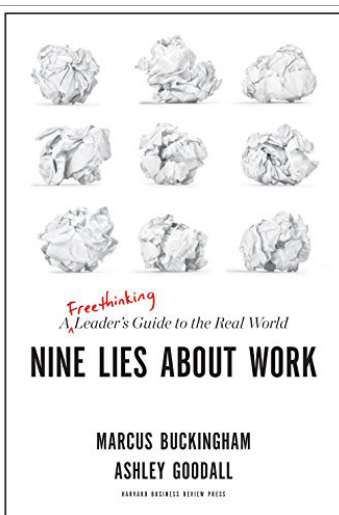


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

www.convenebooksummary.com



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marcus Buckingham

Marcus Buckingham is head of research at ADP Research Institute.

Ashley Goodall

Ashley Goodall is a Senior VP at of Leadership and Team Intelligence at Cisco.

Nine Lies About Work

THE SUMMARY

Harvard Business Review Press 2019

Introduction

We began this book with a paradox. Why do so many of the ideas and practices that are held as settled truths at work wind up being so deeply frustrating to, and unpopular with, the very people they are supposed to serve?

We could call these things “misconceptions,” or “myths,” or even “misunderstandings,” but because they are pushed at us so hard, almost as if they’re being used to steer us away from the world as it truly is, we’ll call them “lies.”

Before we can build something strong and fine with our teams, we need to deconstruct each lie to discern how it begins life as a truth in one small set of cases and then spreads into a lie applied to all cases. We must then push on to uncover the broader truths hidden behind.

As you read, you’ll realize that these Nine Lies have taken hold because each satisfies the organization’s need for control. Large organizations are complex places, and a strong and understandable instinct of their leaders is to seek simplicity and order. This makes it easier to convince themselves and their stockholders that they are moving toward their objectives. This desire for simplicity easily shades into a desire for conformity, and before long this conformity threatens to extinguish individuality. Before we know it, the particular talents and interests of each person are seen as inconveniences, and the organization comes to treat its people as essentially interchangeable.

Nine Lies About Work

This is why you are told your organization's culture is monolithic, that the plan must be adhered to, that work must be aligned through cascading goals, that humans must be molded into well-roundedness and given constant feedback until they become so, and that each one of us must rate the others so as to conform most closely to the prescribed models of leadership, performance, and potential.

You'll see, as well, that the strongest force pushing back against the lies, and the force that we all seek to harness in our lives, is the power of our own individuality. The true power of human nature is that each human's nature is unique, and that expressing this through our work is an act, ultimately, of love.

LIE #1: People Care Which Company They Work For

The first lie we'll need to expose is precisely that *people care which company they work for*. It sounds so odd to label this a lie, since each of us does indeed feel some sort of connection to our company, but read on, and we think you'll see that while what each of us truly cares about may begin as "company," it quickly morphs into something quite different.

When we push on the data, and examine closely its patterns and variations, we arrive at the conclusion that while people might care which company they join, they don't care which company they work for. The truth is that, once there, *people care which team they're on*. There are three things for you to do as a leader of a team.

First, you should know the answers to these eight questions for your team all the time. There are technologies available to help you do this, but the easiest place to start is to ask your team members, one person at a time. Whatever their answers are, you'll *always* be smarter because of them, and you'll *always* know you're paying attention to something that matters.

These eight precisely worded items are statements a survey-taker responds to in order to predict sustained team performance.

1. I am really enthusiastic about the mission of my company.
2. At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me.
3. In my team, I am surrounded by people who share my values.
4. I have the chance to use my strengths every day at work.
5. My teammates have my back.
6. I know I will be recognized for excellent work.
7. I have great confidence in my company's future.
8. In my work, I am always challenged to grow.

Second, read on to understand more clearly how to build a great team, and how the lies you'll encounter get in the way of that. Your role as team leader is the most important role in any company. Who your company chooses to make team leader is the most important decision it ever makes. You have by far the greatest influence on the distinctive local experience of your team. This is a weighty responsibility, but at least it's yours. We want to help you step into it.

Nine Lies About Work

Third, when you're next looking to join a company, don't bother asking if it has a great culture as no one can tell you that in any real way. Instead, ask what it does to build great teams.

LIE #2: The Best Plan Wins

If you've recently been promoted to team leader, the first thing you'll be expected to do is create a plan. You'll be asked—before you even start, most likely—what your plan is for your team. You'll have to sit down, think hard, survey your team members (many of whom you will have inherited) and then make your plan.

We do this because we believe that plans are important. If we could just get the plan right, we think, and weave every team's plan into the broader company plan, then we could be confident that our resources were allocated appropriately, that the correct sequence and timing were laid out, that each person's role was clearly defined, and we had enough of the right people to fill each required role. Buoyed by this confidence, we'd know that we only have to galvanize our teams to give their all, and success would follow.

Yet, just as the cycle of big plans leading to medium plans leading to small plans is familiar to you, so—surely—is the nagging realization that things rarely, if ever, turn out the way you hope they will.

This is not to say that planning is utterly useless. Creating space to think through all of the information you have in your world, and trying to pull that into some kind of order or understanding, has some basic value. You'll understand the scale and nature of the challenges your team is facing, but you'll have learned little about what to do make things better. Plans scope the problem, not the solution.

So, though you are told that the *best plan wins*, the reality is quite different. Many plans, particularly those created in large organizations, are overly generalized, quickly obsolete, and frustrating to those asked to execute them. It's far better to coordinate your team's efforts in real time, relying heavily on the informed, detailed intelligence of each unique team member.

One of the eight aspects that distinguish the best teams is the sense of every team member that, "At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me.

Our assumption has most often been that the best way to create clarity of expectation is to tell people what to do. It turns out, however, that by the time you've managed to do this, your directions are wrong because the world has moved on. In this way, the systems we've built to tell people what to do at great scale fail.

The best, most effective way to create clarity of expectations is to figure out how to let your people figure it out for themselves. This isn't a question of removing complexity, but is rather one of locating it in the right place. It should not be hidden from view as the input for a grand plan, but rather shared for all to see. To do this, give your people as much accurate data as you can, meaning a real-time view of what's going on right now, and then a way to make sense of it, together. Trust the intelligence of your team.

LIE #3: The Best Companies Cascade Goals

Goals are everywhere at work. It's hard to find many companies that do not engage in some sort of annual or semi-annual goal-setting regimen. At some point in the year, usually at the start of a fiscal year, the organization's senior leaders set their goals for the upcoming six or twelve months, and then share them with the teams.

Nine Lies About Work

Each team member looks at each of the leader's goal, and figures out what to do to advance that goal, and thus sets a sort of mini-goal that reflects some part of the leader's goal. This continues down the chain, until you, and every other employee, has a set of goals that are mini-versions of some larger goal further up in the organization.

In the era of the smartphone, once-a-year goal-setting has been deemed Not Enough, and so your phone will soon be dramatically upping the frequency of all this goal-setting, assessing, and tracking if it hasn't done so already. This is all because we have come to believe that *the best companies cascade goals*.

It remains true that goals and cascaded goals in particular have an intuitive appeal to many leaders who find themselves in search of ways to ensure efficient and aligned execution in their organizations. At the same time, it also remains true that for those of us in the trenches, our experiences of goals feel non-intuitive, mechanical, fake, even demeaning. Why is that?

In the real world, there is work or stuff that you have to get done. In the theory world, there are goals. Work makes you feel trusted; goals make you feel distrusted. Work is work; goals aren't.

The only criterion for what makes a good goal is that the person working toward it must set it for himself or herself, *voluntarily*. The only way that a goal has any use at all is if it comes out of you as an expression of what you deem valuable. It doesn't have to be SMART, or big, hairy, and audacious. It doesn't need to contain key performance indicators or be built from objectives and key results. If a goal is going to be useful, it is going to help you contribute more, and then the *only* criterion is that you must set it for yourself.

As a leader, you are trying to unlock the judgment, the choices, the insight, and the creativity of your people. As we've seen, the way we go about this doesn't make much sense. We cloister information in our planning systems, and we cascade directives in our goal-setting systems.

Instead, we should unlock information through intelligence systems, and cascade meaning through our expressed values, rituals, and stories. We should let our people know what's going on in the world, and which hill we're trying to take, and then we should trust them to figure out how to make a contribution. They will invariably make better and more authentic decisions than those derived from any planning system that cascades goals from on high.

Since goals, done properly, are only and always an expression of what a person finds most meaningful, then to create alignment in our company we should do everything we can to ensure that everyone in the company understands what matters most. The truth is that the best companies don't cascade goals; *the best companies cascade meaning*.

LIE #4: The Best People Are Well-Rounded

Diversity isn't an impediment to building a great team. It's the fundamental ingredient without which a great team cannot exist.

If we were all the same, there would doubtless be things that all of us could not do, and that therefore the team could not do. We need to partner with people whose strengths are different from ours if we are to achieve results that demand more abilities than any of us has alone.

This means, in turn, that the more different we are from one another, the more we need one another. The more different we are, the more we rely on understanding and appreciating the strengths of others, and on building a

Nine Lies About Work

shared understanding of purpose, and an atmosphere of safety and trust, so that those strengths can be most usefully put to work.

Well-roundedness is a misguided and futile objective when it comes to individual people; but when it comes to teams, it's an absolute necessity. The more diverse the team members, the more weird, spiky, and idiosyncratic they are, the more well-rounded the team.

Competencies, and all the other normative and deficit-focused tools we have, don't push in the direction of expressing and harnessing diversity. They do just the opposite, but we don't need to throw them out completely.

The process of creating them involves a group of leaders, usually, debating what they value most. It is not one that should result in any sort of measurement tool or one-size-fits-all standard. It is, however, exactly the sort of process that should create a statement of collective values, priorities, purpose, and ambition.

Customer focus, innovation, growth orientation, and agility are not abilities to be measured; they are values to be shared. We should remove from our competency models the levels of ability, the individual evaluations, the feedback, and all the other things that they have become encumbered with, and we should instead simplify them, clarify them, recognize them (and name them) for what they are, and stick them on a wall for all to see.

When we carry our competencies across the measurement bridge, we enter a fake and dangerous world. Order and control as tools of assessment are worse than useless. As public signifiers for what we deem most important, they are another way we can cascade meaning in our organizations, and thereby help our leaders and teams understand what's most important.

LIE #5: People Need Feedback

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a millennial in possession of a job must be in want of feedback. Actually, it's not just millennials. It goes without question that feedback for each and every one of us at work is a good thing, and that more feedback is an even better thing. As a result, today we are blessed with upward feedback, downward feedback, peer feedback, 360-degree feedback, performance feedback, developmental feedback, constructive feedback, solicited, unsolicited, and anonymous feedback. With all of these flavors and variants has emerged a cottage industry of classes to teach us both how to give this feedback and how to receive it with grace and equanimity.

We seem certain that modern employees need, and indeed, cannot but benefit from, a real-time, straight-up assessment of their performance, and an appraisal of where they stand in relation to their peers.

You, as the team leader, will be told that one of the most important and tricky parts of your job is to convey this feedback to your people, no matter how negative the reviews might be. Your job is to accelerate team performance, and it'll be your responsibility to hold a mirror up to the performance of your people so they can see themselves as they really are, and see their performance as it truly is. This, you'll be told, is the secret to both success and respect as a team leader. So much so, in fact, that this sort of direct, clear, unvarnished feedback has its own special name at work: it's called *candid* feedback.

However, neurological science tells us what happens in response to a deliberate focus on weaknesses. In a study of both positive coaching students and probing other students about what they thought they needed to do differently to do better, MRI results revealed that the negative feedback triggered the student's "fight or flight" system. Your brain

Nine Lies About Work

on negative feedback responds as if to a threat, and narrows its activity. Negative feedback doesn't enable learning. It systematically inhibits it and is, neurologically speaking, how to create *impairment*.

The question is how can you stimulate learning and growth within your team, steer clear of negative feedback that sets your people back, and still ensure that your team is running smoothly and efficiently?

There's one thing you can start to do immediately and that's to get into the conscious habit of looking for what's going well for each of your team members. The pull to look at the negative is a very strong one, but if what you want is improvement, then look for whenever someone on your team does something that really works. Your goal should be to consciously spend your days alert for those times when someone on your team does something so easily and effectively that it rocks you, just a little, and then find a way of telling that person what you just saw.

LIE #6: People Can Reliably Rate Other People

At least once a year, a number of your more senior colleagues will gather together in a room to discuss you. They will talk about your performance, your potential, and your career aspirations. Then they will decide on such consequential issues as how much bonus you should get, whether you should be selected for a special training program, and when or if you should be promoted. This meeting, as you might know, is called a talent review, and virtually every organization conducts some version of it.

It is going to bother you greatly to learn, then, that in the real world, none of the mechanisms and meetings—not the models, not the consensus sessions, not the exhaustive competencies, not the carefully calibrated rating scales—*none* of them will ensure that the truth of you emerges in the room. That's because *all* of them are based on the belief that *people can reliably rate other people*—and they can't. This is our sixth lie.

Rather than asking whether another person has a given quality, we need to ask how we would *react* to that other person if he or she did. We need to stop asking about others, and instead ask about ourselves. Here's what that would look like in practice.

Ask about the quality of the team member's work: "Do you always go to this team member when you need extraordinary results?"

Ask about how "team-y" a person was, not by asking the team leader to rate the person on collaboration or cooperation, but: "Do you choose to work with this team member as much as you possibly can?"

Ask about the team member's future prospects: "Would you promote this person today if you could?"

Ask if there is anything in the person's work to be concerned about: "Do you think this person has a performance problem that you need to address immediately?"

You don't want someone to be in any room pretending that they have a reliable measure of *who you are*. In the same way that you hated your singular performance rating, you will come to despise the newer tools that now claim, ever more loudly, to capture all your essential competencies. They don't, and they never will. They simply add gasoline to the conflagration of bad data purporting to represent you. Any tool that pretends to reveal *who you are* is false.

Nine Lies About Work

What you want in the room is different. You don't want the truth of you, but just the truth. You don't want to be represented by data that attempts, arrogantly, to divine who you are. Instead, you want to be represented by data that simply, reliably, and humbly captures *the reaction of your team leader to you*. That's not you, and it shouldn't pretend to be you. It's your leader, and what she feels, and what she would do in the future and that's enough.

LIE #7: People Have Potential

It's not true—or, indeed, useful—to think that *people have potential*. Instead, the truth is that *people have momentum*.

Potential is a one-sided evaluation. Momentum is an ongoing conversation. Momentum represents the opposite of “up-or-out” thinking. It's the best concept to address one of the key survey items that measure engagement and performance: “In my work, I am always challenged to grow.” Potential doesn't do that—it doesn't challenge you to grow. It tells you that you either will, or you won't.

As with all the practices we've covered thus far, assigning a “potential” rating to each employee is a product of some very good and necessary intentions. Your company is a maximization machine—it wants to make the best use of its finite resources—so it is greatly interested in identifying precisely who to invest in, and how. As with all the lies we've addressed so far, the lie that *people have potential* is a product of the organization's desire for control, and their impatience with individual differences.

There is no such thing as having potential. There is, but it doesn't mean anything or rather, it doesn't mean anything beyond being a human. To say that you have potential means simply that you have the capacity to learn, and grow, and get better, like every other human.

In the world of physics, there's a name for the discrete, measurable, definable, and directional thing that is produced when *mass* and *velocity* combine. It's called momentum. In the world of teams and team members, the same applies. *Mass* is what a team member loves and aspires to. *Velocity* describes how a team member moves through the world—how she's done it, how well she's done it, how quickly, and in what direction.

When you talk to a team member about the trajectory of her momentum, you help her understand where she is at the moment in time so that she can understand what paths are possible next.

Addressing their potential makes people feel like they've been dealt with. Addressing their momentum makes them feel *understood*. More important, it helps them understand themselves, by encouraging them to consider where they are, right now—not as a point of stasis, but as a unique human being moving purposely through the world.

Teams are where we live, and team leaders can make or break that experience for us. Rather than investing in systems and processes to provide a fallback in case our managers are found wanting, it's far better to invest in helping our team leaders do what we need them to by 1) getting rid of ratings of “potential,” 2) teaching team leaders what we know about human growth, and 3) prompting them to discuss careers with their people in terms of momentum—in terms of who each team member is, and in terms of how fast each is moving through the world. This is harder, of course, than buying the latest piece of enterprise software and then imploring our people to use it, but it's the best right hard thing to do.

Nine Lies About Work

LIE #8: Work-Life Balance Matters Most

In the real world, does anyone, anywhere, man or woman, young or old, affluent or barely solvent, ever actually find balance?

If any have, we haven't met them yet. This is why balance is more bane than benefit. In the end, balance is an unachievable goal anyway, because it asks us to aim for momentary stasis in a world that is ever changing. Supposing we ever get things just exactly in balance, we know for sure that something will come along and unbalance them and that we'll be back to pushing our balance rock up the hill again. Balance as an ideal erases our humanity—the essence of who each of us and aspires to be—and replaces it with a Sisyphean coping strategy.

So what then should we do? Work can be hard. So can life. There's too much of both, too much of the time. If balancing everything out isn't the answer, then what is? We need a new way of thinking. About work. About life.

Think about the most successful person you know. Not in terms of money, necessarily, but in terms of her contributions to her team, and her organization—someone enormously productive, creative, resilient, and seemingly at one with her work. More than likely, as you think of this person, you're thinking she got lucky. "How," you're asking yourself, "did she *find* that role, how did she *find* that work, how did she *find* that life? I wish I could find something that fits me as well as her work fits her."

You've landed on the wrong verb. This person didn't *find* this work—she didn't happen upon it, fully-formed and waiting for her. Instead, she *made* it. She took a generic job, with a generic job description, and then, within that job, she took her loves seriously, and gradually, little by little and a lot over time, she turned the best of her job into most of her job. Not the entirety of it, maybe, but certainly an awful lot of it, until it became a manifestation of who she is. She tweaked and tweaked the role until, in all the most important ways, it came to resemble her—it became an expression of her.

You want to find love in what you do. The truth is that—more than striving for balance between work and life—*love-in-work matters most*.

Should you work fifteen hours a day? Should you have three kids before the age thirty? Should you devote all your time to your career until you can afford the day care you will need? Should you take six weeks of vacation a year, or one? Should you quit your job and go surfing or van-ing? These are all choices that only you can make, and the only way to make them wisely is to honor the truth that your life will give you strength if you can but pay attention to your emotional reactions to the events and activities and responsibilities you choose to fill it with.

LIE #9: Leadership is a Thing

It's become something of a cliché in the business literature, to bemoan the vast volume of writing on the topic; to list the number of books on leadership that come up if you search on Amazon; to point to the great library of articles and blog posts and videos and inspirational speeches as evidence that leadership is either a Really Important Subject or else a Really Over-Analyzed Subject. Certainly leadership is enduringly fascinating to us and we believe it to be critically important at work.

We can say that there appears to be broad agreement that certain people exhibit a definable, consistent, and meaningful quality called leadership. And that all the best leaders possess this set of qualities. Seemingly, as a

Nine Lies About Work

consequence, if you want to be a leader, you have to have this set of qualities.

There is a frustrating circularity to the argument—that there's a thing called leadership, and we know it's a thing because leaders have it, otherwise they wouldn't be leaders. It's like saying your cat has catness because he's a cat: it might be true, but it's hardly helpful to your hamster if he dreams, someday, of being a cat.

The final lie that we encounter at work is that *leadership is a thing*. When you take any of our definitions of leadership, and then try to locate it in the real world, you encounter exception upon exception upon exception. The very least we can conclude is that if there is some magical set of leadership attributes, we haven't figured out what they are, and that plenty of leaders are doing plenty of leading without many of them. We see many leaders with significant shortcomings such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Warren Buffet, Winston Churchill, Susan B. Anthony, Steve Jobs, General George Patton, and more.

We recognize leaders as leaders. This is the true lesson in leading from the real world: a leader is someone who has followers, plain and simple. The only determinant of whether someone is leading is whether anyone else is following. The idea of leadership is missing the idea of followers—their needs, their feelings, their fears and hopes. It's missing the idea that our subject here is, at heart, a question of a particularly human relationship—namely, why anyone would choose to devote his or her energies to, and take risks on behalf of, someone else. In that, it's missing the entire point.

The best people aren't well-rounded, but are instead *spiky*—they have honed one or two distinct abilities that they use to make their mark on the world. What we see in the best leaders is a similar extremism such as a few signal abilities refined over time. Now, these abilities are so pronounced, and the leaders so adept at transmitting them to the world, that they stand out to all of us. The truth is, *we follow spikes*.

Leading and following are not abstractions. They are human interactions; human relationships. Their currency is the currency of all human relationships—the currency of emotional bonds, of trust, and of love. If you, as a leader, forget these things, and yet master everything that theory tells you matters, you will find yourself alone. If you understand who you are, at your core, and hone that understanding into a few special abilities, each of which refracts and magnifies your intent, your essence, and your humanity, then, in the real world, we will see you.

And we will follow.

TRUTHS

TRUTH #1: People care which team they're on. (That's where work actually happens.)

TRUTH #2: The best intelligence wins. (The world moves too fast for plans.)

TRUTH #3: The best companies cascade meaning. (People want to know what they all share.)

TRUTH #4: The best people are spiky. (Uniqueness is a feature, not a bug.)

TRUTH #5: People need attention. (We all want to be seen for who we are at our best.)

TRUTH #6: People can reliably rate their own experience. (That's all we have.)

Nine Lies About Work

TRUTH #7: People have momentum. (We all move through the world differently.)

TRUTH #8: Love-in-work matters most. (That's what work is really for.)

TRUTH #9: We follow spikes. (Spikes bring us certainty.)