

# THE LEAP: UNLOCKING PERFORMANCE POTENTIAL IN THE WORKFORCE

By Rick Smith

In every walk of life, ordinary people have turned into extraordinary performers. Consider Frances Hesselbein. A stay-at-home mom, she reluctantly accepted a series of leadership positions, and eventually became acclaimed director of the Girl Scouts. Silvia Lagnado, a soft spoken middle manager, transformed her company (Unilever), her industry, and her career with a simple, yet groundbreaking idea—the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Brad Margus, a small-town shrimp farmer facing a family medical tragedy, started a new philanthropy and ultimately became a world-renowned genetics expert and entrepreneur.

Hesselbein, Lagnado, and Margus were all unremarkable (initially). But their careers took off, as did their contributions to the organizations they served. Why? And



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what do their stories suggest for workforce learning and performance professionals?

## A common thread

In a groundbreaking study on professional career success, I found that on average, professionals believed that they would be 35 percent more productive if they were in roles that fully leveraged their unique strengths and passions.

This intuition is supported in real-world experiences. Nearly every extraordinary leap I studied began with the individual finding her way to a job in which her unique strengths were consistently called on and her passions fully engaged. Some stumbled into these positions, but it is a primary responsibility of training and development professionals to help guide them there.

Evidently, few are having much success. According to my research, only about 5 percent of professionals say that they are currently in a role that leverages their strengths and passions every day. This represents an ocean of unfulfilled workers, and incredible amounts of untapped organizational potential.

## Identify your strengths and passions

Take the Primary Color Assessment by going to [www.primarycolorassessment.com](http://www.primarycolorassessment.com). This test identifies the intersection of your greatest strengths (the assets that produce results) and your strongest passions (activities that fully engage them). When focused on activities that draw on your strengths and passions—your “primary color”—you can accelerate the acquisition of new skills and achieve unexpected new levels of performance.

The test, which takes 15 to 20 minutes to complete, is built on the assumption that there is a basic spectrum of abilities—an essential map from which strengths, passions, jobs, and career paths can all be compared and analyzed—providing actionable information for leaders and individuals alike.

Working with well-regarded psychologists and other experts, I designed and tested the Primary Color Assessment throughout the last eight years. The test consists of a group of statements representing behavioral preferences, styles, and beliefs (such as, “I am best in a fast-paced environment” or “I like conceptualizing and planning new things”) that you may find important to your way of life.

Indicate which statements are “most like me” or “least like me.” Test results suggest where the intersection of your strengths and passions (your “primary color”) lies—in areas such as innovation, strategic leadership, and line operation. A second group of questions helps you to identify how strongly your current job activities and requirements align with your primary color.

It was never my intention for this assessment to replace some of the more sophisticated, popular tests such as MBTI or HBDI, which are most often administered under strict counselor supervision. Rather, my hope is that this assessment can engage a broader audience at a higher level, compelling them to ask the questions: “What are my real strengths and passions?” “How important are they to me?” “Is my current role in alignment with my true nature?” “Is my career moving me toward my ideal role, or farther away?”

In summary, I designed the tool to be not merely interesting, but to provide participants with a relevant and compelling “so what?”

### **Migrating toward your primary color**

If your current work doesn't align strongly with your primary color, you

can fine-tune your job responsibilities to enhance that alignment. Talk with your supervisor or another leader about small changes that will enable you to engage in more activities that evoke your primary color.

For example, suppose you have unique strengths and passions in the area of strategic leadership, but no opportunity to exercise these traits. Perhaps your boss could put you in charge of a task force responsible for formulating and executing a plan for solving a particular business problem.

With a little creativity, managers partnering with employees can identify numerous strategies to leverage unique primary colors, while simultaneously achieving (or exceeding) the business goals.

In addition, research other roles and career paths available to you within the organization. Often, there may seem to be only one or two “logical” paths for promotion within a given role—but within any company, there are roles that represent a great fit for every person. There isn't just one “right” path for each person.

If your organization has a mentoring program, seek out a mentor who can brainstorm ideas for fine-tuning job responsibilities. Mentors can also put protégés in touch with people inside or outside the organization who might shed additional light on possible new professional paths.

Volunteer in new areas that may be right for you. For instance, someone whose primary color test results suggest a passion for innovation might volunteer at a community organization that needs to develop new services for constituents—further developing these skills and positively representing your organization in the community.

Finally, conduct low-risk experiments to test possible new job activities. For example, let's say your primary color suggests an appetite for inspirational leadership. You might try assembling

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and leading a small team committed to finding new cost-saving measures for the company. Even informal roles that team members are assigned can affect their development, and demonstrate the organization's commitment to their career.

Building a productive, satisfied workforce requires time and investment. But the rewards are well worth it. By helping employees find their “primary color” and diagnose any misalignment between that color and their current work role, you can then assist them in migrating their careers toward greater productivity and fulfillment. Everyone wins—employees, your organization, and you.

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***Rick Smith** is the author of *The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great*, and is co-author of the Wall Street Journal and Business Week bestseller *The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers*. He is the founder of *World 50*, one of the most influential executive networking companies in the world; [www.leapbuilder.com](http://www.leapbuilder.com)*