

# Getting People To Perform Differently

BY TOM WENTZ

Lunch was far more than a relaxing break. The conversations were all about Joe's inner voice e-mail and their own elephant training experiences.

Some began to realize that their inner voice was in fact their own stake in the ground that was holding them back from being the leaders they wanted to be. It was also dawning on them how difficult it would be to do business with a company of trained elephants chained to the stakes of more efficiency — more profit, more market share, more, more, more and “er.” The world is changing at an incredible pace and to be incremental and linear in their thinking caused one person to conclude that it would be impossible to change a company if the structural design is flawed.

I sat beside Jean as she had been silent all morning. She quietly confided in me that her people were all eagles. When I asked her to explain, she quietly said, “Because that is how I see them.”

That is a very profound perspective so I asked her to explain further. She said, “If you see people as functional things — like elephants — only worthy of doing a function when told what to do — then they will only perform within the functional limits of their job description. If you want people to be entrepreneurial and accountable for the success of your company, you must start by seeing people as talented, creative people.”

## Seeing People Differently

We talked further about her perspective and she then revealed a very profound truth: “You must see people differently before they can perform differently.” She paused

to be sure I agreed with that assessment. I nodded agreement and she continued. “You cannot treat an elephant with kindness — give them food and benefits — and expect an elephant to become a person.” She looked me in the eye and said, “As you have been trying to tell the group, an elephant has no ability to soar. This is so simple. It started with how I see my people.”

Since we were at lunch, our conversation was interrupted by others at the table. I asked, “Would you be willing to share this perspective with the total group during the afternoon session?”

She said, “Maybe — I've told the story before and they didn't listen. They think it's that California stuff. There are a lot of elephant trainers in this group.”

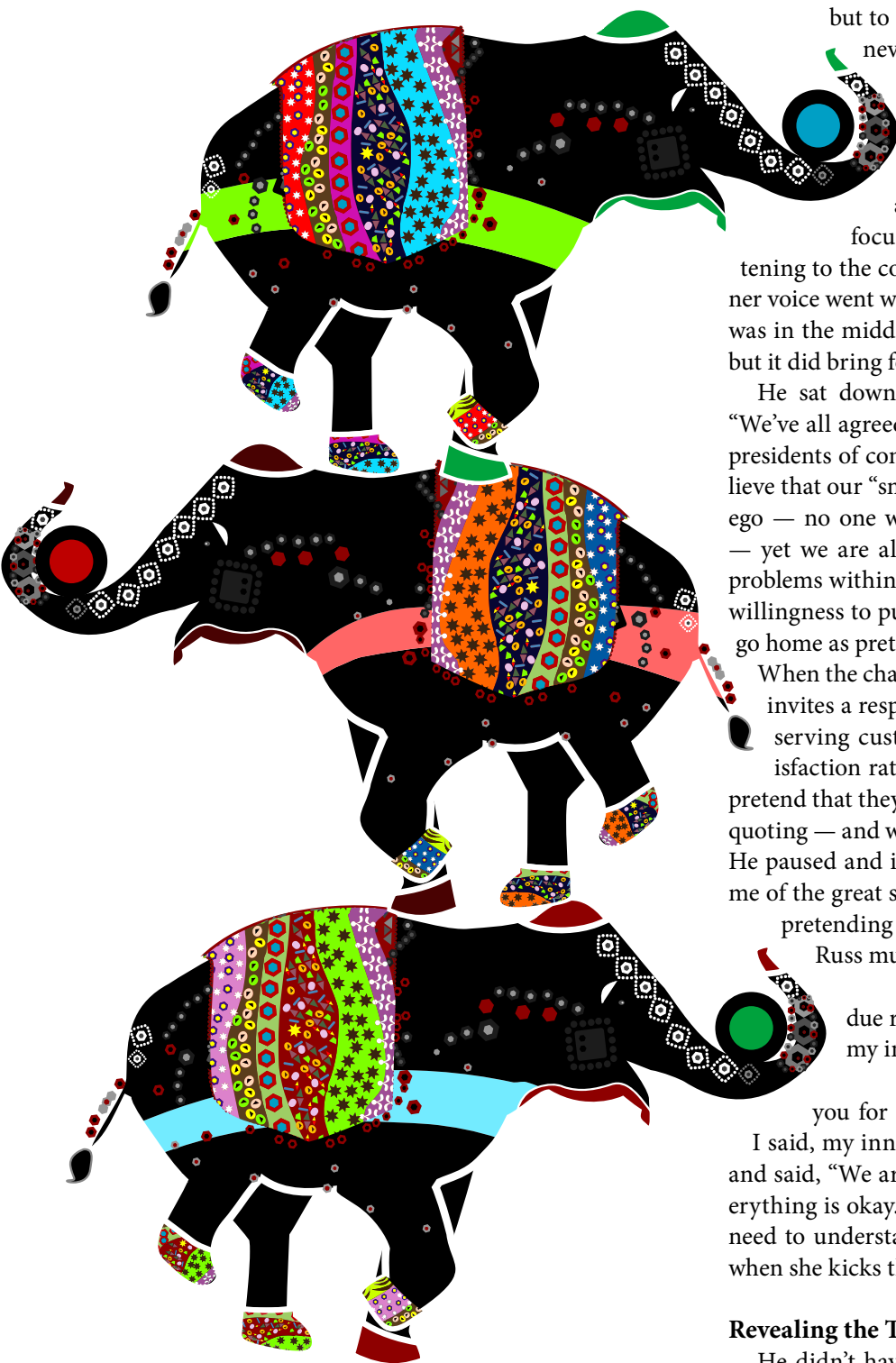
“You must have a very different inner voice from Joe?”

She said, “I have things that keep me awake at night, but it is not about how I lead my people.”

As the group reconvened for the afternoon, the chairman stood up and volunteered that the session will not be a success if they leave without understanding soaring. He said, “I for one learned an amazing lesson from the *gimme* putting experience and how we are all programmed to cut corners to expedite the game. I drove ‘3’ and realized that I could, in fact, wage peace with myself about the issue of time.” He paused for almost 10 seconds, looked at me in a rather strange way and asked, “But there is still something presidents at all levels need to learn — isn't there?”

I could tell that he wasn't referring merely to his group,

“You must see people differently before they can perform differently.”



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but to a larger agenda. I said, “Presidents must never stop learning.”

He was still standing and said, “It must have something to do with soaring and it is not that ‘touchy-feely’ California stuff.” He paused and looked at the group to be sure their minds were focused on what he was saying. “As I was listening to the conversations at my table at lunch, my inner voice went wild. It was worse than yours Joe — and it was in the middle of lunch.” Laughter broke the tension but it did bring focus to the group.

He sat down and in his contemplative way asked, “We’ve all agreed that we are all very mature, intelligent presidents of companies — we’ve been challenged to believe that our “smarts” are not smart. That’s a shot to our ego — no one wants to admit that we are incompetent — yet we are all still pretending that the performance problems within our businesses are due to the elephants’ willingness to pull the stake out of the ground. We can’t go home as pretenders.”

When the chairman speaks, no one interrupts until he invites a response. “Our people pretend that they are serving customers every day but our customer satisfaction ratings don’t improve. Our sales managers pretend that they are selling — but many of them are just quoting — and we are losing business in many accounts.” He paused and in a rather serious way said, “It reminds me of the great song, “Oh yes, I’m the great pretender — pretending that I’m living well.”

Russ mumbled, “Sounds like our city.”

Joe jumped in and said, “Sir — with all due respect, singing will add to the misery of my inner voice tonight.”

“Joe you are absolutely right. Thank you for sharing that inner voice e-mail, and as I said, my inner voice at lunch scared me.” He paused and said, “We are all living well and pretending that everything is okay.” He paused and once again asked. “We need to understand the inner voice of the mother eagle when she kicks the kids out of the nest? Does she...?”

### Revealing the Truth

He didn’t have a chance to finish his question when Jean interrupted and quietly asked, “Are you sure you really want to know?”

The chairman looked at her and in a very respectful way said, “Jean — that is why we are here. If you know the answer, please share it with us.”

Jean stood up and said, “Sir, I’ve heard the *gimme* putt story many times and while I really know very little about golf, I can tell you why golfers take *gimme* putts.” She paused to allow the suspense to elevate. “They are orchestrating the false meaning of numbers — a false set of numbers to satisfy their inner voice — that insecure self that says, ‘I need to prove to everyone that I’m a good golfer, so I’ll take that putt for fear of missing it.’”

She paused, “They don’t *gimme* putt to cheat — it’s like driving 80 on the freeway — they claim that it is to expedite play, but they take the putt to orchestrate a false set of numbers that has a legitimate excuse, you know, ‘We’re in a hurry and they gave it to me.’”

She paused, “It’s like the end of every month — we all do things to make the numbers look good. We don’t cheat — we just orchestrate numbers that have legitimate excuses.”

She had everyone’s attention as they all knew that she was touching on a very delicate issue.

The chairman asked, “Legitimate excuses — give me an example of a legitimate excuse?”

“As presidents, we have hundreds of excuses — you know, ‘Our profits are not as expected because our prices are not competitive, because, because, because — and sooner or later we blame the elephants for not pulling their load. There are many legitimate ways to justify our incompetency that can not be challenged. Joe’s inner voice e-mail is full of them — you know, how he leads is ‘scientific.’”

Joe was about to get defensive, but Jean in a rather emphatic manner said, “It is not about you Joe — that’s what many presidents believe. I was guilty — I orchestrated numbers and my people began to believe our excuses, but we were merely afraid of being accountable.” She paused and said, “It is all about the fear of failure.”

There was silence as everyone could tell that Jean had more to report. “We began to believe that a 90 percent on-time shipment rate was as good as we could do, because, because — and that customers would keep doing business with us because we were at least as good as our competitors. That kept the illusion alive. Over time, it became an addiction — they did it at General Motors and

they do it in Washington every day — and as Tom and Mr. Hock clearly pointed out, the not enough game gives it legitimacy — it is the Industrial Age way.”

Jean had total command of the silence. “We are all great at orchestrating numbers — we have very sophisticated ways of justifying that 20 percent market share is our fair share — yet as Joe’s inner voice reveals, things are not fine — we pretend that we are soaring when in fact, to use the elephant metaphor, we have a lot of people chained to their cubicles.”

The chairman interrupted and asked, “So — how is it different for you today?”

She paused and said, “Before I tell you how it is today, you need to understand the conscious choice I had to make. Sir, I thought a lot about your *gimme* putt message — but it was the drive ‘3’ thing that gave me time to think about the truth. It was amazing how I had time driving my car to think about the meaning of my leadership role.”

She paused and said, “If you guys haven’t done that yet ....” She realized that it would be of no consequence to lecture them. “I had to get everyone accountable for customer satisfaction, but my people could not translate the meaning of the numbers — 90 percent meant that we were doing rather well compared to years past, but that meant that 10 percent of the orders were late — and we had a very legitimate excuse as to why 100% was impossible.”

She paused for a drink of water and continued, “In my inner voice conversations while driving ‘3’ I recalled an executive conference at the University of Michigan that I attended several years ago. One of the presenters was Professor Robert Quinn, author of a great book entitled *Change the World*. I asked Dr. Quinn how I could get everyone to be accountable for customer satisfaction. I told him that if I was going to change the world within my business, I was not going to settle for anything short of one hundred percent.”

She paused and said, “Dr. Quinn — like Tom — had a very strange way of realizing that there is an answer to be known if the student was ready to hear it, and that I was a ready student searching for an answer to an impossible vision.”

She picked up Dr. Quinn’s book and read the following quote by David Whitwarm, CEO, Whirlpool Corporation:

“My people were ignoring the meaning of our customer satisfaction ratings — you know, no one was accountable for the *whole* customer.”

**“My old one [inner voice] still surfaces when I’m trying to defeat time — but my new one is built on *possibility*.”**

**“I think that I had to come to grips with the fact that it is not enough for me to be committed, to have a plan and understand where we are going. I had to get everyone engaged and committed. I had to stop trying to enact a journey of intense achievement and enact a journey of collective fulfillment.”**

“As Dr. Quinn told Mr. Whitwarm’s story, he said doing what appears to be impossible requires a transformation of how you see people. It is a well known fact that people can do impossible things if leaders will inspire them with a vision of possibility.”

“The entire conference was about a vision of possibility and how collective fulfillment was the answer. If you see people as functions or costs, or worse yet as *things* — you know, like elephants — they won’t work together — they’ll lack fulfillment in their work and totally ignore the performance of the whole company.”

“My people were ignoring the meaning of our customer satisfaction ratings — you know, no one was accountable for the *whole* customer.”

Recalling the story caused her to pause with some emotion. “I was trying to enact and elevate the intensity of achievement defined by pie charts and meaningless numbers.” She paused and said, “Bob, it was my way of trying to out-Roger Roger.”

Jean looked at Cheryl and said, “Cheryl, remember when we tried to change the culture of indifference. We yelled at the water — we yelled at the reps. That’s why I went to that conference. Frankly, I hated myself. Joe, my inner voice was keeping me awake. I would have never admitted it.”

### **The Meaning of Work**

She looked at me and said, “As I told you at lunch, all of my people are eagles because that’s how I see them.” She picked up Joe’s inner voice e-mail and said, “Talk about insanity — look at the addiction — *Work should not have any meaning beyond the results at the end of the month.* That is just not true. In order for work to be fulfilling it must have meaning *every day*. After that conference, I made a conscious choice that work would be fulfilling — for me and all of my people — and it has nothing to do with California.”

Bob wanted to ask a question. Jean said, “Let me fin-

ish.” She paused and said, “So, how is it different for me today? I’m free of that inner voice that says I must sacrifice everything including my happy home life to the certain reality and pursuit that execution of these principles brings regardless of consequence.” Once again she read from Joe’s e-mail. “We’re beginning to live the truth — eliminate the excuses — and the truth is, we don’t need to pretend. I’m really proud of the fact that we do a lot of things very well in our business today.” She paused, “We haven’t reached the impossible — but today my people are beginning to believe that *anything* is possible.”

She finished by saying, “Joe, the numbers at the end of the month are meaningless to your people — and if that is the only meaning you orchestrate for them, they will be elephants and your inner voice will be that of an elephant trainer the rest of your business career.”

There was silence. I allowed it to continue, as the truth of Jean’s words was irrefutable. The normal judgmental response did not surface.

The chairman broke the silence by asking, “Is your inner voice permanently different?”

Jean said, “My old one still surfaces when I’m trying to defeat time — but my new one is built on *possibility*.”

There was a rather serious silence in the room and Steve said, “That’s something I don’t know how to do.”

After they returned from a break, I thanked Jean for self-disclosing her perspective. I asked them to think of what Jean said in the context of the New Energy Age. “We know what it is like to be an elephant trainer in the Industrial Age business model, but very few people are really aware of what leaders must do in what I call the Energy Age business model.”

I asked them to turn in the handout to the page that contained the following quote by Michael Dell from his book *Direct From Dell*. “Let’s consider what Michael’s inner voice must be like.”

**“A reporter once asked me which of our competitors represented the biggest threat to Dell. I said the greatest threat to Dell wouldn’t come from a competitor. It would come from our people. It is not easy to maintain the energy of a focused team as we’ve expanded around the world.**

**Perhaps most important of all, we have created a**

**partnership of trust and communication among our most significant allies: our people, our customers, and our suppliers.”**

“Notice how he is focused on the energy of his team.”

“What is the source of the energy field that unites and motivates and inspires people? Jean has it right — fulfillment from the meaning of work.”

Joe said, “I tried for years to motivate my people and it never worked.”

Jean said, “Joe, I tried the same approach you did — look at your inner voice e-mail — you gave them great benefits — food, clothing, shelter, retirement security — but to young people today those issues are almost irrelevant.”

I said, “Joe, every president has tried very legitimate things to motivate their people but it is impossible to motivate people who are in fear. People are afraid to try the things they do on the rope courses back at work when it is classified as California stuff.” I paused and with some emphasis said, “The mother eagle does not motivate her young — she merely kicks them out of the nest knowing that they are eagles. She knows they have a fear of falling, but as my friend David McNally said, “The thrill of soaring always starts with the fear of falling.” I paused, “It’s the soaring that motivates.”

I could see everyone processing that thought as it is a confusing paradox. “Our Industrial Age mind will easily ignore the thought about collective fulfillment as some quirky cultural issue associated with Generation X, Y or Z but the *truth* is contained at the structural level. The new Mass Customization business model can not be executed by fearful people.”

Joe’s comment about motivation surfaced additional concerns. Of significance, they were all confused as to how they could orchestrate meaning for their people when their own jobs lacked meaning.

They were also skeptical that it was just another “program du jour” that would set false expectations for their

employees. They were very confident that resistance to change by their managers would be massive.

Some were concerned that orchestrating meaning was similar to a religious conversion. Others were determined to protect their mantra about withstanding the heat in the kitchen. They had pretended to be tough guys for so long that changing that impression would make them appear weak, and they would lose control.

To the bitter end, some argued for keeping their weakness. They argued that they knew how to lead — yet they all acknowledged that their inner voice was not likely to change if that was going to be the end result of our time together.

After the resistance subsided, I said, “Let me be very clear that what I am talking about has nothing to do with religion, culture or personal habit. It is all about the economics of your businesses. 