EXCLUSIVE VIP PREVIEW

CULTIVATING EXCELLENCE

The ART, SCIENCE, *and* GRIT *of* HIGH PERFORMANCE *in* BUSINESS

DARRYL CROSS

with WILLIAM CROSS

Why and how do world-class leaders and great performers consistently beat their competition?

They realize they cannot go it alone. They use teams and coaches to amplify their results. Many performers who have already surmounted exceptional tests and challenges and have succeeded in business, sports, the military, or the arts well beyond their peers think performance is only up to the individual. Many become frustrated when hours of hard work, years of experience, and expensive educations don't lead them to the top of their domain. They are already among the best, but they want to be *the* best.

The elite realize there is only so much they can do on their own to achieve that status. They understand they need coaches, colleagues, and competitors to provide the collaboration and competition that serve as a constant push to keep forward momentum going toward attaining that next level.

In *Cultivating Excellence*, Darryl Cross uses thirty years of experience to show top performers that the key to continued enhancement of performance and success is an exceptional coach and team. They guide the elite performers to see situations and challenges in new ways (art), to perfect their craft to the *n*th degree (science), and to commit to deliberate practice that eliminates performance gaps (grit) and puts the summit within reach.

DARRYL W. CROSS is an internationally known expert on the art, science, and grit of high performance and the chief performance officer and founder of HighPer Teams, a high-performance training company. Darryl has addressed more than 10,000 executives, professionals, and athletes from more than 100 countries about how to continuously maximize performance and results.

WILLIAM V. CROSS enjoyed a career in the US Navy and retired as a two-star rear admiral after serving as a fighter pilot and commanding officer of a nuclear aircraft carrier. Bill's philosophy on success and high performance is based on the principles of hard work, personal responsibility and accountability, constructive competition, innovation and creativity, and compassionate leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

"Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives—choice, not chance, determines your destiny."

—ARISTOTLE

Why and how do world-class leaders and great performers consistently beat their competition?

There is no shortage of high performers in the world. In every discipline, field, industry, and enterprise, proven experts at the top of their game are trying every trick in the book to squeeze one more challenge and one more percentage of improvement out of one more year. Other leaders, who want to win just as badly, and possess similar levels of experience, ability, and work ethic, test them. The next generation of performers jockey to take their positions and start erasing their records and replacing those memories with their own achievements.

However, all of them cannot be the best. Despite the fact that any given high performer might be in the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent in terms of success, most fields are still dominated by a handful of performers year after year. They all want to excel. They all think they can. However, many of them become frustrated when thousands of hours of hard work, years of experience, and an expensive education do not lead to the winner's podium as often as they think they should. Thus, you hear this familiar signal of acquiescence from "the best" who are not actually doing the best they *could*:

"Some people just have a divine gift that I could never hope to achieve." They are wrong. The common thread of outstanding accomplishment in any domain—from business to sports—involves what we term the art, science, and grit of high performance.

There are certainly great differences in natural abilities, access to training and education, connections, and the luck of the draw between people in the general population. But we're not discussing the general population; we're referring to people who have already succeeded beyond most tests and challenges. They are already among the best. But only a few of the best will be known as elite. The elite see situations and challenges in new ways. They perfect their craft to the *n*th degree. They put in countless hours of deliberate practice to eliminate performance gaps and realize that reaching the summit in one domain does not necessarily mean leaping to the summit of another. All high performers quickly realize there is only so much they can do on their own. Those who believe they can self-manage their drive and progress find the tendency is to default into areas of strength, ignoring weaknesses and reinforcing their current level of mastery.

High-performing leaders and other elites need someone with an external perspective and the expertise and patience to provide feedback, guidance, and a constant push to keep forward momentum toward attaining the next level. If art, science, and grit are the common threads, the needle pulling these components together is an exceptional coach.

The very best performers rely on expert coaching for plans that continually enhance their performance. Properly coaching elite performers involves a collaborative relationship between professionals, where discovery-based questioning and real-world application lead to solutions identified by the performer. These leaders see their coaches as partners who help them find answers and waste no time listening to endless advice and platitudes about theory.

High-performance coaches and their elite clients rely on simulations and managed competition to demonstrate competency and identify fundamental

abilities. This allows coaches to develop preparatory scenarios for situations their clients might encounter. Together, they eliminate performance gaps, tackling them head-on, instead of ignoring or working around weaknesses. Then, they do it again—and again, and again.

Good performers tend to rely on their natural ability, previous education, and past experience. They look backward—mostly through self-reflection—for guidance. In contrast, those who are the absolute best envision new approaches to challenges. Guided by expert coaches who help them get better at what they do every day, they advance and perfect technique, and practice deliberately. They look forward to how things could (and will) be, and they do so with the counsel of others.

While the difference between the good and the best may be only a few percentage points, those extra points become logarithmic in terms of rewards. This is why coaching is so very important to high performers. Coaching is the force multiplier that takes talent to an advanced level beyond that of their peers—peers who may have almost identical abilities, backgrounds, and environments. *The only difference between being good and the best is if—and how—performers are coached*. If high performance is to be translated into future, sustained performance, the act of coaching is the catalyst.

Sports records never stand for long. Business superstars are always looking over their shoulder at the new up-and-comers who want their offices and their titles. Astronaut Gordon Cooper once famously said to reports, "Who is the best pilot I ever saw? You're looking at him." However, someone is always the new "best pilot you ever saw"; the only sure thing is that yesterday's success will not be enough to stay on top tomorrow. Great coaching, therefore, depends upon our understanding of individual successes and the application of research- and results-proven principles, methods, and approaches to the future.

The key to high performance is domain agnostic. Whether coaching an athlete, astronaut, pilot, doctor, lawyer, CEO, butcher, baker, or candlestick

maker, there is a way to prepare. There is a way to instruct. And there is a way to win. It is the coaching method that determines if—and how—you'll get to the win.

The purpose of our book is to help coaches get the most out of an individual's or an organization's performance. Once it is understood how and why some individuals excel, processes can be repeated, and success replicated.

You may have heard of some of these principles before, and you may even already agree that they should be a coaching priority. Though many organizations understand what they *should* do, they often do not understand *how*. The plan is simple, but admittedly, not so simple to do.

We will show you how.

PROLOGUE

THE POTATO KING OF MARS AND THE RISE OF MAVERICK

"An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises."
—MAE WEST

"The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand."
—VINCE LOMBARDI

"Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose."
—BILL GATES

It seems counterintuitive, but the types of organizations that have the most trouble developing high performers are the ones already flooded with them. Successful corporations, agencies, teams, firms, and units rest on soft, cushy laurels in relative comfort—for the time being. Full of great people, outstanding products and services, winning strategies, sound tactics, and a great deal of momentum, they keep rolling forward. Why, then, is there need for concern? Ask any leader and you will hear these responses:

"Clients are asking for new, sometimes unreasonable, things."

"Our competitors are catching up."

"Our enemies have thought of new ways to beat us."

"We have to do more with less; we get less from doing more."

"Everything has changed. The world is completely different."

Successful individuals, teams, coaches, and leaders share a common perception: that conditions affecting their status are changing at an exponential rate. While this may be true in some cases, it is not necessarily the world that is changing rapidly—it is the number of high performers competing for the spoils. To illustrate, here's an extremely fictional, yet also very real, example.

BEST IN HIS WORLD

In *The Martian*, an Academy Award-nominated movie about the Ares III expedition to Mars, the protagonist (astronaut Mark Watney, played by actor Matt Damon) is presumed dead during a freak storm and left behind when the rest of the crew makes an emergency evacuation. The crew does not realize their mistake until they are long gone, and so Watney becomes Mars' sole resident. On the plus side, he is a botanist. On the minus side, things that humans eat don't grow on Mars—that is, not without extreme ingenuity, arduous work, and a whole lot of luck.

Watney, naturally, was quite motivated. He could have complained about the unfairness of that unexpected storm. He could have bemoaned his lack of tools and supplies. He could have decided to sit back and watch old videos until his food ran out. No spoilers here, but he doesn't do any of these things. He gets to work, eventually figuring out how to grow potatoes. Potatoes, on the surface of Mars! One of Watney's most memorable lines is this

proclamation: "I don't want to come off as arrogant here, but I'm the greatest botanist on this planet."

While Watney mightn't win any *Iron Chef* cooking competitions with the resulting cuisine, it kept him alive, buying time for the astronaut to figure a way out of his predicament. (If you want to know how things turn out for Watney, you'll need to see the movie, but this short recounting demonstrates a number of lessons about performance and success under extreme circumstances that we'll come back to later.)

Mark Watney was right; he *was* the greatest botanist on Mars. In fact, even including the six-person crew of the Ares III, he was still the best botanist on the planet. And when he was left behind on Mars, he also became the best football player, singer, and artist. Lack of competitors elevated his every level of performance. However, let's alter the story.

What if another botanist were to show up? Ignoring the feasibility, suppose that each trained at NASA, studied botany at the University of Chicago, and desired to keep eating on a regular basis. Who would be the best botanist now? Would there be that much of a difference? Potatoes are potatoes, and these two Martian neighbors would just need to produce enough to survive.

Let's add ten more botanists. Mars would become a regular hotbed of botanists; they'd establish infrastructure and industry on the red planet. Perhaps they'd vary the crops and try new techniques. At first, survival is the goal. Add one hundred more botanists, and the survivors are now a colony. Botanists might not be the most exciting bunch of people, but now there's a vibrant Martian community. And, pretty soon, something else is naturally introduced: competition.

On Mars, with its limited resources, Spartan habitats, and few luxuries, there is a finite supply of rewards to go around. This breeds more competition. When struggling to survive, little things—an extra twenty-five square feet of living space or a living pod with a window—don't matter. Once you are no longer just scraping by, however, people with talent and skills want more.

At this point, somebody on Mars is going to create an ever so slightly better tasting potato. This new unique skill will allow them to trade or barter for the bigger living pod. Other colonists will try to match or outdo the new Potato King of Mars, and the race is on.

Watney was surely the best botanist on Mars when alone, but now he is one of over a hundred. His skills are the same. Mars is the same. What has changed is the number of viable competitors for the "Best Botanist" trophy and their competitive desire for resources, comforts, and pride. You could, though, group them all together and claim they're the best botanists on any planet in the entire solar system! (Well, unless you included Earth.)

Should that disparity count? This depends on the market for potatoes. If markets and potato buyers on Mars and Earth can be separated, different sets of winners and high performers will exist. The worry is about size—do these sets form a small playing field? When rewards are abundant and everyone does well, the level of competition decreases. However, when the scope of the playing field is expanded and there's a finite number of desirable rewards, competition emerges and amplifies. In the real world, each of us deals with this every day.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

At the height of the Vietnam War in 1969, the US Navy grudgingly recognized an inconvenient truth: The kill ratio of Vietnamese MIGs (a type of Russian-built fighter aircraft) to American fighter jets in air-to-air combat was only 7:1. That is, seven MIGs were being shot down in aerial dogfights for every one of the navy's fighters. At first glance, this might appear to be a good exchange, but it wasn't. A nearly inexhaustible supply of cheap yet highly maneuverable MIGs was being supplied by Russia and China; a relatively small number of much more expensive US fighters was stationed on aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin and at air force bases in South Vietnam and

Thailand. Therefore, the kill ratio needed to be at least 20:1 for the United States to win the strategic battle in the skies over Vietnam.

The navy and air force's frontline fighter at the time was the F-4 Phantom II, manufactured by the then-McDonnell Douglas Corporation. The airplane was designed at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s primarily as a supersonic interceptor of Russian bombers. Close-in air-to-air combat was no longer considered likely in the world of supersonic fighters and long-range, radar-guided missiles. Vietnam proved this assumption totally wrong.

Close-in dogfights between MIGs and Phantoms were commonplace, though sporadic. Since the Phantom was not designed for maneuverability, the smaller, more agile MIGs had a distinct advantage in dogfights. Only individual pilot skill and aggressiveness produced the initial 7:1 US advantage. However, North Vietnamese pilots learned and improved quickly, and something had to be done to improve the kill ratio. That "something" was the Navy Fighter Weapons School (commonly known as Top Gun), established to teach pilots new tactics for applying the Phantoms' speed and power to counter the MIGs' agility and stealth. The best of the best needed to get better.

The foremost task for 1969's nascent Top Gun was the selection process for both instructors and students. The navy realized that the value of the program would only be as good as the professional skill and reputation of the participants. Instructors were carefully screened and chosen as the navy's most experienced and capable Phantom pilots. They would teach new tactics in the classroom and fly as adversaries, or red teams, in specially designed airplanes made to look and perform like MIGs. The students were similarly screened as the best of the navy's junior fighter pilots and radar operators (RO): one pilot and one RO from each Phantom squadron.

Imagine the level of competition for selection to Top Gun within each squadron! Navy fighter pilots were already at the top of their peer group in multiple schools and screening tests. But only a handful of the best pilots in

the world were qualified for and selected to Top Gun. There were rivalries, hard-nosed competitions, and the occasional heated exchange of words.

The experienced instructors won most of the initial fights in the training syllabus, but surprisingly not many of the later ones! When the Top Gun syllabus had been completed, graduated students became their squadron's tactical experts, responsible for teaching the rest of the squadron the tactics and techniques they had learned to win against the MIGs.

While those pilots and operators not chosen for this elite training were clearly disappointed, they remained totally supportive of the selectees. Top Gun graduates formed a band of brothers who fought together and forged strong bonds of trust and mutual respect. Most importantly, competition for Top Gun slots improved the knowledge and skill of junior officers in every squadron. The results speak for themselves—within three years, the kill ratio had increased to 22:1!

Competition, combined with teamwork, trust, and mutual respect, brought out the best in every pilot and RO, and created a sea change in performance against the MIGs. In the end, they were all on the same team, and this method of training, coaching, and testing made *all* navy pilots better. To this day, Top Gun is widely acknowledged as the ultimate model for success in training fighter aircrews.

Both of these stories illustrate a key point: Performance is always relative to the competition. This doesn't matter as much if an individual is pursuing a hobby for personal gratification or checking something off a bucket list. However, when keeping score, or the consequences of winning and losing are severe, *self-perception* and assessment of current level of performance becomes irrelevant.

It's why the best pilots in the world had to go back to school to deal with

a new reality. It's why Olympic champions have to work harder *after* winning medals to win them again. It's why business executives, lawyers, and doctors must constantly improve and update their skills as practitioners and acumen as client service providers.

EVERYONE NEEDS A COACH

High-performance coaches know that in business, sport, the military, protective services, and every other segment of society, top performers exhibit three key characteristics that allow year after year wins, no matter what conditions or competitors emerge. They coach mastery of the principles we call the *art, science, and grit of high performance.*

High performers constantly work on perfecting these principles, and they learn how to balance all of the elements required to reach the top and stay there. They don't rely on past experience, diplomas hung on walls, or titles on a business card to insulate them from reality. They relish the arena, ask their coaches for help, and compete over and over again. All of them.

It may seem a strange dichotomy that performers who wish to excel and unleash their potential must be so dependent on others for help. From a young age, many of us are taught to only depend on ourselves and that success is up to the individual. In fact, you will be hard pressed to find world-class performers who have not relied on a coach and coaching to get where they are today. Individual protégés in music, sports, or the arts might be viewed as exceptions and may give pause about whether anyone can achieve high performance alone. But parents, teachers, peers, partners, and trusted mentors all had a hand in their achievement. Those individuals may not have worn a shirt with the word *Coach* stenciled on the front or been dedicated to what they were doing full time, but they were "coaching" throughout their protégé's development. The performer may take home the trophies, but the team comprised of those who "coach" them makes those trophies possible.

THE BINARY CONSEQUENCES OF PERFORMANCE

Can coaches apply these same principles of art, science, and grit in all other domains so that leaders can achieve greater success and market advantage? The answer, we submit, is absolutely *yes*!

Today's top performers live in a world where competition increasingly has *binary consequences*. One wins, and everyone else loses. One business gets the deal, and the others get nothing. Industries have dominant players, and the rest are absorbed. At the individual and organizational level, the world has become a much harder place. More educated, skilled, driven people exist in the market than at any other time in human history. They work for some of the most innovative, successful, and robust organizations ever. And many of them will be left behind.

This concept of binary consequences is not new. In sports, winners take all while losers, who finish just one hundredth of a second behind, fade from memory. Navy SEALs do not compete for second place on the sea, air, and land. No one tells an airline pilot, "Nice attempt at keeping that plane in the air. Better luck next time." In these examples, the individuals' performance—despite the fact that they train and prepare as teams led by exceptional coaches—is the focus. Society rewards and encourages individual performance, and this will not change in the foreseeable future. However, this should not be mistaken to mean that the development of individual greatness comes from solitary toil and effort. In all elite domains, leaders have a methodology for getting the best out of people. The primary reason for this—there is no other choice.

Disciplines such as the military, police, firefighting, and space exploration often deal with binary consequences, better known in these lines of work as *terminal consequences*. The penalty for substandard performance is, well, quite high. Therefore, individuals in these disciplines train differently. Their demeanor relating to skills development and retention is more serious. They obsess with planning for every situation and pressure testing through

simulation. They compete with each other to prepare. They are tremendously dependent on coaching as a constant factor in their development and integration with teams of other high performers. This is why they are so prepared and able to constantly take on new, increasingly difficult challenges.

Your performers may not be running into burning buildings or dealing with killer space debris hurtling at 22,000 miles per hour. However, when you are coaching top performers, teams, and their organizations, you are dealing with increasingly high-stakes issues in their areas of operation. There are businesses that attract the most profitable work and grow unremittingly, and those that get just enough scraps to keep the lights on. There are firms that lose over and over and over again to seemingly equally matched competitors. There are individual performers who attended the best schools, spent twenty years learning their craft, and still underperform their peers.

Why is that? Is it luck? Is it a matter of being in the right place at the right time? Do some performers have a divine gift that cannot be replicated? Perhaps it is something else. Perhaps high performers should be preparing for a more competitive world in the same ways that groups who live with the threat of terminal consequences do every day. The consequences may not be as severe, but they are just as binary. It's a lot to ask someone to self-manage their way to realizing their full potential when they are already overburdened with actual performance. They need an alternative perspective, one that provides an honest look at what needs to change and improve. This is where coaching comes in.

HIGH PERFORMANCE DEMANDS CONSTANT VIGILANCE

Some self-proclaimed high performers think they no longer need to develop skills and challenge abilities. The summit of their careers, they believe, has been achieved and now they'll spend the years until retirement repeating

those winning ways. In most cases, if they were honest with themselves, these self-determined summiteers would admit that ascension was due less to a unique ability and more to unique circumstances. Through luck, random choices, or rare environmental forces, they have reached the top without much assistance from others. However, it is the highest performers who have already made it into the top tier who need the most training, coaching, and ongoing competition to stay there. Only a fool expects lightning to strike twice and then, when standing in the exact same spot, bemoans that it doesn't.

Experience, expertise, and wisdom can be great strengths for some performers. For others, these characteristics serve as their greatest sources of weakness. It's clear from research and experience that leveraging competition and training under duress play a huge role in developing better people and better organizations. However, despite displayed bravado and confidence, some performers shy away from further difficult challenges or appearing on a public scoreboard once they've reached the upper tier of their domain.

A coach's role includes creating situations where teammates prepare, plan, perform, and compete against each other. But high performers must be able to come together and operate as a team when the real competition against actual competitors begins. Great coaching involves encouraging performers to compete against other, slightly better leaders, as well as the ultimate competition—a better version of themselves.

People at the top of their field must also balance creativity, perfection, and hard work. Some performers constantly search for a shortcut or unique approach to getting an edge. Some may try to incessantly perfect their craft in antiquated or less effective ways, still obsessed with those processes that first made them a star. Other hard driving performers will work themselves into the ground, counting those long hours as guarantee of a next big win just ahead.

All performers tend to favor one of the following behaviors:

1. Pioneers always seek a better way, but they do not put in the time and practice necessary to learn and perfect their approach.
2. Purists refuse to look up to see what has changed, and they are overly concerned with fine-tuning performance to the *n*th degree.
3. Plow pushers work until they drop, whether or not their approach actually works.

Under duress, all performers default to their comfort zone.

High performers who, year after year and despite changing conditions and competitors, succeed in any one arena are able to balance and shift fluidly between all three of the following behaviors:

1. They look up occasionally to see how things could be different or who is doing things differently.
2. They perfect their craft.
3. They work hard.

These behaviors define the art, science, and grit of high performance and are a high predictor of those who will always be on top of their tier.