Leading Change: Is the Who More Important Than the What?
Russ Linden and David Forney

Abstract

The Torah is filled with examples of change. In some instances, the emphasis seems to be on the what, *e.g., God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At other moments, the focus is more on the who; Moses and Aaron's efforts to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites—with God's direct involvement—is an example. In our paper, we suggest that the* who *is usually more significant than the what when organizations experience major change. We explore episodes in the Torah, review some of the leadership literature on this topic, and describe several contemporary examples in which the* who *plays a dominant role. We also offer several practical applications of focusing on the* who *in people's work lives and discuss implications for the curricula of leadership development programs.*

"An angel of the Lord appeared to [Moses] in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, 'I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?'" (Ex. 3:2–3).[1]

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[1] David L. Lieber, Jules Harlow, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and The Rabbinical Assembly, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society; June 1, 2001).

Introduction

"What work issues keep you up at night?" When we ask mid-career students this question, they often talk about their leaders' inability to make decisions. One of the reasons for this paralysis is they do not know where to start on the dozen essential priorities (to which we gently remind them, if everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority). They mention the controversial issue that created divisions among their members. They never report waking up worried about their strategic plans.

By far the most frequent issue keeping them awake at night is dealing with difficult people on their staff. We ask how many difficult employees they have, and the answer is usually one or two. "One or two, and that causes you the most grief?" we ask. "Yes," they say, "because one or two can 'infect' the entire group."

From our experience, just one thing explains this problem: these experienced leaders invest far too little time upfront finding and selecting good people, and then they pay for it later through diminished productivity and team morale. The problem is understandable. These leaders are extremely busy, with large and weighty responsibilities and a variety of constituents demanding their time. In addition, it is only fair to recognize that it can be difficult to identify those job applicants who are likely to cause them and their staff grief.

It is important to think carefully about the tasks in a leader's life that make the biggest impact. Without question, *talent management* is one of them. Talent management refers to everything from recruiting and hiring to training and reward systems. Private sector executives are discovering the huge impact that talent management has on overall performance. One study of twenty senior corporate leaders found that fourteen spend twenty to fifty percent of their time on talent management issues; the rest spend five to fifteen percent.[2]

This article looks at two key aspects of talent management: (1) hiring people and (2) selecting existing staff to lead important

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[2] "The CEO's role in talent management," by *The Economist's Intelligence Unit* (2006).

projects.[3] We discuss why these *who* tasks are usually more important than the *what* issues that leaders must address when leading change: organizational vision, structure, plans, policies, roles, procedures, and so on. We start by looking at one of the most significant and remarkable episodes in the Torah: God's interaction with Moses at the burning bush.

God, Moses, and the Burning Bush

Moses has spent about forty years in Midian after fleeing Egypt, living a pastoral life with his wife, father-in-law Jethro, and his family. Suddenly, while tending Jethro's flock one day, he comes upon a bush that burns and notices that the bush is not consumed. Then, text reads, "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him … "(Ex. 3:4). Why does the Torah add God's reaction? Depending on the size of the bush, it can take a while to realize that a burning bush is not being consumed. Moses was aware that something unusual was happening. Rabbi Larry Kushner suggests that this was God's test: "Could Moses pay attention to something for more than a few minutes?"[4] Leadership, it turns out, requires situational awareness. What follows is one of the most extraordinary conversations in the Torah.

> God: "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals … for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am … the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob... I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters. I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them … to a land flowing with milk and honey.... Come, therefore, I will

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[3] While the hiring of people to serve in religious organizations can involve the "call process," this article does not distinguish the ways in which various religious traditions think about and process call. Whether the *who* is serving in an ordained position or not, we believe the *who* ought to play a dominant role in leadership formation.

[4] Lawrence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder: A Lawrence Kushner Reader* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 10.

send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the
Israelites, from Egypt" (Ex. 3:5–10).

This is quite a shocking introduction from this unseen voice.
God starts by giving Moses the big picture, explaining who God
is in relationship to Abraham and his descendants. It is a bit like
meeting a relative and saying, "We've never met, but I knew your
grandparents." Moses responds:

"Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring forth the children of
Israel from Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11).

What an absolutely human response. God gives Moses the lead
role in this historic drama, and Moses replies in personal terms.
Many of us have been in a position where a large opportunity or
challenge was given to us; the "who am I?" question resonates.

God: "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I
who sent you" (Ex. 3:12).

"I will be with you." These five powerful words were intended
to reassure an overwhelmed and anxious Moses. Leaders need to
keep these words in mind when offering someone a big assignment.
What we see as opportunity, the other person might read as danger.

Moses: "When I come to the Israelites and say to them: 'The
God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me: 'What
is his name?' What should I say to them?" (Ex. 3:13).

Moses' question might reflect what he saw while growing up
in Egypt, where the gods were all idols. The Israelites will want
some tangible evidence that this unknown and invisible god is
real. Moses not only has situational awareness, he is also a strategic
thinker and is anticipating future events.

God's answer: "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* [I AM WHO I AM] … Thus
shall you say to the Israelites, '*Ehyeh* sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:14).

And God continues with detailed instructions of what to tell
the Israelites: The God of their fathers has heard their suffering
and will liberate them. God wants Moses to tell the Pharaoh to let
the people go. God then anticipates what will happen after Moses
makes that demand; Pharaoh will refuse, God will work wonders
to change his mind, and the Israelites will finally be able to leave.

If God's first comments included a long-term goal, we could see the above words as God's implementation plan, complete with the enemy's expected response and a contingency response.

Moses: "But what if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: 'The Lord did not appear to you'"? (Ex. 4:1).

The Torah later describes Moses as the humblest of all people. That humility is evident here. At this point, God performs some relatively minor miracles, turning Moses' rod into a serpent, then momentarily making his hand leprous. Moses then worries aloud that he is "slow of speech" (Ex. 4:10), to which God replies, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you on what to say" (Ex. 4:11–12).

This is another "I will be with you" moment. God responds to Moses' anxieties with the ultimate reassurance: Not only will God provide moral and emotional support, but God will actually give him the words to use. Moses makes one final "yes, but" plea:

"Please O Lord, make someone else your agent" (Ex. 4:13).

The dialogue ends with God simultaneously showing anger and reassurance:

"The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, 'There is your brother Aaron, the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. ... he will be happy to see you. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—and he shall speak for you to the people'"(Ex. 4:14–16).

Through these five intriguing exchanges, Moses shares his grave doubts, and God uses different approaches to address Moses' anxieties and fears. This is a remarkable example of forming a relationship while asking someone to make an enormous change.

Why does God go to such lengths in responding to Moses' various doubts? After all, this is the same God who offered no introduction when telling Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge and the same God who suddenly appeared one day to Noah and gave him his incredible task, the God whose first words to Abraham (then "Abram") were "Go forth from your native land and from you father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Now God, the

unchangeable changer, approaches Moses in a wholly different way. Many of God's earlier directions to humans went badly. To fulfill God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God needs a special person. Without the right *who*, God's covenant is at great risk.

What Does Leadership Literature Say About the Who and What?

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes his findings from research on eleven companies that went from "good" to "great."[5] These companies were selected from the 1,435 firms that appeared on *Fortune*'s ranking of publicly traded American companies from 1965 through 1995. Each of the eleven showed a sharp increase in performance at some point and maintained that performance level for at least fifteen years.

Collins learned that the eleven "good-to-great" firms shared seven principles. Four years later, he wrote a monograph titled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, which argued the same seven principles could be applied in the nonprofit world. One of the seven principles is first *who*, then *what*. The leaders who helped their organizations become great did not start with compelling visions and smart strategies. Rather, as Collins put it, "they first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and *then* they figured out where to drive it."[6]

Collins adds that selecting people because they are excited about the organization's current direction can present problems when you learn that you need to drive the bus on a different route. Far better, he argues, is to select people for the culture a leader is trying to build. The eleven companies in his book usually sought traits like character, work ethic, and dedication to fulfilling commitments and values, which are ingrained, as opposed to specific skills and knowledge that can be learned. Together with such people, Collins

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[5] Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
[6] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Between Truth and Peace; Ki Tissa, 5771," *Covenant and Conversation*, February 19, 2011, https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5771-ki-tissa-between-truth-and-peace/.

says, a leader can decide where the bus needs to go, how to get it there, and make changes when the situation calls for it.

Why take this seemingly counterintuitive approach? Collins explains his reasoning: "First … you can more easily adapt to a changing world… If people are on the bus because of who else is on the bus, then it is much easier to change direction."[7] Second, motivating people is not usually an issue when they are excited about the people they are working with. The reality in some organizations, of course, is that leaders do not always have the option of holding out for the right people. If they cannot pay the prevailing salary or if the job requires specific skills that are not widely available, leaders might be glad to find any competent person. Most people who have professional training want more than the best salary, though. When options are available, we have found Collins's idea to be accurate.

It is important to note that first *who*, then *what*, like the other six principles of the firms that Collins studied, relates to what helped those companies make the leap from good to great, and stay there. He does not explicitly state that these principles are necessary for organizations that are satisfied with their current performance. He implies as much though, given the fast-changing, unpredictable environment with which most organizations must cope.

A literature review did not uncover other studies done on the relative importance of *who* and *what*. What we did find were a few articles that criticized Collins's research methodology.[8] That said, we have identified numerous leaders who strongly support Collins's finding. One is Rob Stalzer, a highly regarded local government executive who became city manager of Fairfax City, Virginia, in 2019. He invests a huge amount of time getting the right people on the bus, in the right seats, and, when necessary, the wrong people off the bus. As he sees it, "Having the right Who is absolutely essential to getting the What done and done correctly."[9]

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[7] Collins, 42.
[8] Todd Satterson, "The Might and Myth of Good to Great," June 13, 2011, https://toddsattersten.com/2011/06/13/the-might-and-myth-of-good-to-great/.
[9] Personal communication with Russ Linden.

Another strong advocate of the first *who* approach is Robert Glazer, founder and CEO of a global marketing agency, Acceleration Partners. He writes:

> Having seen many companies in our industry rush into new markets only to waste both time and money, we chose instead to put our focus on finding the right people to lead our efforts in those new countries and represent our brand. Once on board, we then asked them to develop the plan for their market, rather than the reverse.[10]

There is another reason that first *who*, then *what* makes sense. As Terry Newell, a retired federal executive who led two high-quality executive development programs, says:

> The *what* is nothing without the *who*. For example: if leaders who are initiating change have positive relationships with their staff, other stakeholders, etc., those people are far more likely to give the change—the *what*—a chance. You're not a leader if nobody is following you. Leadership is a relationship; if others don't know *who* you are, they could care less about *what* you want to do, unless, of course, they're following out of necessity.[11]

It might surprise those who have not served in the military—long known for its endless lists of policies, rules, procedures, and the like—that the *who* is often paramount in that culture. During his long military career, General Colin Powell used to say, "Plans don't accomplish work. Goal charts on walls don't accomplish work … talking papers don't accomplish work. It is people who get things done."[12] As one of many examples, he points to the 1990

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[10] Robert Glazer, "First Who, Then What," *Friday Forward*, August 30, 2018, https://www.robertglazer.com/friday-forward/first-who-then-what/.
[11] Personal communication with Russ Linden.
[12] Oren Harari, *Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 125.

Gulf War. Many of the original planning assumptions about Iraq's military prowess and American casualties turned out to be wrong. Powell concluded that the two major success factors were mission and people, "with a particular emphasis on the latter."[13]

Examples of the Power of Who

The power of *who* is evident in many different aspects of our lives. Here are three examples in which the *who* is more consequential than the what.

A Lower-Level Person's Idea Is Ignored

Many people have been in meetings where someone who is low on the organization chart makes a suggestion and receives little or no response. Then a bit later, a more senior person offers the same idea, frames it a bit differently, and people suddenly pay attention to it. This is not only about one's formal authority. Women frequently experience the same phenomenon. One study found that sixty-two percent of women in the tech industry report that their ideas are often ignored until they are repeated by a man.[14]

Reimagining the Camden, New Jersey, Police Department

In 2020, an enormous protest movement started after the murder of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer in Minneapolis. The protests soon turned to a search for solutions: how to reform policing to prevent such violence and repair relationships between police and those they are sworn to protect. Some people looked to Camden, New Jersey, as a model.

In 2012, Camden had one of the highest crime rates in the country. Relationships between the police and African Americans were extremely tense. So, the city did something radical: it disbanded the police department and gave the county control of the city's police. Those who had been laid off could apply to be rehired. Several new people joined the force. The former (and

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[13] Harari, 127.

[14] Xavier Harding, "Nearly Two-Thirds of Women in Tech Say Their Ideas Are Ignored Until a Man Repeats Them, Study Shows," June 15, 2018, *https://www.mic.com/articles/189829/nearly-two-thirds-of-women-in-tech-say-their-ideas-are-ignored-until-a-man-repeats-them-study-shows.*

enormously powerful) police union was taken over by new leaders who were committed to helping keep the new department's costs within reason.

The person who became police chief in 2015 made clear his top goal: build relationships with the community in order to earn their trust. Over the next several years, the department trained officers in the art of de-escalation. Complaints about police using excessive force fell. By 2020, murders were down sixty-three percent, robberies were down sixty percent, and overall violent crime declined forty-two percent.[15]

It is impossible to pinpoint the precise reasons for these improvements; the economy was on the upswing, and that was likely a factor. But comments from community leaders reveal what changed their perceptions of the police. As one put it: "Before the change, the police department did not care about our safety. When they made the transition, they built partnerships with members of the community."[16] These and other changes reflected (1) the selection of new people for the force, (2) the selection of some former officers, chosen because they wanted a change in policing, and (3) the department leaders' expectations.

This was an excellent instance of first *who*, then *what*. Camden's leaders said, "Let's start over." How did they restart? They did not do it the way many other departments have tried to create change, starting with a host of new policies and procedures (which have produced mixed results, at best). Instead, they started by focusing on the *who*: Who should work here? Who should lead? How can they build trusting relationships with the residents? As they got those people "on the bus, in the right seats," they worked together to plan and implement the *what*.

The new department still has its detractors, but there is little question that it has improved dramatically since 2012.

A Personal Example: What Dad Was Remembered For

In the years after Russ's father died, Russ would come back to his hometown of Detroit to see family. On one visit, he ran into

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[15] Bates and Vick.
[16] Bates and Vick.

an elderly Jewish man with a wrinkled face and a sweet smile. The man recognized Russ but forgot his name. "Russ Linden," he said. The man's eyes got wide. "Linden?" "Yes." "Samuel Linden was your father?" "Yes, he was." "I never met him," the man said, "but I heard a lot about him. Samuel Linden. A true *mensch*" (a decent, responsible person who has integrity).

Russ was pleased, of course, but also surprised. He assumed that people who did not know his dad but knew of him, probably had heard about his construction company and some of the buildings they built. Indeed, as they continued to talk, this man recalled one or two of Samuel Linden's larger projects, part of the *what* in his life. What first came to the man's mind though, and what he later returned to, was an aspect of Samuel Linden's character. Russ still recalls the smile on the old man's face when he said that his dad was a *mensch*.

God Begins With *Who*

The Camden story brings to mind God's interactions with Moses at the burning bush. Like the Camden leaders, God witnessed an intolerable situation and decided a wholesale change was required. As with Camden's choice of a new police chief, God initiated the change by identifying someone to lead the change, Moses, a person who had shown concern for the powerless. One more similarity surfaced: God's interactions with Moses offer a remarkable example of focusing on relationships, the same strategy employed in Camden. God responded to Moses' anxieties by providing support, encouragement, and a partner to share the leadership burden: Aaron. In doing so, God is developing a strong relationship with Moses and helping him connect with the enslaved Israelites through Aaron's existing relationships with the people.

The Torah contains several examples of the power of *who*, in addition to the one cited at the start of this article. For instance, immediately after Joseph dies and is buried in Egypt, we read that "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). Why would the text include this detail? The following verses show that this is no small detail. Pharaoh fears that the Israelites are

becoming too numerous and could turn against Egypt. Thus began the Israelites' enslavement. What difference did it make that the new king did not know Joseph? Some commentators suggest that Pharaoh's ignorance of Joseph led to fear, then to paranoia, and ultimately to outright oppression.[17] The *who* made an enormous and tragic difference.

Throughout the Torah, the Israelites frequently violate God's commandments, only to be rescued by Moses or Aaron. One of the most famous examples is the golden calf incident, when the people demanded that Aaron provide them with a visible god just weeks after Moses had read the Ten Commandments to them, the second of which states that "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Ex. 20:3). Aaron's action could have been a delaying tactic to distract the people until Moses returned from the mountain. Once he did return, Moses helped God let go of His urge to destroy the people. The *what*—God's second commandment—did not influence the people's behavior. The *who*—Aaron and then Moses—prevented a revolt by the people and massive retaliation by God.

"Yes, But ..."

While we argue for the primacy of the *who*, there are several possible objections to this position. Here are a few.

What About Vision?

Since Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus wrote *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* in 1985, leadership scholars and others have emphasized the importance of articulating a compelling vision.[18] Vision certainly can be helpful for any organization, and it can be a powerful motivator for staff. In our experience, however, all too often vision statements are just that: statements that are disconnected from the staff members' reality. If the leader does not talk about the vision frequently, helping staff see how

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[17] Nathan Weiner, "And a New King Arose Over Egypt Who Knew Not Joseph," *Jewish Community Voice*, January 20, 2017, https://jewishcommunityvoice.com/2017/01/20/and-a-new-king-arose-over-egypt-who-knew-not-joseph/.
[18] Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

their work contributes to the vision and demonstrating the impact that achieving the vision has on constituents, the vision becomes irrelevant to staff members' daily work. Even when the vision retains its appeal, changes in the environment frequently render the vision outdated.

Torah scholar Erica Brown puts it this way: "The problem … [with emphasizing vision] is that leadership is rarely so linear or logical … leaders meander …because when they enter the messiness of leadership, all of their carefully made plans must get rethought."[19]

We Have Hired Many "Great" People, Then Most of Them Move to Another Organization

That, of course, is frustrating. The question is, "Why did they leave?" If they need more than you can pay and pay is paramount to them, you might not be able to do much. Are they being challenged? Are they given interesting projects? Are they getting support from above? If there is a "revolving door," it might be important for someone to help you figure out why people keep moving through it. According to a Gallup study of seven thousand employees, most employees do not leave their organization, they leave their manager.[20] If you conduct exit interviews and spend time listening carefully to people at various levels of the organization, you probably will learn that your managers and supervisors need to make some significant changes in how they lead and support people.

On the other hand, attracting and then losing great people might be a positive. That is, perhaps an organization is known as an excellent place to work. If a number of people leave because they discover even better opportunities, that can be a real positive. Leaders should stay in touch with them, because they can help in a variety of ways, such as recruiting other great people.

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[19] Erica Brown, *Leadership in the Wilderness: Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2013), 80–81.
[20] Rachel Mucha, "Fifty Percent of Employees Leave Because of Their Managers: Three Things That'll Get Them to Stay," May 11, 2018, https://www.hrmorning.com/articles/50-of-employees-leave-because-of-their-managers-3-things-thatll-get-them-to-stay/

Figuring Out Who Will Be a Terrific Hire Is Often Hard

We could not agree more. Anticipating the best fit is difficult for most leaders. It requires knowing what one is looking for. It also requires a commitment to spend the time needed to fully vet applicants. Later in this article, we will discuss some approaches for finding the people who are the best fit for a group, including several useful interview questions.

An Exception to First Who, *Then* What

One circumstance where the *what* sometimes precedes the *who* is when an organization selects a new leader. Depending on the organization's situation for new leadership, it might be important for the board, or its senior leaders, to take a time-out and consider the *where* question: Where do we want to go in the coming three to five years? In turbulent times, that of course is an iffy proposition; who knows how the world might change in the next few months, let alone years? However, the process of discussing the where question can help get people on the same page in terms of how they see the environment, what their core values are, and how they want to move forward. That can be a meaningful exercise when choosing the next leader.

Application: Selecting People to Lead an Important Project

Because it was in a crisis, Camden "started over" and could select whomever it wanted for its new department. When the organization is not in crisis mode and a leader is looking for someone to take charge of a significant project or program, how does one make that selection?

1. Look for people with great track records... and the flexibility to change.

God chooses Joshua to succeed Moses. We began this article by discussing God's excellent selection of Moses to lead the people out of bondage. Equally impressive, in our view, is the choice of Joshua to take the baton from Moses and lead the people into the promised land. After years in the wilderness, Moses is depressed. He has been subjected to the people's ongoing complaints, suffered

as he saw them yearn to return to Egyptian bondage, and even withstood rebellions against his leadership. At one point, Moses actually begs God to end his life. How much can one individual take?

After forty years in the wilderness, the people face a totally different challenge: to settle in a land that is already occupied by several tribes. The people have been led by the great law giver and teacher, Moses. Now they need someone else—a courageous fighter, one who has the people's strong support, and one who has not accumulated lots of baggage.

Joshua fits the bill. Soon after the Israelites escape Egypt, the Amalekite tribe attacks them without cause or warning. Moses immediately directs Joshua to gather several men to fight against the Amalekites. Joshua has not been mentioned previously in the Torah; one commentator suggests that Moses must have known him to thrust him into such a critical role.[21] With Moses' help, Joshua performs admirably and defeats the attackers. Later in the text, when ten of the twelve spies exaggerate the risks of entering the promised land, Caleb and Joshua have the courage to disagree and give a more accurate appraisal, citing reasons to be confident. The Torah refers to Joshua as Moses' "attendant." Joshua has shown the skill and will to be a future leader. God knows it, and so does Moses.

The word *future* is significant. Leaders sometimes give people roles based on past performance, which is understandable. The question, however, is this: Does the person have the skills and attitudes to take on a new and different role, helping the organization to move forward?

One of the easiest and most common mistakes when selecting someone to lead an important project (of, for that matter, when considering someone for a promotion) is to assume that past performance guarantees future success. If only it were so simple. Ask a group of veteran teachers if they have ever seen a great colleague become a mediocre principal; many will roll their eyes in despair. Interestingly, the same is true in sports. The list of all-star athletes who bombed as coaches is a long one: the greatest hockey

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[21] Lieber, 421 (note).

player, Wayne Gretzky; two of the finest basketball players, Magic Johnson and Bob Cousy; baseball greats Ted Williams and Pete Rose, among many others.

Not only was Joshua an excellent choice to succeed Moses, but God and Moses provide us with a true model for how to communicate a transfer of leadership. Consider this: Toward the end of the book of Numbers, God reminds Moses that he will not be able to enter the promised land. What is Moses' response? He urges God to appoint someone who will bring the people into the land, "so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:17). God responds, "Single out Joshua ... an inspired man, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before ... the whole community, and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey" (Num. 27:18–20).

Later, in Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that Joshua will lead them, "as the Lord has spoken" (Deut. 31:3). Finally, after Moses dies and the thirty days of mourning end, the text reads, "Now Joshua ... was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon him; and the Israelites heeded him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses (Deut. 34:9). Moses is exhausted by his long ordeal; being denied the chance to even step foot in the promised land must have been incredibly disappointing. Yet he puts all that aside when God reminds him that he will not enter the land. Moses immediately focuses on the people and their future. God names Joshua and sets the stage for an empowering introduction as the new leader: Moses should stand before the entire people, put his hand on Joshua, and convey authority in doing so. Then Moses gives the same message to the people during his final days, citing God as the decision maker and giving Joshua greater authority.

A different example is selecting someone for a time-limited project, such as recruiting a capital campaign leader. The leaders of a congregation decided to embark on a major capital campaign to build more classrooms and equip them with advanced technology. It was the third time in eight years that the board had announced

such a campaign. The first two went nowhere after several focus group meetings failed to generate enthusiasm. Naturally, many members were skeptical when they learned of a third campaign. A member of the congregation overheard the following conversation after the new campaign was announced:

> Bill: "Well, here we go again! More focus group meetings that end with no consensus. And, no doubt, more money spent on a high-priced consultant. What a waste!"

> Carol: "Actually Bill, I think this one has a good chance of working."

> Bill: "What? They are talking about a similar plan, trying to raise the same amount, for the same needs. Nothing's changed, Carol! Why should this one be different?"

> Carol: "Just one reason: this time, Gretchen's in charge. She gets things done. She's smart. And she's not rigid; if it looks like the plan needs to be changed to get the congregation excited, she'll change it. See, Gretchen only signs on when she sees a way to succeed. Watch her, she'll get us to the goal."

In this case, the *what*—the goal, needs, strategy—did not change. Only the *who* is different. The board of directors found someone with an excellent record of success. It might seem apparent that this is always important, but when a project has been tried once or twice and falls short, it is not just important, it is critical to find someone with a great track record for at least two reasons. First, the selection gives others a reason for hope: "Gretchen's in charge, she gets things done." Second, people like Gretchen, who have a reputation for high-quality work, want to maintain that reputation. Therefore, they are usually picky about which requests they accept. As a result, the selection also can breed confidence that the project is doable.

2. Think counterintuitively: Find an unlikely candidate whose selection will send an important message.

Dwight Eisenhower demonstrated numerous skills when he was in charge of planning Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion of Normandy. One of those skills, collaboration, was especially critical, given the huge egos he had to deal with. Here is an example: In mid-May 1944, just three weeks before the invasion, Eisenhower held a briefing for the British king, queen, and senior military people. Eisenhower surprised the group by holding the briefing in the headquarters of General Bernard Montgomery. "Monty" was considered a brilliant strategist and one of the key members of the president's senior team. However, he had vigorously opposed the president's D-Day plan—directly with Eisenhower and with Prime Minister Churchill. In addition, Montgomery had an enormous ego.

Once the briefing began, Eisenhower surprised the audience again. After giving a short introduction, he announced that his senior officers would conduct the briefing, and Eisenhower would take questions after. First up was Montgomery. This might sound like a huge risk, but it was not. For one thing, Churchill was present. It certainly would not be in Montgomery's interest to say or do anything suggesting he was not in favor of the D-Day plan in front of the prime minister and the royal couple. In addition, Eisenhower had already assured Montgomery that after the invasion, Eisenhower would listen to him and other senior officers to determine the need for any changes in the plan as their troops advanced.[22]

Eisenhower was doing far more than playing to Montgomery's ego. Montgomery's implied support for the invasion plan was particularly important to those assembled, almost all of whom were Brits. As those who have engaged in competitive debating know, being in a position of supporting a position that one does not personally favor (debaters must be adept at arguing both for or against a given proposition) forces a person to look for the positives in that position. Note to leaders: Consider using Eisenhower's

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[22] Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

approach when briefing a senior leader, funder, or other stakeholder and ask yourself who else on the team might be an effective advocate and could help with the presentation.

Application: What to Look for When Hiring People?

In today's fast-changing, disruptive environment, many leaders are rethinking the criteria they use when seeking new talent. As the director of talent for a large global corporation shared confidentially, "The pandemic has forced us to place a stronger emphasis on several items. Things are changing so fast now; we need to hire people who are resilient and agile. They also must be empathetic and understanding. And today, the need to be a good 'virtual leader' is huge."[23] This executive's company is also placing more emphasis on such capabilities as dealing with ambiguity and working across functions. Consider these approaches when filling a vacancy or new position. The choice that is best for you depends on the organization's culture and current and future challenges, among other factors.

1. Hire for attitude, train for skills.

That was Herb Kelleher's mantra when he founded and served as the CEO of Southwest Airlines. Kelleher wanted certain kinds of people in his company: people who love to serve others, who have a sense of humor, who embrace the team concept, and who will "go that extra mile." There are limits of course: you are not going to hire an attorney (or nurse, or musician, or …) to be a pilot because of the person's great attitude.

Several reasons can explain this strong emphasis on attitudes. In any service organization, customers and clients make quick judgments about the experience they will have based on their direct contact with the staff. We cannot always judge the person's competence, but most people know a bad or a good attitude when they see it. Another benefit has to do with attracting employees who are a good fit for the organization. Southwest's ads convey its love for creativity, individuality, humor, and "outrageous customer

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[23] Personal communication with Russ Linden.

service." Many people want to work in a place like that. Similarly, Southwest' employees are urged to be informal recruiters who are always on the lookout for people who have the attitudes that the company loves. That helps increase Southwest's pool of quality applicants.[24]

In addition, as people at the company sometimes say, "you can't train nice. You can't train a sense of humor. You can't train a love of service." For the most part, Kelleher believed, you either have these attitudes or you do not.[25] Learning skills, however, is different. Considerable data backs Kelleher's belief. One study that tracked twenty thousand new hires in a variety of firms found that forty-six percent of them were fired or disciplined within their first eighteen months. Eighty-nine percent of the time it was because of attitudinal issues; just eleven percent left for lack of skills.[26]

As we mentioned earlier, difficult people can consume enormous amounts of our time and emotional energy. Most of those termed "difficult" suffer from attitude problems. Mark Murphy, who wrote a fine book about hiring for attitude, notes that although attitudes are often paramount in an organization, they are far harder to assess than technical skills. Murphy identifies attitudes that most of us seek, such as being positive, taking the initiative, showing respect, and being flexible and coachable. He also offers excellent advice on how to discern such attitudes in job applicants. To accomplish this, Murphy developed the following four-step process for designing questions that reveal people's attitudes:

> 1. Identify a characteristic that is important in your organization's culture.

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[24] Russ Linden, "Hire for Attitude, Train for Skills," *Governing Magazine*, November 9, 2011, https://www.governing.com/columns/mgmt-insights/public-workforce-hiring-employee-attitude-skills-southwest-airlines.html.

[25] Mark Murphy, *Hiring for Attitude: A Revolutionary Approach to Recruiting Star Performers With Both Tremendous Skills and Superb Attitude* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2017), xii–xiii.

[26] Elisabeth Brier, "Herb Kelleher, Legendary Southwest Founder: From the Forbes Archives," January 4, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/elisabethbrier/2019/01/04/herb-kelleher-legendary-southwest-founder-from-the-forbes-archives/#1fd2eaba405b.

2. Identify a situation that calls for that characteristic.

3. Begin the question this way: "Could you tell me about a time you …" and insert the situation you have identified.

4. Leave the question hanging; that is, do not add anything to the question. For instance, if your question is, "Could you tell me about a customer you found especially difficult to work with?" resist the urge to add, "… and how did you handle it?" [27] Just ask the question, pause, and let the interviewee speak.

It is important to add that certain organizations seem to do well, for a while at least, by focusing almost entirely on applicants' technical skills. Some high-tech companies either encourage or put up with attitudes that most of us would not want to be around, because their sole focus is on skills. Uber is a case in point. Employees described it as hyper aggressive, ugly, and a place where sexual harassment was common. It caught up with Uber, which fired its founder and CEO in 2017 after employee complaints of sexual harassment and questionable ethical business practices went public. Turning a blind eye to hostile attitudes usually catches up with organizations. Many organizations, like Google, place a premium on technical smarts and attitudes, and it seems to work well. It all depends on what products and services the organization provides to its customers.

2. Look for people with grit.
For decades, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point selected applicants based mainly on their SAT or ACT scores, class rank, and athletic ability. By the early 2000s though, the West Point admissions team realized that these scores did not predict who would do well and who would drop out. So, they sought a different

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[27] Murphy, 61–72. Murphy has found that people who have the kinds of attitudes most of us seek in others show some strong indicators in their responses compared with responses of others; they are positive, respectful, flexible, coachable, show a willingness to take the initiative, and the like.

measure, and they brought in psychologist Angela Duckworth to help. She had been researching the psychology of success to learn what helped people reach the top of their field. She assumed that those who were successful would have a combination of strong talent and some luck. Talent and luck help, she found, but many who have that combination did not come close to reaching their potential. What was missing?

She probed further and discovered that a strong pattern emerged. As she put it:

> No matter the domain, the highly successful had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted … It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special. In a word, they had grit.[28]

Duckworth developed a scale to measure people's grit, and West Point began administering the scale. Over a twelve-year period, she collected data on 11,258 cadets who were part of nine separate classes. Among her many findings were that grit, plus physical ability, are remarkably good predictors of who will graduate. In fact, they are more important than cognitive ability when it comes to graduation rates.[29]

Duckworth has used the Grit Scale to study students, parents, participants in the National Spelling Bee, and even the Seattle Seahawks professional football team. She is candid about the appropriate use of the Grit Scale. It is helpful for self-development, for teachers and coaches to use with the students and players; it stimulates a conversation about their passion for their goals and their perseverance in achieving them. However, it is not appropriate

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[28] Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016).

[29] Michele W. Berger, "What Factors Predict Success?" *Penn Today*, November 4, 2019, https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/Penn-Angela-Duckworth-looks-beyond-grit-predict-success.

for selecting employees or applicants to college, nor is it wise to use it when evaluating staff.

Grit is included in this discussion of hiring people for two reasons. First, we believe the evidence is clear that those with grit are far better at dealing with setbacks and major disappointments than people with little grit. Second, a self-administered questionnaire is not necessary to get a sense of someone's grit. You can ask applicants about some of their major challenges and how they dealt with them. More useful is to talk with those who know your finalists. Granted, it takes time to identify and contact these people. Compare that with the time, energy, and frustration you and others experience with employees who were not vetted thoroughly and do not have what it takes to do the job well.[30]

In terms of the Torah, Moses is Exhibit A when it comes to demonstrating grit. For forty years, he dealt with the people's complaints, sins, and revolts, while sometimes pushing back when God threatened massive retribution. Moses also reflects what Jim Collins terms "Level 5 Leadership," which he defines as a "paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."[31] Such leaders are incredibly persistent; their ambition is first for the cause, not for themselves.

3. Look for those with a growth mindset.

In her book Mindset: *The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck describes two kinds of mindsets: fixed and growth.[32] People with a fixed mindset see their abilities as given and unchangeable: I have only so much intelligence, my personality is set, and so on. Those with a growth mindset do not assume such limits. Rather, they see themselves as learning and growing human beings, continually looking for ways to improve. Most people have some of both but lean toward one or the other.

Those with a fixed mindset are less likely to take on big challenges. They often assume the challenge is too tough for them,

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[30] Grit scores can be calculated at https://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/.
[31] Collins, 20.
[32] Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016).

so they avoid it. Those with growth mindsets are more likely to grab challenges; they see "failure" as temporary and as an opportunity for learning. Many school systems are now using these concepts to help kids who have struggled in school to develop positive attitudes about their potential, and the kids' improvement is impressive. The schools focus their praise on kids' efforts and persistence and avoid saying things like "you're so smart" (a fixed attribute). These schools use the grade "not yet" for poor performance on tests and papers, reinforcing their message that every kid can improve.

Having a growth mindset is good for most people; during rapid and unpredictable change, it is a requirement. The head of talent quoted at the start of this section says that in a changing environment, it is imperative to have people who embrace innovation. She adds that it is also important to seek people who are open to different perspectives. In our experience, those with a growth mindset usually excel at both.

4. Seek people who love the mission and the culture.

The Jewish New Teacher Project (JNTP) of the New Teacher Center is dedicated to improving student learning by accelerating the effectiveness of beginning teachers and early career school leaders in Jewish day schools. Their work is based on research showing that teachers and school leaders are the two most important in-school factors affecting student learning. So, they focus on helping Jewish day schools recruit, support, and retain excellent teachers and leaders. How do they do it?

Nina Bruder, senior director at the Jewish JNTP, explains:

> Our starting place is always, "do you believe in our organization's mission?" We call it, "mission alignment." If we do not see that in the applicant, there is no reason to go further. Beyond mission alignment, one of our top requirements is flexibility. Change is our reality, we live with last-minute, unpredictable changes. So, the person has to be nimble. And this is a team-based culture, so we look for people who like working in a team. Equally important are certain generic skills, like coaching others and being competent in certain IT areas.

How do they learn whether their applicants have these skills? They usually hire from a circle of people they already know. "These are people who have attended training sessions for new teachers and principals. We stay in touch for up to two years as they apply what they have learned. It is a great way to identify future talent for JNTP," says Bruder.[33]

Finally, here are two more thoughts on interviewing. First, remember that some people interview extremely well. That might or might not indicate how well they will do in the job. Some organizations put their applicants through certain individual or team exercises to get more perspectives on their abilities and attitudes. Many of them make a new hire's first several months a probationary period.

Second, look for creative ways to learn about the applicants. Southwest Airlines uses an unusual and creative exercise when hiring flight attendants. The airline conducts group interviews. Applicants come to the front of the room one at a time and talk about their most embarrassing moment. The speakers naturally assume they are being assessed. The interviewers, however, focus mainly on the applicants in the audience, looking for one thing: empathy.[34] That is something Southwest values, and they found a smart way to identify it.

Conclusion

When God first meets Moses at the burning bush, He tells him:

> "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt
> … I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down
> to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them
> … to a land flowing with milk and honey…. Come,

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[33] Personal communication with Russ Linden.

[34] Stan Phelps, "Southwest Airlines Understands the Heart of Marketing Is Experience," *Forbes*, September 14, 2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/stanphelps/2014/09/14/southwest-airlines-understands-the-heart-of-marketing-is-experience/#4577f5aa2bda.

therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt" (Ex. 3:7–10).

God is focusing on the *what*—Moses' historic task. Almost all of the rest of their remarkable conversation focuses on the *who*—Moses' questions and God's responses: "Who am I" to liberate the people? "But what if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?" "I am slow of speech." "Make someone else your agent." Rather than maintaining the focus on the *what*, God responds to Moses' human concerns with compassion and helpful guidance. Religious leaders can benefit from God's example. The *what* of leadership—providing direction, clarifying roles, creating a plan, and the like—is always important. To ensure that the *what* succeeds, though, we need to put special focus on the *who*, for surely God's intent to set the people free is all about the *who*.

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