



## The Rare Find

### Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

One of the nation's biggest music labels briefly signed Taylor Swift to a contract but let her go because she didn't seem worth more than \$15,000 a year. At least four book publishers passed on the first Harry Potter novel rather than pay J.K. Rowling a \$5,000 advance. And the same pattern happens in nearly every business.

Anyone who recruits talent faces the same basic challenge, whether we work for a big company, a new startup, a Hollywood studio, a hospital or the Green Berets. We all wonder how to tell the really outstanding prospects from the ones who look great on paper but then fail on the job. Or, equally important, how to spot the ones who don't look so good on paper but might still deliver extraordinary performance.

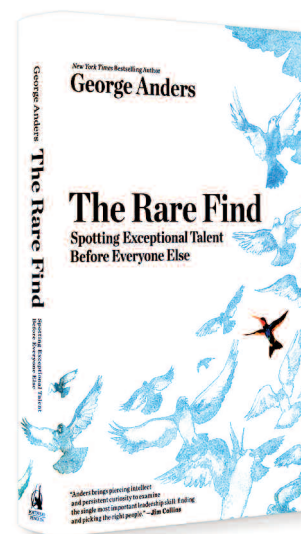
Over the past few decades, technology has made recruiting in all fields vastly more sophisticated. Gut instincts have yielded to benchmarks. If we want elaborate dossiers on candidates, we can gather facts (and video) by the gigabyte. And yet the results are just as spotty as they were in the age of the rotary phone.

George Anders sought out the world's savviest talent judges to see what they do differently from the rest of us.

In *The Rare Find*, Anders draws on the best advice of these and other talent masters to reveal powerful ideas you can apply to your own hiring.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why you should never ignore “the jagged résumé” — people whose background appears to teeter on the edge between success and failure.
- How to look extra hard for the obscure, out-of-the-way candidates who most scouting systems overlook.
- Why you must be careful with the spectacular but brash candidates who might have trouble with loyalty, motivation and team spirit.
- How to clear away the clutter and focus on what matters most.



by George Anders

#### CONTENTS

**Introduction**  
Page 2

**Sand, Sweat —  
and Character**  
Page 2

**The Talent Problem**  
Page 3

**Decoding the  
Jagged Résumé**  
Page 3

**Where Insights Are Born**  
Page 4

**Auditions That Work**  
Page 5

**Talent That Whispers**  
Page 5

**What Can Go Right**  
Page 6

**Talent That Shouts**  
Page 7

**When to Say No**  
Page 7

**Fitting the  
Pieces Together**  
Page 8

# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE RARE FIND

by George Anders

**The author:** George Anders is one of the founding writers at *Bloomberg View*, specializing in opinion pieces about the U.S. economy, financial markets and innovation. He spent two decades as a top feature writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, where he was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting. He has also written for *Fast Company*, *The New York Times*, *Parade*, *Smart Money* and *Harvard Business Review*. He is the author of three previous books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Perfect Enough*, a biography of Carly Fiorina.

*The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else* by George Anders. Copyright ©2011 by George Anders. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Portfolio/Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 276 pages, \$26.95.

ISBN: 978-1-59184-425-9. To purchase this book, go to [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.bn.com](http://www.bn.com).

Summary copyright © 2012 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com), 1-800-SUMMARY.

For additional information on the author, go to [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com).

## Introduction

In 2010, business strategist Marc Effron surveyed a group of 1,800 human resources managers at big companies. He asked if they thought they were winning the war for talent. Only 18 percent of respondents said yes. All the rest felt they were either losing ground or stuck in an endless struggle where they weren't making headway.

There are 208,000 full-time recruiters in the United States today, working everywhere from General Electric to a three-person firm specializing in pulp-mill operators. They tend to be likable, diligent, well-connected people. They reliably find competent candidates for their clients. Often they go one step further and produce what the business community calls "A-level players."

But when it comes to recognizing the first stirrings of genius, conventional talent spotters might as well be blindfolded. In pop music, one of the biggest recording labels in the country briefly signed teen sensation Taylor Swift to contracts very early in her career, but let her go because it didn't seem worth spending more than \$15,000 a year for exclusive rights to her work. In baseball, a host of future All-Star players went undrafted through the first 30 rounds of the sport's annual amateur draft, as teams burned up more than 900 picks on other players, most of whom would never play an inning of major league baseball. And in book publishing, at least four houses had a chance to buy the rights to J.K. Rowling's first Harry Potter novel for less than \$5,000. All but one of them said no.

Of course, in each of those cases, someone did break away from the pack. Someone did take a chance on the unlikely prospect. ●

## Sand, Sweat — and Character

Of all the military equipment at Camp Mackall, nothing is more pitiful than trailer 2K9395. Oil stains and rust patches have devoured the trailer's cargo bed. A rusted axle droops awkwardly from the frame's left side. The trailer joined the U.S. Army in June 1967, bound for service in Vietnam. Judging by appearances, this contraption has been rotting for decades at this Army outpost in the North Carolina pinelands.

For Dan Fagan, the trailer is perfect.

Fagan is a tall, broad-shouldered sergeant in the U.S. Army Special Forces. After years of overseas deployments, he has come to Camp Mackall for three years. In his job, he helps screen about 300 soldiers a month, all of whom hope to join the elite Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets.

On this particular morning, unprepared soldiers will be thrust in front of the Army's worst-kept trailers to see who can propel these 800-pound wrecks, by hand, to a faraway destination. Fagan will judge their work.

Walking alongside the trailer-pushing soldiers in the hot North Carolina sun is tedious, unpleasant work for the Special Forces assessors. There's no way of predicting when the next revealing moment will occur. Soldiers can trudge through the sand for hours without doing anything out of the ordinary. Yet Special Forces assessors regard their duty as an honor. For them, moment-by-moment observation is a crucial part, maybe even the essence, of how the U.S. Army Special Forces ensures it is selecting the right new soldiers.



**1-800-SUMMARY**  
service@summary.com

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 500 Old Forge Lane, Suite 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2012 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®.

**Available formats:** Summaries are available in several digital formats. To subscribe, call us at 1-800-SUMMARY (240-912-7513 outside the United States), or order online at [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com). Multiple-subscription discounts and corporate site licenses are also available.

Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Chris Lauer, Contributing Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer

### How GE's Corporate Audit Staff Program Works

One of the most famous talent-spotting systems in corporate America is General Electric's (GE's) Corporate Audit Staff program. It is a multiyear gauntlet designed to be a selection/initiation hybrid. Candidates may spend six months in Brazil working around the clock on leasing deals — and then be rocketed off to Australia on short notice to learn the mining business. Such progressions draw the most dedicated into a fast-paced career in corporate finance while discarding those who can't keep up.

The interplay between broad rules and specific examples is endless and rich. It's possible to learn from a vast assortment of fields, so long as each discipline's unique habits are seen as metaphors, rather than as a literal role model.

Their vigilance provides what every organization wants: accurate early assessments of who has the right stuff — and who doesn't.

Camp Mackall's rituals provide a useful starting point for thinking about talent selection. Any system for picking the right people needs to be more than just a thousand disconnected habits. Success means building on a few central principles. Step back from the details of Special Forces' methods and it's possible to discern three big ideas that can apply almost anywhere. They are:

- **Look for the hidden virtues.** One of the most overlooked strengths in America today can be expressed in one word: resilience.
- **Find your unlikely stars by noticing what others don't see.** The best assessors in any field are constantly learning something new about their subjects.
- **Push your best candidates to grow even stronger.** Motivation reveals itself as the selection process plays out. ●

### The Talent Problem

Teach for America's (TFA) early approach to picking teachers suffered from a narrow/superficial problem, with assessors relying far too much on the illusory value of tests that looked for classroom charisma. Those were easy tests to administer and they appeared to be ferreting out attributes that were highly relevant. In reality, though, chasing charisma wasn't the right approach.

Nonetheless, TFA got back on track, and how it did so is instructive. Recovery started with some serious rethink-

ing by Wendy Kopp, TFA's founder. In her autobiography, *One Day, All Children*, Kopp talked about a series of visits she made in the spring of 1999 to schools where the best TFA-selected teachers were at work. "What I realized in getting to know exceptional teachers," she wrote, "is that good teaching is not about charisma. It's not anything magical or elusive. These teachers set clear goals for their students, motivate people (in this case students and their families) to work hard toward these goals, work relentlessly to accomplish them and constantly assess their effectiveness and improve their performance over time. As I got to know these teachers, a whole new conception of teaching formed in my head."

### Come Back and Do It Again

Resilience became the new watchword within TFA. In its 2004 website briefing for prospective applicants, tfa.org declared: "Because our corps members face such tremendous challenges, we seek applicants who have demonstrated determination and persistence when confronted with obstacles in the past." The language was recast a few years later, but the message remained just as strong. In 2010, tfa.org informed candidates: "Our successful corps members refuse to allow the inevitable challenges that they face to become roadblocks." In other words, work hard. Don't complain. Don't lose faith. Come back tomorrow morning and do it again.

By the time the 2009-10 academic year was over, TFA recruiters had auditioned a record 46,359 applicants, competing for just 4,500 openings. As selectors narrowed down the candidate pool, they enjoyed a pickiness that outsiders found breathtaking. Some 18 percent of Harvard's graduating class applied; most of those students didn't get in. A future Fulbright scholar was turned down. A Duke senior told *The New York Times* that getting into the teaching corps is just as hard as "being accepted to an Ivy League grad school."

Does all that intense jockeying for a few slots mean that TFA is able to find extraordinary teachers? Traditionalists say that they are more comfortable with the classic belief that top teachers develop slowly, through years of training. TFA's defenders counter that by selecting only the most promising candidates, they have been able to launch teachers successfully into classrooms with only a few weeks of intensive training. Often these newcomers can achieve gains in their classrooms that match those of long-time teachers — and exceed what traditional first-year teachers with years of conventional training can do. ●

### Decoding the Jagged Résumé

During his time at the University of Utah, David C. Evans filled his graduate programs with the young engi-

## Summary: THE RARE FIND

neers and scientists who later created the Pixar movie studio, a pioneering Internet-browser company, Photoshop editing software and more. As *The New York Times* declared in Evans' 1998 obituary, Evans discovered and groomed "an extraordinary group of graduate students who went on to groundbreaking careers in computing."

Practically all of Evans' selections required him to make sense of what amounted to "jagged résumés." That term doesn't appear in standard human resources manuals. But it's a familiar concept for top assessors in fields ranging from commerce to medicine, sports, high finance and philanthropy. Knowing what to do when a jagged résumé candidate enters the picture is the single biggest differentiator between leaders with a gift for picking winners — and those who keep wrong-footing themselves.

Whenever a search for talent begins, it's customary to draw up a list of all the desired traits that a winning candidate should have. As candidates come in, standard protocol calls for dividing résumés into two piles. People whose background and credentials largely fit expectations become serious contenders for the job. People who come up short are shunted aside.

### A Grievous Flaw

That's a perfectly logical system, with a grievous flaw. The most intriguing candidates often don't fit into either pile. These are the candidates who don't have smooth, well-rounded credentials to date. They show up with a tantalizing, jarring combination of promise and pitfalls. They are jagged résumés.

The cautious answer in such situations is to shunt such candidates into a third pile: the "maybes." That way, no one needs to make a decision for a while.

The best assessors thrive on analyzing the middle of the pile. Even if there's just one overlooked winner in each stack of 50 "maybes," they find him or her. They widen the talent pool and never lower their standards or tarnish their reputations with a flurry of poor hires. In their hands, the jagged résumés aren't so hard to decode after all. Here are their most powerful methods:

- **Compromise on experience; don't compromise on character.** Be willing to embrace unconventional views of what skills are truly needed in each specific field.
- **Your own career is a template; use it.** The best insights into candidates' potential come from leaders whose own life experiences speak to the traits they are seeking.
- **Rely on auditions to see *why* people achieve the results they do.** When great assessors watch a candidate in action, they aren't just looking for a

momentary flash of brilliance. They are hunting for dozens of clues that show how and why someone succeeds. ●

### Where Insights Are Born

Most of us dodge the hard work of extracting lasting truths from the zigzags of our own careers. We don't want to know why we stumbled at certain points. We may not even care to pick apart our successes that much. We would rather settle for a soothing narrative — revealing little about the real reasons for success or failure — instead of staring at the raw truths of why some people achieve great things and others don't.

In his book *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, psychologist Daniel Goleman documents how pervasive such coping mechanisms have become. As he points out, "the mind can protect itself against anxiety by dimming awareness." Evasions shield us in the face of everything from severe physical pain to awkward dealings with friends, colleagues and societal problems. It takes a special sort of courage to revisit the critical junctures in our lives, and to look at them calmly and with clarity.

Why bother? Because that's where insights are born.

More than a half-century ago, an 11-year-old boy was admitted to Children's Memorial Hospital with a ruptured appendix. He didn't leave the hospital until three months later. A fierce stomach infection had set in. Antibiotics of that era were barely sufficient to bring it under control. As if finally became clear that the boy would recover, he wanted to know everything about what his doctors and nurses did, and how they helped him heal.

### Spotting the Nonobvious Winners

That unforgettably scary experience became Dr. James Weiss' touchstone. It doesn't show up on his résumé. But it is clear that a harsh childhood illness still shaped his thinking about what doctors could be — and should be. Without that illness, Dr. Weiss might have become an oboist. Without that illness, "bedside manner" might never have been more than a phrase to him. Without that illness, he might have taken the easy route to guiding Johns Hopkins' admissions committee toward picking strictly the candidates with the best grades and scores, rather than looking for the ones with the most caring souls, too.

One of Dr. Weiss' favorite ways of spotting the nonobvious winners is to see how candidates answer a quartet of essay questions that are aimed at drawing out students' character. Those questions ask students to talk about rewarding experiences, overcoming adversity,

areas of pride and moments of exclusion. Dr. Weiss added those questions shortly after taking command of the admissions effort in 1999. There have been answers, he says, that brought him to the brink of tears.

But those gentle questions have also provided Hopkins with some of its starkest warning signs. “We’ve had essays that dripped with breathtaking arrogance,” Dr. Weiss says. “And there was one where a candidate said that his proudest moment involved getting his guitar to make a warbling, Pink Floyd sort of sound. I have no idea what he was thinking when he told us that.” ●

### Auditions That Work

The best independent scouts blend opinion and facts so skillfully that college sports departments gladly subscribe to the assessors’ high-priced newsletters year after year.

Bob Gibbons is an informal dean of the scouts. He is a friendly, paunchy man from Lenoir, N.C. He has been appraising high-school basketball stars since 1977.

“You want guys diving on the floor or crashing into the stands, chasing a loose ball,” Gibbons explains. “You look for ‘effort’ people. It makes a huge difference how dedicated they are. You’re always asking ‘Are they willing to do whatever is necessary to get to the next level?’”

Jared Sullinger not only made the starting lineup at Ohio State as a college freshman; he helped propel the Buckeyes to a top-five ranking in the country. Before Sullinger’s first college season was done, sportswriters predicted he could be one of the NBA’s top draft picks.

Aaron Craft wasn’t making as big a splash, but he was on his way to stardom, too. He became a key reserve for the same Ohio State team, playing 29 minutes a game and averaging 6.9 points. He led the team in steals, even though he wasn’t on the court for as many minutes as the starters.

Millions of auditions take place in America every month. They come in every imaginable form. Some can be as brief as an actor’s two-minute reading of a minor movie part. Others involve two weeks of round-the-clock rigors at the FBI’s main training facility in Quantico, Va. Whatever the format, each audition represents a chance to see what a candidate can actually *do*. At a certain point, it’s time to move beyond the indirect insights that can be gleaned from résumés, references and interviews. It’s time to ask the actor to step on stage; the pilot to crawl into the simulator; the educator to teach a class. It’s time to see, right there in action, who possesses the right stuff.

The best auditions reveal profound strengths — and flaws — that might not be obvious otherwise. When it’s

### What Audition Masters Hunt For

Ask audition masters what they are hunting for and the deepest answers involve subjects’ character. Regardless of differences in the exact ways that talent is expressed, each domain’s underlying quests are strikingly similar: Who tries hard? Who prepares well? Who recovers quickly and calmly from a setback? Who works well with others? Who can size up a turbulent situation and come up with a plan? Or, taken from the other direction, which people cut corners? Who turns brittle under pressure? Who is clueless about group dynamics? Who ultimately doesn’t care?

All these queries help illuminate the reasons *why* candidates achieve the results that they do.

time to make sense of jagged résumés, auditions help identify the Sullingers and Crafts of any field. Just as important, well-run auditions can sound the alarm about candidates who seem spectacular on paper but falter on closer inspection. Every field has its share of high-scoring performers whose shortcomings take a while to perceive. Auditions uncover those flaws. ●

### Talent That Whispers

“We should come up with programming puzzles,” declared Facebook’s chief technology officer, Adam D’Angelo, a recent Caltech graduate. If the puzzles were clever enough, they could be posted on Facebook’s website as a form of “brain candy,” inspiring gung-ho solvers to think about working at Facebook. So Facebook engineer Yishan Wong cobbled together some jaunty stories with sneaky-hard puzzles embedded in them. Most of his creations were so gnarly that he couldn’t solve them. D’Angelo liked that.

As Facebook’s puzzle inventory grew, so did the company’s understanding of the national talent pool. “We developed this theory that occasionally there were these brilliant people out there who hadn’t found their way to Silicon Valley,” Wong recalled. “They might be languishing in ordinary tech jobs. We needed a way to surface them.” Goofy puzzles looked the perfect bait. So Facebook began looking for ways to get its brainteasers in front of whatever desk-bound slackers might have hidden aptitudes for top-flight programming.

Facebook’s puzzles began attracting a cult following among programmers worldwide. Utter strangers spent as much as 40 hours trying to devise solutions. Most of their efforts didn’t work. About 10 percent of submissions, however, amounted to accurate, runnable programs.

## Summary: THE RARE FIND

---

Within that pool, a much smaller number amounted to genuinely elegant work. Those standout candidates earned job interviews at Facebook. Contestants who passed all the regular tests for new hires were invited to come on board.

Alert organizations find clever ways to widen their net without wrecking the careful checks and balances involved in a conventional hiring system. Often the pioneering work can be done by a few explorers who approach the hunt for talent in a radically different manner.

The key techniques are:

- **Break down barriers that restrict where you look.**
  - **When exploring, ask: “What can go right?”**
  - **Figure out how to take tiny chances — so you can take more of them.** ●
- 

### What Can Go Right?

In Silicon Valley, where even well-established companies try to retain the friskiness and childlike curiosity of their early days, the willingness to ask, “What can go right?” never dwindles.

The model in many executives’ minds is Bill Hewlett, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard (HP). During his heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, he developed a famous three-step approach for dealing with engineers who were excited about what they hoped was an amazing breakthrough.

At the start of the process, one chronicler recalled, “Bill immediately put on a hat called ‘enthusiasm.’ He would listen, express excitement where appropriate and appreciation in general, while asking a few rather gentle and not too pointed questions.” Later, Hewlett would revisit the issue, in effect wearing new hats called “inquisition” and “decision.” In those later stages, Hewlett could turn fiercely critical. Shortcomings in either the idea or its champion would be bluntly aired. But the critiques wouldn’t happen until Hewlett had first enjoyed a chance to see what could go right.

As a result, the best ideas (and the most talented engineers) prospered within HP. The duds were culled. Thanks to Hewlett’s willingness to begin with an open-minded look, morale stayed strong, no matter what the outcome. The boss’ overriding message: New ideas and new talent were welcome at HP.

There is a powerful benefit to this strategy of opening the doors wide at first, and then getting picky as newcomers reveal their full strengths and limits. It becomes much easier to hire someone intriguing without a fully formed view of what she or he might accomplish in the

years ahead. All that matters at the beginning is a willingness to get started. ●

---

### Lottery Tickets

When Scott Borchetta founded his own music label in Nashville, at age 43, he was trying to rebound from a run of bad luck. He had been squeezed out of MCA Music years earlier because of a personality clash with a boss. He lost another job in the summer of 2005, when DreamWorks Nashville shut down.

Borchetta yearned to be in charge of picking talent. He had spent 20 years in Nashville, taking orders from a long series of music label chiefs. They decided who should be a star. Borchetta’s job was to get on the phone with radio station music directors and programmers around the nation, trying to make someone else’s business plan come true.

Right after leaving DreamWorks, Borchetta moved his work gear into an aging bungalow on Nashville’s Music Row — and declared himself CEO of Big Machine Records.

### Discovering Talent

To succeed, Borchetta needed to sign the singers America wanted to hear. He had to *discover* talent that the rest of the industry didn’t see.

Three of Borchetta’s artists were gritty male soloists who had cut a few songs for other labels. None had hit the big time yet. Another addition was an astonishingly good-looking woman whom Borchetta had met at a sushi restaurant. The fifth arrival in Big Machine’s lineup was a tall, blond high-school girl, just 15 years old at the time. She didn’t fit into any familiar category, but Borchetta really liked her lyrics.

In essence, Borchetta had bought five lottery tickets.

Ultimately, Borchetta’s venture paid off in ways he hadn’t dared hope. During Big Machine’s first five years, his artists sold more than 20 million albums and won four Grammy Awards. One of his performers made the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Big Machine became country music’s top-selling label in 2009, which changed the way Borchetta was seen in Nashville. He became a powerful man.

Practically all of Big Machine’s success came from the teen artist nobody noticed at first: Taylor Swift. When her debut album hit the stores, she won fans in small towns and big cities with her candor, poise and warmth. She turned out to be the unlikely superstar that made Big Machine the hottest ticket in Nashville.

In areas of artistic creation, such as music, our first encounters with greatness very seldom amount to

## Summary: THE RARE FIND

---

“Wow!” moments. All we notice at the beginning is a slight flutter. We see, hear or read someone who stands out. How much? We’re not sure. We need to know more. But our curiosity has been engaged. We certainly will take stock of this new presence some more. Those follow-up sessions — the second, third, fourth and fifth encounters — are where we gradually gain the conviction to say: “That really is something extraordinary.”

If bells went off every time someone amazing walked into sight, it wouldn’t be hard at all to recognize the first stirrings of greatness. The great art lies in being open-minded enough to see faint possibilities at first, and then being methodical enough to keep coming back for more impressions, until the full picture is clear. ●

---

### Talent That Shouts

Decades after they scrubbed together, surgeons across the country still hear Dr. John Cameron’s voice in the operating room. Dr. Cameron is in his 70s now, yet the mentor’s impact lingers. At some of America’s finest hospitals — including the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and Brigham and Women’s in Boston — when surgeons get to work, it’s as if they were back in Baltimore, finishing their training while their former chief stands beside them. Nothing the younger surgeons are doing is good enough. The testy, silver-haired boss is demanding perfection.

His voice begins gently. It is the cadence of a patient teacher, sharing maxims and anecdotes. Everything is delivered at a smooth pace that is just right for full, first-time comprehension. Dr. Cameron wants you to learn. Yet every few minutes, there’s something odd that he wants to single out. Now the pitch rises. The frequency of words slows down. Dr. Cameron lingers on a single word with incredulity. A puzzled, mocking tone takes hold. The great teacher has come across something that makes utterly no sense. Now he wants you to realize how wrong-headed this is. Even before you can absorb the reasons he will share, he wants you to shudder at this bad practice.

Should you forget for a moment to clamp off a blood vessel, Dr. Cameron’s high-pitched whine will assault your ears. “*Jeez, Mike, every surgeon in North America ... knows ... better ... than to do that.*” Start working around the incision and the voice keeps reminding you to handle the patient’s tissues as delicately as possible. Make a single awkward move and the voice will snap: “*Wooden hands!*”

Yet when the operation is over, Dr. Cameron’s voice is gentle again. “*You did a good job,*” the voice says. “*I hope you don’t mind me yelling. Yelling makes me feel better.*”

For 20 years, Dr. Cameron ran what amounted to an extraordinary boot camp for America’s most ambitious

surgeons. Starting in 1984, his general surgery department accepted about 30 young doctors a year as Hopkins trainees. All of them had been winning competitions their entire lives. They were academic standouts in high school, college and medical school. Many had worked part-time in top research labs; some had been standout athletes, too. Each beat out 15 or more rivals to win a place at Hopkins. They represented talent that shouts.

Those aren’t easy people to manage and they can be even harder to assess. What seems like bountiful, overflowing talent can turn into a minefield of petulance, frustration and selfishness. Many organizations suffer their worst setbacks when dealing with “can’t miss” talent.

The best strategists involve a tough-love approach, as epitomized by Dr. Cameron’s marathon training programs. He bombarded young doctors with fierce challenges and lofty goals. As each round of apprenticeships played out, Dr. Cameron could see who the true winners were. The result: an extraordinary crop of future medical leaders and a talent-grooming system that ought to be an archetype. ●

---

### When to Say No

Bill Cosby’s foray into book writing is a cautionary tale in the publishing industry that still attracts notice two decades later. Everything started well in 1985, with Doubleday editor Paul Bresnick signing up Cosby to write a short book that became *Fatherhood*. That book’s gentle mix of advice and wisecracks captivated America. Readers snapped up more than 2.5 million hardcover copies, creating millions of dollars of profits for Doubleday and making its author’s advance of \$850,000 seem like a bargain.

Doubleday briskly signed up Cosby for another book, this time on what it’s like to get old. The publishers paid \$3 million for the rights to *Time Flies*, which had strong but not spectacular sales. Everyone decided to try a third time. This time Doubleday paid \$3.5 million for *Love and Marriage*, which ran into serious buyer resistance. Of the 850,000 hardcover copies printed, journalist Gayle Feldman reported, barely one third had been sold a year after the book’s debut. This latest project was at risk of sticking Doubleday with losses of \$1 million or more. Ordinary business logic would suggest that Doubleday stop publishing Cosby’s books, or at least stop paying so much for them.

Even so, Doubleday nearly ended up publishing Cosby’s next book, *Childhood*, for another hefty advance before tensions between publisher and author caused *Childhood* to be published by a different house.

Feldman, who summarized the economic rise and fall of Cosby’s titles in a *New York Times* feature, declared that such follies are just part of the way publishing works. In

## Summary: THE RARE FIND

her words, “famous authors’ advances frequently rise in inverse proportion to the sales of their books.” The main reason, she contended, is that authors press for more and their publishers capitulate, fearful of seeing a major author go elsewhere.

For the last word on acquiring talent at sensible prices — and avoiding catastrophic overpayments — the right expert is football’s Bill Polian. “In any given year,” he says, “there are exceedingly overpriced areas of the talent market. That’s most common with free agents, and it’s usually recognizable.” Other teams battle to sign the players everyone wants; Polian seldom does.

“You get confident over time about breaking from the pack,” he says. In his pre-NFL jobs, his budgets were so tight that he had no choice but to look for low-cost ways to fill his roster with the overlooked or underappreciated. Now he remains thrifty by choice. “You need to be as efficient as you can about solving the problem,” he says. “You don’t take things for granted. You analyze the solution. You find a solution. There’s always a solution.” ●

### Picking the Boss

A new breed of outside assessment experts is getting better at winning boardroom credibility. Old-time stereotypes of odd-looking psychologists in tweed jackets have succumbed to the arrival of polished assessors with MBAs and big-league experience at Bain, McKinsey and other strategic consulting shops. These interlocutors know how executives think and act; some are so accomplished that they could sit on either side of the table. In turn, directors have sobered up. Aware of the hit-and-miss results that come from falling in love with candidates, board members are much more amenable to formal screening methods instead. Highly structured interviews may not be as fun as a couple rounds of drinks at a speakeasy. But if a carefully scripted approach produces better results, it’s hard to argue against it.

There’s a parallel here with Major League Baseball, where laptop carrying data crunchers have had a huge impact on the talent market. As chronicled in Michael Lewis’ book *Moneyball*, the numbers geeks proved that major-league teams had been paying far too much for flashy home run hitters, and not enough for scrappy ballplayers who kept reaching base by drawing walks.

Could something similar be true for hunting for executive talent? It’s still early days. The ingredients for a successful CEO are far more complicated than the elements that define an All-Star baseball player. But it’s intriguing to see where dispassionate assessors are focusing their attention.

Spotlights are centered on everyday virtues — such as efficiency, self-reliance and an ability to “read the room” when people with different interests are crammed together for a meeting or a negotiation. Such skills are the equivalent of a CEO’s brilliant speech or high-stakes strategic thrust. Over time, though, it’s the little stuff that may add up to lasting success. ●

### Fitting the Pieces Together

Time and again, the experts converge on the same three principles:

**1. Widen your view of talent.** The best assessors in any field look at people differently. These judges all have the courage to focus on candidates’ underlying character and motivation, rather than sticking merely to classic measures of experience. Credentials and job history still matter, but they aren’t the whole show anymore. Once some basic level of competency has been established, the key question stops being: “What can you do for us today?” Instead, it becomes: “What might you be able to do for us years from now?” The payoff from this bolder, more forward-looking perspective can be huge.

Compromise on experience; don’t compromise on character. Seek out “talent that whispers.” On the fringes of talent, ask: “What can go right?” Take tiny chances — so you can take more of them.

**2. Find inspirations that are hidden in plain sight.** Patterns that may be difficult to see in one realm can be stunningly clear in others.

Draw on the “hidden truths” of each job. Many organizations are in too much of a hurry to get started with the drama of screening candidates, without ever fully knowing what the hunt is all about.

Be willing to use your own career as a template. Rely on auditions to see *how* and *why* people achieve the results they do. Master the art of aggressive listening.

**3. Simplify your search for talent.** Be willing to pick one trait that matters more than anything. Often the ability to recover from setbacks is what separates people who surpass expectations from those who disappoint.

Be alert to other invisible virtues, too. Insist on the right talent. Push your best candidates to grow even stronger. Become a citadel of achievement. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Rare Find*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The 2020 Workplace* by Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd.** In 2020, multi-generations will place new demands on employees. Learn what your organization can do.
2. ***Smart Hiring at the Next Level* by Robert W. Wendover.** This book shows how to pick the best while avoiding the 10 most common hiring mistakes.
3. ***Topgrading* by Bradford D. Smart.** Author Bradford Smart spells out his practical approach to finding and managing A-level talent.