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## When Bright People Don't Perform (Part 1)

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*Many managers feel intensely frustrated by subordinates who are obviously bright and intelligent, yet can't seem to use their ability in positive and useful ways. People like this are usually characterized as "difficult" or "under-achievers." What's so maddening is that they obviously have masses of talent, but seem hell bent on **not** using it in ways that the organization—or the boss—deems acceptable and useful. When the potential does appear, it's often of a kind that's almost willfully perverse.*

### A Parallel Universe?

Let's start by trying to look at things from the point of view of our hypothetical bright individual who doesn't fit in.

His or her experience is typically one of being misunderstood and devalued. People don't feel happy when they aren't validated by those around them, so our bright person will have tried many times to win the respect and recognition he or she wants. The trouble is that—just like anyone else—the bright person will use the means that seem "right," based on his or her **own** values. Since these are likely to include a high value on knowledge, learning and being creative rather than conforming, the result is like pouring gasoline on a fire. The bright person tries to use the very behaviors that cause rejection by others to win their approval: behaviors like talking in unfamiliar language, using lots of jargon, parading esoteric knowledge or loudly correcting others' mistakes.

Bright people often put a lot of value into mental stimulation and achieving challenging, even near impossible goals. This can lead to others seeing them as show-offs and prima donnas, out to continually prove their superior intellect.

In reality, these bright people are simply seeing the world through a different set of mental filters. We all have such filters, usually derived from the habits we've built up

over the years and the kind of values we've come to adopt. The trouble is, we don't recognize that they're only ideas—we treat them as revealed truths. What accords with **our** filters is "right" and "good" and "sensible." Anything else is perverse and wrong, even evil. So when two people with very different filters try to communicate, the outcome rapidly becomes a mutual exchange of highly judgmental criticisms. The manager can't understand why the bright subordinate can't get the point and change his or her ways. It must be arrogance or willful insubordination! The subordinate feels misunderstood and wrongly accused by a manager who ought to know better. It must be envy or an inability to see value in others! Once these mutually critical assumptions are in place, the whole sad scenario rolls out in an almost inevitable fashion. Usually the ending only comes when one or the other (most often the subordinate) leaves or is fired.

Why do bright people sometimes seem dismissive of everyone else? Because they feel threatened by people who don't value what they're good at—being bright. Why do "ordinary folk" act as if being bright is a kind of social disease? Because they feel threatened by people who don't value what they're good at—fitting in and getting on with others. It would be funny, if people weren't being hurt!

### **Making Values Conscious**

One of the key steps in coaching bright people away from behaviors that hinder their success is helping them become aware of their values and how they shape behavior. Again, this needs to be a mutual activity. Ordinary folk also have values that can hinder their appreciation for the intellectually and creatively gifted. The history of science, medicine and all other human endeavor is filled with instances of people of near genius whose breakthroughs came with behavior seen as impossible by the 'ordinary' people around them.

Over more than 30 years, I've been privileged to work with some of the most creative and successful managers and leaders in four continents. This experience has convinced me that there are no "bright people" or "ordinary people." There are just people, some of whom have developed particular aspects of their potential to an extreme degree. The resulting habits become automatic, just as the rest of us develop automatic habits—only ours are accepted by society and theirs may not be. All of us have lost sight of the reality that these are simply habits.

Many of the "top people" I've met readily express despair at the dullness and lack of ambition of the people around them. They've taught themselves to value achievement and mental challenge and developed filters that quickly identify emerging patterns in events. They've worked hard to learn how to take broad, strategic viewpoints and home in on key fundamentals. When this works, as it often does, they build confidence in what they've done and use it as the basis for their sense of self-esteem.

What they miss is that the "dull," "unambitious" people they criticize have followed an identical path. These "ordinary folk" have also developed habits and mental filters. They're just using different ones,

perhaps more based on short-term goals, feelings of acceptance by others and need for security. The process is the same; only the ingredients differ. One group finds security in achievement and proven intellect, the other in familiar friends and accustomed tasks. Both are "right." Both have chosen the way they want to live. Both—in my experience—come close to smugness in approval of their own position and arrogance in dismissing the other. "High fliers" are irritated by the "envy" of "plodders;" "practical folk" are contemptuous of the eccentricities of "eggheads."

### **Corporate Cultures**

Corporate cultures are nothing more than collections of approved values and habits of thinking and action. Many are pretty much an extension of prevailing norms in society. In the USA, for example, action is usually valued over reflection. It's a society where what matters is getting things done. Sociable extroverts are more highly regarded than quiet introverts. Organizations similarly value people who are active and involved—and don't "waste time" asking irritating questions about what they're doing and whether there might be a better way. To be successful, you need to fit in. Don't rock the boat.

My point is only that there's nothing fundamental about any of these values or habitual ways of doing things. They've simply arisen from generations of people trying to make sense of their world. They may be useful or not useful, but they are never fundamental truths that cannot be questioned or revised—though many of us treat them as exactly that.

Because these values and opinions—for that is all they are—quickly become habitual, we no longer notice them. They become "the way things are around here." Everyone had better conform or expect trouble! Indeed, someone who threatens our habitual values and opinions—or even seems to do this—makes us

feel so uncomfortable that we have to try to bring them into line. We've got much of our self-esteem invested in looking good to others. If the "rules" about what's good change, we may lose out, so we get alarmed and try to reestablish the status quo. To do this, we must devalue the opposing position and increase the value of our own. Even the English language reflects this process. For every "dreamer" there's a "visionary;" for every "go getter" a "bull in a china shop." It's just the result of differing values and filters.

### **Mutual Complicity**

Everyone shares equally in the blame for this process. The bright people who scorn fools miss their own complicity in the situation. It's their dismissive behavior that makes someone else into a fool. In the same way, those who revile the products of the intellect and claim that only the practical person is worth anything are heaping hurtful derision on fellow human beings whose only crime is to be different.

There are no heroes or villains in this story. Bright people who under-perform typically rationalize their frustrating behavior by blaming it on the envy and foolishness of others. Managers trying to produce changes in such maddening people usually go to great lengths to try to persuade (even force) them to fit the cultural norm—a process that will be strongly resisted, since it's the cultural norm that these people blame for their isolation and lack of recognition.

Both sides have to first see that the way we think and behave is only the product of our habits and values. It's not a test of normality or worth. If we can drop all the emotional baggage and learn to value our diversity as one of the things that makes people marvelous and interesting, we can see beyond the minor differences of emphasis to the common humanity beneath.

### **Practical Steps**

Recognize and explore different ways of thinking without feeling the need to pass judgment on any of them. Everyone has the basic potential to think in many ways, some tightly focused and some broad and far ranging. We make choices and get better at what we do most often. It doesn't mean that **we're** better than anyone else—we've just practiced longer and with more attention. Value people for what they can do well. Don't fall into the trap of judging them on the basis of what **you** do well, but that they maybe haven't gotten around to trying yet.

Understand that values and opinions are just that—not some kind of absolute truth. We all have a right to hold strong opinions and act on them in our own lives. We don't have any right to force them on others, even in the guise of standards of normality or approved behavior. If we drop the judgments, we'll be able to see the untapped worth of people who march to a different drummer. The unthinking assumption that our values and opinions are bound to be shared by all right thinking people is the single most corrosive behavior in any relationship.

Find out what people—bright or ordinary—do best and value most. Set them to work there and praise and validate their achievements. Let everyone have the opportunity to shine at what they esteem the most. That way there won't be "good" sheep and "bad" goats—just a whole group of people contributing whatever they can in ways that suit them best.

Stop treating the organization's values and opinions (a.k.a. corporate culture) as sacrosanct. They're just habits. Sometimes the culture is beneficial; sometimes it gets in the way. Don't deify the organization as the sole arbiter of truth. It's a human creation—and human creations, like human beings, are terribly fallible.

Try to step beyond habitual judgments to see what's truly there and what its value can be. Drop the elaborations, emotional overtones and instant opinions that we all use to embellish what we see and turn it into what we think ought to be there. All these assumptions and facile judgments only cloud the clarity of our view.

The bottom line is that the bright person who under-performs has a reason for doing so. If we discover the reason, we may well change the behavior. Preaching, threatening and fussing never work. The only real barrier to finding the truth could be that it will throw an uncomfortable light on our own part in the whole sorry mess.

#### ***About the Author***

Adrian Savage is an international authority on organizational development and potential. More than a decade ago Mr. Savage co-founded the forerunner of PNA, Inc. to help clarify the way people view employee and organization potential. Mr. Savage believes that employees can align themselves more successfully with their commitments and opportunities by exploring their unused talents and fundamental values.

PNA, Incorporated provides corporations with solutions for talent management, organizational development, succession planning and key staff retention. Using proprietary approaches that have been developed and proven over more than 15 years, the company helps national and international clients maximize individual, team and organizational strengths to achieve their business goals. PNA is part of the global RSM International network. Visit [www.nettps.com](http://www.nettps.com) for more information or call 908-541-1700.

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managers and teams. Her approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. "When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits *and* people's view of what they can accomplish together is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization the ability to create and fulfill rewarding futures."

As an associate of PNA, Inc., Camille is a certified NetTPS™ Solutions Provider. For more information, call 831-685-1480 or visit [www.wipcoaching.com](http://www.wipcoaching.com).