

*Companies typically use one-size-fits-all management training programs. But Nationwide Financial has found an individualized approach to be far more effective.*

# Personalize Your Management Development



by Natalie Shope Griffin

**M**OST ORGANIZATIONS struggle with leadership development. They promote their top performers into management roles, put them through a few workshops and seminars, and then throw them to the wolves. In the Darwinian process that follows, those with the ability to survive and thrive are rewarded; those without it are disciplined or reassigned. An alarming number of people fall into the second category.

Why do so many people botch their chances at success? It's not simply that new managers lack the talent or skills for the job. They fail, I've come to believe,

because their companies' development approaches fail *them*. I've seen hundreds of leaders-in-training stumble as they attempt to master the difficult and subtle task of management. These prospective managers fall short because companies don't recognize the degree to which personal characteristics, ideologies, or behaviors affect an individual's ability to lead. The truth is, people don't check their individuality at the door before leaping into the great corporate melting pot, nor do they all fit a single leader-in-training profile.

At Nationwide Financial, a 5,000-employee financial services company based

in Columbus, Ohio, we've found there are four kinds of people that land in management development programs, each embodying unique challenges and opportunities. First, there are the *reluctant leaders*, who appear to have all the necessary skills to be excellent managers but can't imagine themselves succeeding in a leadership role. *Arrogant leaders* have the opposite problem; they believe they already possess all the leadership skills they'll ever need. They typically lack the empathy and humility characteristic of an effective leader. The third group of people, *unknown leaders*, have the right blend of humility, confidence, and leadership skills, but their talents are overlooked because they fail to develop relationships outside of a small circle of close colleagues. Finally, there are the *workaholics*, the most common profile among our prospective managers. These individuals have been rewarded for putting work above all else and spending excessive hours at the office. Unfortunately, workaholics often lack both the perspective and personal-ity to inspire others.

Identifying these four types of prospective managers and tailoring a specific development path for each has been a boon to Nationwide Financial. By treating potential leaders as individuals—focusing on their unique personalities and circumstances, offering effective coaching, and providing real-life management experiences—Nationwide's leadership development program produced scores of effective managers during a time of rapid growth and expansion when the company needed leadership most.

### Responding to the Pipeline Problem

In 1996, the leaders of Nationwide Financial's life insurance operations declared a state of management emergency. Organizational structures had flattened during the economic boom.

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As the remaining mid- and senior-level managers were promoted or retired, those who should have replaced them were increasingly unable to lead. Employee satisfaction fell to low levels owing to mediocre frontline management, which suffered from discontent and turnover of its own. The morale problem was exacerbated by the fact that Nationwide had been forced into the expensive practice of hiring talented managers from outside the company; employees hoping for promotion felt passed over. It was clear the company needed to develop a new generation of competent managers from within its own ranks.

To address this worrisome situation, a cross-functional team (of which I later became a member) conducted best-practice research into talent management and leadership development and set about creating a management development process. We agreed that only a rigorously managed program committed to continuous improvement would deliver the kinds of results the company hoped to see. The team opted to make application to the program a matter of choice, rather than a prerequisite for management positions; admission should be a coveted prize so that participants would work hard during the development process. To that end, the admission process mimicked that of a top business school. In addition to submitting a portfolio of documents—performance evaluations, an essay, responses to a questionnaire, a recommendation from a manager—applicants would be screened and interviewed by a team of more senior managers and HR professionals.

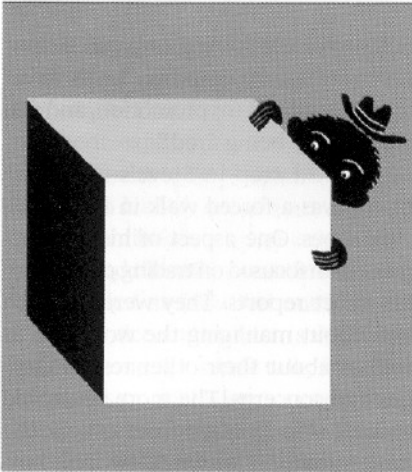
The yearlong development program included coaching, mentoring, observing others, hands-on management experience, and training classes backed up by regular feedback sessions. The development focused on the whole person, not just on individual competencies. As the first rounds of participants moved through the program, we noticed that nearly all of them fell into one of four categories. Over the past five years, we've developed specific approaches tailored to each type of prospective leader.

### The Reluctant Leader

About 20% of the participants in our program are "reluctant leaders." These employees often have the raw material to make outstanding managers, but they're sabotaged by their own lack of confidence. Their deeply ingrained insecurities manifest themselves in a variety of ways—indecisiveness, risk aversion, and the tendency to avoid conflict. To transform reluctant leaders into strong ones requires helping them change their assumptions about their own abilities, providing them with specific training in decision making and conflict management, and giving them steady doses of encouragement.

Consider Julie, a dedicated employee in our company's call center. A natural leader, she loathed the idea of being one. Though she was an able, intelligent, and compassionate team player, Julie simply didn't believe she had the right to make decisions for others. Moreover, she had worked for too many bosses who routinely took credit for her work. She had convinced herself that being a boss meant being nasty and that altering her style to fit such a mold was neither possible nor appealing. Yet because she was both nurturing and competent, her coworkers naturally turned to her for guidance and feedback. In fact, Julie was already their informal leader. When her manager asked Julie to apply for the job of call center leader and for the leadership development program, Julie reluctantly applied and was accepted to the program. Yet she continued to see herself not as a leader but as a team member who had some additional administrative duties.

It was soon clear that Julie would need to do more than be just another team member. Julie's new team of 15 call-center associates—many of whom were rumored to have been "dumped" in her area by managers who couldn't motivate them or fire them—had a reputation for consistently failing to meet quality and productivity objectives. But still Julie maintained a low profile; faced with decisions, she demurred. A comment she made in a one-on-one coach-



ing session captured her attitude perfectly: "Who am I to make these decisions? I'm not more important than the people I work with. I'll let them decide. They are adults."

In learning to become a good manager, Julie first needed to change her negative assumptions about leadership. In her case, 360-degree feedback was an excellent tool. She scored high in her ability to handle customer problems, get results, and collaborate with peers to solve problems. And people loved her; she received kudos for creating a work environment that was fun and for helping people maintain perspective, even when call volumes peaked. One person wrote: "I would follow Julie wherever she went." Still, criticism followed praise: "I only wish she had enough confidence in her ability to just make decisions and take the lead." Julie was taken aback by the comments: She realized that she was already the empathetic leader she herself had craved, but she also learned that she was a long way from reaching her potential. Sharing the feedback she'd received with her team, Julie explained why she had been reluctant to make decisions. She then solicited the group's expectations of her and outlined her aspirations for them.

To help Julie become more comfortable making decisions and managing conflicts, a mentor created a series of hypothetical problems for her to handle. During coaching sessions, we asked Julie to make and justify decisions about everyday call-center dilemmas. A sample problem went something like this:

"A customer calls to complain because he hasn't received the money he requested be withdrawn from his account. You discover that the money was mistakenly wired to another customer's account. The amount is significant, and your boss has been encouraging everyone to find a way to serve the customer

**Reluctant leaders have the skills to be excellent managers but can't imagine themselves succeeding in a leadership role.**

without losing money. Do you send the money back to the caller with an apology immediately, or do you try to get the money back from the other customer first?" Julie had to ask herself, "Which has a worse effect on Nationwide's bottom line—the cost of the reimbursement or the cost of going through a collection agency to try to recover the funds?" She chose to reimburse the customer—and when her mentor told her that he would have made the same decision, she felt affirmed in her judgment. The mentor added that it costs Nationwide more to bring in a new customer than to keep an existing one, so you want to nurture those relationships. As Julie became practiced at thinking through managerial decisions in a safe environment, she gradually learned to trust her own thought processes, knowledge of the business, and ability to make good decisions on the spot.

Teaching Julie to manage conflict required a more forceful combination of coaching and hands-on experience. In one instance, an employee felt that a colleague wasn't carrying his weight. Resentful, the employee refused to take up the slack on days when her coworker was away from the office, which placed an additional burden on the other team members. In the past, Julie would not have tried to interfere, simply hoping that the disagreeing parties would sort things out by themselves. But during coaching, she came to understand that such infighting would seriously compromise her department's productivity. She learned how to smooth conflicts

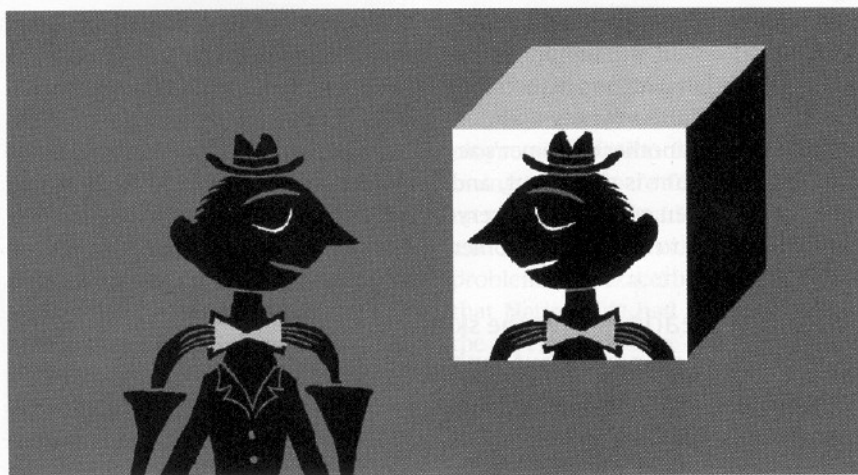
by listening to the two opposing sides, then demanding that the combatants focus on their work instead of each other. As part of her development, she was also required to meet with each associate on her team to discuss career goals and progress—including the sensitive subject of performance improvement, a challenge for any risk-averse manager.

Critical to Julie's transformation was an enormous amount of encouragement. During the entire development process, coaches, colleagues, bosses, and mentors were all called upon to provide her with constant, encouraging feedback. The more frequently Julie heard that she had made a good decision or had handled a conflict well, the more confident she became.

More than likely, Julie will never be overly confident, but she has learned to take a stand when necessary and to manage around her self-doubt. The team has responded by exceeding every production measure. Her natural ability to rally others won over even the most skeptical and unmotivated associates, and quality scores rose as the individuals began working as a cohesive team. Just three months after holding the expectations meeting, Julie's team doubled its productivity, lowered its absenteeism, and earned the division's top ranking for quality.

### The Arrogant Leader

Only 10% of our participants fall into this category, but they stand out the most because they can be brazen. Arrogant leaders are just as insecure as reluctant ones, but they overcompensate for their self-doubt by convincing themselves that they are already terrific managers. Because they are ambitious self-marketers, most organizations promote them without a second thought. Yet arrogant leaders can wreak havoc on their teams. Transforming such people into capable managers requires a rude awakening in the form of harsh feedback, hands-on practice in empathetic listening and teamwork, and even threats of demotion or dismissal.



**Arrogant leaders are ambitious self-marketers who rise quickly to the top. But they lack the empathy and humility common in effective leaders.**

Steve, for example, was an extremely competitive and technically competent customer-service team leader who had already been promoted to manager on the strength of his individual performance. Talented at handling difficult customers, Steve's belief in his own capabilities had been reinforced by several promotions from an entry-level position. During our first coaching session, Steve displayed overweening confidence, saying he knew he could do "any management job." In further sessions, we talked about the ways arrogance and ambition can bump a career off track, but he didn't take the hint. Rather, he noted that he'd never recommend one of his own arrogant team members for promotion. When we suggested he might have a similar attitude, he took offense, saying: "Ask anyone I work with. They love working with me. They know I am bored in this job and could do more."

Steve's confrontation with his mistaken self-image began during his 360-degree feedback session, in which he had rated himself as perfect in all categories. The feedback from others was, predictably, the opposite. Scoring low in nearly all areas and hearing that he was considered self-serving came as the first of many shocks.

Clinging to the false image of his own perfection, Steve was slower to make progress than other program participants. Like many arrogant leaders, Steve spent a lot of time laying the groundwork for his next job—scheduling numerous lunches and meetings with executives in other areas of the company—at the expense of his current one. He excused his lack of interaction with his team by saying he trusted his people. But as his team's performance began to suffer, Steve went so far as to ask one of his direct reports to exaggerate the team's production numbers.

This ethical lapse and the attendant humiliation were blessings in disguise, for they provided the breakthrough Steve needed to correct his behavior. A written warning was placed in his file. He was notified that if he didn't turn his performance around, or if he demonstrated any further lapses in judgment, he risked getting fired. During the hard-line coaching session that followed, we pointed out to Steve that his behavior, not that of his team, had led to his current situation, and he needed to take responsibility for it. Steve's self-deceptive armor finally cracked. For the first time, he admitted his fear that people would find out the truth about him—that he was unsure of himself and had no idea how to improve team performance. Steve's manager also took a hand in deconstructing Steve's lifelong assumption that being a leader meant looking good. He told Steve, "You're talented,

but you're not fooling anyone. If your behavior doesn't improve, I will never recommend you for promotion, and you may end up being fired."

The next step in Steve's metamorphosis was a forced walk in his associates' shoes. One aspect of his development plan focused on trading places with his direct reports. They were to teach him about managing the workflow, as well as about their other responsibilities and concerns. The more he proved himself able to learn from others, the more successful he would be. This hurdle was huge, for Steve's past actions had cost him the team's trust. At first, associates were reluctant to share ideas, complaints, or anything at all with him.

But as people witnessed Steve's sincere effort to change, heard his thoughtful questions, and saw him listening carefully to their answers, they began to forgive him. A self-deprecating honesty began to replace Steve's phony self-confidence. Because he finally understood that his own success depended on that of his team, he was able to laugh at himself. After graduating from the program, he continued to work extremely hard to change his arrogant habits. Though he's not perfect, Steve is now one of our best mentors—in part because he understands the value of tough love.

### The Unknown Leader

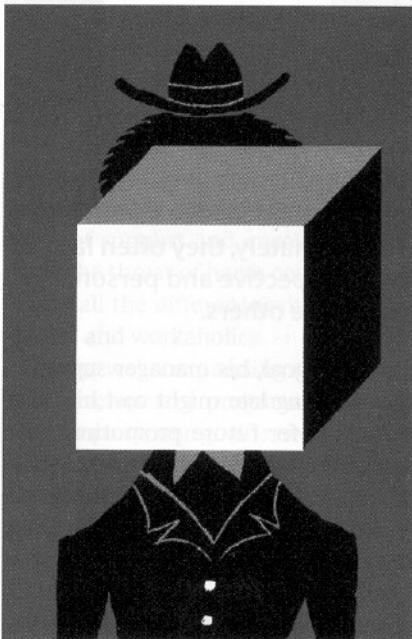
Roughly 25% of our program participants are "unknown leaders"—ambitious, highly competent, yet cautious people who form relationships more slowly and tentatively than others. Because they are often introverted, their personal networks are small and they rarely initiate conversations. People don't usually look to them for leadership, and they have little "brand recognition" in their organizations.

To transform unknown leaders into effective managers again requires 360-degree feedback, followed by careful deconstruction of their underlying belief that networking means glad-handing, and that it is a waste of time. It's also effective to force unknown leaders into meetings with new people, but, as is the

case with reluctant leaders, this requires a lot of monitoring and support. Additionally, we've found hands-on management experience in an unfamiliar environment to be helpful in bringing unknown leaders out of their shells.

A commissions analyst named John personified the unknown leader. Though he excelled at financial analysis, customer service, and problem solving, John was not one for small talk; his entire focus was on achieving his own results. His fast pace made him seem too busy to entertain questions. He smiled rarely and walked the halls with his head down. His demeanor caused some to conclude he was unapproachable or aloof. Repeatedly passed over for promotion, John was beginning to feel resentful.

His manager noted John's grumblings and suggested he enroll in the leadership development program. The initial 360-degree feedback session was telling. John received average scores and no comments from his peers, simply because no one knew much about him. During the coaching sessions that fol-



**Unknown leaders have the right blend of confidence and leadership skills, but they fail to develop relationships outside of a small circle of colleagues.**

lowed, we asked John how he expected to climb the corporate ladder if nobody knew who he was. Then we discussed his underlying assumptions. To John, quality work spoke for itself. Networking was phony, something that people with less talent had to pursue in order to get noticed. In his view, a relationship was worth having only if the other party shared common ground with him and was capable of a deep conversation. We proposed to John that his assumption that hard work alone merited promotion was outdated. To get ahead, he needed to think of himself as product in need of a brand. Like products in the marketplace, we explained, people are associated with certain characteristics: Joe is brilliant with customers; Jane is creative and innovative; Bill is a master with numbers.

John remained somewhat cynical about being compared to a little-known product, but he saw the point. He responded well to our stark questions: "What have you been doing to move your career forward? Has that been working for you? Why not? What else could you do?" Understanding that he would not get promoted if he didn't begin to network, he decided to try to change. But changing was hard. John couldn't simply flip a switch and become a sociable person. First, he needed to become more comfortable meeting and talking with new people. To this end, we required him to do what Steve had always done as a matter of course—regularly invite more senior managers to lunch. We also required John to interview his own prospective mentors.

We prepared John for these interview sessions by giving him a list of questions—"Tell me about your business?" "What was your career path?" "What do you look for when you're hiring a manager?" and so on—that we also sent to the interviewees. John was surprised to discover that he could hold serious, interesting conversations with total strangers. Like Julie, he learned that he didn't have to totally change his style. In fact, he learned that his natural ability to think analytically and drive to a deeper level in conversations impressed

others. And again like Julie, John needed ongoing encouragement, so we made sure that he heard the interviewees' positive comments about him. As these meetings became more habitual for John, he began to look forward to them. In time, he became more approachable, and as a result, his relationships with his coworkers deepened. John began to see that networking was about building authentic relationships.

Another way to bring unknown leaders out of their shells is to give them unfamiliar assignments in new environments. This forces them into close contact with other people—and out of their sphere of technical expertise. This was the case with John. He knew little about the life insurance division he was assigned to take over for a manager on temporary medical leave and was understandably apprehensive. Still, he took the opportunity to build his brand by coaching people, running meetings, overseeing projects, and dealing with problems. Early in this new role, John quickly helped the team deal with a tough customer complaint, prompting his peers to talk about his contribution and good attitude. Eventually, a buzz developed around John—and today, he's considered a top candidate for future management roles.

## The Workaholic

By far the largest number of managers in our program—fully 45%—are workaholics. Many have anxiety-driven, addictive personalities, choosing work over and above family, spiritual growth, sports, hobbies, love, or friendship. Of course, workaholism has degrees of severity: There are those people who love their jobs and work long hours without suffering negative consequences. But acute workaholics are like hamsters on a wheel, laboring relentlessly to finish endless daily tasks. Typically extroverts hooked on activity and action, severe workaholics are far more likely to suffer from burnout, stress, and the attendant physical problems—chronic fatigue, heart disease, high blood pressure, and so on. Unfortunately, most companies continue to reward workaholism.



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Our own informal research has confirmed that employees respond far more favorably to well-rounded managers with outside interests. They willingly work harder for such managers because they know that when the team is reaching its goals, their personal lives will be respected as well. Our challenge with workaholics, then, is to demonstrate that their modus operandi of working harder rather than smarter is a zero-sum game. Rather than rewarding workaholism, we try to punish it.

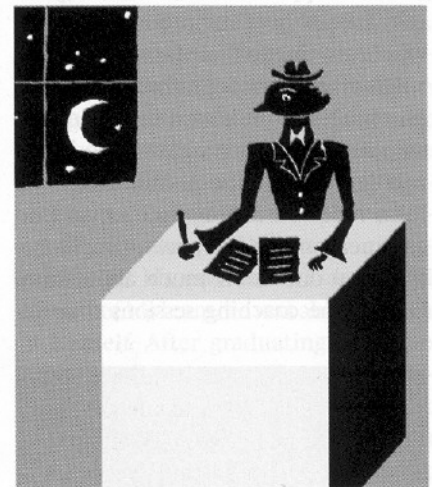
Mark, for example, was a classic workaholic. In his first job out of college, he worked 100 hours a week, and his company rewarded him with a string of raises and promotions. By the time Mark's organization was acquired by Nationwide and he came into the leadership development program, he had been a systems project manager for seven years with a track record of positive results. But he had never worked less than 90 hours a week.

During our first coaching session, Mark expressed frustration with some incorrect billing statements issued six weeks earlier. His colleagues didn't take work seriously, he said. He'd lost touch with friends. He blamed his steep weight gain on scant time for exercise. Six-week-old billing issues were his life. Deep down, Mark distrusted everyone. If making up for others' perceived irresponsibility was what was required for his own career advancement, well then, work was his life.

Because workaholics tend to focus on objective measures, 360-degree feedback is not usually an effective training tool for this type of leader. Where participants like Julie, Steve, and John saw areas where they needed to improve, the feedback merely reinforced Mark's belief that he was doing just fine by any objective measure – belying the spiritual, emotional, and physical sacrifices he'd made to become what he sadly was. So we tried another assessment model—the wheel-shaped “healthy leader” model borrowed from professional development consultant Lewis R. Timberlake, which describes the ideal manager as one who is strong in physi-

cal, emotional, spiritual, business, family, and social skills. This holistic model proved much more powerful. Having observed that he'd failed in four of the six categories, Mark responded to the kind of wake-up call Scrooge faced: What will people say about you at your funeral?

During the weeks that followed, Mark considered how he'd lost friends, happiness, perspective, and health. With his manager's help, Mark devised a development plan that required him to balance, on a weekly basis, his personal life and work demands. In particular, he was to leave work before 7 PM every day. When Mark wasn't originally able to



**Workaholics get ahead by putting work above all else. Unfortunately, they often lack the perspective and personality to inspire others.**

meet the goal, his manager suggested that working late might cost him consideration for future promotions. The suggestion was clearly absurd to Mark, but he was forced him to ask himself, “Is working so hard really worth risking my job?”


At first, Mark made an awkward attempt to delegate to others. Unaccustomed to the additional work, his associates submitted hurried and incomplete assignments – convincing Mark he'd been right all along. But rather than doing the work himself, Mark chose to talk to his team about his predicament and his attempt to “get a life,” to which

one team member responded, "Thank goodness. You're too young to be so old and grumpy."

Everyone chipped in to help Mark get his life back. They pushed him out the door before 7. They made certain he reconnected with old college buddies and played golf with them. During these golf outings, Mark's curiosity, creativity, and sense of humor rebounded. At work, he began chatting with coworkers about Ohio State football games and joking around. He started sharing more about himself and taking a genuine interest in people. He also started taking the team to lunch occasionally. He soon found he was better able to set priorities for himself and his staff members; they responded with their own ideas and redoubled energy. Not long after, Mark the golfer and Mark the football fan became Mark the well-rounded senior manager.

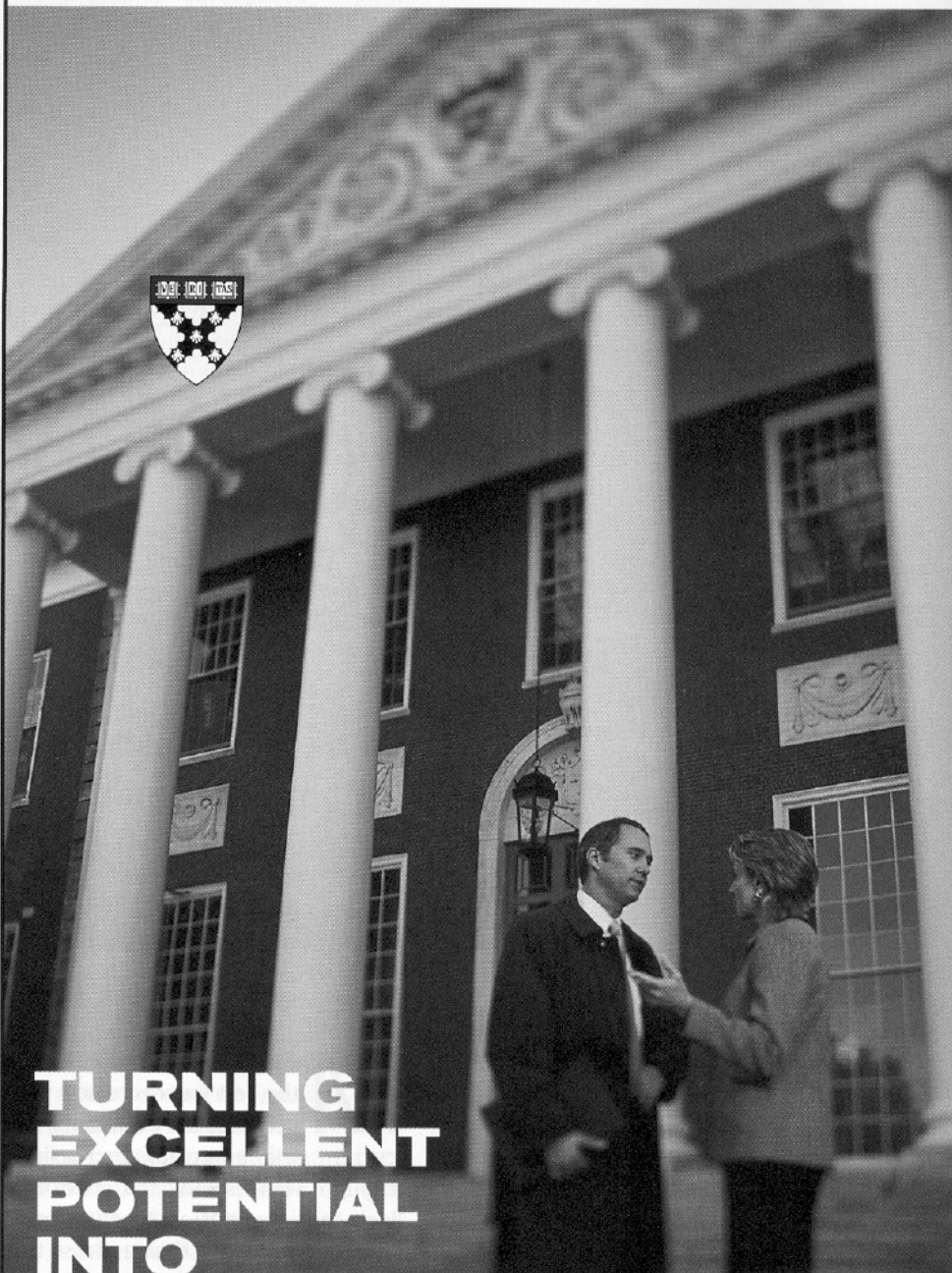
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In the process of working with the four types of managers, we've learned something about the efficacy of the various development methods we apply. We believe that had we not developed a tailored approach, we would be setting up our managers for failure. While one type of person responds very well to one form of "treatment," the same approach backfires with someone else. Reluctant and unknown leaders require extra doses of support and encouragement, while the threat of harsh consequences makes all the difference with arrogant leaders and workaholics.

Today, we're expanding our leadership development program to the entire company; our goal is eventually to work with all managers in the organization. We have created a process that is turning out leaders that understand how to engage employees, no matter what position they hold in the company, to accomplish great things. Nationwide's culture is becoming one that nurtures talented managers, rather than one that leaves them to struggle through a Darwinian survival game. 

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