

Bob Gunn, Editor

Welcome to the High Wire

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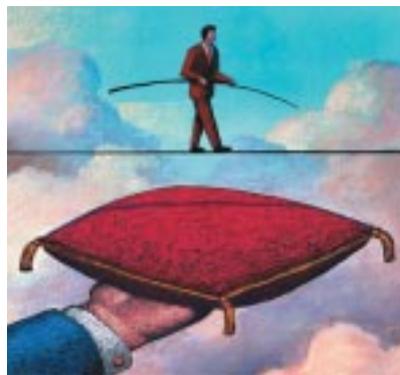
Ah, the circus. The greatest show on earth. Fun for ladies and gentlemen and children of all ages. And a great source for metaphors to describe management.

Naturally, there's the juggler: imposing order in chaos, keeping any number of objects—some heavy,

some sharp, others on fire—flying through the air. Then there's the ringmaster: directing attention wherever the action is most intense. There's also the lion tamer: using the sheer force of his will to get performances from larger beasts who could just as easily have him for lunch. But our personal favorite is the "funambulist"—the tightrope walker.

There comes a moment at the circus when all heads turn toward the center ring. High above the sawdust floor, a spotlight picks out a slender figure standing alone on a cramped platform. Eyes focused on some distant point, the performer places one slipped foot and then the next on an impossibly thin wire. He glides slowly at first, then picks up speed, tipping and dipping a long pole in a constant struggle for balance.

A promotion can feel like being thrust out onto the high wire. After



the high fives and the congratulatory e-mails, we find ourselves alone in the dark. No matter how much support we have—from peers, the boss, employees, even family—we must make our own way. There is no place to hide. Any misstep hurts and can even be fatal.

That gasping anxiety is felt daily in countless business arenas. It's one of life's little jokes: Our knowledge, talent, and experience add up to success and new challenges. But sooner or later, we bump into a transition in

which we can't rely on the behaviors that have worked for us before. We feel an ineffable itch, the uneasy sense that we are missing something. "Now what?" we wonder. "Is this all there is?" Questions spin out on those nights when we have trouble sleeping:

- "Why do I have to tell my employees what to do, over and over? Why don't they proactively use their own creativity and abilities?" When people "get it," action seems to accelerate. But where does the leader's ability to inspire others come from?

- "Must I invest heroic amounts of energy to motivate others?" On some teams, people are keenly engaged, and progress seems effortless. How do leaders foster productivity? How do they create feelings of enthusiasm, even joy, and still get the nitty-gritty tasks done?

- "Do I have to do it all myself? Why do my team members sometimes stand aside instead of jumping into the fray?" It's easy to ascribe special, even mysterious, qualities to the leader. Yet no great company can sustain results without the energy of many. How do we encourage collaboration?

- "Am I doomed to be isolated, to be 'lonely at the top?'" Approach-

ing the corner office takes so much courage, and no conversation with a boss ever seems to be a casual chat. How can we avoid sacrificing interpersonal relationships?

We understand that each leader must find his or her own answers to such questions because we've walked the high wire ourselves. Bob has started two companies; Betsy replaced a business unit director felled by AIDS. We honed our leadership through frenetic growth and layoffs, marketing mayhem, and mergers. Along the way, we discovered a way of stepping up from management to leadership by unleashing the energy blocked in too many organizations, bringing good feeling into the workplace, and delivering bottom-line results without great human cost. We've sought to put our insights to the service of our organizations' goals.

We are also honored to be able to share our hard-earned lessons with readers of *Strategic Finance*. We're talking to and with those who find themselves—perhaps suddenly and unexpectedly—thrust forward from management into leadership, to the achievers who sacrifice countless hours of sleep to the challenges of leading well, of pursuing a common dream, of playing to win, of making things happen, of nurturing the capacity of others, and of leaving a lasting legacy.

We're also talking to and with the burnt-out leaders who seek to balance work and life, results and meaning, tough-mindedness and warm-heartedness. To the bosses, HR professionals, and coaches that watch new managers struggle and want to give them better support.

The key to success that we continuously discuss in these columns is the integration of *earned capabilities*

(learning, experience, skills) with the *innate capacity* to access insight, intuition, gut instinct, wisdom. Stepping up from management to leadership is really the inner game of self-discovery.

Such "inward" emphasis is gaining cultural traction in many ways. Yoga studios are becoming as ubiquitous as Starbucks, urging fitness buffs to "meet yourself with compassion." Dr. Phil's best-selling diet book spurns calorie-counting and other "outside" tactics in favor of reflection on our attitudes and feelings toward food. And stressed-out Americans have turned to meditation in such great numbers that the subject rated a *Time* magazine cover ("Just Say Om") last August.

Not surprisingly, the business world has been a holdout to the new "inside-out" movement. But the shockwaves of the past decade have forced executives to seek new constructs and methodologies. Emerging emphasis is on the psychological, emotional aspects of managing and leading well. More and more leaders are acknowledging that the human dimension makes the difference between good and great performance. In other words, lasting management achievement requires nothing less than an understanding of the operating principles that drive human behavior.

"The difference between 'good' and 'great' is, maybe, 2%," one of our early mentors used to say, "an extra, indefinable *something* that comes from *somewhere*." We're talking about the intangibles that separate acceptable outcomes from outstanding results. If we could put that 2% in a box and mail it to you, we would. The best we can do is to share with you our own explorations beyond accumulated knowledge or

experience to the very source of wisdom or gut instinct: mankind's powers of thought.

Each business challenge requires a unique response, one that's perfectly tailored to the events and circumstances at hand. No matter how good your intentions and how devoted your attention, you simply can't master one technique, or even a set of techniques, that will apply to every challenge. Rather, rely on the inborn human capacity for creativity and insight whenever it is needed.

In the metaphor of the high wire, you have a kind of built-in safety net: your inner resources. Calmly accessing that *innate capacity*, you can make optimal use of your *earned capabilities* to exercise management and leadership that burn brightly without burning out. You can find the confidence to step up boldly, to experience thrill in the face of risk.

The high-wire walker isn't afraid. For her, there is the intense delight of concentrating completely on one thing—that razor's path between her beginning and where she must end.

Welcome to the journey! ■

Bob and Betsy have expanded their "Best Practices" columns in a book being published this April, On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted (Praeger Publishers). A portion of proceeds will be donated to IMA. For further information, visit www.amazon.com.

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