

A Lesson in developing people

Thanks to Peter Bregman of the Harvard Business School for these sage words

Susan Boyle, who recently performed on the UK television show *Britain's Got Talent*, has captured the world's attention. And it's a good lesson for managers the world over.

In case you've missed it: she's a 47-year-old unemployed charity worker who lives with her cat in a small village in Scotland. As soon as she walked on stage the audience began to snicker and roll their eyes. Simon Cowell, the show's host, asked her some pre-performance questions in his famously condescending style and, to the audience's enjoyment, she answered awkwardly.

She was painfully *ordinary* and everyone was prepared, looking forward even, to see her fail.

By now, if you don't know the story, you could guess it, right? She more than wowed them. She opened her mouth to sing and, as one of the three judges Pierce Morgan later said, she had "the voice of an angel."

She wasn't painfully ordinary; she was *extraordinary*. The audience immediately jumped to their feet in a standing ovation and stayed there for the entire song. The YouTube video of Susan's performance (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lp0IWv8QZY>) has, so far, received nearly 100 million views.

We are riveted — and a recent article in USA Today (http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2009-04-19-susan-boyle_N.htm) does a good job of cataloguing all the reasons. We prejudged her by her looks and were fooled. We experienced the full gamut of emotions in a few short moments: guilt, shame, vindication, hope. She's a modern Cinderella and these days it's a wonderful distraction and inspiration to witness the triumph of the human spirit.

But there's something else Susan Boyle awakens in us as we watch her come out of her shell. Our own selves. Who among us doesn't move through life with the hidden sense, maybe even quiet desperation, that we are destined for more? That underneath our ordinary exterior lies an extraordinary talent? That given the right opportunity, the right stage, the right audience, we could shine as the stars we truly are?

We all have that sense to one degree or another. And it's a great opportunity for managers. How we handle that opportunity is what distinguishes the great managers from the merely good ones.

Good managers help their employees succeed in whatever role they happen to be in. Great managers see the unique talents of each employee, and then create the role that's a perfect vehicle for those talents (<http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org/2005/03/what-great-managers-do/ib>). Great managers remove the obstacles that prevent their employees from unleashing their talent. And they make sure each employee has the right opportunities, the right stage, the right audience, to be fully appreciated.

While Susan Boyle became an overnight sensation, hers was not an overnight transformation. She's been practicing singing since she was 12. In her case, overnight lasted 35 years.

And she didn't do it alone. Susan Boyle had a voice coach, Fred O'Neil, who worked with her for years. And she had her mother. "She was the one who said I should enter Britain's Got Talent. We used to watch it together," she told the UK paper The Times (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article6121279.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>), speaking about her mother who died in 2007, "She thought I would win . . . I am doing it as a tribute to my mum and I think she would be very proud."

In a study by two graduates of the University of Pennsylvania's Applied Positive Psychology Program (<http://gmi.gallup.com/content/27496/Business-Benefits-Positive-Leadership.aspx>), managers who provided frequent recognition and encouragement were rewarded with an increase in productivity of 31%. As a manager, your greatest tool is recognizing each employee's talents and encouraging that employee to use those talents.

"There is grace," a friend recently wrote to me, "in being molded by your own gifts."

To allow yourself to be molded by your gifts takes courage. By recognizing and encouraging the particular gifts of their employees, great managers increase the chance that those employees will be willing to stand there, exposed and authentic, while their audience rolls their eyes and sneers, expecting failure.

And then, when their talented employees fail (which they inevitably will at some point), after they laugh or cry at their failure, great managers hold them up, keep them focused, help them refine their talent and keep going, until one day the audience stops laughing and starts clapping.

With her mother gone, Susan still has O'Neil. And recently he told The Telegraph he was worried about all the attention on Susan. "I am concerned about her being surrounded by all these PR people," he said, "that she will not be given the time to sing." That's the voice of a great manager.

Susan Boyle is a phenomenal person to keep in mind as you manage your employees. In all her awkward ordinariness and amazing extraordinariness. She is talent discovered. Can you uncover the Susan in each one of your employees? Can you draw her out? Can you support her fully? Put her on the right stage? In front of the right audience? Can you keep her focused on her talent?

If so, then be prepared to be wowed.

Read more... (<http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/bregman/2009/04/susan-boyle-a-lesson-in-talent.html>)