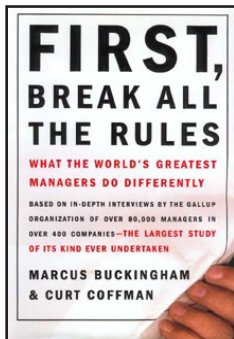


# Book Reviews for Managers

## First, Break All The Rules

*What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*

by Marcus Buckingham & Curt Coffman



Simon & Schuster, 1999,  
ISBN #0-684-85286-1

*"The 'great managers'  
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already"*

### REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Can you really “develop” your people? And just what is it you want to develop anyway? Do you want them to learn a few new techniques or approaches (what Buckingham and Coffman call *skills*)? Or perhaps what they need is more information about your product line or industry (*knowledge*)? Or, does what stops them from contributing more lie deeper within the employee? An inappropriate attitude? A lack of motivation? A fear? An aversion to authority? A “rough” side to their personality? (*talents*)

Well, consider this provocative position these author/researchers take: *Skills and knowledge can be imparted to employees. The third, talents, essentially cannot. Why?* Because messing with someone’s talent involves reconfiguring their brain’s synaptic pathways which formed early in life and have become entrenched through repeated use, controlling their “default” responses to certain situations. So, say the authors, instead of wasting time and money trying to put in what appears to have been left out of an employee, the “great managers” focus on drawing out the talent that is in there already.

*First, Break All the Rules* is a significant book for managers. If nothing else, it will make you think about how you manage. The book reports on results from two mammoth longitudinal (over the past 25 years) studies by the Gallup organization. The research asked two questions. First, *What do the most talented employees need from their workplace?* The overwhelming answer: GREAT MANAGERS. When good employees leave an organization, the main reason is seldom the executive leadership, the product/service, the compensation level, the vacation policy, or the physical work environment. The biggest reason they leave is because of their

*immediate manager.* In other words, the research reveals: *Managers trump companies! YOU, their manager, are the most important influence on how long your best employees stay and how productive they will be.*

The second question asked was *How do the world’s greatest managers find, focus and keep talented employees?* (Now, isn’t this an key question for all of us?) What emerged were twelve questions to which employees-in departments or organizations with higher levels of productivity, profit and customer satisfaction-tended to answer “yes”. (Gallup has since developed a 360-degree instrument based on these 12 questions). These questions focus on items such as knowing what you are expected to accomplish, having the right equipment, having a work opportunity where you can do your best, receiving recognition for good work, and having a manager that cares about you and encourages you.

The Gallup research has a crucial message for today’s managers. It is contained in what the authors call the “Four Keys” of great managers...

- 1. Select for talent.**  
Since it is difficult to train “talent,” make sure you hire it in your initial selection process. You want particularly to look for three kinds of talent. Striving talent covers what motivates a person, the “why” of their life and work. Thinking talent is about the mental processes one uses to weigh alternatives and make decisions. Relating talent addresses how you relate to others, especially in matters of trust, confrontation, support, and so on.
- 2. Define the right outcomes.**  
Great managers operate by remote

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control. (What a great way of putting it!) Focus your people on the priorities and results that you want by defining and communicating these clearly. Then, get out of the way and let them each determine their own best way to accomplish the goals.

**3. Focus on strengths.**

Here is another provocative position. Consider the conventional wisdom. It says that to increase someone's contribution, you have to identify and "fix" their weaknesses. Not so, it turns out, with the great managers. They concentrate instead on leveraging the strengths of their employees. Furthermore, they devote most of their attention on their better performers, their more productive people. It's just a better use of a manager's time, they believe.

**4. Find the right fit.**

This links to #3. Get to know the talents of your people and put them in roles, jobs, and assignments that represent a good fit for their natural abilities. And, when the great managers find themselves spending too much time managing a marginal performer, they treat it as a "casting error" (another great term!) and fix the error instead of trying to fix the person.

I found myself arguing with several of Buckingham and Coffman's conclusions. First of all, I am not such a pessimist about altering an employee's "talent." I have coached a manager who faced one of his "demons" and risked conflict by confronting, face-to-face, a poorly performing staff member. I have seen people, exposed to a superior leader/manager, discover for the first time in their career a genuine passion about their work and a new belief in self. You can be sure that some synaptic pathways were altered there.

Secondly, should you always minimize the time you invest in your marginal performers? No. I would gladly spend time and attention on anyone who, though below acceptable performance, is (1) genuinely trying (positive attitude) and (2) possesses the potential to master the competencies within a reasonable time. Finally, when you transfer people to a new function to broaden and test them for promotion, you often intentionally create a "wrong fit" situation. That is appropriate.

This research has a lot of managers talking—and rethinking their style. It is cutting edge. Above all, we need to realize, in the words of the authors,

The employee is the star. The manager is his/her agent.

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