

An Excerpt From

***Take Charge of Your Talent:  
Three Keys to Thriving in Your Career, Organization, and Life***

by Don Maruska & Jay Perry  
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

**DON MARUSKA AND JAY PERRY**

Foreword by **JIM KOUZES**, coauthor of the bestselling *The Leadership Challenge*

# TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR TALENT

**Three Keys to Thriving in Your Career,  
Organization, and Life**

## **More Praise for *Take Charge of Your Talent***

“This book offers you the keys to ignite your personal power.”

—**from the foreword by Jim Kouzes, coauthor of the bestselling *The Leadership Challenge***

“I’ve seen the key practices in *Take Charge of Your Talent* work with hundreds of people—from frontline employees to CEO. Read it and help your career and your organization thrive.”

—**Frank Benest, Senior Advisor for Next Generation Initiatives,  
International City/County Management Association**

“I’ve long been aware that even the best of our company-sponsored talent development programs reach only a select few, leaving tremendous potential in the organization untapped. This powerful, persuasive book effectively supplies the tools for all employees to gain a fresh perspective, articulate aspirations, and recognize opportunities while confronting concerns and obstacles to gain results.”

—**Ursula Kiel-Dixon, Special Projects Manager, Corporate Center  
Human Resources, ThyssenKrupp AG**

“In the new era of free agents, this book provides exactly what both individuals and organizations are looking for. Don and Jay have delivered a proven and easy-to-understand process for the development of an organization’s most precious resource, its talent pool. In so doing, they inspire more job satisfaction and greater career fulfillment.”

—**John Steinhart, Silicon Valley human resources consultant and former  
Director, Sloan Executive Program, Stanford Graduate School of Business**

“The heart of this book is a profound but easy-to-learn approach to becoming a ‘generous listener.’ Using the transformational power of this mindful practice, Maruska and Perry expertly guide the reader in a step-by-step process for recognizing, catalyzing, and optimizing your talent while helping others discover and express theirs. Highly recommended.”

—**Michael J. Gelb, author of *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* and  
coauthor of *Brain Power***

“All too often, I hear promising young talents speak of being ‘lucky’ in their careers. I hate that. You make your own luck by knowing your strengths, embracing risk, and leading change. This book has the keys to unlocking what makes you thrive so that you can give voice

to your ambition with authenticity and purpose.”

—**Denny Marie Post, Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer,  
Red Robin International**

“The world is filled with people who never realize their potential, many of whom never even realize they have unfulfilled potential. *Take Charge of Your Talent* provides an effective game plan for helping people move toward their hopes for what they might become.”

—**Jim Thompson, founder, Positive Coaching Alliance, and author of  
*Elevating Your Game***

“This practical book, filled with detailed coaching and useful exercises, reflects the extensive experience of the authors in coaching executives. This book will help you clarify, enhance, and find ways to apply your talents.”

—**Jim Clawson, Johnson & Higgins Professor of Business  
Administration, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia**

“*Take Charge of Your Talent* is a positive and refreshing approach to talent development. The Take Charge methodology offers techniques on how to own and grow your career while supporting the personal and professional development of your colleagues—creating a win-win for all!”

—**Renée Robertson, former Director of Talent Development, Verizon**

“The powerful tools offered in this book provide the only real security we have in today’s job market—the ability to take control and fully realize one’s talent.”

—**Dawn Legg, Construction Liaison, Topaz Solar Farms, First Solar**

“The gem of *Take Charge of Your Talent* is that it reinforces the (often lost) reality that there are opportunities at any time, in any business climate. It is the prospect for meaningful productivity using your unique talents that lights the fire.”

—**John C. Summer, Director of Business Development, Taylor Frigon  
Capital Management LLC**

“I had the opportunity to experience the Talent Catalyst Conversation with many of my HR colleagues, and it was amazing to see how following the process led to igniting possibilities for the participants. I hope Maruska and Perry realize their vision of 20 million people in 20 countries having these keys to take charge of their talent by the year 2020!”

—**Donna Vaillancourt, President, County Personnel Administrators  
Association of California**

**TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR TALENT**

*This page intentionally left blank*

# TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR TALENT

Three Keys to Thriving in Your Career,  
Organization, and Life

Don Maruska & Jay Perry



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
San Francisco  
*a BK Life book*

# Take Charge of Your Talent

Copyright © 2013 by Don Maruska

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 650  
San Francisco, California 94104-2916

Tel: (415) 288-0260, Fax: (415) 362-2512



[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the “Special Sales Department” at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

*Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers.* Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: [customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com](mailto:customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com); or visit [www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering](http://www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering) for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-60994-723-1

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-736-1

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-737-8

2012-1

Cover design by PemaStudio. Project management and interior design by

VJBScribe. Copyediting by Elissa Rabellino. Proofreading by Don Roberts.

Index by George Draffan. Interior photos: Don Maruska, Bella Castle Photography;

Jay Perry, Jen Fariello Photography.



*We dedicate this book to our parents, spouses, and children, and to the many teachers who nurtured us and encouraged us to take charge of our talent.*

# CONTENTS

*Foreword* by Jim Kouzes ix

Introduction: The Perfect Moment Is Now 1

Your Take Charge Checklist 11

## **KEY #1 POWER UP YOUR TALENT STORY 12**

1: Be Your Own Hero 15

2: Explore a Talent Catalyst Conversation 23

3: Connect with a Catalyst 39

## **KEY #2 ACCELERATE THROUGH OBSTACLES 56**

4: Keep Your Hopes Humming 59

5: Grab Opportunities to Grow 77

6: Challenge Yourself to Stretch 93

## **KEY #3 MULTIPLY THE PAYOFFS FOR YOURSELF AND OTHERS 114**

7: Create Enduring Career Assets 117

8: Share the Wealth and Everyone Wins 127

9: Champion a Take-Charge Talent Culture 135

The Take Charge of Your Talent Manifesto 145

## RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions  
about the Talent Catalyst Conversation 149

Sample Talent Catalyst  
Conversation and Summary 157

Services to Support You 177

Visit the Online Community 181

*Notes* 183

*Acknowledgments* 187

*Index* 189

*About the Authors* 193

## FOREWORD: THREE TRUTHS ABOUT TALENT

Jim Kouzes

**A**s I was reading *Take Charge of Your Talent*, I was reminded of something Melissa Poe Hood said about the work she had done in leading Kids For a Clean Environment (Kids F.A.C.E.), an organization she started when she was a fourth grader in Nashville, Tennessee. In accepting the Women of Distinction Award from the American Association of University Women and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators twenty years after her initial efforts, Melissa offered this advice:

*Change does not begin with someone else. Change begins in your own backyard, no matter your age or your size. I had no idea that one simple action could change my life so much. Most journeys start this way, with simple motivation and a choice to do something or not. You never know where one step will take you, and you never know where the next one will lead. The difference with being a leader is that you take the step; you take the journey. The greatest obstacle you will ever encounter is yourself. Just like Dorothy never knew that she always had the ticket home, the Scarecrow always had a brain, the Tin Man always had a compassionate heart, even the Cowardly Lion had courage. Everything you need to be a successful leader you already have: your intelligence to see an issue and a way to fix*

*it, your heart to stay motivated, and your courage not to give up. You can't look for the man behind the curtain to solve your concerns. Everything you need you already have. It's all about taking the first step.*<sup>1</sup>

Melissa's remarks go straight to the heart of what this marvelous little book is all about. She affirms—and is living proof—that each and every person has the power to make extraordinary things happen in his or her life. What is required, however, as Melissa implies, is that each and every person also take personal responsibility for using that power.

And that's why this book by Don Maruska and Jay Perry is so important and so useful. They give us the methodology and the tools to bring out what is already there. This book offers you the keys to ignite your personal power.

Don and Jay talk about three keys—Power Up Your Talent Story, Accelerate through Obstacles, and Multiply the Payoffs for Yourself and Others. Each of these, I submit, is based on three fundamental truths about what it takes to perform at your personal best.

The first truth is that *you make a difference*. It is the most fundamental truth of all. Before you can take charge of your talent, you have to believe that you can have a positive impact on your own life and career. You have to believe that you have it in you to improve what you do and how you do it.

When Don and Jay talk about how you are the hero of your own story and you can reclaim the power of your story, they are saying, at least to me, that you have to believe your future is in your hands and not controlled by somebody or something else—a manager, a parent, your genes, the rotten hand that you were dealt. This doesn't mean that context doesn't matter, that you can deny the laws of nature, or that other people don't also have something to say about what you do. What it does mean is that the hand turning the key is yours and not someone else's.

That's where it all begins. You have to believe that you can make a difference. You have to believe that your life counts for something. You have to believe in yourself. If you don't, you won't even try. It begins with you.

The second truth is that *challenge is the crucible of greatness*. Barry Posner and I have been studying what leaders do when they're at their personal best for over thirty years, and in every single case there is some element of challenge, difficulty, adversity, and uncertainty. There has never been a single case in the thousands we've analyzed in which someone did his or her best when keeping things exactly the way they were. Doing one's best is never about doing the same thing just a little bit better. It's always about doing different things, new things, and innovative things extraordinarily better. Whatever the function people are in, giving an Olympic-level performance is always about pushing the limits, exceeding prior records, dealing with adversity, and learning from failure.

Great achievements just don't happen when you keep things the same. Change invariably involves challenge, and challenge tests you. It introduces you to yourself. It brings you face-to-face with your level of commitment, your grittiness, and your values. It reveals your mind-set about change.

In *Take Charge of Your Talent*, Don and Jay help you learn how to master frustration, overcome discouragement, and get past self-imposed or externally imposed limits. They talk to you about, for example, how to make your hopes visible, how to turn concerns into energizers, how to craft an inspirational personal story, and, my favorite, how to get your *but* out of the way. They offer checklists and resources that help you to take charge.

The third truth that's evident in this book is that *you can't do it alone*. No one ever got anything extraordinary done without the talent and support of others. You can graduate at the top of the class from the best schools in the world; reason circles around your brightest peers; solve technical problems with

wizardlike powers; and have the relevant situational, functional, and industry experience, and *still* be more likely to fail than to succeed—unless you also possess the requisite personal and social skills. The mandate is very clear. You have to learn how to work well with others in order to become your best.

While you are the hero of this book and the central character in your story, you are definitely not the only actor. This is evident in the third key—Multiply the Payoffs for Yourself and Others—but it’s also a message that’s woven through the other two keys to taking charge of your talent. Throughout this book there is a requirement that you work with a Talent Catalyst to implement the tested process that Don and Jay have designed. That person could be a coworker, friend, family member, or acquaintance, but this is a process you can’t do alone. You have to do it with someone else. Don and Jay even offer you a handy sample of how a Talent Catalyst Conversation goes so that you can see how it’s been done before.

Studies of top performers strongly suggest that you have to have a supportive environment in order to develop expertise. A supportive family is very common in the stories of world-class performers. Supportive colleagues at work are critical. Leadership can’t grow in a culture that isn’t supportive of continuing development. You need to surround yourself with people who are going to offer you encouraging words when you try something new, understanding and patience when you fail, and helpful suggestions as you try to learn from mistakes.

Don and Jay ask you to go one step further. They ask you to apply the lessons you learn toward the goal of serving others. This reminds me of the hand-carved wooden plaque my wife and I saw nailed to the side of a store in the historic mountain town of Truckee, California. It was dedicated to the memory of Joseph Ignatius Firpo, and it read: “What we have done for ourselves dies with us. What we have done for others remains, and is immortal.” The legacy you leave lives on, not in what you have

done for yourself; when you go, it goes with you. But what you do to teach others, engage others, inspire others, support others, develop others, and enrich others carries your legacy long after you've left.

There's one other thing. To become your best self, you must have a passion for learning. You have to be open to new experiences and open to honestly examining how you perform. You have to be willing to quickly learn from your failures, as well as your successes, and find ways to try out new behaviors without hesitation. You won't always do things perfectly, but you will get the chance to grow.

You'll get a chance to do all of that when you put *Take Charge of Your Talent* into practice. Enjoy the adventure in learning ... and success.

JIM KOUZES is the coauthor of the best-selling *The Leadership Challenge* and is the Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University. The *Wall Street Journal* has named Jim one of the ten best executive educators in the United States, he is the recipient of the Thought Leader Award by the Instructional Systems Association, and he is one of *HR Magazine's* Most Influential International Thinkers.



*This page intentionally left blank*

## INTRODUCTION: THE PERFECT MOMENT IS NOW

*Storybook happiness involves every form of pleasant thumb-twiddling; true happiness involves the full use of one's powers and talents.*

JOHN W. GARDNER

**T**he world belongs to the talented, and that means you. If you want to take charge of your talent, enhance your career, and discover new possibilities, this book is for you. You don't need to wait for a golden opportunity or for someone else to give you the thumbs-up; you can take the initiative yourself. It's your talent, and the perfect moment is now.

Whether you're the new kid in a cubicle, you're the boss in the executive suite, or you run your own business, you have huge potential for greater productivity and fulfillment. Even very high performers in excellent organizations—large and small, for profit and nonprofit—report that 30 to 40 percent of their talent is untapped.<sup>1</sup> And that's only the talent they know about. It doesn't capture what they haven't discovered yet.

It doesn't matter if you are the senior manager of a big team, a teacher, a techie mastermind, or a freelancing artist. It doesn't matter if you are salaried in six figures or are just starting out. The picture is the same: *You could enjoy using more of your talent, if you could just figure out how.*

Your talent is not simply your strength or your skill set. It is your self-expression—the joyful demonstration of your unique abilities that benefit both you and the world.

Over the course of your life, the story about your talent can take many twists and turns. At one point, you may feel on top of the world. At other times, you may feel stuck on the sidelines. Which of the following describes where you are now?

Stymied by a hurdle, like lack of education, experience, or credentials

Lacking time and opportunities to grow

Concerned about the personal costs related to making a change

Eager and ambitious and looking for the best path

Blocked by organizational constraints

Afraid that if you tried something different, you might fail

Pigeonholed in a role you want to change

Settled, a little complacent, wondering if there is something more

Feeling fulfilled and ready to grow further

You may be itching to move forward. However, even if that's not the case and you feel at ease with the status quo, you may be missing out.

Interestingly, as authors we experienced each of the above states in the process of bringing this book to life. We felt the excitement of sharing new insights and tools. We experienced the obstacles and constraints to relaying them. We needed to navigate the fear of failure and tradeoffs with family and other interests to bring the book to completion. Fortunately, we took our own advice and employed the practices we offer in this book.

We developed the keys in this book to make talent development easy, accessible, and enjoyable for everyone. The keys are the essentials that we have distilled from decades of personal

experience working in organizations as assistants, managers, and CEOs, and as professional coaches stimulating cultures of talent development. They also incorporate insights from the latest neuroscience and psychological research on how to elevate performance and satisfaction.

As powerful and effective as professional coaching can be, we became concerned that it is only accessible and affordable to less than 1 percent of the workforce. We wanted resources available for everyone. Thus, we created, tested, and optimized a simple set of keys for you to use. As our clients began to apply these keys and see the benefits, they wanted to share them with others. Some even asked, “How do we get a copy of your book?” before there actually was a book. So, here it is.

Throughout this book, you’ll read the experiences and perspectives of a wide range of people, representing many different roles and workplaces. They draw from real-life situations. We’ve changed the names and circumstances both to protect the individuals’ privacy and confidentiality and to help illustrate important points. The challenges will probably sound familiar to you. Their purpose is to help you visualize the keys in action. Ultimately, your proof will be your own experience in taking charge of your talent.

## **WHY YOUR TALENT MATTERS**

Why should you take charge of your talent? Because your talent matters. It matters to you, it matters to your organization, and it matters to the world. When your talent lies dormant, there is a hole in your daily life. You may feel a lack of contentment and try to fill the hole with all kinds of activities and possessions that never quite do the trick. Opposing forces blunt your efforts and squash your hopes.

On the other hand, when you express your talent, the world vibrates with possibility. You feel the sweet experience of

satisfaction. One idea leads to the next, and the next. Time flies. Life is filled with resources that carry you forward, sometimes in surprising ways.

Is it really that big of a deal for you to find a way to use more of your talent at work? We say “*Yes!*” It’s a terrible waste when talent gets brushed aside. We know that when you aren’t using your talent to the fullest, everyone pays the price. Your productivity dips, your innovation peters out, and your love of life may evaporate. You may still be doing your job, but the joy you may have had has dissipated. The frustration, boredom, or stress from work can cause toxic damage to your personal life as well. You may get in a rut and become blind to new opportunities. If you can’t see the road signs, you don’t take the right turns. You lose something of yourself and what you could be. Thus, the obvious makes sense: when you engage more of your talent, you become happier. And how important is that?

## **PUT TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN THE HANDS OF THE TALENTED**

If you’ve gone out on your own or have recently lost your job, it may be clear to you that it’s your responsibility to take charge of your talent. You need to take care of yourself, because there’s nobody else who will. This book will support you in doing just that.

What if, however, you are in an organization that does give attention to talent development? Maybe *it* will take care of you. After all, enlightened organizations often have training classes and leadership development programs and give special attention to people identified as “high potentials.” That’s all fine and dandy, *if* you are one of the chosen ... in which case, we encourage you to take advantage of the resources that serve your aspirations. But what if you aren’t one of the chosen, or you want to do more on your own initiative? We will help you to explore your talent potential more fully at work.

Even if you are one of the chosen and feel fully engaged in your work, there are strong reasons for you to take charge of your talent and for your organization to encourage you to do so. As good as top-down talent development programs in organizations may be, they have limitations for both employees and their organizations. Many start with organizational needs and train people to fill those requirements. Such programs, however, don't tap a person's core enthusiasm and accompanying talent.

How much talent gets bypassed with a mechanistic approach where each person fits into a slot and organizational objectives drive talent development? That's probably a big chunk of the 30 to 40 percent of untapped talent that employees reported in the surveys we noted earlier.

The mechanistic approach would make complete sense except that people aren't machines and don't want to be "driven" like cattle. As Daniel Pink concludes in *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, transactional systems may successfully get people to complete routine tasks, but they aren't likely to inspire the groundbreaking innovations and genuine engagement that both individuals and organizations need to thrive.<sup>2</sup>

When companies ask, "How do we get employees to contribute more than what's required for their pay?" they lose the race right out of the gate. This is the *transactional* view. When employees sense they are working in a tit-for-tat environment, they may respond by thinking, "OK, I've got my skills. You're my employer. How are we going to barter? What's the deal?"

The transactional mode triggers fearful behavior. Everything is a negotiation that no worker wants to lose. Yes, you want to be valued and respected. And no, you don't want to be used and taken advantage of. "What are you going to give me for my extra effort? Is it fair? Who's going to come out ahead? Who's in charge? Do I like him or her?" Even positive answers to the transactional questions lead to a dead end. What if the deal is fair? Lack of fairness can kill motivation, but fairness alone doesn't inspire it.

As a senior executive commented after his management team analyzed how best to boost results, “We concluded that we could pay people twice as much and get a short-term bump in performance, but it wouldn’t make a lasting difference. Long-term change has to come from the employees’ own motivation.”

## **WHY WHAT’S GOOD FOR YOU IS GOOD FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION**

*Take Charge of Your Talent* provides an alternative to the top-down transactional model of talent development with a new *generative* paradigm of “Everyone can play and everyone can win.” This approach makes access to talent development available to all and generates an environment where people want to contribute. If your organization chooses to encourage all employees to take charge of their talent, you’ll benefit from having coworkers who will be learning and growing with you.

Talent development needs to ride the wave of interest people have to take charge of what’s important to them. As new opportunities arise for people to do things for themselves—for example, online brokerage or smartphone apps—generations, young and old, rush to use them. Putting talent development into the hands of the talented is similarly a movement whose time has come.

This book enables you to put the yearning to take charge into action. It offers a generative view that shifts the dynamic from “top down” to “bubble up.” In the generative approach, employees are more inclined to support one another instead of competing against each other, which creates an environment that welcomes and explores fresh ideas.

Margaret Wheatley noted in *Leadership and the New Science*, “As we let go of the machine model of organizations and workers as replaceable cogs in the machinery of production, we begin to see ourselves in much richer dimensions, to appreciate our

wholeness, and, hopefully, to design organizations that honor and make use of the great gift of who we humans are.”<sup>3</sup> People can be more focused and productive in such an atmosphere because they know that they are appreciated as individuals and that the expression of their talent matters.

Maybe you’re wondering, “What’s in it for the boss?” Or maybe you are the boss. A brief look at employee survey data highlights the urgent need to boost employee engagement and use of talent. A Gallup employee engagement survey from 2011 reported that 71 percent of American workers were either “not engaged” in their work (emotionally detached and unlikely to be self-motivated) or “actively disengaged” (viewed their workplaces negatively and were liable to spread that negativity to others).<sup>4</sup> The estimated cost of actively disengaged employees in the United States alone is \$400 billion to \$500 billion per year.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, engagement statistics have varied only a few percentage points over the last decade during both boom and bust economies.<sup>6</sup> And similar engagement patterns elsewhere in the world underscore the global challenge.<sup>7,8</sup> In short, these data demonstrate a chronic and costly problem that has remained basically unsolved.

*Take Charge of Your Talent* goes right to the heart of the problem with a fresh solution: tapping employee self-motivation to create authentic engagement and enduring value. The keys work at both an individual and an organizational level. They apply up, down, and across an organization and scale easily so that you can grow together efficiently and effectively. You’ll learn how each employee can translate his or her talent into tangible career assets. You’ll see concrete examples of how to enjoy “everyone wins” results.

Now, some managers may worry, “Will encouraging my employees to explore their own hopes for their careers prompt more people to leave and the organization to suffer?” The short answer is no. Why? Employment is a relationship. As with



personal relationships, if people feel that they can't explore and grow in the relationship, they withdraw energy and commitment or pursue their interests outside the relationship. Thus, it behooves employers to encourage their employees to explore their hopes. Yes, a few people may leave, but decades of experience have shown us that the vast majority of people stay. Thoughtful conversations and engaging exercises often enable people to discover that their unexamined assumptions about limitations in the workplace were incorrect or to identify new opportunities to grow within it. The organization gains a more committed and engaged workforce.

Whether you are reading this book on your own or in an organization, you already know this fundamental truth from your life experience: *We each develop and grow most vigorously when we feel powered up.* If your engine is sputtering out or could use a boost, don't despair. It's there for you to restart—and we'll show you how.

## START TURNING THE KEYS

Think of the keys in this book as your personal ignition system. Once you use the keys and get started, you can go to amazing places. What are the keys to thriving in your career, organization, and life?

**Key #1: Power Up Your Talent Story.** You'll gain fresh perspectives and discover resources that will support you as you become the hero of your talent story. The leaping-off place is a structured conversation that takes about an hour; it gets you in touch with powerful sources of insight and creativity that will lead you to action.

**Key #2: Accelerate through Obstacles.** You'll learn how to engage your talent and master frustration, discouragement, and limitations so that you can build momentum and turn your

aspirations into reality. You'll gain insights into how to keep your hopes humming, fully use your resources, and take healthy stretches.

**Key #3: Multiply the Payoffs for Yourself and Others.** You'll convert what you know into valuable career assets that will let your talents shine and serve others. This process not only advances your personal interests but also creates a take-charge talent culture that works for everyone.

As you immerse yourself in the book, you'll find many chances to take charge of your talent. All you need to start is willingness and an open mind. For each chapter, we provide many real-life scenarios, answer critical questions, present a concise "Talent Takeaway" for you to remember, and provide clear direction with "Take Charge" actions so that you can immediately put what you read into practice. As you proceed, we want you to enjoy the process—and, dare we say, even have fun. Why? Because sustained learning and growth happen more readily when people have fun.

Unfortunately, many people don't associate developing their talents with having fun. Judgment and fear flood into our thinking: "Am I talented? Who's more talented? Will I succeed?" All of these typical reactions get in the way. Thus, it's not surprising that many people give more time, money, and attention to maintaining their cars than they do to the real engine of their success—their talent. In terms of fun, we figure that the idea of talent development probably ranks, for many people, somewhere in the neighborhood of getting your teeth cleaned. It may be important, but it's definitely not fun. So, how could this process possibly be enjoyable?

The difference is that you are in charge, and you will always remain in charge as you use the three keys. You decide how you will pursue your hopes. No one is going to drive you anywhere that you don't want to go. You will have a unique opportunity to

articulate your hopes, look at your resources, and make a plan of action. While you are in charge, you won't be left adrift. You will have a catalyst and other resources to support you along the way.

Finally, you'll be able to explore on your own terms. You will be the hero of your own story. If you don't like your talent story now, change it—make it fulfilling and fun. You'll be able to share with others what you see and learn on the journey. Unlike old photos in a travelogue that fade over time, the career assets you develop will be tangible and will last. As an up-and-coming engineer commented, "This is a hoot! I mean, it's a good time."

You can start right now, right where you are, to reap benefits for your career, organization, and life.

Let's get rolling!

## YOUR TAKE CHARGE CHECKLIST

Why do you want to take charge of your talent? Your reasons will be as individual as you are, and they are all valid. We've provided the checklist below for you to assess how this book can deliver what you truly want and need. Before you read about the keys to accomplishing all that, we invite you to consider which reasons resonate most for you. Which of the items on the checklist would benefit you, your organization, your family, and the rest of your life?

I want to ...

Make better use of my talent

Gain more satisfaction from my talent

Move forward in my career with gusto

Know how to turn obstacles into stepping-stones

Identify and tap the resources I need to thrive

Develop the inner qualities I need to experience deep fulfillment

Enjoy a better balance at work where I'm neither bored nor overloaded

Build tangible talent assets that enhance my career and opportunities

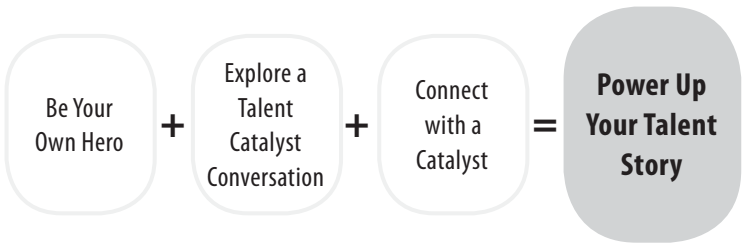
Make a bigger contribution to others and receive recognition for it

Take pride in my work environment where everyone has opportunities to grow

Which of the above are true for you? Whichever reasons speak to you most, *Take Charge of Your Talent* will give you both the inspiration and the tools to create the professional life that you may have only dreamed of until now.

Key #1

# POWER UP YOUR TALENT STORY



**H**ow do you start to take charge of your talent? Key #1 engages you to power up your talent story. You begin by shifting from victim of your circumstances to hero of your story. The carefully structured Talent Catalyst Conversation provides a proven way to gain a fresh perspective and stimulate new ideas. You'll learn how an appropriate person from your collection of coworkers, friends, family members, and acquaintances can be your Talent Catalyst.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## BE YOUR OWN HERO

*Strive to live the ordinary life in an extraordinary way.*

RALPH BLUM

**Y**our talent lives inside a story. Everyone has a story about his or her talent—what it is, how he or she has used it, and what’s gotten in the way. Your story works either for you or against you. It’s a story of limitation or a story of possibility: the tale of a victim or the tale of a hero. The victim story is one of fear, moving away from new possibilities, being stuck, and staying put. The hero story is one of hope, obstacles overcome, and action. It is a story of new chapters, fresh energy, getting unstuck, and taking charge. At some time or another throughout our lives, we have all probably played both roles, knowingly or not.

Since no one wants to be the victim of his or her story, it’s good news that the hero story can belong to all of us, not just a golden few. Most of us think of heroes as those extraordinary people who have almost magical abilities. Capes and super powers may even come to mind. For this book’s purposes, when we talk about being the hero of your talent story, we refer to everyday heroes—people who take action in the face of their fears and move toward their hopes to enjoy practical results.

### RECLAIM THE POWER IN YOUR STORY

It may seem strange to think of your talent as a story. You may be saying to yourself, “My situation isn’t just a story. It’s the hard



and cold reality that I live.” That’s true. The facts are what they are. But pause for a moment to consider the idea that your *interpretation* of those facts is a story. Changing your interpretation can make all the difference.

Between coaching and delivering talent development workshops, we have met thousands of people and have heard their stories. Let’s look at the situations of some typical people who began with some frustration about their circumstances or hunger for change and transformed their stories using the keys in this book:

Fran: “I want to be a supervisor and know I’m ready, but the supervisory job opportunities require prior managerial experience. I’m stuck.”

Sheila: “I want to work on bigger projects that will bring more value to our business, but as a financial services manager, my plate is so full and I’ve pushed my team so far that I don’t see any way. I can’t spend more time at work; my family would really suffer, and so would I.”

Miguel: “I have much more that I could contribute to our IT firm, but rising higher in the leadership would compromise time with my family and require me to be too political. I’ll keep my head down and continue plugging away at my current role. I guess it’s better to be a little bored.”

Nadia: “I’ve been given a great opportunity to restructure our health care organization and want to take advantage of it, but I’m struggling to lead the way I want to.”

Ben: “I really wanted this job and started with lots of energy and ideas, but now I’m totally at the mercy of the bureaucracy. I want to teach and show the kids that learning is great, but how can I do that with all the regulations and tests?”

Kim: “I’m not sure I have the talent to pull off this presentation. What am I doing on the same stage with these expert scientists and this CEO? I will probably fail and look stupid.”

Tony: “My problem is that everyone just sees me as a police chief, when I feel ready for broader opportunities in local government. I can’t break out to grow.”

Jesse: “Many people envy my position, but the fact is that I’m a little bored. Unless my boss dies or retires, this is it.”

Do you see something of your situation in any of these stories, or maybe in several? What does your story read like at this time?

Each of these stories is true in the sense that the circumstances are real. In fact, the stories provide some comfort for the people who hold them. They describe circumstances—situations, other people, or even requirements—that keep these persons from greater fulfillment of their talent. It gets them off the hook for taking responsibility. As a result, they have a ready response to coworkers, friends, and family members who ask, “What’s happening with your job?” The answer is simple: “I’m stuck.” In fact, they may even find sympathy from others. They might hear comments like “Yeah, the requirements are unfair. How could anyone expect you to move forward?” “Boy, the economic downturn is really hitting your business. You’re lucky to just hold on to what you have.” “You do have an overwhelming workload. I don’t know how you do it.”

Thus, there are many reasons for people to hold on to their stories and to keep their circumstances fixed, even immutable, in their minds. But is that how these stories must continue or, worse, end? Are the characters—*are you*—stuck in a rut without hope for change?

In each of these talent stories, people have given their power to someone or something else. Indeed, they have become merely

players in the stories about other people, their organizations, or economic circumstances.

To create new and more fulfilling chapters in your talent story, you need to take back the lead, the power, of your story. You need to be your own hero. In fact, you are the only person who can be the hero of your talent story. If you're not the hero of your own story, you simply become a player in one you didn't choose.

Now, many of us don't think of ourselves as heroes. The role sounds too big, too risky, or just not us. That might be true in terms of being a hero on the battlefield, in politics, or while attempting some world-saving feat. However, you *can* be the hero of your talent story. We'll show you how and give you examples of everyday people who have done just that.

## HOW DO HEROES OF TALENT STORIES ACT?

We all love heroes, especially those who rise from being seemingly everyday people. While they may be ordinary folks, something sets them apart. Heroes act differently because they learn to think differently. Heroes are ordinary people who are willing to go beyond their perceived limitations. They see the potential for growth and change in themselves and their circumstances.

**Heroes have hopes.** Heroes have hopes and are willing to do ethically what it takes to realize them. Every hero has fears too. Heroes confront their fears and act on their hopes. If they are on course and confront obstacles, they use their talents to find a way to deal with them. However, in the end, they keep moving forward.

**Heroes recognize opportunities.** Heroes look for opportunities. Where others see dead ends, heroes see possibilities. When heroes see inroads, they take them. If they don't see a way in, they enlist others to help create new solutions.

**Heroes act.** Even when others are afraid to get involved and

prefer to play it safe and watch from a distance, heroes find ways to make steady progress toward their objectives.

It's important to note that heroes are not rabid risk takers. While they are willing to try new approaches, they (or the people who support them) usually have a keen sense of risk and opportunity. Indeed, some of the biggest risk takers, Silicon Valley venture capitalists, focus on how to wring risk out of new ventures to help them succeed. Therefore, we're not suggesting that you bet the farm to develop and apply your talent. It's your story. You'll get to write it how you wish. We will help you to explore the healthy stretches that can lead to heroic results for you.

## **HOW TAKING A HERO'S ROLE CHANGES EVERYTHING**

Let's look at how the people you met before might reframe their talent stories in simple, practical ways to become their own heroes.

What if Fran could communicate her hopes to a boss or friend and find a way to begin acting like the supervisor she wants to be, right from where she is?

What if there were hidden opportunities for Sheila to work with her team and delegate responsibilities so she could branch out into using her talent to create more value for herself and the organization?

What if Miguel could rise in the organization without compromising his personal and family values?

What if Nadia were to discover that she is struggling in her new leadership position only because she is trying to be someone she's not?

What if Ben could find a way to stay passionate about his work and remain productive in spite of the bureaucracy?

What if Kim could use her unique abilities and resources instead of comparing herself with others?

What if Tony could document his broader skills and rebrand himself as a leader guiding innovation in tough budget times?

What if Jesse could shift from thinking his career is set to finding new ways to grow?

Do these what-ifs sound plausible to you? Each of them actually happened. Each of them began with an openness to see the current story as something that the person was willing to look at in a new way. Each of them occurred because the person was willing to explore how he or she might become the hero of his or her own talent story.

## **BE THE HERO OF YOUR TALENT STORY**

Maybe you don't want to wait for someone else to come along and make everything right for you. Maybe you don't want to wait for a golden opportunity or to inherit money from an as-yet-unknown source or to be picked by others to move forward or to wait for your boss to retire or die so that you can advance.

Everything we offer in this book is for people who are ready to be the heroes of their talent stories. The hero story can belong to all of us, not just a chosen few. It doesn't matter what your story is or what your circumstances are. If you are seriously stuck and hate your job, or if you are hoping to make more of the satisfying career you already have, the keys are one and the same.

No matter who you are or what your situation is, it all comes down to one point: you always have a choice. You get to decide *how* you are going to play out your talent story and your role in it. Unless you default and give the power to someone else, it's yours to decide.

When we make choices that are in accord with our hopes and desires, we generally feel good and get a surge of energy and

commitment that comes from being in alignment and taking charge. This is not to say that we won't have to deal with tough situations along the road. We all do. But when we hold true to our hopes, we can take the bumps. We'll talk more in depth about that later.

Is your "current" story ironclad? Can any story be changed for the good? Can you really turn it around and create a story that works for you? Evidence shows that anyone can change his or her story permanently. But you'll have to be willing to open up to possibilities.

As the hero of your own story, you are the singular beginning point.

We realize that it may seem daunting to see your talent as a story you can change and to position yourself as the hero within it. Perhaps you are thinking, "You don't understand how limiting my situation is. I truly am stuck, and the tradeoffs feel too big." Or "I'd like to explore these ideas, but this is a whole new way of looking at myself and my career. How do I make this concrete for myself?" Good questions.

The next chapters will make this process clear for you. You'll learn about a carefully designed conversation that in the span of about an hour will enable you to begin dictating the talent story you want to pursue—one with you in the lead. We'll guide you to connect with an appropriate friend, coworker, family member, or acquaintance who will be your catalyst for new insights, opportunities, and actions and will help you to identify resources to realize them. These tools started the people in this chapter on their new paths.

## **TALENT TAKEAWAY**

Your talent is a story you can transform. When you position yourself as the hero of your story and follow a clear set of actions to act out that role, your career and life can change and move forward quickly.

## TAKE CHARGE

You may feel that you want to change your talent story, but since change can be scary, you might find yourself dragging your feet. If so, try this:

Make two lists on separate pieces of paper, one titled “Benefits I See for Keeping My Current Story,” the other titled “Benefits I Foresee in Becoming the Hero of My Story.” When you are done, read them aloud several times. Then choose which story you want to live by, and post the list in a prominent place. Throw the other list away. The choice is yours.

This material has been excerpted from

***Take Charge of Your Talent:  
Three Keys to Thriving in Your Career, Organization, and Life***

by Don Maruska and Jay Perry

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Copyright © 2012, All Rights Reserved.

For more information, or to purchase the book,  
please visit our website

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)