

# MANAGEMENT CONSULTING NEWS

*all things consulting . . .*

Meet the MasterMinds is an exclusive interview series brought to you by [Management Consulting News](#). Feel free to distribute this interview to others, but please respect our [terms of use](#).

If you'd like to subscribe to our free, monthly email newsletter, sign up at [www.ManagementConsultingNews.com](http://www.ManagementConsultingNews.com).

Comments are welcome, so please send them along to the [editor](#).

Enjoy the interview!

.....

## **Meet the MasterMinds: Marcus Buckingham's One Thing You Need to Know**

Marcus Buckingham is coauthor of the bestselling books *First, Break All the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, and he is a well-known voice challenging business leaders to operate in new ways.

In his latest book, *The One Thing You Need to Know...About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success*, Buckingham once again takes aim at the conventional wisdom on leadership, management, and individual performance.

MCNews talked to Buckingham about his research on what separates the best leaders and managers from all the rest.

**MCNews: The conventional wisdom seems to be that leadership is situational—that our actions are driven by the conditions of the moment. What's your view on that?**

**Buckingham:** Well, I don't think it's right at all. That would suggest leadership is just about good judgment. But the annoying thing about good judgment is that it's only good after the fact—when you see that things worked out well.

Leadership is not about being right. Most of the literature on leadership focuses on how to find the right strategy, or how to find the right way to behave in a given situation. Leadership is supposedly about picking out the one right action, or strategy, or the one right segment to serve. I think all of that's missing the point.

Leaders don't make more right decisions. They just make more decisions. And then they *make* them right, if you follow that.

Most leaders are not right in any objective sense—if there even is a "right" answer. What sets real leaders apart is their ability to turn people's legitimate anxiety about the future into confidence. They do that by showing people vividly what the future is going to look like.

**"What sets real leaders apart is their ability to turn people's legitimate anxiety about the future into confidence."**

I don't mean in some visionary sense... "I see a world in which...blah, blah, blah." I mean vivid in the sense of being deliberately clear in four areas. We need a leader to tell us: Who, precisely, do we serve? What is our core strength? Of the many things we can measure in our business, which one measure of success should we focus on? And, what specific actions can we take right now to improve our business?

If you want to understand leadership, you have to understand it through the impact a leader has on followers. The word leadership explodes into meaninglessness if you don't think about it from that perspective.

What a leader does for followers is, as I said, turn anxiety into confidence. They've always done that throughout time and in every different society and situation. When leaders lead well, it's because they're able to rally people to a better future and make people spirited when they were previously anxious.

**MCNews: Many companies stress that everybody, no matter where they are in the organization, should be a leader. What do you think of that as a managing philosophy?**

**Buckingham:** I have two thoughts. My first thought is that people who manage that way are not clear about the distinct and discrete role that leaders play. When you say everyone in your company is a leader, it's like saying everyone is a human. It doesn't mean anything when everybody is it. You're a person of integrity? Okay, you're a leader. You're a person of initiative? Okay, you're a leader. Well, then the word is so broad it doesn't tell you anything.

The second point is that most organizations are based on the assumption that everybody craves respect and the only way to get it is to climb up in the hierarchy as fast as we can. Companies set up recognition, prestige, pay, benefits, office, and title to encourage people to scramble up that ladder. The message from most companies is that you should want to be a leader, and if you don't there's something wrong with you.

**“When you say everyone in your company is a leader, it's like saying everyone is a human.”**

Leadership is the most respected and rewarded role in business. But I think we've done a terrible disservice to the idea that there is nobility, prestige, and respect due for *any* role done with excellence.

You don't pay a hotel housekeeper as much as you pay a CEO. But what if a housekeeper is so good that guests demand to stay in her section? If she is good enough to dramatically affect the customer experience, then she is the Michael Jordan of housekeepers. That's brilliant and tremendously valuable.

**MCNews: Wouldn't most companies reward that great performer with a promotion to supervisor of housekeepers? Is that an appropriate role for the Michael Jordan of housekeeping?**

**Buckingham:** *The Peter Principle* was written in 1969 as a terrible fate to be avoided, yet the most creative way we've thought of to reward someone for excellence in a role is still to move them out of it.

It's okay for some people. Is it for everybody? We need to find ways to encourage people to pursue prestige without telling them that the only way to grow and get more respect is to move out of what they are doing.

**MCNews: Many organizations promote their best managers into leadership roles by evaluating their managerial performance. Is that the optimal way to find a leader?**

**Buckingham:** Well, it's like saying, you're a good tennis player, so I think you could probably be a good priest. The two skills aren't mutually exclusive. There may be some tennis players who are good priests and vice versa. But being good at one doesn't tell you much about being good at the other.

To manage well requires that you recognize the subtle, but important, differences between people and that you know how to put those differences to work for your organization. Great managers thrive on helping people experience incremental growth. The dynamic creativity of figuring out how to move from the player to the plays is the real genius of a great manager.

Leadership isn't about that at all. Leadership is about finding the words, stories, and images that bring great clarity to people. And that's just different from being a good manager. You could have both talents, but good managers don't necessarily make good leaders.

**“Great managers thrive on helping people experience incremental growth.”**

**MCNews: You write about the need for leaders to take the time to reflect. Bill Gates does his “Think Week” and others have similar ways to step back from the fray. Why do you think leaders fail to recognize how important that is?**

**Buckingham:** Too many leaders think that their charge is to make things happen. And, therefore, they must foster the perception that they are in a frenzy of motion at all times.

What they fail to realize is that the *chief* responsibility of a leader is to draw clear conclusions. The best leaders take time out of their working lives to think, and they practice being clear to get better at it.

Most leaders don't see clarity as their primary job, and they are not expected to. So they don't take the time to think things through and draw reasoned conclusions. Even if they then blow up those conclusions six months hence, that doesn't matter. Conclusions can be modified.

In fact, people welcome a leader who is able to admit, hey, I was slightly off on that. But while I was there, I was really clear about it. The time a leader takes to get clarity is time well spent.

**MCNews: You've said that leaders don't spend enough time practicing the words, stories, and images they use to communicate clarity. Is the need to be in a frenzy of activity the only reason for that?**

**Buckingham:** That's part of the reason. I also think many leaders believe that their job is to analyze the complexity of the world, understand all the many variables at play, and then explain it to us. And that's not their job. Yeah, we want you to be smart and we don't want you to be 180 degrees wrong.

But don't waste our time and yours telling us, for example, about our six strengths in the market, or proving that you know every variable under the sun. A leader must know all that, but must go beyond it and tell us what *the* most important thing is.

**MCNews: Do you mean that a leader needs to convey a vision?**

**Buckingham:** No. It's not quite vision. I'm a little sensitive about that word because so often it's about being vague. A leader needs to be *specific*.

You're trying to turn anxiety into confidence. Rah, rah visioning doesn't do that for long. Give us precision—something that's as specific and vivid as the current situation we are in. Give us something to hang onto and clear actions we should take.

**MCNews: A lot has been written about leadership, management, and personal success. What is your opinion on state of the thinking and writing in those areas?**

**Buckingham:** Well, there is a lot of thinking going on. I'm not sure how rigorous it is. Most writing on those subjects falls into one of three categories. One is the personal success story—people

like Jack Welch and Rudolph Giuliani saying, here's what I did. There's nothing wrong with that; it's kind of intriguing. But such people are not always the best ones to analyze what they did because they're so inside the frame. Personal success stories, nonetheless, provide some very good anecdotes and perspectives.

Another approach is the parable. We seem to have parables coming out of our ears these days, some of them quite good. ***The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*** by Patrick Lencioni was very thoughtful. Others are less so.

We have very short attention spans and parables are—and I guess they've always been—a pretty good way to get a message across. I don't tend to like parables, though. They seem to me a little obscure.

And then the third category of writing is the ***Harvard Business Review*** sort. Some of that stuff on management and leadership is hard to come to grips with. It's abstract...no, abstract is the wrong word. It's just dense.

**MCNews: What do you think is missing from the literature on leadership?**

**Buckingham:** What we need in the areas of leadership, management, and sustained individual success is a really productive marriage between data and concepts.

Most books don't have any data in them at all. There is no back-up research, so they are anecdotal. There you run the risk of over-generalizing from the particular.

On the other extreme, you've got books with tons of data but no ability to generalize from it. Data without generalization—without concepts—is just gossip. You need to develop a rich data underpinning, and then dive deep into the details to make sense of the data for the reader.

**MCNews: Are there business writers who bridge the gap?**

**Buckingham:** Two writers in particular influenced me as I was growing up as a management consulting person. One of them was Peter Drucker. The other was Charles Handy, who wrote ***Empty Raincoat*** and ***The Age of Unreason***. They wrote for educated, thinking readers about important subjects, without trying to dumb them down or elevate them into obscurity.

That's how I try to write. Hopefully, as you turn the page you're not sure where the next example is going to come from. The research is there, but it isn't so overwhelming that you don't see the stories and the detail the research came from.

**MCNews: What's on your personal reading list these days?**

**Buckingham:** ***The Wisdom of Crowds*** by James Surowiecki. And ***Blink*** because I love the way Malcolm Gladwell writes.

I'm a huge Steven Pinker fan, so ***The Blank Slate***. I'm currently rereading ***The Moral Animal*** by Robert Wright. I'm always interested in where our values come from. Are they socially conditioned, or are they evolutionary?

I'm also interested in how things are connected, so I'm reading a wonderful book by Edward. O. Wilson called ***Consilience***. It's about how the various science disciplines don't help one another, but should. Some of it's over my head, but it's a good, new perspective.

And I'm reading ***Krakatoa*** by Simon Winchester, which is about when that region blew up in 1883.

**MCNews: I truly appreciate your time today.**

Find out more about Marcus Buckingham at [www.marcusbuckingham.com](http://www.marcusbuckingham.com).