PEAK PERFORMANCE CULTURE

THE FIVE METRICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Preface

I didn't see that coming.

It was January 2012. Verona, Italy. My 16-plus years (at that time) as an international speaker on organizational development did not prepare me for what I was about to experience. The 12 years I'd worked in corporate human resources development before *that* also failed me. Nothing about the chain of events leading up to this moment foretold the incredible reveal that would happen at an auditorium within a vibrant pharmaceutical research and manufacturing facility.

The day had started as normal as a day can start when you grew up in a small town in southern Illinois and find yourself in an incredible Italian city surrounded by the architecture, culture, and lore that Verona offers. Only a few blocks from my hotel was "Juliet's House" – Verona was the setting for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The day before, my lovely bride and I had toured the city on our own. Particularly memorable was the arena. It wasn't hard to imagine gladiators competing within this incredible amphitheater, the third largest in all of Italy. One of my favorite photos is a shot that Lori took of me on the "playing field" of the arena, having just sculpted "Maximus Dave" in the sand with my feet. We walked around several piazzas, visited museums, and essentially maintained an unsurpassed sense of awe all day.

Me at the arena in Verona, Italy.

But this day had started normally. It was training day. Whether the event is in Verona or Detroit, my preparation is the same. There was the usual breakfast at the hotel, laptop to be packed up, and a car to transport me to the site exactly as expected. We traversed Verona, leaving the history of the city center for the modernity of the industrial district.

Gaining access to a pharmaceutical facility – especially one that both conducts cutting-edge research and produces large volumes of drugs – is not simple. Having done an

event in Langley, Virginia, for the CIA, I am no stranger to security protocols. Suffice it to say, this site was more secure than our icon of the intelligence community. After providing ample evidence of my identity and receiving my badge clearly labeling me as VISITOR (a wholly unnecessary label given my obvious confusion and distinct American pronunciation when struggling through Italian greetings), I made my way through the labyrinth of gates, doors, and hallways necessary to access the learning center.

Today my audience would be scientists – 400 highly educated experts in the field of chemistry. Most of the attendees would be Italian, but there were representatives from all over the world. I was focused on the delivery of my content. I describe my public speaking style as "enter-train-ment," and humor plays a large role in my presentations. I have been described as the unlikely pitch cross of a college psychology teacher who moonlights as a stand-up comic. My seminar that day was *Consultative Selling: The Customer Centric Sale*. Much of the content was derived from my most popular program, *The Power of Understanding People*. I was anxious about how the material would translate. Would my humor work for this audience? Scientists, multicultural visitors, potential language barriers – these are the things that keep training professionals up at night.

As the crowd began to assemble, I tried to mitigate my nervousness by mingling with the attendees. Perhaps some schmoozing of the crowd would allay my fears, I thought. It didn't. Despite my attempts to learn a few words in Italian, I quickly felt awkward during most interactions. Beyond the language challenges, I was certain that this group of analytical, detailed, and fact-based professionals had little interest in something so conceptual as consultative selling. It was not like I hadn't worked with pharmaceutical companies before; I had, many times. But it was almost always with sales professionals. This was a different demographic. In my nomenclature, these were Experts – a way of thinking that is based on pragmatic best practices gathered from personal experience. Things that you can *know* to be true. "What on earth would a scientist care about this topic?" I thought to myself. It is entirely theoretical.

It was also not like I hadn't experienced this kind of crowd before. In my seminars, I often share the story of presenting to chemical engineers in Lake Jackson, Texas – a memory that has traumatized me for 20 years. Essentially, it was three hours of me feverishly attempting to elicit some type of reaction from 35 stoic audience members, only to ultimately fail. It still haunts me, even though my client tells me that the attendees that day still talk about that seminar. "Me, too," I reply.

On stage in Verona, my host introduced me with the bio that I had provided. Two years later, *The Power of Understanding People* would be released as a critically acclaimed book, but I remember wishing for that kind of credibility in that moment. As I made my way to the stage, my mind raced with toxic thoughts. I like to start strong with some mildly self-deprecating humor, but I worried that it would be lost in translation. How would I react to a crowd that didn't laugh? Would I again escalate my energy to manic levels? I began reliving the mistakes of Lake Jackson, Texas. Oh, and did I mention that this was the first event of a week-long schedule of seminars? Imagine the emotional pain involved if I discovered in this first session that I was out of my element—for me *and* the crowd.

The first surprise struck me more as a sense of relief than insight. They laughed. They were engaged. It was the first clue to the larger reveal that was to come when they completed the interactive-style assessment about 45 minutes later. For the time being, I just felt the reassurance that this was going to go well and that all my fears had been for naught. While that was personally satisfying, the big revelation arrived when I asked the group to stand as I polled their interactive style results.

Readers of my last two books, *The Power of Understanding People* and *The Power of Understanding Yourself*, know that I discuss four iconic ways of communicating:

The Expert: Detailed, fact-based, thorough

The Romantic: Emotional, tactful, diplomatic

The Mastermind: Conceptual, systemic, unpredictable

The Warrior: Logical, direct, results oriented

I fully expected most of the room to rise when I introduced the Expert style. In fact, only a handful of attendees stood. Same for the Warrior and Mastermind styles. More than 75% of the room would score as a Romantic.

"What? How can this be?" I thought to myself. How is it that these incredibly knowledgeable chemists, technicians, and researchers would be so emotionally sensitive? It had not occurred to me that these professionals were not merely drawn to the science of health care, but also to the service of others.

It was at this moment that I knew that the organization had a core ideology that could differentiate it from its competitors. This corporate culture was unique, possessing not just the technical expertise to enhance the work of those clients whom they supported, but also a passion for helping others. We already knew they had a head for science, but we discovered that day that they also had a heart for service.

And so it was that the company's core ideology was discovered. "Heads for Science, Hearts for Service" became their brand – the basis for horizontal and vertical alignment. The entire organization – with locations in England, Scotland, Italy, and the United States – began the process of implementing an operational and marketing strategy around this ideology. And it all started with the realization that they had something special in their culture. Something that would resonate with the marketplace and produce successful fiscal results. It was just a starting point toward peak performance, but a necessary one.

This book is about just that: recognizing and leveraging your organization's "special sauce." It is about creating an infrastructure that maximizes the strength of the institution, both employee facing and customer facing. It is about separating your operation from those of your competitors. It is about building an organization of peak performance, much like you would build a house: with a foundation, framework, and power sources to create something special for its inhabitants.

There is a lot of information in this book. One of my favorite attendees and loyal readers messaged me after my last book saying, "I am enjoying your new book, but it is much

denser than your previous book. There is a lot to consider." This book increases that density. In a way, it completes the trinity of my work involving of cognitive and organizational psychology spanning nearly a decade, a trifecta including understanding yourself, others, and the organization. We are going on a journey to every corner of the organization, from the proverbial 40,000-foot view to the minutiae of policies. There are ideas, strategies, tactics, best practices, assessments, checklists, and examples to illustrate the full range of organizational development considerations – all designed to assist the reader in building a higher-performing institution.

This book is about peak performance culture. It is about operational excellence. It is about finding and delivering – every single time, every single day – your own secret sauce.

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of interactions with countless leaders, specifiers, influencers, and team members of thousands of organizations with whom I am proud to have worked. Since founding the Leadership Difference, Inc. it has been my great fortune to travel the world – not just to educate, but more importantly to be educated. Thank you, all of you who have made the last 25 years so amazing.

As I am writing this book, the world is experiencing a generational event – the COVID-19 pandemic. Great organizations will lead us out of this challenge and into a period of new progress, prosperity, and innovation, largely due to their own operational excellence and peak performance cultures. I look forward to watching it happen. We will persevere and transcend.

For the last 35 years, my lovely bride, Lori, is my reason for being. It bears repeating (as I mentioned in my previous book)

that you never stop astounding me as a person, a spouse, a mother, and a friend. I love you more than I thought it possible to love. We quarantined together during the pandemic and didn't really notice anything different in our behaviors. Turns out, we have been self-isolating with each other all along.

All my love to my daughter, Brooke; my son, Slade; my sister, Diana; Debby, Nancy, Russ, Tom, and Peggy.

A shout out to the best editors a writer could have, Vicki Adang and Christine Moore.

Those who know me best know that I have a special affinity for my dogs. Since my last book, we adopted Mingus. He is 130 pounds of Irish wolfhound and border collie. He taught me that small, smart dogs are good; big, dumb dogs are good; but big, smart dogs are a problem. We have locked our cabinets and refrigerator; duct taped our sectional, and reinforced all fences. And when I would get frustrated with the world, it was Mingus who would drop a ball at my feet and run in the direction he wanted it thrown. It was his reminder to me that when things get tough, grab the ball and start running with a purpose.

Peak Performance Culture

Introduction

By 1981, it had become clear that a debilitating lack of talent was likely to create a ceiling for my baseball career well below the major leagues. So it was, after my sophomore year of college, that I needed to choose a major. Since I had worked part-time at a commercial radio station – shout out to WCRA/WCRC FM in Effingham, Illinois—and the closed-circuit radio station on the college campus at Eastern Illinois University, I decided that Mass Communications would make the most sense. Heck, I might well become a sportscaster, the next best thing to nabbing the first baseman position for the New York Mets (my original occupational aspiration). My guidance counselor concurred but offered one suggestion. Given that I had a highgrade point average and appeared to arrive at my academic major largely based on convenience rather than aptitude, she encouraged me to augment my Mass Comm major with a business administration minor. You know,

just in case my sportscasting career went the way of my baseball career.

When my broadcasting career fizzled – turns out the guidance counselor was on to something – I found myself without a clear idea about my professional future. I bounced around for a year – a very interesting year that you really should ask me about if we are having a glass of wine together. Eventually, I ended up in Chicago and working in retail. About six months into a job as a customer service representative – a job that essentially meant that you got yelled at by angry people for 8 hours and then went home to a frozen dinner alone in a roach-infested apartment (but I don't want to romanticize it), a position as a trainer opened up. My first job in human resources development was teaching new hires how to use the point of sale system at Marshall Field's. I loved it.

The job was hard. I led eight-hour training sessions on highly repetitive tasks. It wasn't sexy, or fun. At least it wasn't for most people, but it was for me. I still remember meetings with other store trainers during the holiday season hiring blitz. They all had the same look: dead eyes, expressionless face, shuffling gate, garbled muttering under their breath that sounded vaguely like a countdown until Thanksgiving—the unofficial end date of the seasonal hiring. Not me, however. I couldn't wait to get up in front of a new class, memorize their names, beguile them with stories of how to navigate a credit card sale to be shipped out of state as a gift to a third party using an American Express card. Good times. I had found my passion.

Unfortunately, I became the epitome of the "Peter Principle" – Laurence Peter's observation that people tend to get promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. I find Laurence's observations a little constrictive. I think the Peter Principle is broader than reaching a level of incompetence. I think many people simply reach a level of disinterest. After over a decade of promotions within the field of human resources development, I had reached an executive level that was entirely about strategies, budgets, staffing, and litigation defense. The area of passion that ignited my career – training

and education – was nary a part of my last corporate job. I knew I needed to realign my profession with my joy.

"FAT ENOUGH, HAPPY ENOUGH" ISN'T ENOUGH

In 1995, I left corporate America to pursue my muse: the Leadership Difference, Inc. Armed with a business plan and a passion for training and development, I envisioned myself providing high-level leadership development to small- and medium-sized companies that otherwise could not afford to have a full-time staff member dedicated to this role. That vision has evolved over the years; now I spend more time delivering keynote speeches than seminars. But the 25 years since has given me a glimpse – sometimes more – into the vagaries that constitute "organizational culture."

In 1995, the concept of corporate culture was just finding an audience in the business world. It had existed for around 30 years – largely as an academic construct – but had become more popular as an organizational development consideration in the 1980s and 1990s. It was still a bit of an enigma – one that continues to this day. What exactly *is* a "culture"? More importantly, what kind of culture drives peak performance? Finally, how do I create a peak performance culture?

That's the challenge.

As an aside, there is an important lesson in my own company's evolution. It began with a vision to be the training and development partner to other organizations. Providing education is my passion. That passion supplied the fuel to begin my organization, but that alone would not be enough to sustain it. Much of what follows in this book is a map for harnessing and directing passion in a way that will achieve success. Without passion, there can be no success; but passion without structure is a recipe for failure. I see that every day in business. That is an important thing to understand about a peak performance culture. Culture is not entirely conceptual. It requires that you combine concept with execution, principles with practices, vision with pragmatism.

Interestingly, it may not be the best organizations from which I have learned the most. Most of the companies and associations I have been exposed to do not apply the best practices outlined in this book. The truth is, even relatively successful organizations are plodding along, using processes that hamstring their success. It is a variation of the "no news is good news" mentality in that they have managed to do things just good enough to have success that is just good enough. Perhaps the better cliché is "fat and happy." Or maybe "fat enough and happy enough." But fat enough and happy enough do not allow you to achieve a peak performance culture.

For example, in preparation for a speaking engagement, I like to schedule a phone call with the key contact(s) to better understand their goals for the session. Minimally, I like to know the demographics of the audience and how they will benefit by and apply the concepts that I will be sharing. Optimally, I would like to integrate my content within the broader context of the conference at large or the strategies of the organization. This exercise is a version of "horizontal alignment," a concept that will be explained later in the book. Peak performance culture requires broad vision, strategies, and ideologies designed to connect the needs of the market with the measures of organizational success.

Most of my clients are eager to provide at least a minimal amount of information for this purpose. Now, that sounds hopeful, but consider for a moment the fact that a significant percentage of my clients don't take the time to educate a guest speaker on information that will make the transfer of learning easier and enhance the likelihood of the attendees actually applying new and useful skills. That is a bit shocking to me. Add to that fact that only a handful of clients each year take the time to help me understand their current strategic approach, and how I can and should align with that during my presentation. I don't think this is an oversight of communication so much as a lack of clarity on that strategy. Many conferences don't have a clear purpose, desired outcomes, or even a theme.

I am not sharing that to shame anyone. People are busy. Conferences and training seminars are often constructed from checklists rather than strategic plans. Location determined, check. Agenda created, check. Invites sent, check. Speaker hired, check. Hotel rooms reserved, check. Our lives are quickly enveloped by activities – "things to do" lists that seduce us into thinking we are working hard to achieve success. I am a box to be checked. This approach results in tons of tasks, but little attention to the event's purpose. Much of this work rhythm is created by the lack of the strong infrastructure described in this book. These events are not supporting some broader approach to peak performance so much as they are an annual event that the organization schedules because, well, we did one last year. Peak performance cultures are not just horizontally aligned, but also vertically aligned. This means that all the tasks within the organization are being performed for reasons that can be tracked back to the company's core vision, strategy, and ideology.

For example, a recent client approached me to do strategic planning facilitation. The group represented a local chapter of a national organization that is well known and established. To successfully facilitate the construction of a new strategy, I felt it would be beneficial for me to understand past strategic plans, the process they used to achieve them, and the usefulness these past efforts had on actual results. To that end, I met with the organization's executive director.

Turns out, the organization had *no* strategic plan and had never had one. They had a generic mission statement that was rarely referenced when conducting business. They didn't clearly define their measures of success, other than not to spend more money than they had. Again, this is common. To the credit of this organization, the new executive director and board wanted to change that. They realized that to achieve a peak performance culture, they would need a vision and a strategy that resonated with their market and a clear articulation of success (horizontal alignment). They also knew that this strategic plan would illuminate several actionable items