

“I know from my own experience having Cathy Salit as a teacher that her lessons can be life-changing. This remarkable book will electrify your work and enliven your soul.”

—DANIEL H. PINK, author of *To Sell Is Human* and *Drive*

PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH

*A Radical Approach
to Success at Work*

CATHY SALIT

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Advance Praise for **PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH**

“What a delightfully captivating performance! Salit invites us all to be more than we are, to open new vistas for relating with others, and to develop our skills for creative improvisation. And what’s more, she provides us with the practical tools for achieving these ends. Given the current context of rapid organizational change, Salit’s wisdom is essential.”

—Kenneth J. Gergen, author, *The Saturated Self and Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*

“PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH is written in language that sparkles with energy, persuasion, and intelligence. Ms. Salit brings her theater and coaching experiences to life in this book... an instruction manual for any and everyone interested in performing the person they are becoming to the very best of their abilities. I can’t think of a business, enterprise, or life situation where the fundamentals of performance as outlined in this book cannot be applied. The illustrative examples and performance exercise manual offer compelling and practical applications of the theories that underlie the benefits and effects of using ‘performance’ to improve one’s performance. And, as a client, I can attest to the effectiveness of the principles that Ms. Salit outlines. This is a book that I will often refer to and reread, and recommend to everyone.”

—Sharon Krumm, PhD, RN, and director of nursing/
administrator, Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive
Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins Hospital

“What a brave new contribution to leadership thinking! Cathy has a rare ability to completely shift people’s view of themselves and their teams, with a masterful touch and a twinkle in her eye. Her work is transformative, and this book captures more than twenty years of experience in a way that is witty, often heart-wrenching, and always practical—teaching us to explore our human potential by seeing through the lens of a director on the ‘stage of life.’”

—Tom Andrews, president, SY Partners

“Cathy Salit’s PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH breathes life into the tired buzzwords taking over business, education, and social science writing. Here’s a book without hype! Bravo! Salit has managed to share not merely her extraordinary successful workplace practice but as well its underpinnings in the theoretical ‘breakthrough’ of performance as a new ontology. Bravo redux!”

—Lois Holzman, Vygotskian scholar, and co-author,
The End of Knowing

“Performing on the athletic stage is something everyone understands. Cathy Salit surprises us all with her innovative approach and practice about performing every day—off the field of play. She and her team have helped to grow the teamwork and collaboration of our U.S. Olympic athletes, as well as my track-and-field athletes at the University of Maryland. PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH shows us how to harness the power and techniques of performance into achieving our goals in all aspects of life, work, and play. I’m a believer! You will be, too, once you read her book.”

—Andrew Valmon, two-time Olympic gold medalist, and
United States head track-and-field coach,
2012 London Olympics

“In a book as energizing as she is, Cathy Salit captures her unique method of learning by connecting what, for many of us, are the exotic concepts of theater with the familiarity of everyday work life. She shows us how to step out of our comfort zones and ‘perform’ each scene in the office—and life—in new and exceptional ways.”

—Linda Tepedino, former VP of
human resources, *Consumer Reports*, and
HR and leadership consultant

“Every CEO—indeed every leader—should read and apply PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH to their business. I will personally be handing out copies of this elegant, powerful book to every leader I know. Wow!”

—Phil Terry, founder and CEO, Collaborative Gain

“Salit and her performance approach is a breakthrough, indeed. She has broken through with new thinking and practices to help business professionals grow and navigate the workplace. In PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH, Salit shares her powerful learning method that overcomes the divide between art and science, cognition and emotion, work and play. Get ready for a journey that is sure to shake and wake you up.”

—Judy Rosenblum, former chief learning officer, Coca-Cola, and former president, Duke Corporate Education

PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGH

*A Radical Approach
to Success at Work*

CATHY SALIT

Illustrations by Drew Dernavich

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BOOKS

NEW YORK BOSTON

This book is a compilation of real case studies and stories, featuring real people from real companies my team and I at Performance of a Lifetime have worked with over the past twenty years. Throughout, I've changed names and in some cases created composites to protect the privacy of our clients. The resulting stories reflect both the wide range of industries and the diversity of the people and teams we work with.

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All illustrations by Drew Dernavich

Hachette Books

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

www.HachetteBookGroup.com

Printed in the United States of America

RRD-C

First Edition: April 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Hachette Books is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBNs: 978-0-316-38248-9 (hardcover), 978-0-316-39504-5 (int'l)

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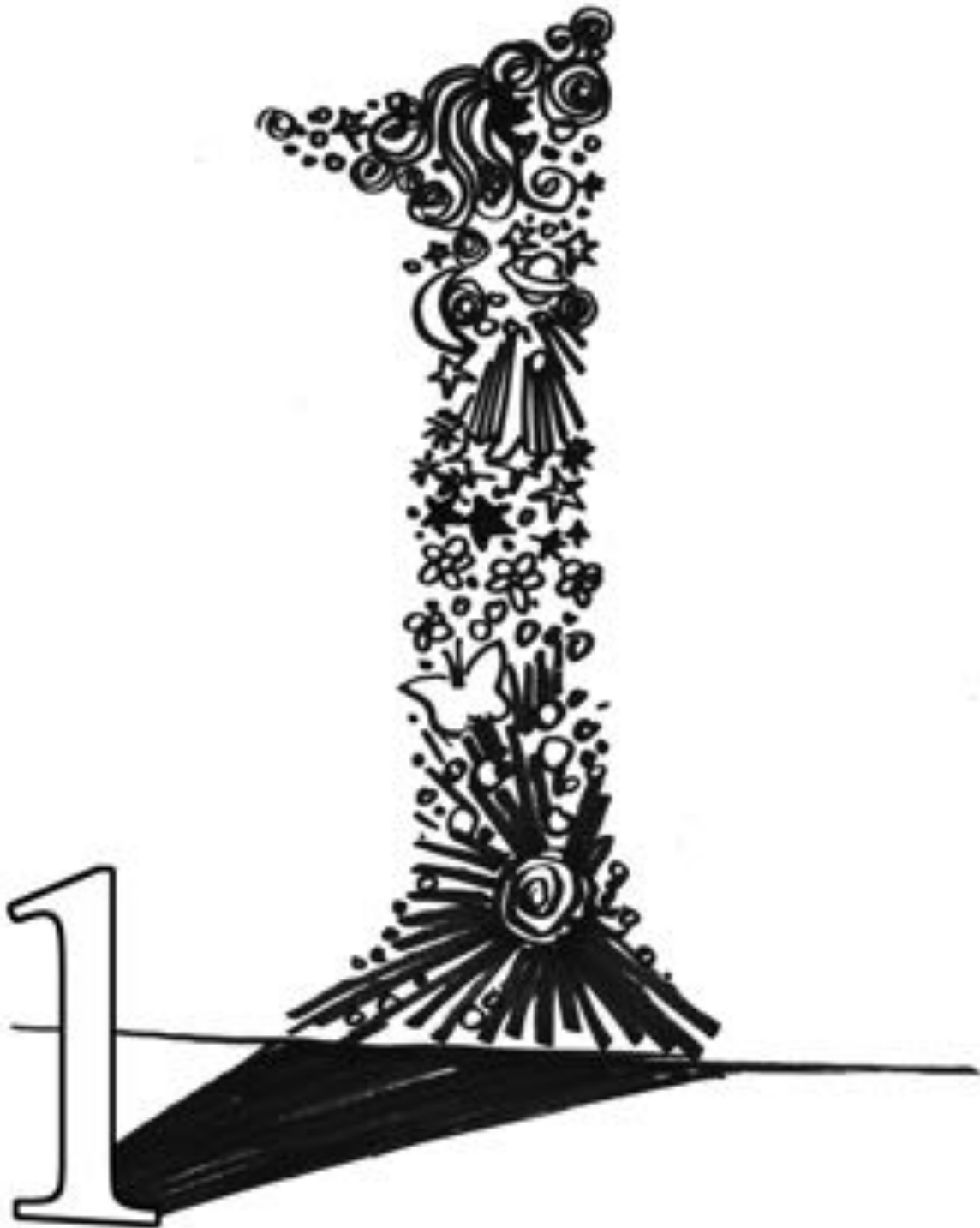
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Who You Are and Who You Are Not

I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order
that I may learn to do it.

—Pablo Picasso

Henry is seven and got his big-boy birthday bike almost two months ago. But with training wheels, he doesn't feel like a big boy riding it. He sees the other kids on their bikes—smooth and graceful and so grown-up—and wonders what it feels like.

Today he's going to find out, because Mom took the training wheels off. He knows he should be excited, but he's not. He's terrified. How is he supposed to stay up? He doesn't know how to do it. He should never have asked for this, he's not really a big boy, he's made a terrible mistake.

Mom says to get on the bike; that she'll hold on until he gets going. Never, he thinks.

They start down the driveway, and Mom reminds him to pedal. He does, and he feels the bike move a little under his power. He pedals harder and pretends he's one of the big kids on their smooth two-wheelers. Mom's running beside him, and he pretends he's in a race with her. He pretends he's in the Tour de France.

By the time he realizes it, Mom has been standing still for fifteen seconds, and he's riding. Henry's a bicyclist.

Cindy is thirty-two and just celebrated her third anniversary with the firm. She's happy there and has done very well, but her boss wants more. She has great ideas, he says, but nobody ever hears them. Why doesn't she speak up in meetings? Because I'd sooner throw myself into a volcano, she thinks. He says he wants her to open next Tuesday's all-hands meeting. She says it's not possible—that she'll panic, forget her words, say something stupid, say

nothing. She never says anything. He says he understands, and he wants her to open the meeting by telling a joke. She doesn't reply. He says he'll help, that she should find a joke, and he'll help her get ready.

She goes home, asks her husband for some jokes. A couple of days later in the conference room, her boss listens to her tell one of them. He asks her to do it again, pretend to be Ellen DeGeneres, dance around a little first. She does, and this time he cracks up. She starts to do it again, and he stops her. "Save some for the show," he says.

The what?

She arrives for Tuesday's 9 a.m. meeting at 7:15 and sits in the Starbucks across the street from the office silently muttering her joke. By 9 she's next to her boss in the conference room. He welcomes the team and turns to her. She stands, takes a breath, looks around the room. Takes another breath. And tells the joke.

Then everybody laughs. For a long time. Somebody starts to clap, and then they all do.

Her boss thanks her. He starts to speak. She doesn't sit down. He looks at her. "I have another joke," she says.

When we get up on that bicycle seat for the first time, we don't know how to ride the contraption. In order to learn how, we have to pretend that we do. It's a performance of sorts: Like Henry, we perform as a bicyclist before we are a bicyclist. And by doing so, we become bicycle riders. Millions of people the world over have done this. As adults, when we have a new challenge, when we are being called upon to do something we've never done before, when we need to grow beyond our current capabilities, like Cindy, we can perform our way there. But also like Cindy, many of us are afraid to try.

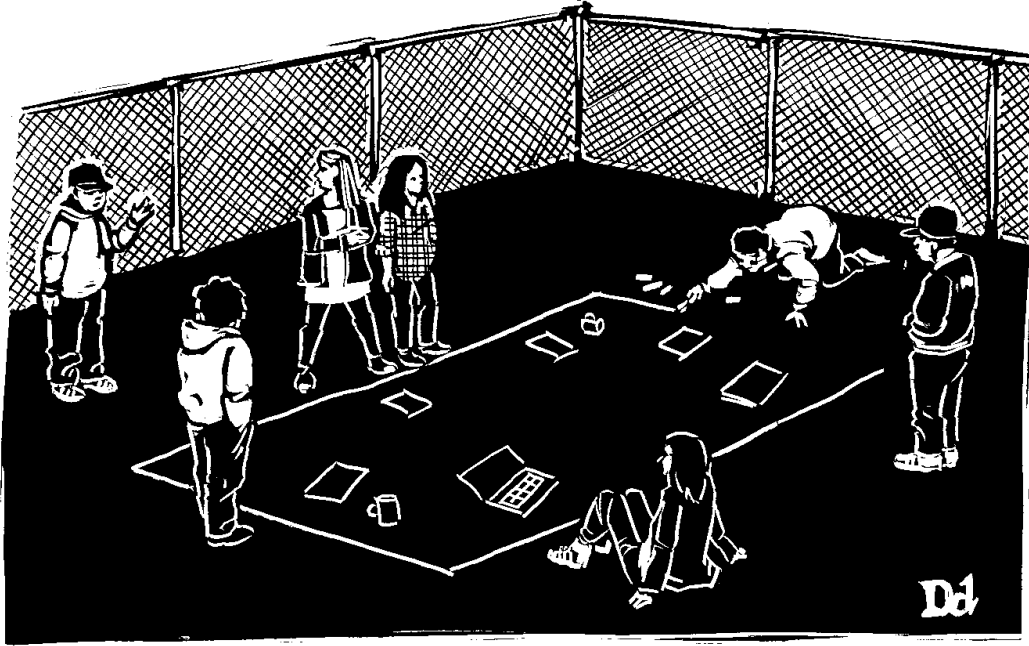
And that's a shame, resulting in a huge waste of human potential. But it doesn't have to be that way. There's a method for learning to grow, learning how to take on challenges that seem far beyond us, that's rooted in what Henry did—and what you probably did the first time you rode a bicycle. With the encouragement of a caring bystander, you pretended you knew how to ride that bicycle. You performed as a bicycle rider until you became a bicycle rider. Henry (and Cindy) and you... performed as who you were and who you were not, at the same time.

Baby Talk

At one time, you were *explicitly* who you were and who you were not. You may not remember it very well because you were a baby, but here's how it worked: Babies talk baby talk. *Goo goo, ga ga*. Babies do this hour after hour, day after day, month after month. Nearby adults—parents, grandparents, babysitters—respond. They say, “Okay, cute-illy patoot-illy, I’ll go get your bottle!” And, “Sure, honey bunny, that’s the moon!” And, “Yes, sweetie, that’s a bowwow!” Millions of these “conversations” are going on right now, all over the world. And I guarantee you, not one of those millions of adults is turning to the baby and saying, “Listen, kid, I can’t understand a word you’re saying. Here’s a dictionary—learn some language and then we’ll talk.” No, the adult and the baby are creating a performance. And the adult is relating to the child as both who she is and who she is not—but is becoming. She *is* a baby with no language; she is *becoming* the person who one day will speak words, talk torrents, and maybe even become a CEO. We relate to babies unconditionally as who they are and who they are *not yet*, and in that way we create one of the most successful—if not *the* most successful—performances that people do all over the world and every day of every year: becoming a language user.

And it doesn’t stop there. Think back to when you were a kid or about the young children in your life. When second graders run out to the playground at recess, within minutes they’re playing characters. They’re acting out Mommy and Daddy or the creatures in their favorite cartoons. They have superpowers, funny voices, and in their play, anything is possible. When recess is over, no seven-year-old has ever turned to another and asked, “Was I convincing as Superman?” There’s no getting it right or getting it wrong—there’s just the natural way that we human beings express our imaginations, by being who we are and who we aren’t, and we get a lot of encouragement from the adults in our lives to perform in this way.

I didn’t make up this idea of being who we are and who we are becoming. Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, formed a theory in the 1920s and ’30s around children’s language and play that has been very influential to us at POAL and to many schools of psychology and education that believe in the importance of play for healthy development and good learning. Vygotsky’s short life (he died at age thirty-seven) overlapped



"I got next game as CEO."

with those of psychology greats Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget, whose theories have dominated modern psychology. Vygotsky's work laid the groundwork for a different kind of psychology but, suppressed by Soviet rule, it was virtually unknown there, or anywhere, until the 1960s.

Vygotsky believed that humans, being essentially social animals, achieved growth by engaging in group activity with other humans (e.g., all that goo-goo-ga-ga talk that we grown-ups respond to as if it makes perfect sense) rather than through an individual, internal process driven by our responses to external stimuli. We don't, according to Vygotsky, grow, change, evolve, and transform by having things happen *to us*; we *create* growth, change, and personal evolution ourselves by engaging in our culture's activities *with those around us*. Rather than learning and growth happening individually and as an internal process, human beings learn and grow through and with others.

Vygotsky's brilliant work and study didn't extend beyond childhood. But a new crop of psychologists and educators have taken his work further to include adult learning and development, and today the research and study of how play, performance, and development are related is a burgeoning field sometimes called performative psychology, of which Vygotsky and Performance of a Lifetime are a part.

Welcome to Adulthood

Eventually the encouragement we received as children—as well as most of our performing—dissipates. There's that point in most of our lives when we go from being praised for trying something new (even if we didn't get it right) to being told we didn't get it right (even though we were trying something new). Maybe we bring home a drawing and expect it to be proudly displayed on the refrigerator. But instead of the “ooh” and “aah” we're used to, our parents say, “That's not a horse! A horse doesn't have toes!” Maybe we go from loving soccer to not being good enough to join the team. Or we get told that if we keep making that face, it'll freeze that way.

People stop growing and developing precisely because they no longer take part in the kinds of performances that encourage them to be—in Vygotsky's words—“a head taller” than they are. In environments that expect adults to do only what they already know how to do (as well as environments that demand that we do what we don't know how to do and provide no way to learn it), we are not likely to take risks to perform as other than who we think we are. Instead, we tend to repeat our well-learned patterns and passively play out the roles we have already learned and are comfortable with.

We play it safe because more and more we get the message: Color inside the lines; know the correct answer; understand how to behave and fit into society. And a lot of that's pretty important—we need to learn how to safely cross the street, tie our shoes, calculate a tip, and about a billion other things. But as we grow into adults, this need to *get it right* eventually takes over. We put a lot of effort into it, and we get rewarded for it. We learn what we need to in school and then at our jobs. There's little support to create new performances. Getting it wrong, not knowing something, experimenting, trying something new, being silly, and making a fool of yourself are in most spheres of adulthood flat-out discouraged and usually disdained. We become expert at being who we are—as defined by ourselves and others—and in that box there's not much room for development, growth, or testing out new waters.

On top of these definitions, throughout our careers we are often given tests to help us (and our employers) specify, identify, and narrow even further who we are. From Myers-Briggs to Wonderlic, these

instruments can provide many interesting insights. But when insight becomes definition—if you're an ESTP, you're a Doer; if you're an INTP, you're a Thinker (because everyone knows you can't be a Thinker and a Doer)—we start acting more like this tiny collection of letters we've been assigned. These definitions are antithetical to change, to growth, to transformation, to becoming who we are not... yet.

The fact is, we can all grow and develop as adults. That is, we can reinitiate the kind of creative learning and development experiences and abilities we had as children so that we can perform in new ways, do new things, and break out of habitual scripts that are holding us and our organizations back. We are in plays of our own making, as well as in the plays of others. As performers in life and work, we can impact these plays in a rich variety of ways. We can exercise our human ability to change our performances.

We call this approach The Becoming Principle™, and it's an unusual blending of theater and improvisation, together with breakthroughs in the human development sciences, that makes it possible for individuals, teams, and companies to learn, grow, and develop and do things before they know how. Sometimes that means becoming what and who you want to be. Sometimes it means discovering a way to be that would never have occurred to you.

The Becoming Principle in Action

Let's take a common workplace challenge: improving interpersonal and relationship building skills. It's critical to any role, from the C-suite to the factory floor, from leadership and teaming to sales and customer service. It's also a lot like the challenge we all faced as babies when we were learning to speak—just as the dictionary wouldn't have been much help to us then, a cognitive approach to better interpersonal skills falls short now, and in a very important way. It's simply not possible to think and analyze your way into the social activity of relationships. To get better at them, you have to *perform* them, *with others*.

So when a global electronics company asked us to work on this skill with their highest-potential leaders, we introduced a set of performance experiences that are at the heart of building relationships. Here's one example: Two people face each other. Their job is to mirror each oth-

er's movements simultaneously—in complete silence. When one slowly moves his arm or tilts his head, the other has to perform as the mirror and move in exactly the same way, at exactly the same time. It's much easier said than done, and, at first, there is usually a big gap between the movement of one person and the other.

But by practicing this exercise for even a few minutes, people start to learn to perform a relationship in a new way. If one of the pair isn't able to follow the other, who is responsible? People in leadership or sales roles immediately grasp that they need to notice whether they are making it possible for someone to follow them, to collaborate, to connect; that it is not the follower's responsibility to "catch up" and get with the program. In the exercise, with a little bit of coaching and practice, they learn to slow down and focus on the other. They see/feel/experience what it means to be in sync with their colleagues or customers. That way of performing is learned and remembered in their bodies, not memorized from a list of do's and don'ts.

Here's another example of the Becoming Principle in a difficult, high-stress situation: Imagine you are the nursing supervisor at a world-renowned cancer center. You're part of a hopeful organization, developing and administering cutting-edge treatments not available elsewhere. Your nurses are dedicated to their jobs, working long hours caring for (and becoming attached to) their patients. But as with oncology units everywhere, they burn out and quit their jobs more quickly than any other type of nurse. The pain of repeated death can be too much to bear. Can you help them learn to bounce back more easily and be nourished by their work?

When the director of oncology nursing at a major hospital brought us in to work with her 250 nurses, we got them performing right away. We asked them to perform scenes of their work in brief improvised skits together: talking to a nineteen-year-old patient dying of leukemia, or being a nineteen-year-old patient dying of leukemia. They were always moving performances—sad, funny, shocking, deeply personal—and always challenging to perform.

Performing onstage with and for one another allowed the nurses to see the variety of performance choices they were making. Some of these were nourishing, and some were hurtful and draining. The question we set out to answer was: What performances were needed for the nurses

to become more resilient? Together we discovered that most nurses did not know how to ask for help—from one another, at home, pretty much anywhere. By training and disposition, they know how to care for patients but not for themselves or one another. In their onstage scenes, we saw how challenging it was for a nurse to say, “I’m tired—can you help me turn this patient’s bed?” Or, “I can’t sleep. I miss my patient so much, and I’m so upset I couldn’t save him.” But by speaking these “lines” in a “rehearsal” environment, the nurses began creating a new play—with new characters, new scripts, and new ways to relate to one another. In these new performances, they were who they were (stressed out, upset, sleep-deprived) *and* who they were becoming. They learned how to ask for and to give help by performing in scenes in which they asked for and gave help. And, immediately, that new rehearsal/play began to create a support system that helped produce greater resiliency and continues to this day.

Performance can, indeed, have a profound effect on performance.

To Become or Not to Become

If performing—being who you are and who you are becoming—sounds weird, counterintuitive, and not worth the risk, think about this: In most workplaces, we can no longer thrive and grow by seeing, thinking, and acting only within the status quo or what’s “normal.” In the workplace, the marketplace, our personal lives, politics, and culture, our world continues to change and transform. Billions of words have been spoken and written about how rapid change is the new normal. To get better at navigating that change, we need to develop tools for new ways of seeing, understanding, and participating in creating that change. We can’t stand still, personally or professionally.

I once heard the Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Stanley Kunitz read from his poem “The Layers,” which ends with the line “I am not done with my changes.” He was ninety-seven when I heard him say that. Clearly, we *all* can become who we are not yet.

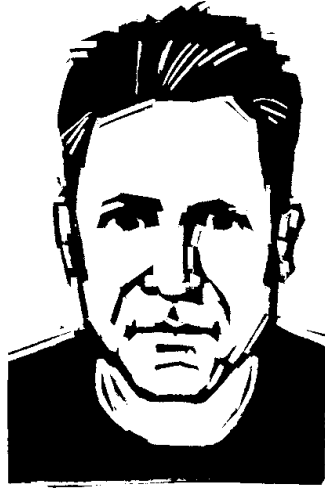
So what will your new performances (of you) be? Maybe it’s performing new ways of conducting or participating in the Thursday morning staff meeting, the sales pitch with a client, the performance review, the promotion that got you a new seat at a new table. Who (and how) will you become? There’s only one way to find out: Let’s get onstage.

About the Author



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About Performance of a Lifetime



Performance of a Lifetime (POAL) is a consulting firm that helps leaders, teams, and organizations grow their business by focusing on the human side of strategy. Using the art and science of performance, we help leaders close the gap between the status quo and their desired future. Our team of coaches and human development experts leverage our proprietary method, The Becoming Principle™, to engage leaders and entire organizations in discovering, creating, and acting on new and uncharted possibilities. Our services include organizational change solutions, custom leadership development programs, professional development workshops, and individual and team coaching.

POAL is headquartered in New York City with teams across the globe. Our clients include Nike, DIRECTV, News Corp, Chanel, American Express, PwC, Rolls-Royce, Coca-Cola, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Grey Group and Bank of America. Our work has been featured in best-selling author Daniel Pink's *To Sell Is Human* and on the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek*, *Wired*, and *Fast Company*.

Learn more at www.performanceofalifetime.com.