

THE OFFICE PSYCHOLOGIST



SUPERLATIVE ABUSE

I CATCH myself committing this crime with appalling regularity: someone agrees to perform a facile task — send an e-mail, confirm a meeting, deliver a fresh packet of staples, and I say: “Excellent”.

What’s excellent about that? Nothing. It’s just the usual office stuff. Nevertheless, my colleague will no doubt respond with, “Great”, “Top” or even “Wonderful”. Maybe I’ll then lob in a “Fantastic” and they’ll close the exchange with “Brilliant”.

Every day I hear similar office chatter. We’ve turned into corporate versions of Smashy and Nicey, bandying superlatives that should be saved for events such as ending global poverty or assassinating Robbie Williams.

This verbal contagion has been lurking for decades, as anyone who remembers the “Great, Super . . . Achievement City, Ohio” catchphrases from the Seventies TV series *The Fall and Rise of Reggie Perrin* will know. But lately it’s become endemic.

Who’s to blame? Perhaps the guys in corporate communications for giving human-resource programmes titles such as “Achieving excellence” when in fact they’re about cutting jobs and saving money. Fantastic.

Where did they get it from? My money’s on sports commentators, whose job it is to create a spectacle from even the most tedious of matches. If it isn’t jazzed up with “tragic”, “titanic”, or “heroic”, it’s merely a bunch of blokes clogging a ball around a sodden pitch.

It’s time to fight back, to restore superlatives to their special status before they become devoid of excitement or meaning. But how? Let’s play the abusers at their own game. Next time someone says “brilliant” when you offer to make the tea, try replying, “Yes, it’s so amazing that blood is spurting from my eyeballs.” If we could, by an effort of mass sarcasm, rescue the superlative from the endangered-meaning list, it would be, well, fine. **JOHN NAISS**

HOW TO . . . COPE WITH OVERPROMOTION

Take the next big step

Careers have a tendency to stagnate and decline once you’re promoted beyond your level of competence, unless, as **Carly Chynoweth** discovers, you have the tools to retailor your skills

YOU’RE good, sure. But are you good enough? How would you react if your boss quit tomorrow and you, as deputy, were asked to take over? Are you really ready for that promotion? Or consider the next stage: you take a new and more senior job, only to start work and discover that it’s harder than you thought. Much harder. Harder than you can handle, perhaps. If you’ve considered developing a drug addiction to be able to take advantage of the e-mail-free relaxation of life in the gutter, it’s time to get help.

1. Take it temporarily. If asked to take a position that you don’t feel qualified for, qualify the offer. Peter Appleby, the managing director of Appleby Associates, the careers advisers, says: “If it’s an internal position, get the company to agree to you taking the role on a probationary basis to allow both parties to confirm the fit.”

2. Nerves are normal. “Every step will be a step into the unknown, even taking the same position in a new company,” Appleby says. “There’s always that fear of the unknown.” Fear is not a reason to say no. “Ask yourself ‘If I said no to the offer how would I feel in three months’ time? Would I be kicking myself?’” he says.

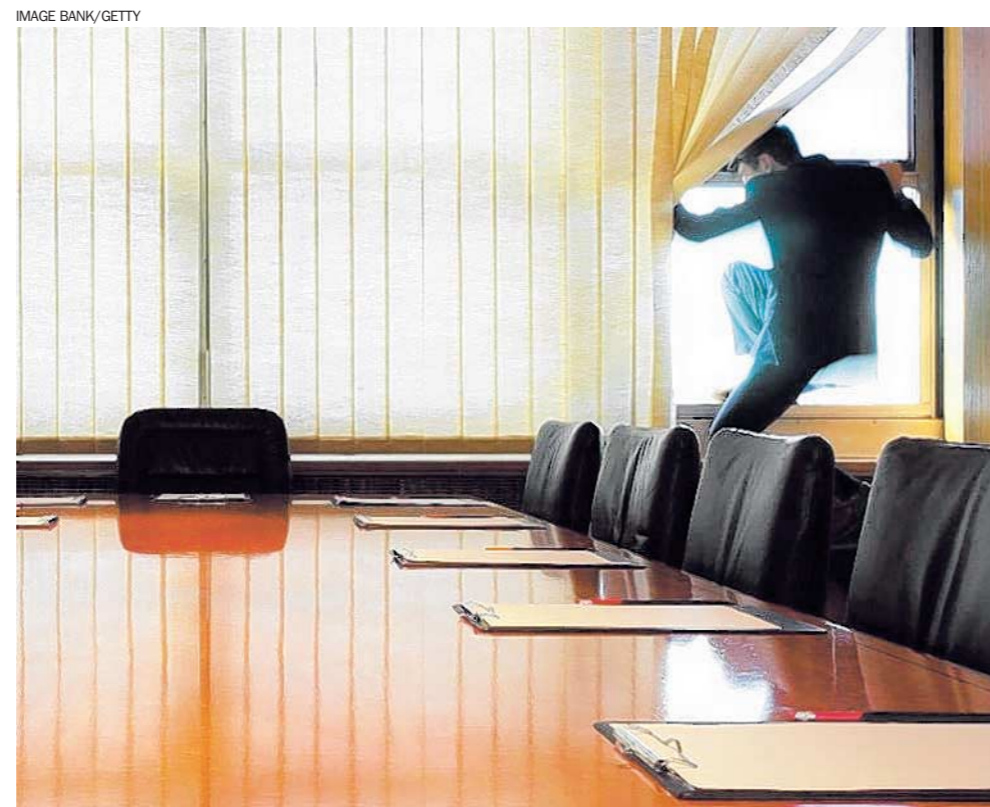
3. It will get easier. Liz McGivern, the director of talent management at Chiumento, the HR consultancy, says people are more likely to worry that they have been overpromoted when they are in the earlier stages of their career. “You will get more accustomed to making these step changes as your career progresses.”

4. Stretching is good. “You should go through life stretching yourself and sometimes that means taking opportunities outside your comfort zone,” Appleby says. McGivern agrees. “Quite honestly, if the stretch isn’t there you have to ask where they learning’s coming from and how you’re going to grow,” she says.

5. Don’t panic. Jumping back to your comfy old ship at the first sign of rough weather can damage your career chances, McGivern says.

6. Take control of the situation. “When you start to feel that you are losing control, you have to say to yourself ‘hang on, I need to take charge,’” McGivern says. Remind yourself of why you got the job ahead of all other candidates. Look at what you need to learn to fill your skills gaps — and reassure yourself that you are capable of doing this in a managed way.

7. Take control of your career. Don’t let the



Peter appeared in danger of taking the phrase “step into the unknown” too literally

company decide your future, McGivern says. “You need to be prepared to take a few risks but you have to think it through properly first. You only have so much time and talent to invest. You need to make wise choices and you can only do that if you have taken control.”

8. It might not be you. “Put a talented person into the wrong culture and all of a sudden they don’t look so talented any more,” McGivern says. It is, however, up to you to do all the research you can to avoid this happening.

9. Use an external sounding board. “It’s best not to talk to your boss or your peers initially,” McGivern says. There’s no guarantee that they have your best interests at heart. “Talk to an outside person to get an objective assessment.”

10. Ask for help once you have the situation under control. “Always take the boss a solution, not a problem,” McGivern says. “Don’t be afraid to say ‘I don’t have this skill, this is what I am doing about it; will the organisation help me with this other bit?’”

GETTING AHEAD

■ A number of HR and careers consultancies can offer advice on managing your upward path. This week we spoke to Chiumento (www.chiumento.co.uk) and Appleby Associates (www.applebyassociates.com)

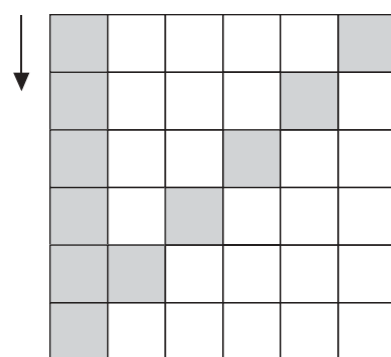
■ Build your self confidence with help from www.mindtools.com/selfconf.html or www.businessballs.com/self-confidence-assertiveness.htm

■ Think all this talk of being promoted too fast is rubbish? Others don’t. Speed your way up the ladder with the help of books such as *It’s Not How Good You Are, It’s How Good You Want To Be*, by Paul Arden (£3.96 plus delivery from Amazon) and *Get Paid More and Promoted Faster: 21 Great Ways to Get Ahead in Your Career*, by Brian Tracy (£9.09 plus delivery from Amazon)

TEST YOURSELF . . . DO YOU HAVE AN EXECUTIVE IQ?

1 Rearrange the order of the given words and place one on each row of the grid. If placed in the correct order two associated names will be read along the shaded lines. What are they?

SAFARI TARTAN ABSEIL EERILY MOVING HAZARD



2 For each of the following find a word beginning with N with a very similar meaning to the given word. What are the words?

- a) MISBEHAVED
- b) ALMOST
- c) UNNECESSARY

3 Rearrange the letters of each group to give a word. What are the four associated words?

HEATCARLD SMUMUE ASHOPILT PURESMEKRAT

4 The name of a certain fruit can be rearranged to give a nationality. What is the fruit and what is the nationality?

These questions are provided by Mensa, the high IQ society. For more puzzles and further information about Mensa please visit www.mensa.org.uk. If you would like details sent to you about IQ testing in your area please e-mail bookatest@mensa.org.uk.

Answers on page 7

THE 60-SECOND BUSINESS BOOK



The Living Dead, by David Bolchover (John Wiley & Sons, £12.99)

Don’t mind me. You’re at it too.

What? Doing nothing when you should be working.

But reading *Career* is good for me, no?

Yes. But had you instead been one of the 14.6 per cent of workers who admit to constantly surfing the net, or one of the 24 per cent who admit to having fallen asleep at work, you’d be one of the “no-good” employees who cost the US economy an estimated \$85 billion (£48 billion) a year. David Bolchover calls them “The Living Dead”.

You mean, literally, dead? Could be pretending. Of the midweek visitors to Alton Towers, one in three takes the day off work on a dishonest pretext — often pretending to be ill.

I couldn’t do that — I love my job. But most don’t — 67 per cent of 18 to 35-year-olds in the UK claim to be unhappy at work.

They should read *Career*. Probably. But they may be so disenchanted with the chronic mediocrity of their bosses that they become “actively disengaged”.

So bosses should read a management book? No, they’re rubbish too, apparently.

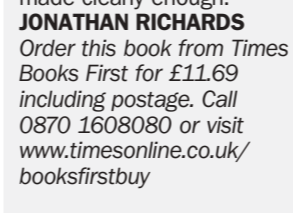
But not this one? No, it has solutions.

Such as? Appointing managers who aren’t “Lickers of Important and Influential Arses”.

Getting people to work from home where they can’t hide “preparing for meetings”.

Sounds a bit novel? Actually, it’s not that well written. But the point is made clearly enough.

JONATHAN RICHARDS Order this book from *Times Books First* for £11.69 including postage. Call 0870 1608080 or visit www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy



FOR THE TOP JOBS, TURN TO PAGES 9-16

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MANAGEMENT GURUS

Porter thinks his way to the top

Des Dearlove and Stuart Crainer assess the list of thinkers after the death of Peter Drucker leads to a change at No 1

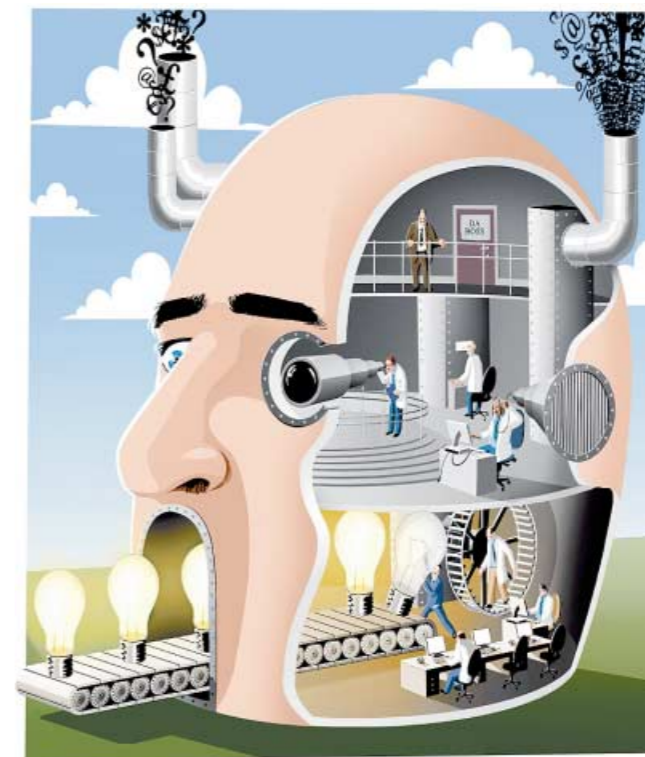
THE most influential living management guru is Michael E. Porter, head of Harvard Business School’s Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, according to the rankings of *The Thinkers 50* 2005.

The Thinkers 50 ranking is based on the votes of 1,200 business people, consultants, academics, MBA students and visitors to the project’s website. Nonetheless, Professor Porter only just made it to the top. Had the ranking been compiled a few weeks earlier, the title would have gone to Peter Drucker for the third successive year. But the father of modern management died on November 11 at the age of 95.

Professor Porter’s ascension is no surprise. After the new economy meltdown, strategy is fashionable again. More of a surprise is a massive surge of support for Bill Gates. Once regarded as the business equivalent of a James Bond villain, Gates’s elevation to the No 2 slot suggests that he has successfully reinvented himself through a judicious combination of vacating the Microsoft hot-seat and billion-dollar philanthropic giving.

Also benefiting from a generosity of spirit is another strategy guru, Professor C. K. Prahalad, of the University of Michigan, whose book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* challenges conventional thinking about the world’s poor. He rises an impressive nine places to No 3. Professor Prahalad is one of several Indian-born management gurus to make the 2005 ranking. These include the CEO coach Ram Charan (ranked 24), Professor Vijay Govindarajan, of Tuck Business School (30), and Har-

STEPHEN COLLINS



vard’s rising star Professor Rakesh Khurana (33). As yet no Chinese guru has emerged. Business gurudom is a man’s world, with only four women in the top 50. Insead’s Professor Renée Mauborgne is the highest placed at 15, followed by Harvard’s Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter at 19, Dr Lynda Gratton, of the London Business School (34), and the *No Logo* author Naomi Klein (46). The anti-management message of Dilbert rises from 27th to 12th place in the guise of the cartoonist Scott Adams. However, despite a strong showing early on, there is no place in this year’s ranking for the ultimate management fashion victim David Brent.

THINKING TIME

VOTING for this year’s Thinkers 50 resulted in a shortlist of 80 gurus.

A Google search established the number of references for each before they were assessed against criteria including originality and practicality of ideas, presentation style, research rigour and impact. The research was done by Suntop Media in association with the European Foundation for Management Development. www.thinkers50.com

THE TOP 50 BUSINESS BRAINS

- 1 Michael Porter (2)*** Harvard strategy specialist
- 2 Bill Gates (20)** Founder of Microsoft
- 3 C. K. Prahalad (12)** (left) LBS strategy man
- 4 Tom Peters (3)** Leadership consultant
- 5 Jack Welch (8)** GE’s ex-CEO and celebrity
- 6 Jim Collins (10)** Author of *Good to Great*
- 7 Philip Kotler (6)** Kellogg’s marketing guru
- 8 Henry Mintzberg (7)** Promotes *Managers not MBAs*
- 9 Kjell Nordstrom & Jonas Ridderstrale (21)** *Funky Business* exponents
- 10 Charles Handy (5)**

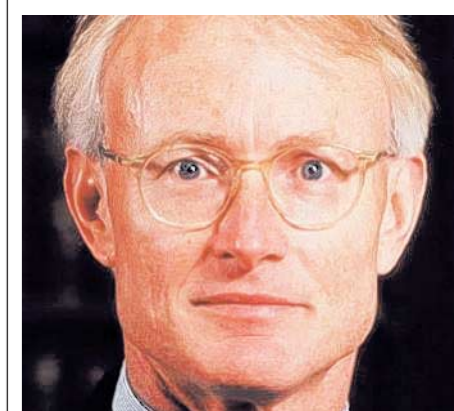
- British portfolio worker
- 11 Richard Branson (34)** Entrepreneur and Virgin flyer
- 12 Scott Adams (27)** Dilbert’s (left) creator
- 13 Thomas Stewart (37)** *Intellectual Capital* author
- 14 Gary Hamel (4)** Strategy consultant
- 15 Chan Kim & Renée Mauborgne (31)** *Blue Ocean Strategy* duo
- 16 Kenichi Ohmae (19)** Japanese strategy master
- 17 Patrick Dixon (46)** Futurist and change guru
- 18 Stephen Covey (16)** *Knows The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

- 19 Rosabeth Moss Kanter (9)** Harvard’s change manager
- 20 Edward De Bono (35)** Lateral thinker and author
- 21 Clayton Christensen (22)** Harvard’s new-tech guru
- 22 Robert Kaplan & David Norton (15)** Balanced scorecard creators
- 23 Peter Senge (14)** Learning organisation inventor
- 24 Ram Charan (-)** Coach to the CEOs
- 25 Fons Trompenaars (50)** International management man
- 26 Russ Ackoff (-)** Specialist of systems thinking
- 27 Warren Bennis (13)** Humanist leadership guru
- 28 Chris Argyris (18)** Action and learning guru
- 29 Michael Dell (33)** Dell Computer’s founder

- 30 Vijay Govindarajan (-)** Tuck’s strategy innovator
- 31 Malcolm Gladwell (-)** *Blink* and *Tipping Point* guru
- 32 Manfred Kets De Vries (43)** Psychoanalytic economist
- 33 Rakesh Khurana (-)** Harvard labour market guru
- 34 Lynda Gratton (41)** LBS people and strategy guru
- 35 Alan Greenspan (42)** Head of US Federal Reserve
- 36 Edgar Schein (17)** MIT organisational psychologist
- 37 Ricardo Semler (36)** Radical CEO of Semco
- 38 Don Peppers (48)** Customer relationship man
- 39 Paul Krugman (40)** LBS strategy professor
- 40 Jeff Bezos (39)** Amazon’s main man
- 41 Andy Grove (26)**

- One of the Intel founders
- 42 Daniel Goleman (29)** Emotional intelligence inventor
- 43 Leif Edvinsson (-)** Professor of intellectual capital
- 44 James Champy (25)** Advocate of re-engineering
- 45 Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones (-)** Authentic leaders
- 46 Naomi Klein (30)** (left) *No Logo* author
- 47 Geert Hofstede (47)** Cultural expert
- 48 Larry Bossidy (-)** Chair of Honeywell
- 49 Costas Markides (-)** LBS strategy professor
- 50 Geoffrey Moore (38)** Hi-tech marketing man
- 41 Andy Grove (26)** * 2003 ranking in brackets

MICHAEL E. PORTER



MICHAEL E. PORTER is the Bishop William Laurence University Professor at Harvard Business School. With 18 books and a host of influential articles to his name, his status in the world of management thinking is legendary. As well as teaching and writing, he consults widely with the Monitor Group, the consulting firm he helped to establish.

Professor Porter is an educator but he is not a performer or management superstar in the conventional guru sense. One magazine observed that he was as likely to write a bestselling management blockbuster as give a lecture wearing a bra and stockings. Few of his books are available in paperback.

He has advised the public and private sectors world wide and has received civic medals usually reserved for military heroes or extraordinary sportspeople. The son of an army officer, he was born 1947 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He studied mechanical and aerospace engineering at Princeton and then switched to business, gaining an MBA and PhD in economics from Harvard.

A talented golfer and all-round sportsman, Professor Porter has always been obsessed by competition. His first widely-read book, *Competitive Strategy*, is now in its 63rd imprint. In it he analyses competition, introducing his Five Forces framework, still essential reading for MBA students. He subsequently moved from competition between firms to competition between nations. In *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* he examines why some states are wealthy and others not. His study of national economies has been extensive, though not always welcome. In *Can Japan Compete?* he showed that the long recession suffered by Japan was the inevitable result of successive postwar Japanese governments’ policies. In 2003 he produced a report for the DTI on the UK’s competitive position — examining ways to tackle the productivity gap in the UK. He also established the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City in the mid-Nineties.