



# “A Better Work force”

**Self-improvement** in an era of steroids, Adderall, and executive coaching. By Michael Schrage

>>> The largish thirtysomething male across from me on the Acela wore an unmissably thick World Series Championship ring. Jared doesn't play ball, though—he helps run the Boston Red Sox's minor-league talent-development program. He travels the world evaluating young hotshots competing for their shot at the pros.

A fan of sabermetrics and *Moneyball*, Jared spoke passionately and fluently of his club's cutting-edge culture of data-driven innovation. The Red Sox take technology more seriously than virtually any other major-league baseball team. Everything from computer-enhanced biomechanics videos of batters' swings to intricate statistical analyses of pitcher/batter match-ups is used to judge potential and performance. Any insight that might give a player an edge is fair game.

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Like every ballclub, the Sox are looking hard for the Next Big Superstar. But the team's most pervasive personnel challenge, Jared observed, is procuring players who are more "coachable" than their predecessors. Athletic excellence and burning desire aren't enough—the Red Sox want top-tier talent capable of using the team's tools, techniques, and technologies to play better. Major League Baseball's stats-centric, always-looking-for-an-edge environment makes players who are unwilling or unable to constantly improve riskier investments. Empowering talent to better itself along every legitimate dimension—a category *not* including steroids or human growth hormone, Jared insisted—is the ethos that sets Red Sox management apart.

Not three months later, I participated in an unclassified Department of Defense workshop exploring future high-tech warfare scenarios. Performance-enhancing drugs that amplify professional athletes' physical prowess, one Ivy League attendee declared, could comparably boost the lethal effectiveness of warriors. It was no secret that some military services already allow—even encourage—their people to take "go" pills to sustain field energy and endurance. High-performance drugs, he argued, should be conscripted for war.

A Marine colonel, who commanded men in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaned forward with narrowed eyes: Yes, he was well aware that "go" drugs already played non-trivial roles in soldiers' lives. But, no, he was not about to formally propose "pharma-military" doctrine as part of America's future combat culture. "I understand logically and intellectually why you want us to discuss that," he said. "We're just not going to do it. That's not what being a Marine should mean."

**T**hese simple vignettes foreshadow the painfully complex future of human-capital investment. Your people may be the most talented in the world—your company's greatest asset, etc.—but how far should you be prepared to go to make them even better? What "self-improvement culture" should world-class firms openly champion—or quietly permit? What performance-enhancement investments must be expressly forbidden? Honestly answering these questions will soon become the most difficult personal—and personnel—challenge for executives who authentically care about their people.

With regard to issues of enhanced performance, opportunity and opportunism are ruthlessly transforming executive ethics, expectations, and economics. When management demigod Jack Welch proclaims, "The team with the best players wins," he inadvertently begs the question of what "the best" will mean for tomorrow's CEOs. You may soon be forced to rethink everything you thought you knew about improving talent and bringing out the best in people.

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increasingly unconventional "self-improvement" options. Personal ambition, international competition, and technology-driven talent won't let them. Any serious discussion about the future of managing talent demands a leadership debate about the future of enhancing performance.

### BETTER PERFORMANCE WITH PROZAC?

Google, General Electric, and Goldman Sachs face the same full-spectrum "self-improvement" conflicts as the Red Sox and the Marines. Even seemingly trivial "performance enhancement" investments place well-intentioned organizations atop slippery slopes. No one thinks twice about free coffee and espresso served in the cafeteria. But eyebrows would surely arch if big bowls of complimentary caffeine pills took their place.

The inevitable next step: A pharmaceutical company offers a relatively safe and legal "brain Viagra" that stimulates superior cognitive performance. Doctors happily prescribe it. Your HR people conclude that forbidding its use, via corporate policy, would literally prove counterproductive. Might subsidizing the drug's consumption be the smarter investment? Perhaps your employees would think you smart(er) to pop those pills, too. Consider it "leadership by example."

This issue isn't dystopian science fiction—it's coming, all too soon, along with a series of tough and troublesome questions. When tens of millions of hard-working Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian managers start using drugs or neural implants to enhance their professional effectiveness in global markets, should ambitious Western executives match those behaviors or cede the field? WWJWD? (What would Jack Welch do?) How about Peter Drucker? It's unrealistic and unwise to believe that emerging-market talent is less committed to getting an edge than their post-industrial competitors.

All over the world, the best-performing people in the best-performing organizations always look to get better at getting better. They don't want to cheat—they just want to win. They know results matter. So do their bosses. Pretending otherwise is dishonest, and as personnel policy, dishonesty is unsustainable.

In tomorrow's global markets, being the best will increasingly depend on ready access to the best technologies, the best (presumably legal) drugs, and the best coaching and mentoring money can buy. "Initiative" won't be the only thing the firm's best players will be taking. The performance-enhancement future will alternately push and seduce executive elites to avert their eyes, slip through legal loopholes, and reinvent leadership by example.

This creates growing schisms between how organizations choose to invest in talented individuals and how talented individuals choose to invest in themselves. And these choices mat-

more-dedicated staff to see self-improvement as part of the job? Would refusing counseling, coaching, or drugs justify non-promotion?

A generation ago, fast-track enterprise talent answered comparable questions about serving stints overseas to learn and grow the business. Declining a foreign post could kill a career. Tomorrow's questions demand a different kind and quality of employee initiative and commitment. Executives who believe these decisions can be reliably delegated to the HR department are kidding themselves.

### GOING BETA

Even today, strategically awkward decisions around personal enhancement are found everywhere talent strives to outperform and overachieve. Professional sports are merely the highest-profile global industry in which performance-enhancing drugs rewrite the rules and record books.

For instance, beta blockers such as Inderal have become pharmaceuticals of choice for anxious concert musicians desperate to quell bouts of "rubber fingers." Managing adrenaline receptors in the heart and blood vessels that help control arrhythmias and high blood pressure—as well as neural adrenaline receptors—beta blockers give musicians an edge by taking an edge away. As one neurologist described it to the *Los Angeles Times*, "You still have adrenaline flowing in your body, but you don't

feel that adrenaline rush so you're not distracted by your own nervousness." Doctors legitimately prescribe beta blockers for panic-prone performers.

Publicly, music professionals prefer yoga and exercise to drugs for jitters management. But surveys and anecdotal reports posted on classical-music websites such as Chamber Music Today suggest that at least a third of America's orchestra musicians have gone beta.

One New York symphony board member acknowledged awareness of the practice but said it's not an issue about which his colleagues or the orchestra's audiences care: "You want us to ask our violinists to pee in a cup?" he asked me. Actually, no: The better

question is whether a world-class orchestra—and the communities that fund it—should explicitly encourage or actively subsidize beta blockers for musicians. "I don't think I want to answer that," he said, asking that his name not be used.

Other organizations are less inhibited about paying for performance enhancement. In preparation for the 2009 Miss America pageant, the Miss California committee purchased breast implants for their contestant. Both the committee and their candidate believed the procedure would boost her chances. More than one former Miss America winner commented how there was nothing unusual, unethical, or improper about augmenting nature, and competition owner Donald Trump expressed no substantive concerns about surgically supplemented success. (Miss California's candidacy was derailed not by her subsidized surgery but by her comments about same-sex marriage.)

## development" practice with increasingly unconventional "self-improvement" options.

ter enormously: They influence who gets fast-tracked, who gets left behind, and who gets laid off.

Leadership of a Fortune 100 engineering firm, for example, might insist that a promising but overly aggressive project leader attend anger-management coaching to smooth his jagged edges. Would the company equally support career advancement if he preferred to overcome his interpersonal issues with prescription Prozac instead?

As medication both competes with (and complements) therapy as the surest path to on-the-job success, responsible leadership had better rethink what interventions it recommends to ambitious employees. If the right drugs might make the right difference to an employee's career, then management may have a duty to disclose that option. Should companies then pay for counseling, drugs, or both? Can firms reasonably expect their

But in truth, pharmaceutical controversies and implant aesthetics obscure a more significant performance-enhancement issue. The imperative driving talented people—and the organizations that employ them—to enhance performance is less about gimmickry and technology than about the nature of self-improvement itself. The very idea of what it means to be “better” has itself been “improved” and “performance-enhanced” almost beyond recognition.

**I**n his 1859 book *Self-Help*, Samuel Smiles celebrated the self-disciplined cultivation of character and capability. “The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual,” he declared. His Victorian bestseller became a cultural standard-setter for Britain’s new class of industrial-age aspirants striving to, yes, improve themselves.

Smiles’ suggested path to both worldly and spiritual success? Personal initiative and virtuous investment in one’s self to be a “better” person. The proper role of institutions and organizations, he argued, was to facilitate self-help. Character was self’s core. Better character invariably meant better outcomes. Improving the person inevitably improved the performance.

Less than half a century later, the enterprise accomplishments of Andrew Carnegie, Frederick Taylor, and Henry Ford essentially redefined the character of character. Carnegie’s restless adoption of novel technologies to produce greater volumes of better steel less expensively and more efficiently made *innovation* an essential workplace ingredient. Ford’s declaration that, “If it doesn’t add value, it’s waste” became a managerial mantra for assessing industrial investment—including, of course, talent. *Efficiency, effectiveness, and elimination of waste* assumed parity with—and then primacy over—*character* as key to enhanced performance and productivity.

Victorian virtues such as thrift and perseverance remained desirable, of course, but employers valued them more as qualities that drove cost-effective outcomes than as hallmarks of personal integrity. “Self-help” became less about Smilesian cultivation of character than Tayloresque performance efficiency. In other words, *self-improvement no longer meant improving one’s self—it meant improving one’s results*. Self-improvement became indistinguishable from performance enhancement; performance enhancement morphed into self-improvement.

Granted, plenty of industrial sociologists found it demeaning to deemphasize investment in personal integrity in favor of improving workplace efficiency. Entire schools of management thought—from Mary Parker Follett to Elton Mayo to Douglas McGregor—sprang up to reintegrate personality and potential with productivity. Human-relations and organizational-development experts championed workplaces that respected the whole person. “Professional development” budgets and “human resources” departments were born.

But the shift also proved liberating. Freed from focusing on character development, talented individuals and ambitious

organizations could turn their attention to any technique, tool, or technology that might enhance performance. The world outside the workplace became a treasure trove of opportunity. A tendency to seek shortcuts and create competitive edges mutated from an unpleasant character trait into a welcome virtue.

This is the self-help sensibility of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The One Minute Manager*, instant messaging, Dianabol, Prozac, Google, iPhones, Bluetooth, LinkedIn, Lasik surgery, personal coaches, Botox, Rogaine, charity events, and liposuction. The common denominator: a rational belief that successful self-improvement investments can pay off sooner rather than later. Get good results fast; get faster results better.

Just as important, skillfully managed investments yield results that will speak for themselves. Colleagues, clients, and even competitors can see and experience the relevant performance enhancements. That’s empowering. Success inspires further investments in self-helpful innovation.

But here’s what’s truly remarkable: More often than not, over the years, workers have footed the bill for their self-help programs, regardless of whether their employers were the ultimate beneficiaries. Employees looking for an edge personally purchased the drug or the surgery or the technology or the coach. The firm allowed—encouraged?—employees to effectively subsidize the organization through their own portfolio of performance-enhancement investments.

The unspoken and unwritten deal, of course, has been that the resulting performance improvements would be recognized and rewarded through increased salary, benefits, and promotions. Not a bad deal for either party.

Of course, not all deals pay. Bidding to appear more youthful and energetic, an older female executive at a leading pop-culture marketing firm underwent a facelift. The unhappy result undermined both her appearance and internal perceptions of her professional judgment. “Her people didn’t know where to look when she talked to them in the elevator,” snipped a colleague.

#### WHO PAYS FOR PERFORMANCE?

Corporate cultural histories of human-capital investment have traditionally stressed top-down conformity over bottom-up initiative. *Professional development* and *executive education* are enterprise euphemisms for how firms define and reward *performance enhancement*. John H. Patterson’s National Cash Register, Thomas Watson’s IBM, and, of course, General Electric set America’s gold standard for institutionalized grooming of executive talent. Successfully educating, acculturating, and indoctrinating the firm’s best players was the mission. Market dominance was the happy result, one that inspired global imitation.

This begat the centrally subsidized sensibility of chief learning officers, corporate universities, Myers-Briggs evaluations, Outward Bound retreats, wellness programs, diversity webinars, mentors, virtual coaching, Mayo and Cooper clinic check-ups, corporate BlackBerries, decision support systems, executive MBAs at Harvard Business School and Insead, and corporate-

sponsored community service. Instead of “pay for performance,” firms pay to *improve* performance. Talent, like Carnegie’s steel, makes great material for capital-intensive enhancement.

These aren’t perks or benefits—they’re investments that organizations make to have talent feel and be more valuable. Not incidentally, these investments also exert a measure of corporate control: Company-provided BlackBerries unobtrusively set expectations that executives should be accessible 24/7; Myers-Briggs testing reminds talent that collaborative success requires complementary chemistry as much as technical competence.

After all, firms invest not just to enhance talent’s performance but to improve their own. Individual self-help must align with corporate self-interest. That’s the payer’s prerogative.

But it’s now where worlds collide. Competitive pressures and innovative options have turned enterprise-driven performance enhancement and individual self-improvement initiatives into battlegrounds. The self-improvement needs and aspirations of ambitious, high-performance individuals increasingly interfere with organizational expectations and desires. Ambitious executives resent being passed over for that advanced management program at Harvard; high-performance firms get frustrated with fast-trackers who decline executive coaching.

“**B**e careful of what you want, because you’re sure to get it.” Talented individuals and innovative organizations both want—or claim to want—self-improvement and enhanced performance. Unfortunately, regulating what that actually means is proving impossible. Human-capital investment is becoming such a welter of confusing cross-subsidies and inherent conflicts of interest that gauging returns is also proving impossible. Worse, clashes between formal and informal markets in “performance enhancement” promise to further polarize firms and their talent.

Consider executive coaching. One survey has almost half of Fortune 500 firms providing some form of coaching for their top executives, and the International Coach Federation and other accreditors have sprung up to bring professional standards to the nascent field.

But unexpectedly, many ambitious executives have taken the initiative and hired their own coaches—who are, presumably, more loyal to the executive’s needs than to the company’s. Increasingly, executives in top-tier firms find themselves forced to side with either the counsel of the independent coach or that of the company-provided coach. As one executive remarked, “Sometimes I wonder if I’d be better off if I had my coach talk to their coach instead of dealing directly with my employee.”

### **PRESCRIPTIONS AND INJECTIONS**

With guidelines for corporate self-improvement—whether initiated by employer or employee—fuzzy or not yet drawn up, managers are facing uncomfortable questions. Both culturally and economically, organizations are deciding that they can’t af-



ford either the freedoms or the costs of supporting people's ongoing performance-enhancement efforts. They grow even more nervous pondering potential scandals and possible side effects. (Picture that Stradivarius-wielding teen prodigy keeling over from a beta-blocker overdose during her Carnegie Hall debut.)

Talent, for its part, wants the recognition and rewards that go along with better performance. But high performers, naturally, prefer minimal "bureaucratic" managerial constraints and oversight. They want the right to take innovative shortcuts to their innovative shortcuts—even if it puts themselves and their organization at risk. That guarantees further conflict.

Indeed, ever-murkier multibillion-dollar gray markets in performance enhancement will become tomorrow's new normal, with unclear rules, questionable ethics, and uncertain technologies spiraling almost totally out of control.

Consider, for example, a tale of two enormous industries with global reach: education and elite sport. Both are highly regulated, talent-rich, starkly in the public eye, and so competitive that even marginal performance enhancements determine individual failure or success. Most importantly, the problem isn't a new one: Disruptive performance-enhancement innovations have long challenged the credibility and fairness of both schools and sport.

**F**or schools, educational accountability has shifted from subjective evaluation to standardized tests. Test performance alone can determine whether students advance to the next grade, require special assistance, or get into the college of their choice.

Underperforming students can be diagnosed as learning-disabled—typically, ADHD—and prescribed drugs such as Adderall or Ritalin; between 1990 and 2005, the number of children taking Ritalin quintupled, to more than four million. Many parents don't wait for medical diagnoses, pointing to behavioral issues—moodiness, for example—as the real source of a teenager's academic distress. Chemically mitigate the misbehavior and the student can become an academic success. Sometimes the families pay; other times, the state does.

But diagnosing meaningful distinctions between the physiologically disabled, the cognitively impaired, the emotionally challenged, and the merely unmotivated is more clinical art than science. Pediatricians, child psychologists, and educators strongly disagree about whether academic underperformance is a "treatable condition." Nevertheless, pharmaceuticals have been as effectively mainstreamed into K-12 American education as school lunches, recess, and bilingual education.

Better performance through chemistry is only part of the educational equation. A multibillion-dollar "enhanced academic performance" standardized test-preparation and tutoring industry has also taken commercial root. Firms such as Kaplan and Princeton Review promise student/customers that they'll boost their ACT/SAT test scores to help get them into their college of choice. Although the top test-prep firms do offer scholarships

to the less fortunate, students from wealthier and more ambitious families enjoy inarguable advantages in standardized testing competition. Formal and informal test preparation and extracurricular tutoring can—and do—make the difference between a thick envelope and a thin one.

Complicating discussion of educational performance enhancement: policies, laws, and rules that effectively forbid inquiry. Privacy laws, for example, typically prevent high schools from disclosing to prospective colleges whether a student takes mood- or cognitive-enhancing drugs. (Universities generally have no clue how many of their students take prescription or performance-boosting drugs.) The same studied ignorance exists around test-prep services. Ignorance isn't bliss—it's public policy.

**T**he contrast with world-class sport could scarcely be starker. With literally tens—if not hundreds—of millions of dollars at stake, elite athletes and their equipment are subject to enormous scrutiny. Athletes must be careful about everything from the food they eat to the coaching they accept. In the wake of the 1998 Tour de France scandal, the International Olympic Committee helped establish the World Anti-Doping Agency to coordinate global testing of blood, saliva, and urine for illicit chemical enhancement.

Nevertheless, an enormous sub-rosa performance-drug industry thrives, exploring and exploiting illegal pharmaceutical innovation with a speed and agility that Merck and Pfizer can only envy. The allure of these drugs isn't their illegality—it's their proven effectiveness. The syringe-versus-sampling competition between ever-cleverer circumvention and more ingenious detection continues apace. But the dominant reason why athletic drug use is in apparent decline is that the price of being caught has become overwhelmingly punitive.

Steroids and their chemical cousins have drawn the lion's share of attention, but the scrutiny hardly ends there. Name the sport—baseball, bicycling, America's Cup, Formula One racing, golf, swimming—and you'll see authorities struggling to regulate any and every innovative edge that athletes, their coaches, and their equipment providers might pursue in the name of victory. In a global era of great rewards, great recognition, and even greater competition, investing in novel technologies and techniques that might even marginally enhance performance is the rational bet. Precisely because elite sports are inherently "high-performance cultures," the line between respecting the rules and testing them is vanishingly small. Why not be creative? Why not push?

When Speedo's breakthrough LZR competitive swimsuit hit the pool in 2008, for example, its rapid approval by the sport's authorities and swift adoption by the world's best swimmers shocked the sport and transformed the record books. As ten-time Olympic swimming medalist Gary Hall Jr. recently posted on a *New York Times* sports blog: "I'm washed up. I'm not bitter because my best times don't stack up to what we are seeing today.

I'm a guy that romanticized the sport of swimming being as simple as man versus the element of water. It used to be the swimmer in the suit, not the suit on the swimmer. How times have changed."

Exactly. Times have changed. Technology matters more. As Jack Welch might observe, the best players had better act on this if they want to stay the best. In the LZR's turbulent record-breaking wake, FINA, the international swimming federation, is reviewing its technical standards for swimsuit materials. But this is no different than technical reviews the U.S. Golf Association conducts over proposed golf-club redesigns or the International Cycling Union's analyses of innovative bicycles.

Purists insist that these reviews and regulations are essential to preserving the integrity of their favored sport and the primacy of the athlete. They may be right. But what's unusually

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revealing about Major League Baseball's steroids scandals is who chose to enhance performance. The biggest users weren't the journeymen hangers-on desperate for any edge they could find: It was the sport's superstars—Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Roger Clemens, Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramirez—who committed to chemicals. For the most part, the teams employing them didn't ask and didn't tell. Everyone was apparently pleased with the results.

You can—if you want to—dismiss superb athletes with superior records as foolishly misguided or sleazy cheaters who did it for the money. But the fact is that the sport's best players—athletes who loved the game—genuinely wanted to be even better. They decided that they couldn't play their best without the drugs. They chose accordingly. If those drugs were allowed, they might still be taking them. And that, too, is a form of integrity and primacy of the athlete.

### IN SEARCH OF ENHANCEMENT

So which industry offers the best insights for business? Prescription performance enhancement and personal privacy are everyday occurrences in education at all levels. While tutoring and test preparation may reflect unfortunate cultural and class inequities, they're not forbidden. Indeed, if the school or state pays, tutoring is welcome and encouraged. So long as texting and the Internet are not used for "cheating"—however loosely defined—digital innovations are welcome as well.

Despite the competitive nature of college admissions, the educational performance-enhancement market is remarkably laissez-faire: Cheating is idiosyncratically defined, punishments are arbitrarily enforced, and schools rarely stand in the way of

innovative self-help investment. When push comes to shove, the schools, the students, and their families all want measurable results. The media and mechanisms for practically improving those results are secondary.

Elite sport, by contrast, is a regulator's paradise. No reasonable expectation of privacy exists; in fact, invasive monitoring is mandated. The more innovative a proposed technological innovation, the more rigorously it's scrutinized. External coaches, trainers, and nutritionists are not unwelcome, but they had better coordinate closely with their team-sanctioned counterparts.

Because high-performance athletes, coaches, equipment providers, and proprietors are always looking for an edge, the sporting overseers must constantly invest in innovative infrastructures. These structures must assure not only that everyone "plays" by the rules but that the rules can quickly be changed if too disruptive a performance enhancer hits the field, the court, the water, or the links.

Alas, neither the school nor sports model appears to offer much help to CEOs and their boards. To the extent companies are "learning organizations" like schools, then almost anything legal goes. Employees would be allowed to pursue whatever performance enhancers they think necessary to do their jobs best—whether coaching, medication, cosmetic surgery, or the latest personal productivity technology. If they themselves paid, then it would be OK. The informal market would rule.

The elite-sports model, though, suggests extremes where firms might indeed have a duty to ask their most talented employees to pee in a cup. Similarly, using unauthorized social media—say, Facebook or Twitter—to boost one's job performance could be a firing offense. A talented employee looking to hire her own coach would need to get approval from her boss or boss's boss. In other words, the importance of rigorous institutional oversight would trump the innovative initiative of individual talent.

### IRRESISTIBLE INNOVATIONS

Even though schools and sports have been wrestling with real-world performance-enhancement challenges for years, neither approach appears sustainable for the corporate universe. One reason is straightforward: It's unclear what role government will play in establishing new social contracts for enhancement in the workplace. Think of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Americans With Disabilities Act as workplace



analogous for performance-enhancement policy enforcement.

Should the government declare cognitive-enhancing drugs illegal, business would likely be enlisted to test employees for abuse. After all, unlike with illegal narcotics such as cocaine or methamphetamines, companies would arguably benefit directly by employee use of such drugs. Similarly, if officials could demonstrate that employees who received coaching were promoted more quickly than those who didn't—resulting in discriminatory outcomes—equal-opportunity laws might force firms to legally forbid people from hiring their own coaches.

But regulating enhancement becomes complicated for other reasons. The global nature of economic competition—like the global nature of elite sport—demands a coordinated worldwide approach. Perhaps the World Anti-Doping Agency might extend testing and monitoring protocols to workplaces in China, India, and the United States. If not, “performance permissive” economies will steal an enhanced jump on market leadership.

Workplace issues are more complex than swimming-pool and stadium competitions: Performance enhancers in sports are outlawed; in the workplace, they may be legally prescribed. It beggars belief that governments and companies want workplace policies perversely incenting talented people to shop for doctors to procure performance-enhancer prescriptions.

The costs, bureaucracies, and red tape inherent in any serious performance-enhancement regulatory regime would boggle even the most cognitively enhanced, best-coached, and technologically supported minds. That doesn't mean governments, global industries, and unions won't try.

But the more compelling reason why neither regulation nor laissez-faire approaches offer much guidance is that tomorrow's performance enhancers—and their impact—are simply unknowable. A few simple thought experiments should suffice: A Chinese signal-processing entrepreneur comes up with a voice-stress-analyzing iPhone app that can detect speech patterns most associated with lying and misrepresentation; rapid advances in portable brain scanning make it easier to identify how accurately experts recall vital information and when their cognitive skill begins to fade; mass-produced genetically engineered pheromones can make people with particular body chemistries more likable and therefore more persuasive.

Whether these particular innovations emerge is immaterial; the point is that it's difficult to imagine talented individuals and

competitive organizations not wanting to employ them. The benefits intuitively appear to outweigh their risks.

But play out the (probable) implications: The same voice-stress analyzers used to check a client's veracity can be used on one's boss and colleagues; the same brain scanners to review your surgeon's mental acuity can also review yours; should pheromonic influence lead to pernicious business outcomes, expect to be required to splash on a pheromone neutralizer before you come to work. How do bosses regulate that?

#### REENGINEERING THE EXECUTIVE

The next generation of performance enhancers promise to be far more disruptive than the last's. Ironically, the surge of self-improvement opportunity and complexity will likely increase demand for professional coaching and expert advice. The more technologies an organization has, the more coaching and advice its talent needs. If firms are unable to adequately supply it, then—no surprise—talented employees will go outside. Global gray markets in performance enhancement are destined to grow far larger. Lawyers worldwide should be thrilled.

Arguably the single most important step executives can take in confronting this future is not to retain high-powered consultants and design performance-enhancement policies in anticipation of unknown technological revolutions. Organizations would be similarly ill served by policies emerging as the ad-hoc byproducts of case-by-case, crisis-by-crisis business judgment.

The most productive approach is for a company's leaders to seriously ask themselves this question: *What do we want “leadership by example” to mean?*

In other words, what are the choices that companies want their own leadership to make when investing in their own performance-enhancement initiatives? Paying one's own way for an executive MBA while performing well at work might be desirable. So might a stimulating blog that keeps everyone up-to-date on divisional accomplishments and challenges.

Taking yoga or a Pilates class during lunch? Getting a hair transplant? Botox? “Leadership by example” might mean hiring one's own coach if the organization won't provide one. What about executives paying out of their own pockets to retain a “team coach” for their direct reports? Is popping a pill to stay up all night to meet a deadline a leadership choice to be celebrated, accepted, ignored, or discouraged? Does it depend on

the talent, or on the result? This is where culture comes from.

There's a wide range of plausible scenarios. The essential insight, however, is that when talented employees look to see what is organizationally acceptable or culturally beyond the pale, they don't look first at corporate policy manuals. They look at the leadership. Leaders who evince little interest in their own performance enhancement but sit in imperial judgment over the performance investments of others are unlikely to command the respect of talent committed to being the best.

If your most talented employees can't rattle off three or four good stories about how their boss and their boss's boss have gotten great value from smart performance-enhancement investments, then your organization's leadership will have real issues. You may not like the stories they choose to tell, but they reveal—much like the Red Sox or the Marines—the self-improvement culture you have. There has never been a better time for executive leadership to explore initiatives—not just experiments—in performance-enhancement portfolios.

A decade ago, enlightened firms oversaw work-at-home and flextime initiatives for moms with newborns and employees with temporary disabilities. Tomorrow's CEOs, along with their boards, may decide to approve enterprise initiatives encouraging employees to help define corporate best practice on combining mood-enhancing medications with professional counseling to work better with colleagues. As more performance-enhancement options proliferate, executives will have more opportunities to lead by example. How best to share those examples will come to dominate talent management.

### BRAVE NEW WORKPLACE

Top-tier organizations have already experienced benign versions of this with the Internet and Web 2.0 services such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. That a 55-year-old executive declines to use a social-network utility like Facebook to, say, better manage a project deadline or check a job prospect's portfolio sends an unambiguous signal to the organization at large.

The danger is that the absence of an articulated and demonstrable performance-enhancement ethos creates both managerial and leadership gaps that will be filled by arbitrary—and ambitious—individual initiative. Organizations lose both control and influence over their “self-improvement” cultures if they substitute rhetoric for action.

The irony here is that tomorrow's business leadership has no choice but to enhance its performance around how it enhances performance—or forfeit its best people and best opportunities. What makes respecting this seemingly straightforward charge so complex is not law or even ethics—it is that policies and practices around improving the self invariably become debates about fundamental values.

Those who declare pharmaceutical enhancement a vulgar value? The late psychiatrist Gerald Klerman critiqued its proponents as champions of “pharmacological Calvinism”: “Psychotherapeutically,” he observed in 1971, “the world is divided

into the first class citizens, the saints who can achieve their cure or salvation by willpower, insight, psychoanalysis or by behavior modification, and the rest of the people, who are weak in their moral fiber and need a crutch, whether it is Thorazine, Miltown, or Compoz.”

In the 1950s and '60s, bottles of Thorazine and Miltown filled millions of American medicine cabinets, but many of the pill-takers would surely have fundamentally agreed with Klerman's harsh assessment. Decades later, pharmacological Calvinism is a rarely encountered attitude in an era where children are already raised to take cognition-enhancing drugs.

Consequently, government regulators or HR departments are unlikely to monitor who takes those Alzheimer's prevention pills—pills that just happen to bestow greater powers of concentration and recall. And it's also unlikely companies will successfully discriminate against executives who attempt to use cosmetic surgery, coaching, or creative technologies to get ahead. CEOs and their top teams are already discovering they can no longer evaluate their top performers divorced from the performance-enhancement investments they've made in themselves.

**I**ronically, the “tear-the-envelope” extremism inherent in ongoing performance enhancement and self-improvement innovation can't help but revive the Victorian specter of Samuel Smiles. Using pills, prosthetics, coaching, and technology to succeed in the workplace is becoming the new self-help agenda. These methods don't reflect an absence of character—rather, they reveal the augmented soul of commitment. To the extent that performance-enhancement investments are investments in being the best one can be at work, perhaps even Smiles might swallow and acknowledge those investments as virtuous.

Consider the counterfactual: Do CEOs in globally competitive industries want their junior executives to forswear cognitive enhancement, give up their coaches, and ignore the external technology that plugs them into innovative information and insight? And does any serious CEO honestly believe that self-improvement and performance enhancement should be the province of the enterprise alone? Of course not.

The direction in which corporate attitudes will lean is clear, but perhaps it'd be helpful to revisit WWJWD. As *Fortune's* “manager of the century,” Jack Welch is both paragon and paradigm of American executive leadership—a man who stresses the importance of people, performance, talent, and relentless self-improvement. Thus far, in his books and columns, Welch hasn't seriously taken on the issues raised here. But he does offer the best reason why so many talented and ambitious people in China, the United States, India, and elsewhere—in offices, not on ball fields—will devoutly explore the frontiers of performance enhancement. That reason won't be found in the content but, rather, in the title of Welch's best-selling book on business self-improvement: *Winning*. ■