

Q¹²[®] ELEMENT: Q03

At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.

The most powerful benefit a manager can provide his or her employees is to place them in jobs that allow them to use the best of their natural selves — their talents — as well as their skills and knowledge in order to build and apply strengths.

Matching a person to the right job, or a job to the right person, is one of the most complicated responsibilities any manager will face. As a consequence, no other element of managing has as much depth as the Third.

The Third Element emerged from the ability of a straightforward statement to predict the performance of a given worker and entire teams: “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.” With a front-row seat on their own thoughts and feelings, workers have no trouble assessing this element in their own work lives. But the simplicity of the statement belies the complexity within it. The reasons why this element is so powerful go to the heart of the most recent discoveries about human nature and touch on debates about individuality that stretch back for centuries.

For the manager, the problem begins with a simple question: Who would excel in this assignment? But the more a manager delves into that question, the more it spins off additional puzzles. What makes someone succeed where others fail? Is it something innate, something she learned, or is she just trying harder? Can excellence in a certain role be learned? How fast and how much can people change? Can a job candidate be molded to fit the needs of the position, or is what you see during that first interview what you get? These dilemmas not only get to the heart of human nature; they also stir up a swirl of history, politics, legal constraints, and wishful thinking around philosophies that are often deeply held — and wrong.

To get the most from her team, a manager must help each employee mold his job around the way he works most naturally, maximizing the frequency of optimal experiences

in which he loses herself in the work, is internally motivated, and finds himself naturally gifted. She must also realize that as long as he accomplishes the goals for which he is responsible, without any harm along the way, how he gets there does not matter. Acknowledging one’s greatest natural talents and weaknesses does not mean accepting a narrow set of career possibilities. Rather, it means each employee will succeed in a relatively unique way, applying his own style to the accomplishment.

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This summary is a revised excerpt on this Q¹² element from *12: The Elements of Great Managing*.