of the manager you work for and how he spends time with you and everyone else in your group. That's where you uncover the corporate culture, and it varies hugely.

What companies can do best is to hold each manager accountable for the strength of the individual culture each builds. Part of that culture should be helping people cut out the activities and responsibilities that get in the way of success and focus on meaningful activities that play to their individual strengths.

Daly. To what extent are people spending time on things they are really good at?

Buckingham. People have discovered their strengths; they just haven't been able to apply them at work every day. We asked thousands of people what percentage of their working day they spend playing to their working strengths. Only about 17% of the workers in the U.S. and 15% in the U.K. say that they are working on their strengths most of the day. So that's why it's called work – most of it is boring and worthless.

We've got it all backwards, and we have a long way to go. In the past five years I've sold more than a million copies of the strengths revolution book, and the needle hasn't moved at all. We've got to double the percentage and get at least one third of the people in America saying, "I get to play at my strengths most of the time at work."

Daly. What's the one thing great managers need to do to support the strengths revolution.

Buckingham. The manager can be a fantastic agent in this revolution. It's the manager's job to help us uncover and capitalize on strengths while they help us manage around our weaknesses. We've studied the performance appraisal conversation and uncovered that managers spend 40% of the time talking about the employee's weaknesses, 25% talking about the strengths, and 35% not talking about these things at all. Great managers, however, think very differently about how they develop their people and

spend 80% of their time working toward growing the employee's strengths. Truly great managers take people "as is" and then focus on releasing their talents.

During his 17 years with The Gallup Organization, Marcus Buckingham led its research into the world's best managers, leaders and workplaces, which culminated in his compelling messages about strengths-based thinking. He is author of, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Best Managers Do Differently*, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, *The One Thing You Need To Know* and his newest book, *Now Go Put Your Strengths to Work*. Visit www.marcusbuckingham.com .