



Who Are the Stars?

High fliers are often a study in paradox. But what makes them so special?

Over the years I have observed that organisational high flyers display many contradictory behaviour patterns, and it's this paradoxical nature which makes them so successful. Spotting nascent stars can be a challenge, not least because we can't always be sure what we're looking for. Some may first impress us as "golden larvae", but never complete metamorphosis, while others grow into true butterflies.

What are the qualities that turn them into top performers? Do their connections get them where they are? Or are they just the right people, in the right place, at the right time?

Nature or nurture: What makes a star?

My observations may help tease out some common myths about these high fliers and help us recognise their puzzling qualities, not all of which come naturally.

As a caveat, I would like to add that successful executives come in many different shapes and sizes. Although highly successful people have many qualities in common, context matters. Stardom depends very much on the highly complex interface between stars, i.e., the kinds of people they work with, and in what context (such as the political situation in a country, the national and organisational culture, the nature of the industry, the

life-cycle of the organisation, even the state of the economy).

Although many leaders claim to be able to intuitively identify characteristics that differentiate stars, they often assume stardom is somehow innate.

Having listened to the narratives of thousands of highly successful executives, I have noted that stardom is not merely a matter of luck; it's a question of choice, and beyond that, of cause and effect. Although chance can be a factor, it is not a sufficient explanation. Indeed, the old saying "the harder I work, the luckier I get" contains more than a grain of truth. Often this "luck" is a combination of preparation, persistence, and opportunity. As one star confided to me, "it took me 20 years of hard work to become an overnight success."

Neither is stardom merely a question of having the right connections. It can be very helpful, but many very well-connected people turn out to be highly unsuccessful. Most stars achieve stardom because they possess an intuitive understanding of how to make it happen.

Walking contradictions

What differentiates stars is their paradoxical operational mode. They have a knack for reconciling opposites. The psychologist Carl Jung

used to refer to “mysterium coniunctionis” - an alignment, a joining, or a resolution of conflict between poles or dualities that define human beings - the ability to hold the tension of the opposites.

True stars have the creative ability to manage short-term and long-term orientation, action and reflection, extroversion and introversion, optimism and realism, control and freedom, holistic and atomistic thinking, hard and soft skills.

In addition, they are great at visioning, possess a solid dose of emotional intelligence, take calculated risks, are accountable for their actions, have great tenacity, high energy, and make a heroic (although often unsuccessful) effort to attain some form of life balance. Furthermore, stars seek out the unfamiliar - they are curious, imaginative, and insightful. They like to play with new ideas; they find familiarity and routine boring; they have a great tolerance for ambiguity; and they are prepared to take a detour from the tried-and-tested, just because it is different.

Their behaviour can be contagious, inspiring others to follow their example. Given their specific mindset, stars are more inclined to give people who work for them the opportunity to experiment. They make decisions quickly, but can also be extremely cautious. They are rebellious and conservative, playful and responsible, reflective and proactive. They like to be sociable but also need to be alone; they are highly imaginative but maintain a solid sense of reality. And they are both divergent and convergent thinkers. Stars have the ability to switch effortlessly from one mode to the other.

Star makers

The good news for anyone aspiring to stardom, or those out stargazing, is that top performers can be made. Without discounting nature altogether, nurture plays a very important role. Stars are not born. Many of their psychological factors and behavioural characteristics can be learned, starting from a very young age when our personality is very malleable. If the right foundation is in place at this stage in life, later developmental activities go a long way toward creating stars.

I have been studying top performers for 40 years. For 20 of those years I've been running a year-long CEO seminar that offers me holistic, in-depth psychological portraits of top performers. These seminars have provided a wealth of data and the opportunity to observe stars in an intimate setting. Information about them has been derived from a battery of “720-degree” feedback instruments which collate wide-ranging observations from their colleagues, family and friends, helping me understand the paradoxical nature of the behaviour of these people.

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Once potential stars have been identified, their development is most effectively cultivated with a strategy focusing on self-assessment, action learning, and role modelling, preferably all three.

Creating self-awareness. The journey to stardom begins inwardly. Self-awareness is one of the most important factors in building self-esteem and confidence. Self-awareness helps us understand what drives us, what turns us off, what make us happy, and what we are passionate about. It helps us clarify what we need to do to improve as a person. Greater self-awareness helps us acquire a more realistic sense of our capabilities. With greater self-awareness, we will be able to expand our imagination, creativity, intuition, will, and purpose. An ideal method to jumpstart greater self-awareness is the use of the 720-degree, multi-source feedback mentioned above.

Action learning is a process of bringing together a group of people with different levels of skills and experience to analyse an actual work problem and develop an action plan, using their jobs as the basis for learning. Through this kind of learning process, executives learn more about their own and others' way of solving problems.

Role modelling. Most of us learn by example, and learn most from our earliest job experiences. Our bosses at this period in our life are those we will remember best. While it is obviously more attractive to learn from good bosses than bad, many future stars have also learned from the bad ones. These less than happy experiences may teach them how *not* to approach leadership - what things they should avoid doing to others.

Over the years, I have listened to the narratives of many stars, and I have learned that the only true failure is not having attempted a developmental journey. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture past them into the unknown. Excellence is not an event - it needs to become a mindset. It is doing common things in uncommon ways and the desire always to do things better. To be successful, we must break out of our comfort zone and learn to become comfortable with the unfamiliar and the unknown - and be able to hold the tension of opposites.



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