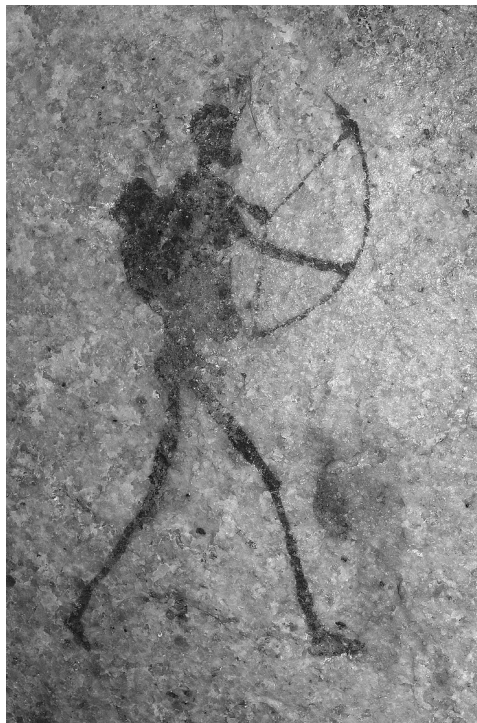


CHAPTER 5

**SOCIAL APPETITE #2:
THE COMPETENCY
APPETITE**

*How to Develop a Workplace Populated
with Confident Experts*



INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPETENCY APPETITE

The cooperation appetite described in Chapter 4 ensures that human beings work together as highly coordinated teams. The competency appetite, the subject of this chapter, plays an equally vital survival role—it makes sure that we master the survival skills (technology) of our group.

Unlike instinct-driven animals, human beings must master difficult and complex skills in order to survive. This is why we are equipped with a powerful competency appetite that rewards mastery and punishes incompetence.

The basic idea behind the competency appetite is quite simple—if we master the survival skills of our group, our self-esteem ratchets upward and we feel more capable and confident. If we fail to master the necessary skills and acquire the necessary survival assets, our self-esteem ratchets downward, and we feel incompetent.

The competency appetite is vitally important for creating a high-performance workplace because it motivates hard work, persistence, mastery, and pride in one's profession. Our goal in this chapter is to activate the competency appetite and thereby create a workplace filled with confident and skilled experts.

Without the competency appetite, human beings would lose their ability to act with a shared purpose and a shared technology and would cease to be human beings at all. Without the competency appetite, we would all resemble Dr. Damasio's lazy and unfocused patient, Elliot, described in Chapter 3, who didn't care about his career or what others thought of him. The competency appetite needs to be thoroughly disassembled because it is just as subtle and inscrutable as the cooperation appetite described in Chapter 4.¹

SEROTONIN AND THE COMPETENCY APPETITE

The competency appetite, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is partly regulated by the neurotransmitter serotonin and serotonin 2 receptors in the ventromedial prefrontal lobes and the amygdala. When our skills match the

consensus expectations of the tribe (the target), serotonin is released in the ventromedial prefrontal lobes, which causes us to experience high self-esteem. Antidepressant drugs, like Prozac, operate by increasing the concentration of serotonin in the brain's synapses artificially. Prozac creates a false sense of competency by making people feel like they are competent, even if they aren't.

Peter Kramer, in his best-selling book, *Listening to Prozac*, agonized over Prozac's ability to create a false sense of competency.² He was disturbed by the drug's reach—its ability to fundamentally alter personality and life priorities. I think his concern was justified because the drug interferes with nature's vital cultural autopilot—the competency appetite.

PROGRAMMING THE COMPETENCY APPETITE

The competency appetite, as I already mentioned in Chapter 3, is programmable via the group consensus. The group determines which skills are valuable and worth acquiring, and which are not. This powerful social appetite imparts emotional bite to group edicts and allows the group to sculpt ridges and valleys into the emotional landscape and to thereby channel human behavior in socially desirable directions (think back to our discussion of emotional physics in Chapter 3). Without this crucial appetite, we (the marbles) would be entirely at the mercy of our basic biological drives because group priorities would lack the emotional force necessary to counteract them on the undulating emotional landscape.

The programming aspect of the competency appetite is stealthy. It seeps into us from the groups we affiliate with. The term commonly used to describe this stealthy programming is “culture.” Culture, we will discover, does not just happen. It is made to happen by the competency appetite and the emotions that empower it. Once the cultural target is programmed into the competency appetite, we are forced to acquire the group's target by powerful feelings of high and low self-esteem—the most valuable denomination of emotional currency.

I hope you can appreciate the elegance of nature's design. The cul-

tural autopilot is disarmingly simple, like the thermostat in your house. The group consensus determines the set point, or target temperature, and self-esteem motivates us to reach the target by developing skills and acquiring desirable assets that promote survival (the social assets in our vault). As long as we maintain alignment with the target, we experience high self-worth and feel valuable and confident. If we move off-target, the competency appetite automatically detects a discrepancy and creates painful feelings of low self-esteem until we successfully reacquire the target by developing the missing skills or acquiring the missing assets.

The competency appetite is programmed by friends, parents, colleagues, and the media over the course of our lives. The group, in other words, determines what skills and assets are valuable and worth acquiring. Once programmed, we are emotionally guided by the competency appetite to home in on, and acquire, the targeted skills. Every human being has his or her unique target programmed by his or her unique network of friends, family, and other affiliations. We are not aware of this programming. It seeps in from the 100 or so people who are closest to us.

The target is not stationary. It shifts when we join new tribes with their own unique priorities. The target changes, for example, when we go to college, enter the workplace, or go into retirement. If we fail to keep pace with the shifting cultural target by mastering new skills, we fall out of alignment and experience low self-esteem. Staying happy requires constant adjustments to keep our skills and achievements in sync with society's ever shifting target.

I don't mean to imply that all our life goals are programmed by the group consensus, because each of us has our own, personal, idiosyncratic goals and values as well. These personal goals and values do not contribute to self-esteem, however, until they are applauded by our group.

Peer Pressure and the Competency Appetite

It is scary to think that the groups we affiliate with subliminally program our values and priorities and influence our life course. We recognize this consensus-driven mechanism in our children and call it "peer pressure." I've seen peer pressure in action with my son, Christopher. Several years

ago I tried to interest Christopher in football so I'd have someone to play catch with. He, unfortunately, had no interest. Shortly after he entered sixth grade, however, Christopher walked into my office and asked me to throw the football with him. When I inquired about his change of heart, he explained that his classmates (school tribe) were now playing touch football at recess. From one day to the next, football went from being a chore to a socially valuable skill worth mastering. My son began pestering me to throw the football with him. Such is the ability of the group to define value and influence behavior.

Human beings are driven by the group consensus but we are loath to admit it. We use the term *peer pressure* to describe the power of the group consensus in our naïve children, but we fail to recognize the same mechanism operating pervasively in the adult world. The programming aspect of the cultural autopilot, as I mentioned earlier, is wickedly subtle.

The Competency Appetite as the Mechanism of Culture

Modern cultures are so complex that it hurts to even contemplate them. In addition, our native culture is such an integral part of our worldview and it colors our sense of reality so thoroughly that it is hard to think about it as something separate from reality. To understand the true nature of culture we need to simplify the discussion by considering a small group of human beings, with a common set of priorities, struggling to survive in the wilderness—which was precisely the sort of environment where the competency appetite evolved.

The following scenario illustrates how the competency appetite provides the emotional underpinning that makes culture possible in the first place. Imagine a tribe in the Kalahari that suddenly faces an environmental challenge, a drought. Finding water becomes a priority. Tribe members who figure out innovative ways for obtaining life-giving water, say by observing where certain plants grow and by developing tools for digging deep into the earth, become respected water-finding authorities who are applauded by the tribe. The innovators set a performance standard, or target, for the tribe because the brain has a sophisticated consensus-detector that stamps applauded skills as valuable. The members of the

tribe who do not possess the new skills experience low self-esteem and a desire to acquire the new skills (the target) to restore their positive self-regard. Everyone emulates the skills of the innovators in order to reestablish their former level of self-esteem—to reestablish social homeostasis.

Now let's imagine that the tribe is attacked. Suddenly, weapon-making and fighting skills become the priority. The competency appetite then steers everyone to develop fighting and weapon-making skills. The entire skill-acquisition process is motivated by a desire to acquire and maintain high self-esteem and avoid low self-esteem. The competency appetite is the mechanism that forces tribal communities to master the business of survival—to become survival experts. I hope you agree that the competency appetite makes perfect survival sense.

Why Put the Group in Charge of Programming?

Readers may balk at the notion that they are programmed by external forces; however, the logic in favor of external programming is irrefutable. If individuals could create their own cultural programming, they could cheat the system. If I had control of my own competency appetite, for example, I could program in “idleness” as valuable. My competency appetite would then detect my idleness and reward me with feelings of high self-esteem. If I had control of the programming, I could reward myself with maximum pleasure for the least expenditure of effort. This would violate the idea that human behavior makes survival sense. Self-programming would make me happy but extinct. It is not an option.

We don't need to look far to see what happens when human beings are allowed to dispense pleasure for themselves. Drug addicts do precisely this. Cocaine and methamphetamine addicts, for example, give themselves dopamine highs that nature intended for rewarding achievement (skill deployment). The phenomenon of drug addiction vividly illustrates what happens when individuals are put in charge of rewarding themselves—namely, they cheat and give themselves undeserved rewards. This is why nature put the group in charge of setting the bar (the target) and defining which behaviors are valuable and which are not. Putting the group in charge of value creation has other important benefits, such as

getting everyone moving in the same direction with a standardized technology.

The Wisdom of Crowds

There are other reasons for putting the group in charge of programming. Recent research indicates that a group will generally outperform individual experts in making complex decisions involving many variables and in predicting future events.³ Individual experts cannot look at a complex problem from as many angles, or draw upon as much experience when making decisions, as a group.

Las Vegas casinos use the wisdom of the group in setting odds for sporting events. They begin with the opinion of expert oddsmakers, but then adjust these starting odds based upon the bets that are placed (the pooled opinions of the betting public). This time-tested system minimizes the casino's exposure to risk, just as the consensus of our ancestors reduced the tribe's exposure to risk and thereby made our existence possible. The stock market is another example of pooled wisdom, which is why it is so devilishly hard for managed stock funds to consistently beat index funds, which respond to the bets (wisdom) of the masses.

Corporations are now tapping into the opinions of their employees to make sales forecasts. Sales predictions are important for retail stores because they are used by the purchasing department to order inventory. Best Buy's employees routinely trounce the oracles (merchandising executives) in predicting holiday sales.⁴

A book titled *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki details many such cases of group wisdom prevailing over individual experts. One of the more interesting cases involved *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, the television trivia show where the questions become progressively more difficult. If a contestant doesn't know the answer to a particular question, he or she can request a lifeline—a phone call to a knowledgeable friend or a poll of the studio audience. Friends have been correct 65 percent of the time, while the studio audience has been correct 91 percent of the time. If we assume that contestants typically phone their most intelligent and knowledgeable friends for help, Surowiecki argues that *Millionaire* is a good example of the wisdom of the crowd beating individual experts.⁵

Now let's think back to the Ice Age, when tribes needed to make life or death decisions all the time. Which tribes were more likely to survive, the ones who got the answer right 65 percent of the time by listening to individual experts, or the tribes that polled the group and then acted based upon the group consensus? I think you can see the advantages of a consensus-based brain.

The power and wisdom of the group is generally ignored in corporate America. Decisions are made by experts with advanced degrees without consulting the troops on the ground. Me-based managers and executives are not consensus leaders chosen by the tribe. They therefore lack the ability to influence the group's goals and define the group's priorities because their plans have not been blessed by the group and therefore lack emotional value. Self-centered managers rely, instead, on rules, regulations, and the coercive use of authority to get things done.

Managers can ignite the power of the group consensus by committing to their employees and creating a bonded work group with a true tribal dynamic, as discussed in Chapter 4. The group consensus will then organically define values and goals and set standards of behavior. Members of such a work group will automatically feel bad (experience low self-esteem) if they do not acquire the skills and achieve the goals that serve the group's survival. This is how human beings are designed to function—automatically and organically without a thick policy manual and cadre of overseers.

THE PENALTY FOR NOT HITTING THE TARGET

If we accept the idea that the competency appetite is programmed by the group consensus, then what happens if we consistently miss the consensus target by failing to develop the requisite skills?

Human beings are skill-based creatures. If we are not competent in the survival skills of the tribe, then we are dead. Competency, as I mentioned before, is a necessity for our species. Perhaps this is the role of depression—to make us feel incompetent and worthless if we are worthless in the eyes of the tribe. Competency-driven depression, I believe, is

nature's version of tough love. It is the penalty imposed by nature for ignoring the survival priorities of the group.

Nature's uncompromising message is, "You must belong to a tribe and you must master its skills if you want to feel valuable and valued." Anything else would not make survival sense. Managers provide a valuable public service when they help employees develop skills and thereby feel capable and confident. On the flip side, me-based managers starve the competency appetite and can push their employees toward the brink of mental illness.

That said, I think there are two basic types of competency-related depression. One type has a message—clean up your act and master the survival skills of your group. This type of tough-love pain is an integral part of the competency appetite. Without it, the competency appetite would lack the emotional bite to regulate behavior. The other type of depression is more like a disease caused by the complexity of modern societies—a programming error that jams the cultural autopilot.

Depression is characterized by social retreat and endless rumination over past and present failures. Social retreat is a hiding behavior motivated by a sense of worthlessness and shame. I suspect that this retreat is a form of self-preservation. It protects the depressed individual's remaining social assets from destruction by failure and social rebuke.

When someone is depressed, the competency appetite floods the mind with images of past and present failures in order to focus the attention of the conscious mind on the problem. The message is simple and clear—corrective action is needed.

High achievers are often motivated by nature's version of tough love. Michael Jordan failed to make the varsity basketball team in high school two years in a row. This was a humiliating defeat for Jordan because skill at basketball was important to his tribe. Jordan dug deep and practiced hard to get the low self-esteem monkey off his back. The rest is history.

Each of us has suffered defeats and festering wounds, thanks to the competency appetite. The good news is that acquiring the missing skills or assets can heal these wounds. I once thought I couldn't learn a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is easy for children, but difficult for adults. I persisted, however, and I am now fluent in German. I subsequently went on a ski vacation to Austria where I met my wife, Britta,

who is German. I now have a home in Germany and a home in the United States. My life is immensely richer because I faced, and healed, my foreign-language wound.

I was also once afraid of public speaking. When I taught geology classes at the University of Wisconsin, however, I decided that teaching my students was simply too important to let fear get in the way. I decided not to be afraid, and, surprisingly, I wasn't. I quickly developed into a confident and competent speaker after this experience. These two anecdotes illustrate how skill deficits that once dragged on my self-esteem now buoy it. If it were not for the competency appetite, and its painful and persistent reminders, my life path would have been completely different, probably for the worse.

Depression Caused by Programming Errors

The competency appetite works best within the context of small groups with a single value system. What happens when a guidance system designed for small, coherent groups is suddenly placed into the modern context populated by a smorgasbord of groups with indistinct boundaries? Modern humans can belong to a bewildering array of groups, all of which compete to program the set point or target of the competency appetite. In modern societies there are multiple captains fighting to program nature's autopilot: family, spouse, country clubs, service clubs, church groups, peer groups, work groups, sports groups, friends, school groups, and so forth. In such an environment, the competency appetite may be unable to parse a coherent target from all the conflicting cultural noise.

If there are multiple captains programming the autopilot, what happens if they simultaneously punch in different targets? Consider, for example, the following situation involving a teenager. The teen's peer group may applaud drug taking and binge drinking, while the adolescent's parents applaud abstinence. The teen is faced with an emotional no-win scenario. No matter what he or she does, he or she will be punished by the competency appetite and suffer a reduction in self-esteem. No matter what the teen does, he or she will hit one target, resulting in higher self-esteem, and will miss the other target, resulting in shame and painful and persistent wounds to the psyche.

Pain is only helpful when it is accompanied by a sense of where the problem lies. Imagine, for example, that someone sticks your finger with a pin. A reference point, your finger, accompanies the pain from the pinprick. Pain with a location, a referent, is helpful and adaptive. It tells you to pull your finger away, not your foot. Similarly, low self-esteem is helpful if it motivates the tribe to master crucial survival skills. In the modern context, however, conflicting programming signals can overwhelm the competency appetite. In this case, it can administer pain (low self-esteem), but without a clear referent for corrective action. This, I believe, is the cause of the most crippling type of depression—chronic pain with no idea of its source. This is the type of depression that can easily spiral out of control.

Here is a second type of programming error that can cause depression. Imagine a situation where parents do not program a child's autopilot. In this instance, the default programming entity might become the popular media, which then program the child's mind with unachievable standards for beauty, strength, and skill, thereby condemning the child to a lifelong feeling of incompetence. In this case, the target is impossible to achieve, and competency is impossible to attain. Deviant social programming can therefore sculpt a nightmarish no-win scenario. This form of depression is not as dysfunctional as the first, because the child at least has some kind of target to shoot for.

Evolutionary psychologists refer to these types of problems as genome lag. The competency appetite evolved in an environment characterized by small, coherent groups of 150 or fewer individuals. This design is not optimal in a complex social environment composed of many competing and sometimes ill-defined groups. Hence, modern societies are stricken with epidemics of depressive illness and drug abuse.

The Epidemic of Depression Is an Opportunity for Leadership

The lifetime incidence rate for depression is around 20 percent of the population. In other words, 20 percent of us are going to become clinically depressed at some point in our lives. The incidence of depression is high and getting worse. Lewis Judd, the former chief of the U.S. National

Institute of Mental Health and chair of the psychiatry department at the University of California, San Diego, said, “I see depression as the plague of the modern era.”⁶ The World Health Organization expects depression to be the second leading cause of disability after heart disease by 2020.

The epidemic of depression and related mental illnesses in Western societies is both a curse and an opportunity. It indicates a distinct shortage of both community and leadership. Leaders who can bring individuals together and weld them into a superorganism are doing them a great favor. Human beings desperately need to belong to such groups. If the consensus leader also has a vision for a better future and projects clear and powerful values and goals, then he or she provides the target that human beings desperately need to achieve homeostasis and self-esteem. Such leaders create a bright beacon within the cultural fog and thereby provide a valuable mental health service to society. In the future, we can either medicate our population to feel competent, or we can do it the old-fashioned way—we can place them into a bonded tribal setting and encourage them to master the survival skills of the group.

Human beings need to be embedded in a group to feel valued and valuable. We need a tribe and a target to feel good about ourselves. Human beings are not inherently lazy. We are built to be creative, to be productive, and to serve the tribe. If the workplace doesn’t qualify as a committed tribe, however, nature’s autopilot is inoperable and managers are left with the default solutions for motivating human beings—money and fear and a hierarchy of overseers.

Great leaders program nature’s autopilot with confidence and boldly steer their groups in the direction of survival. Great leaders work with nature’s consensus-driven mechanism instead of against it and thereby achieve organizational greatness. Great leaders create a workplace ecosystem that is both optimally productive and mentally healthy. Leaders should go about their work resolutely and with the confidence that they are providing a tremendous public good!

PERSONAL IMPLEMENTATION

As I said before, all the social appetites operate by simple rules. If you make a few simple but challenging changes at the emotional level, you

will change the way your organization feels and hence how it performs. Our focus here is to develop a workplace full of competent experts who excel at their craft and work tirelessly to perfect it. Developing an expertise in the modern corporate context means a lifelong commitment to learning. Employees need to immerse themselves in their chosen profession and read widely to learn from other experts and stay abreast of the latest thinking.

Becoming an expert is like drawing a picture. You start out with a sketch or outline and then fill in the textures and colors, brushstroke by brushstroke, until you have a richly detailed mental image of your chosen field of expertise. When this mental image comes into clear focus, you are an expert—the go-to guy or gal inside your organization. You are the expert hunter who sets the standard of excellence for the tribe.

The motive force, or productive pleasure, I am describing how to turn on in this chapter is an energizing feeling of high self-esteem. We want to create a workplace populated with experts where employees walk tall and feel proud and confident, regardless of their function within the organization. This feeling motivates excellence and skill mastery and constitutes a major addition to the emotional paycheck that drives high performance.

Human beings desperately hunger for this feeling, and if they are unable to find it at work they will focus their energies outside of work where they can obtain it from activities like hobbies and sports. If they still can't satisfy their competency appetites, then they may satisfy it artificially with antidepressants like Prozac.

Check the Score

The obvious first step to feeding the competency appetite within your company and igniting the rewarding feelings it controls is to check the Tune-Up Metric. If the score for the competency appetite is in the positive 4 to 8 range, congratulations; your employees already feel like confident, capable, and respected experts and are already receiving substantial self-esteem bonuses on their emotional paycheck. They are ready for challenging assignments and will complete them swiftly, efficiently, and be-

yond your expectations. All you need to do is to continue to respect them as experts and praise them lavishly when they achieve the impossible.

What if the opposite is true? What if your employees have been beaten down by a succession of self-centered managers and by impersonal bureaucratic systems that make them feel powerless and incompetent? In this case, you may need to rehabilitate your employees using the suggestions presented below.

Implementation Step 1: Encourage Employees to Master Skills

The competency appetite is designed to reward human beings for putting in the months or years of hard work required to become truly adept in the survival skills of the group. Within a bonded group this process should occur naturally because human beings instinctively want to feel respected by their tribe.

If you want to give the process of skill mastery a kick start, you might encourage employees to take martial arts classes to show them what it feels like to become an expert at something. The martial arts, in my opinion, provide an excellent template for developing confident and competent experts in any field. Here are some of the elements of karate instruction that align beautifully with nature's competency appetite:

- *Is a Socially Valuable Skill.* The competency appetite motivates mastery of socially valued skills. Karate is such a skill in our culture because it is generally applauded by the greater tribe, which makes it feel valuable and desirable. When we watch a martial arts demonstration we think to ourselves, "I wish I could do that." This is an important requirement to becoming an expert at anything. You need to perceive the skill as desirable—something that will make you feel better and stronger if you possessed it. The same sort of dynamic motivates people to put in years of hard work to become a doctor, lawyer, or master craftsman. This is why every position within a company must be seen as respected and valued, otherwise why would anyone want to master it?

- *Generates Mutual Respect and Trust.* Karate instructors are not like drill sergeants. Rather, they treat students at every belt level with great respect. Instructors look for improvements to compliment more

than they look for errors to correct. If they spot an error they simply demonstrate the correct skill and politely ask the student to repeat it. Corrections are given in a calm, respectful, and friendly manner so that students come to see them as helpful suggestions rather than destructive criticism. Students also treat their instructors with respect. For example, black belts are addressed as “sir,” and when instructions are given, the entire group responds, “Yes, sir.” Students bow-in as they enter the practice floor and bow-out when they leave to show their respect for their classmates, their instructors, and the overall instruction process.

- *Requires Measurement Against Demanding Standards.* Becoming an expert is a demanding and serious pursuit. Karate instruction is based on memorizing a form for each of the nine color-coded belt levels. Each form consists of fifty, or more, choreographed blocks, kicks, and strikes. Even small deviations from the form are corrected by the instructor and the moves repeated until they are as close as possible to perfection. As a student of karate I don’t mind this strict conformance to standards. The skill would not be valuable if it were only half learned or performed in a sloppy fashion. If the need arises to use these skills in a self-defense situation, students want to be confident that they can perform the skills with speed, accuracy, and power. In a corporate setting the standards of perfection should be similarly demanding so employees not only feel like experts, but function as experts too.

- *Breaks Training in a Difficult Skill into Many Small, Doable Steps.* It takes three to five years to earn a black belt in karate—about the time it takes to earn an undergraduate degree. If you had to master the entire skill set before you got your first “attaboy” or “attagirl,” few would ever attempt it. The karate skill is therefore divided into nine belt levels and four stripe levels within each belt level, for a total of thirty-six doable increments. It is possible to move up a stripe level every two or three weeks or so, and a belt level roughly every four months. Each belt level requires a group belt test, after which the next belt in the sequence is ceremoniously presented by the instructor. This system provides a sense of continuous improvement as one’s self-esteem ratchets upward with each new belt level.

My experience in the martial arts has been rewarding. I quite literally felt stronger, and better about myself, as I advanced through the belt levels. Karate training, in my opinion, is a superb way to experience improved self-esteem, without the need for a serotonin reuptake inhibitor, like Prozac. The corporate community can learn important lessons regarding human motivation by studying this ancient art form.

Implementation Step 2: Treat Your Employees Like Experts

If a work group's competency appetite score on the Tune-Up Metric is negative, it means that employees feel painfully incompetent in the workplace. There are a number of potential reasons why employees might feel incompetent and unrespected. The most common reason has to do with the hierarchy issue discussed in Chapter 4—employees probably see themselves as denizens of the broad, lower-tier of the dominance hierarchy. Managers need to disabuse them of this notion by explaining how their job is important to the manager personally and to the survival of the enterprise in general. If managers value their employees as experts, within a short time, I suggest, they will begin feeling and acting like experts.

If your department or work group is just a small component of a large, dysfunctional hierarchy, then create a high self-esteem ecosystem within your corner of the bureaucratic machine, and let the outstanding performance of your integrated team of experts draw the attention of the managers around you. Your colleagues will begin to notice that your employees walk a little taller, procrastinate less, and get the job done faster and better than anyone else. At this point you might want to clue them in to your secret—you work harmoniously with human nature rather than against it.

I hope the importance of self-esteem and the competency appetite is becoming clear. Companies that develop high-performance cultures learn how to tap into this powerful emotional force. They know how to bond with employees, respect employees, and build their capabilities and self-esteem. The key to developing a high-performance culture is to treat every job as vital and respect every member of the tribe as an expert.

Implementation Step 3: Heal Psychic Wounds

There are many reasons why employees might feel like failures and then perform according to their low internal expectations. As I mentioned earlier, we have all failed at something or other during the course of our lives and we all have festering psychic wounds to prove it, thanks to the tough-love aspect of the competency appetite. These psychic wounds drag on our self-esteem and degrade our performance. Since you are already a trusted leader, your employees might be willing to expose their soft underbellies and describe the psychic wounds that secretly torment them.

Several years ago I mentored a friend's son after he confided in me that he felt learning disabled with regard to math. On an incompetency scale from 1 to 10, he felt like a perfect 10. I proceeded to question the boy about his supposed disability because I knew, from experience, that psychic wounds can be healed. I, too, had struggled at math, so I could empathize with him. I initially found math as dry as day-old toast. Gradually, however, I made friends with mathematics and learned to admire its power and precision. I ended up getting an undergraduate degree in engineering and performed admirably in my many math courses (As and Bs). I therefore challenged the boy's assumption that he sucked at math.

I said, "OK, perhaps you aren't that great in math, but maybe, just maybe, you don't suck quite as badly as you think you do. Maybe you are only a 9 out of 10 on the lousy scale. Maybe your brain is not congenitally miswired, but rather, you had lousy teachers who did not explain to you the power or beauty of mathematics, much less its many useful applications." I proceeded to describe my own, tortuous journey through the educational system and the good and bad math teachers I encountered along the way. By the end of our conversation, he agreed that maybe he wasn't quite as bad at math as he had assumed. He also agreed to give math another try. The boy never became a wiz at math, but he graduated from high school with decent math grades, attended college, and went on to a successful career in business.

Helping an employee heal a psychic wound is one way you can go beyond the call of duty for your employees and deepen your relationships with them. It is like pulling the thorn out of a tiger's paw, and your employees will be eternally grateful. Harry Quadracci had an inter-

esting way of healing psychic wounds at Quad/Graphics. Much of Quadracci's executive team was made up of high school graduates with little or no college education—not exactly society's image of the competent executive. Quadracci's blue-collar executives had lots of psychic wounds in need of treatment, so he pushed them beyond their comfort zones as a way of proving they were more talented, capable, and competent than they thought they were. Each assignment was an opportunity for employees to prove to their boss, and to themselves, that they were just as capable and competent as executives with MBAs. By repeatedly crashing his employees into their preconceived limitations, and proving them false, he built up the self-esteem, confidence, and skills of his workforce, and his employees thrived on it. Quadracci often described the mission of Quad/Graphics as, "Helping employees become more than they ever thought they could be."⁷ Quadracci, by removing the thorns from his tigers' paws, earned the undying loyalty and trust of the people around him. By boosting the self-esteem of his employees, Quadracci supercharged his motivational engine and reaped spectacular productivity as a result.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

The competency appetite is a marvelous leadership tool for CEOs of large organizations. In fact, it is difficult to run such organizations without it. As we already learned in this chapter, the competency appetite operates like an autopilot—a cultural targeting system that is programmed by the group consensus. Once it is programmed, the group is compelled to acquire the target by feelings of high and low self-esteem.

This magical ability to set the group's target is transferable. Talented executives can obtain targeting authority if the consensus of the tribe deems them worthy (if they are applauded by the corporate tribe). Obtaining targeting access to the cultural autopilot greatly simplifies the practice of leadership. Your life as CEO will be easier because you will not need to bully or cajole your employees into doing what you want. Rather,

you will merely need to point in the direction you want them to go and leave the rest to the competency appetite and the feelings that empower it.

I assume, in this section, that you have already implemented the suggestions in Chapter 4 and that your company has already metamorphosed into a trust-based superorganism and you are its respected consensus leader. If not, return to Chapter 4 and implement the two-step relationship-building process described there.

It is impossible to gain programming access to the cultural autopilot until you first demonstrate your skills under fire and earn the loyalty of your employees through your devotion to them. You need to be seen as the respected elder of the tribe—a celebrity of sorts—who commands the attention of the group. Once you possess this magical status you will be like Michael Jordan, everyone will want to be like you and the things you touch will feel desirable and worth acquiring. Steering the corporate ship will then become effortless because all you will need to do is point at the target and your tribe will energetically seek to acquire it.

Set the Course

Assuming that your employees view you as their consensus leader, it's then time to set a course that everyone can agree on. Peters and Waterman observed that excellent companies program a heading for the corporate ship by defining a few, primary values that are supported by a clear and stirring imagery and metaphor.⁸ Leaders must paint a picture of a better future and thereby provide a vision and shared purpose for the group. This purpose must transcend making money. It must be something your employees would volunteer to do in their spare time, even if you didn't pay them.

According to Peters and Waterman, the excellent companies they studied were rigid with respect to the direction they were sailing and expected complete employee buy-in. On the other hand, the excellent companies were loose regarding the details of running the ship. Employees could choose the duties they enjoyed most and could execute those duties creatively in any way they saw fit. Employees could choose navigation, ship maintenance, general seamanship, provisioning, and so forth,

as long as they committed to their crewmates and the overall mission. This simultaneous loose-tight organization is one of the key defining characteristics of excellent organizations, according to Peters and Waterman.⁹

Harry Quadracci had a similar loose-tight approach to leadership. Regarding vision and direction, he was tight. Quadracci fought ruthlessly to maintain total control of the overall direction of Quad/Graphics. A lifetime of immersion in the printing industry had given him an intuitive understanding of the marketplace and the best direction in which to sail. If his executive team challenged his vision or direction, he got angry. Quadracci knew exactly where he was heading and would not tolerate dissent on this crucial issue. He especially would not tolerate interference regarding his egalitarian, employee-centric approach to management.

Ricardo Semler, the Brazilian maverick, had a completely different leadership approach compared to Quadracci. Whereas Quadracci capitalized on his celebrity consensus-leader status to steer Quad/Graphics to success in the printing industry, Semler demurred. He could have grabbed the emotional tiller at Semco SA, but didn't. Semler had achieved rock-star status in Brazil by the time his best-selling book, *Maverick*, was published in 1993. When he gave talks, he drew huge, admiring crowds. Semler's employees looked to their CEO/guru for guidance and direction because he seemed all-knowing and infallible. Semler, however, knew that he was just as fallible as anyone else. The true guru, he concluded, was the collective wisdom of his employees. Semler gracefully bowed out of the limelight and took his seat as just another employee with roughly the same rights and decision-making power as anyone else. He sometimes regretted this decision, however, especially when his pet projects got voted down by the tribe!¹⁰

Semler wasn't against leadership because leaders always float to the surface within any consensus-driven group. Semler, however, wanted leadership disseminated broadly. He wanted employees to flow in and out of leadership positions as conditions warranted. The best leader under one set of circumstances, he felt, might be the worst leader under another set of circumstances.

SUMMARY

The basic message of this chapter is that human beings are built to master the survival skills of the tribe, and nature created a powerful incentive, self-esteem, to make sure we do. Put more simply, it feels good to be regarded as an expert in one's profession. Companies that encourage their employees to become skillful, and recognize them for their skill, provide them with a powerful form of emotional reward that is, in many ways, more valuable than money. Employees will work very hard to maintain this annuity of good feelings once they have tasted it.

Leaders who help employees master their professions provide a vital mental-health service because the penalty for being deemed incompetent is chronic, unremitting pain. As I said before, incompetency is not an option for skill-based creatures such as ourselves. Human beings are not designed to be lazy malingerers. Rather, we are designed to struggle, strive, and master the survival skills of the group.

We also explored the big picture of social regulation in this chapter—the cultural autopilot that is programmed by the group consensus. This mysterious, subliminal process programs which life goals are laudable and worth pursuing and which are not. Nature, as I argued earlier in this chapter, had no option but to put the group consensus in charge of determining which goals and directions in life are valuable and which are not. This group programming seeps into us from the 100 or so people we are closest to. The cultural autopilot operates only in workplaces where the individual members are emotionally bonded to one another—where they think and act as one.

Leaders can program the cultural autopilot, and thereby determine which goals are valuable and worth achieving, if the group bestows this right. Leaders who earn the right to program the autopilot obtain a powerful advantage over executives who don't. A consensus leader merely needs to point in a direction he or she wants to go and the tribe will automatically and enthusiastically comply under the influence of intrinsic emotional incentives dispensed by the competency appetite.

The competency appetite lies at the heart of cooperative and coordi-

nated society, and we would be in serious trouble without it. If you want to become a spectacular leader who takes control of the group's social rudder, then you need to be a consensus leader. In other words, if your employees had the choice, they would vote you in as their consensus leader and follow you even if they were paid nothing.