

Let's Hear It for B Players

by Thomas J. DeLong and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan



Harvard Business Review

Reprint R0306F

Harvard Business Review



June 2003

HBR CASE STUDY R0306A
The Global Brand Face-Off
Anand P. Raman

DIFFERENT VOICE R0306B
Storytelling That Moves People: A Conversation with
Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee

Leadership and the Psychology R0306C
of Turnarounds
Rosabeth Moss Kanter

M&A Needn't Be a Loser's Game R0306D
Larry Selden and Geoffrey Colvin

Managing by Commitments R0306E
Donald N. Sull

Let's Hear It for B Players R0306F
Thomas J. DeLong and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan

Pension Roulette: Have You Bet R0306G
Too Much on Equities?
G. Bennett Stewart III

BEST PRACTICE R0306H
Uncovering Hidden Value in a
Midsize Manufacturing Company
James E. Ashton, Frank X. Cook, Jr., and Paul Schmitz

TOOL KIT R0306J
The Myth of Secure Computing
Robert D. Austin and Christopher A.R. Darby

Let's Hear It for B Players

by Thomas J. DeLong and
Vineeta Vijayaraghavan

We all downplay average performers because they lack the luster and ambition of stars. But look again. These best supporting actors may just take the lead in saving your organization.

IN THE MUCH-HERALDED WAR FOR TALENT, it's hardly surprising that companies have invested a lot of time, money, and energy in hiring and retaining star performers. Most CEOs find that recruiting stars is simply more fun; for one thing, the young A players they interview often remind them of themselves at the same age. For another, their brilliance and drive are infectious; you want to spend time with them. Besides, in these troubled times, when businesses are failing left and right, people who seem to have what it takes to turn a company's performance around are almost irresistible.

But our understandable fascination with star performers can lure us into the dangerous trap of underestimating the vital importance of the supporting actors. A players, it is true, can make enormous contributions to corporate performance. Yet in our collective 20 years of consulting, research, and teaching, we have found that companies' long-term performance—even survival—depends far more on the unsung commitment and contributions of their B players. These capable, steady performers are the best supporting actors of the business world.

Consider Ivan Farmer, a manager who worked on oil rigs for a large conglomerate. (While the stories we discuss here are true, the names are fictitious.) Privately, Ivan was

disappointed in his B players for not being “rocket asses,” as they are called in the oil business. (Rocket asses shoot up to the top of the corporate hierarchy because they are ready to move anytime, anywhere.) Ivan later openly admitted that he lost respect for his B players because they were less ambitious and, therefore, less like himself and other senior managers. He didn't value their stability; solid B performers stuck with a rig for several years largely because they enjoyed the camaraderie and security of a dependable team.

Unfortunately, many of Ivan's favorite rocket asses flew off to other companies for more money. Many B players also left the company because Ivan so flagrantly disregarded them. The result was that the number of experienced workers on the oil rig fell to dangerously low levels, and the CEO soon began to notice that performance had slipped. In Ivan's struggle to get off the supervisory radar, he realized he had better start valuing and rewarding his solid B engineers.

Companies are routinely blinded to the important role B players serve in saving organizations from themselves. They counterbalance the ambitions of the company's high-performing visionaries whose esteemed strengths, when carried to an extreme, can lead to reckless or vola-

tile behavior. In this sense, B players act as grounders for charismatic A players who might otherwise destabilize the organization. Unfortunately, organizations rarely learn to value their B players in ways that are gratifying for either the company or these employees. As a result, companies see their profits sinking without really understanding why.

This article will help you to rethink the role of your organization's B players—those employees that in a rough ranking are neither the fast-track A players who make up the top 10% nor the struggling C players who make up the bottom 10%. Once you realize your B players' worth, you'll begin to appreciate them more and to reward them fairly. B performers bring unique strengths to an organization, both every day and in times of crisis, by keeping the company from slipping into entropy. As we'll show, you can mentor and nurture B players to ensure their continued participation in the company. Let's begin by looking at the characteristics of B players your company may be neglecting.

Playing Strong Character Parts

The first truth that companies need to recognize about their B players is that they are not necessarily less intelligent than A players. Achievement is a complicated blend of intelligence, motivation, and personality. As someone once observed of Franklin Roosevelt (a star performer if ever there was one), "He had a second-class mind but a first-class temperament." Research confirms that insight; dozens of psychological studies have demonstrated that A and B players differ at least as much in temperament as intelligence.

So what exactly is the B-player temperament? Perhaps B players' defining characteristic is their aversion to calling attention to themselves—even when they need to. They are like the proverbial wheel that never squeaks—and, consequently, gets no grease. Indeed, we've found that the quickest way of identifying the B players is to list the people who make the fewest demands on the CEO's time. Such reserve is utterly alien to most stars, who make sure that they squeak loudly enough to get the attention they want.

Another pronounced characteristic of B players is that they place a high premium on work-life balance, and they highly value the time they spend with family and friends. Consequently, B players strive for advancement, but not

Thomas J. DeLong is a professor of management practice in the organizational behavior area at Harvard Business School in Boston. Vineeta Vijayaraghavan is a consultant in the New York office of Katzenbach Partners, an organizational strategy firm.

at all costs. Once again, this attitude is anathema to most A players, who relish new opportunities and battles. Indeed, because A players see themselves as stars, they feel less tied to their employers than do B players. At the extreme, they think more about what's good for Brand Me than about what's good for the company.

Like character actors, productive B players tend to assume one of a limited number of distinct organizational types. Perhaps the most productive are *recovered A players* who have rejected the pressures of an A life. For a

Companies are routinely blinded to the important role B players serve in saving organizations from themselves.

variety of personal reasons, they have made a conscious decision to drop off the fast track.

Consider Justin Nuckolls. He graduated top of his class at Princeton before winning a Fulbright to study third-world development in Kenya. At 23, Justin was recruited by the American Foreign Service, where he held two major posts by the time he was 30. But Justin soon shifted gears, deciding he didn't want to be a workaholic. He returned to the United States and joined a small publishing firm, where for the last ten years he has been a recovering A player. "I know there are people who look at me today and say that I haven't amounted to much," Justin admits. "What those people don't realize is that there's often as much pleasure in balancing one's whole life as there is in hobnobbing with diplomats and politicians."

Justin Nuckolls isn't alone in wanting something more from his job than glory and a fat paycheck. We've found that individuals who ratchet down their careers because they do not want to be high-powered stars make up about 20% of all B players. Many of these people are tremendously skilled, highly focused professionals in their thirties who have scaled back their ambitions so that they can spend more time with their young families.

Former A players are especially valuable to corporations because they are mobile within the organization. They have "been there" and breathed the rarefied air of A-level performance. They know how A players maneuver and think, and they often continue to accomplish A work—but on their own terms. An A player who values autonomy, for example, will say, "I'm willing to be a B player and do outstanding work for 50 hours a week, but I'm not going to work 80 hours a week no matter how many promotions or how much money you dangle in front of me."

A players who have decided to scale down are a steal for any company, so long as they are correctly managed. Like

pinch hitters, they can step up to the plate in times of crisis and bring more to their work when the job requires it. They come equipped with a reservoir of knowledge and wisdom, and the organization is richer because of them.

A second large group of B players consists of *truth tellers*—individuals with an almost religious zeal for honesty and reality in their interactions with superiors. Truth tellers are often functional experts who have carved out a limited but key role for themselves. Typically, they are more interested in their work than in their careers, which means they have the guts to ask in-depth, reflective questions of themselves and others. These B players shatter the myth that all solid players are obedient company types. What's more, because it's widely known that truth tellers aren't ambitious in the usual sense, colleagues don't find them threatening and feel comfortable turning to them for advice.

Take Pete Lassiter, a loner in the trading division of a financial services firm. He is fascinated by his current work at the intersection of technology, trading, and company infrastructure, and he has no desire to be promoted out of his position. Secure in his role, Pete doesn't mince words when he defends the company's values and culture. On one occasion, while traveling to the company's Hong Kong office, he discovered that the office had paid more than the going price for its newly installed computer system. Because the decision to purchase the system had been made by a powerful executive anxious to please a major client, no one had dared to raise any questions. But Pete was in no way cowed by the status of either the client or the executive involved. Pete's courage—which many colleagues described as political naïveté—saved the company millions of dollars.

Another important group of B players consists of managers who may have second-rate functional skills but make up for those deficiencies by developing an extraordinary feel for the organization's processes and norms. We call them the *go-to* people, and their qualities are exemplified by Cindy Friedman, an investment banker who recognized early on that she lacked the analytical skills to shine as a deal maker.

Determined to remain in her high-paying job, Cindy worked hard to become the person others went to when they didn't know whom they should approach or when they had to negotiate difficult political terrain. She man-

aged up with stunning acumen; she developed her networks to such a degree that everyone consulted her when they needed to push something through the organization. As a result, Cindy rose through the ranks, surviving one administration after another and eventually managing bankers far more talented than she was. In a firm where excellence was expected, no one thought Cindy had an A mind—she didn't think so herself. Indeed, she often told her husband that had she been smarter, she never would have become the power broker that she was. Yet the organization undoubtedly got a lot more done because Cindy was there to make the connections.

We characterize the remaining B players as *middling* because, in general, they are less competent than other B players. Although they are responsible and care deeply

Why We Work— That Is the Question

William Butler Yeats once wrote that we all have to choose between perfection of the work and perfection of the life. For Yeats, the idea that there could be a balance between work and life was a fiction. Although Yeats's extreme view does not hold true in Europe, it does in the United States, where a fierce work ethic has imposed a certain rigidity on assumptions about what motivates people on the job. Specifically, the leaders among us often have four misperceptions about employees:

Everybody is the same. Deep down, or so the myth goes, we all have the same goal, to work 24/7 in a way that challenges us uncompromisingly and compels us to continually raise the bar on our performance. Underlying this assumption is the mistaken belief that every employee wants to give his all (or even his best) to the organization, leaving little energy for people and passions outside the workplace.¹

Everybody wants the same thing out of work. Leaders often assume that all of their followers share their drive for power, status, and money. That's just not so. In fact, the evidence suggests that some people want to influence others in their jobs, others primarily want autonomy, and still others want creative opportunities.

Everybody wants to be promoted. The misconception here is that every employee wants to climb the ladder and rise to corporate prominence. The truth is, many people seek recognition rather than promotion. This difference is critical because our belief that people always want to be promoted is deeply tied to ways that we reward, motivate, hire, and fire them.

Everybody wants to be a manager. Corporate career-planning practices assume that everyone wants to be the boss. Indeed, we typically believe that people will feel rewarded and special if they are given even nominal management responsibilities. For that reason, we often ask people to give up their technical competencies for managerial ones. In the process, unfortunately, we often turn terrific specialists into mediocre managers.

1. For more on this topic, see further work by Lotte Bailyn of MIT's Sloan School of Management.

about the organization's values, they generally steer clear of risk and aren't entrepreneurial. One classic B player we met during the course of our work managed to stick around in a variety of organizations – and be fairly successful – precisely because she never had an opinion on anything. Nevertheless, middling B players are important. They come closest to being the company's apostles in that they are motivated by the service they can render for the good of the organization. Middling B players feel that they have accomplished something if the company is running like a well-oiled machine. Their own careers take a backseat to the company's well-being.

Oscar-Winning Performances

Like all prize-winning supporting actors, B players bring depth and stability to the companies they work for, slowly but surely improving both corporate performance and organizational resilience. They are always there as quiet yet powerful reminders to high performers obsessed with themselves or as examples to low performers terrified of failure. In that respect, B players counterbalance both ends of the bell curve. They will never garner the most revenue or the biggest clients, but they also will be less likely to embarrass the company or flunk out. They know intuitively how to stay grounded even when their footing may be unsure. And while managers often take this amazing ability for granted, it brings real value to organizations day after day. In times of crisis, B players' stability can be an organization's saving grace.

That stability makes a particularly important contribution to organizational memory. In recent years, a lot has been made of organizational memory, and since B players shift jobs less frequently than A players, chances are they've really seen it all. Because of this long-term perspective, B players can remember when things were as bad before as they are now – and how the company survived. This can prove to be indispensable in tough economic times, when the stage is set for paranoia, blame, and hopelessness.

Take the case of Richard Snow, a truth teller at a New York investment bank. Like all truth tellers, Richard had held a secure, essential position for a long time and posed no threat to higher-ups. During the economic downturn of 2000, therefore, he knew his job was safe. But because he cared deeply about the organization, he reached out to younger colleagues who didn't yet have firsthand experience of how Wall Street firms survived financial crises. Richard's stories brought insight and comfort to the team, reassuring those with shorter organizational memories that things were going to be okay. Like Richard Snow, most B players know through experience that getting back to normal will take time and emotional energy, and in sharing their stories they help move the company toward long-term recovery.

B players not only provide ballast in bad economic times, but they are also less frightened by the possibility of restructuring. They know that change is inevitable; over the years, they've been through a number of major change initiatives, and their historical perspective dampens the volatility that often accompanies these efforts.

When the boss says that things are going to be different around here on Monday morning, B performers are not only able to adapt, but they often also have the credibility with the rest of the organization to share important information and convey a sense of confidence. Even more important, B players have the inner resources to mentor less-experienced people through the transition, stress, and even panic of change – a grossly underestimated talent.

Consider a company that we'll call Scibiolo, a rapidly growing group of biogenetics laboratories that underwent three disruptive change initiatives in five years. After the company's second wave of restructuring, Paul Chung, a promising lab assistant who had just arrived in Los Angeles from Asia, was left without a boss or even a research project. Bruce Jones, a veteran pinch hitter who had once studied in Asia, took Paul under his wing. He put Paul on his team and taught him how the system worked. When a new manager of the lab was eventually put in charge, Paul's potential became clear to everyone. But he always acknowledged that in the midst of chaos and turmoil, Bruce had provided the cultural support that kept the top from spinning off the table.

As a former A player himself, Bruce was well placed to recognize Paul's talent and understand what the young star needed to learn in order to realize his potential. But Bruce's B-player sense of balance kept both of them on the right track. As Bruce put it, "I always knew to pick the foolproof survival strategy: to put our heads down and get to work." Over the years, we have heard the same line

At the extreme, A players think more about **what's good for Brand Me** than about what's good for the company.

from many B players, and we believe that it accounts for the extraordinary sense of emotional and psychological safety we find in many otherwise chaotic organizations.

Beyond the important contribution they make during times of economic turmoil and restructuring, B players have an important balancing role to play in transitions. That's because they are less affected by management shake-ups. By definition, B players are the people passed over for promotions. When a new CEO takes over an organization, A employees prepare to play musical chairs. At the same time, C players burrow deeper into the bowels of the organization to hide their incompetence. But

most B players know that they won't likely be promoted—or fired. As the most secure people in the organization, therefore, they are better able to get back to business as usual. Indeed, that's one reason why new CEOs should turn to B players in times of transition. B players know the score but aren't invested in providing a distorted picture of what's been happening.

Clearly, whatever their temperament, B players are strongly influenced by living in the middle of an organization. Left alone, they quietly complete their projects. They put periods at the ends of sentences. They ignore all the political infighting and just get on with their work. And although they may “only” turn out B performances, these players inevitably end up being the backbone of the organization.

Consider a company we'll call Warewick Life Insurance. After the company amassed huge losses, a new CEO assumed leadership. She immediately fired 400 employees and began to rapidly replace people at the top of the company, making an explicit shift in focus away from personal agents to electronic commerce. The organization was in shock—particularly the company's top players who had invested a lot of political capital in the old regime.

During the internal turmoil that ensued, the company's B players brought continuity and calm. While other people wasted hours processing what would happen to them, the job-secure B players raised the strategic question, Would Warewick Life really be able to sell insurance through an impersonal intermediary like a computer? And though most of Warewick's B players still lacked the entrepreneurial skills that had characterized the stars, their years in the middle of the organization had made them organizationally savvy – and independent.

That self-sufficiency paid off. While their new division heads were being appointed, the B players immediately stepped up to the plate and began to manage informally without being asked. Thus, some solid performers automatically took on more responsibility for customer relations, while others took on tasks like teaching computer methods, mentoring, and coaching.

Teaching the Method

Like any employees, no matter how secure and grounded, B players need nurturing and recognition. Without encouragement, they will begin to see themselves as C players. Indeed, organizations often create a vicious cycle in which solid performers are secure enough not to ask for feedback, so leaders focus on high and low performers who need more attention. As a result, B performers stay off the radar and get fewer job opportunities because they're seldom considered in career-planning meetings when possible promotions are discussed.

But without recognition, most B players eventually begin to feel that they're being taken for granted. They

disconnect from the soul of the organization and start to look for jobs elsewhere. Losing a solid B performer in this way is a failure for any organization. Yet leaders can do better by their B performers in the following ways:

Accept the differences. To deal successfully with B players, leaders must first accept that not everyone is like-minded. That's harder than you might think. Psychological studies confirm that we're tougher on people who differ from us than on those we identify with. Since most leaders are themselves highly motivated A players, they tend to undervalue B players who have a different worldview.

Consider what happened to Bob Prince. He led the e-commerce efforts at a large consulting firm during the go-go years of the late 1990s—until the bubble burst. Bob had been handpicked by Ray Cesario, a managing partner of the New York office. Ray wanted Bob to have burn and ambition, but Bob never pushed for more authority, influence, or power. He did his work—and did it well—but he consistently went home at 6 PM.

When Ray began to realize that Bob didn't have the hunger to make it to the top, he dropped him as a protégé. Bob continued to produce very good work, but he suddenly found himself shunned by the rest of the organization. Predictably, Bob received less mentoring and fewer promotions than his more aggressive colleagues. He eventually left the firm, which was forced to spend a lot of money trying to recruit and train a replacement.

That ending was entirely avoidable. For a start, before he hired Bob, Ray should have asked him in detail what he wanted out of his career. This would have helped reveal early on whether there was a fit between Bob, the consulting firm's work culture, and Ray. Once Ray understood Bob's goals, he could have decided to accept Bob on his own grounds, or he could have passed Bob on to a mentor better suited to his career aspirations.

Give the gift of time. Even when they think they're being fair, leaders often don't realize how much time they give to their various reports. To be sure that you're not ignoring your solid performers, try tracking your communication patterns. You may be surprised. For instance, Larry Minter, the division head of a leading law firm, learned that certain direct reports were feeling alienated and frustrated because other lawyers were getting more attention than they were. Once Larry was made aware of this, he realized that he didn't even know which lawyers he had been paying more attention to. So Larry began tracking the frequency of his interactions with his direct reports.

A pattern quickly emerged. Certain high-performing partners were always stopping by Larry's office, wanting to express their concerns or just talk. Indeed, several partners who Larry knew were considering leaving the firm began to call on him weekly. Through the course of these meetings, Larry came to understand that these partners just wanted career coaching they could apply elsewhere.

Shockingly, over half of Larry's reports had not initiated any contact with him. They simply went about their work, meeting clients and managing projects and professionals. Larry used the information he received from tracking his interactions to change the way he arranged his schedule. Now Larry makes sure that his day includes regular meetings with *all* his direct reports – including the ones who never ask for special attention.

Since most leaders are themselves highly motivated A players, they tend to undervalue B players who have a different worldview.

Hand out prizes. Because B performers are promoted less frequently than stars, senior managers should try to reward them in other ways. Indeed, rewarding good performance can be one of the most effective ways to make B players feel more appreciated – and more motivated.

Take the managing editor of a large newspaper. He makes a point of sending handwritten notes to solid performers who have received few accolades. One recipient said that she kept the note she received for more than a year because it made her feel proud of her accomplishments and gave her encouragement.

While gestures such as these are extremely important in the management of B players, that doesn't mean solid B performers need coddling or flattering; they need recognition of their very real contributions. And by the way, leaders needn't worry. The overwhelming majority of B players know that they're not stars. They will be grateful for praise, of course, but most of them won't mistake management attention for elevation to stardom.

Offer choices. Organizations rarely think about what they can do to retain good performers who don't want to go the usual management route. They typically just ignore the B player until he walks out or gives up and becomes a C player. Sometimes, of course, companies haphazardly fulfill a B player's need for choices. But organizations need to do more than trust their destinies to chance. The challenge is to create a system for allocat-


ing scarce resources such as compensation, coaching, and promotions to B performers with the greatest potential.

Consider what we'll call the Princely Hotels, one of India's premier luxury hotel chains. The company's new management created the career development committee, or CDC, in an effort to give opportunities to all managers, not just the stars. Before the CDC was created, high performers were singled out and groomed for advancement.

But the chain has more than 60 luxury properties, each needing a general manager that has to be coached. Today the CDC helps B performers get the coaching they need to identify their natural roles and to flourish in them. In particular, the CDC has developed a track for promoting promising employees sideways – thereby offering them genuine career alternatives. In these and other ways, the CDC ensures that solid B players do not get lost in the system.

•••

Good movie directors know how important it is to have consummate actors in supporting roles. Like business's B players, these actors come in many shapes and sizes. Some are former A players – think of how many supporting roles have been played by the likes of Alec Guinness and John Gielgud. Others – Kathy Bates, say, or Frances McDormand – have made particular character parts their specialty. These players are the truth tellers of their profession – secure enough to tell the director what they think but not necessarily interested in securing the glitziest roles for themselves.

Finally, there are the go-to players of the acting world, jobbing actors like Kevin Bacon and Ashley Judd who can play almost any role offered – not brilliantly, some might say, but not embarrassingly. Such B players not only make stars like Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts look better, but they also make the films more than just vehicles for the star's performance. B players can do the same for your company, if you have what it takes to foster their particular brand of talent. 

Reprint R0306F; HBR OnPoint 4007

To place an order, call 1-800-988-0886.