

Chapter 1: Escaping the Lemming Conspiracy

(Excerpted from *Don't Waste Your Talent* by Bob McDonald, Ph.D. and Don E. Hutcheson, as revised in 2005 by Lazar Emanuel and Tom Tavantzis, Ed.D.)

Why do some hugely talented people seem to bomb out of life? Why do the lives of others who seem naturally less gifted seem to be so much more productive and fruitful? Many people go through life with the strong suspicion that there is some valuable part of themselves that never finds expression. Why is this? And more importantly, how can you make sure that you are using all of the talents you were born with?

This book helps you identify your true talents and figure out how to use them. It is based on work we have been doing for more than fifteen years in helping people find the right fit in their lives, their jobs, and their careers. We have built a growing network of Affiliates throughout the world. Together, we have helped thousands of individuals and have enabled companies to develop their leaders and build their teams.

Before we talk about how to find the right fit, though, we need to discuss why this is so difficult and why so many people are pulled off track.

You may have heard about lemmings. These small arctic mammals band together from time to time and, running in vast herds, throw themselves over sea-side cliffs to their deaths in the sea. As a metaphor, it seems to describe how too many of us live our lives—the authors included.

Let us tell you about a conspiracy – we call it the Lemming Conspiracy – widespread and insidious, that controls what you do every day and even how you feel about what you do. It is a conspiracy that controls your perceptions of yourself and the options in your career.

This conspiracy routinely invades almost every aspect of our lives. Born of benign intentions, but almost totally hidden from our awareness, it operates outside of our conscious will and keeps us from understanding our real talents and what we could really do in the world.

Why do many of us settle for lives that are stressful, frenetic and often empty of meaning? Why do we spend our energy and time acquiring possessions that bring us so little happiness in the end? Why do we ignore people who are important to us, and ignore ourselves in the bargain? We behave in these "irrational" ways because the Lemming Conspiracy keeps us from experiencing ourselves as we really are.

We grow up learning to see a limited range of options as if they constituted all our options. Our schools, colleges, corporations, organizations, friends and families actively work – albeit unintentionally for the most part – to encourage this limited view of our lives. Why? Not because they are evil, certainly, but because they are organized into *systems*. Systems create and perpetuate the Lemming Conspiracy.

The concept of *systems* and how they operate to control cultures, corporations, biology, families, animal societies and human societies is very complex. Scientific analyses of systems are often rather densely unintelligible to the layman. If you bear with us for a moment, however, you will begin to get the idea of what systems are and how they work. For us, as people living in society with each other, systems impose the rules by which our various groups - family, work and social - operate.

How Systems Control Our Perceptions of Ourselves

The fundamental fact about all systems is this: Any system of which you are a member will have its own goals and interests, and those goals and interests are not necessarily the same as your goals and interests.

An Office System

At the very simplest level, everyone in a typical corporate office goes to work at about the same time every day, works steadily during the morning, takes off for lunch at about the same time, works steadily during the afternoon, and finishes the day's work at about the same time. All of the workers in the office know that they have choices about what they do all day long. But they act as though their choices are limited. In order to be members of this particular system-this office-they have to go by the rules. Otherwise the system will not function. Suppose, for example, that a new executive with fresh insights were to join this office. He may try at first to introduce new policies and new procedures, but over time - say six months - he will lose his original incentives and eventually merge into the mold.

Other rules are less obvious but can nevertheless operate more powerfully. Here are some examples of the unstated rules you may find in your office:

UNSTATED OFFICE 'RULES'

- You should strive to make more money and gain a higher position in the organization.
- You must give up significant aspects of your personal life in order to be successful.
- If you don't get promoted, you are a failure.
- Work is not something you should think about enjoying; that's why they call it work.
- You should do whatever it takes to succeed, including, if necessary, work 12-hour days and 75-hour weeks
- Work hard, play by the rules, and you will be successful and happy.
- Happiness has something to do with how much you can buy.

These rules, powerful but covert, may vary from system to system, but they **make the system work**.

If everyone *didn't* act as though moving up the corporate hierarchy and being able to buy a better car were important, then the young people in the company wouldn't be scrambling all over each other trying to compete for the top spots. They wouldn't be willing to put up with drudgery and meaningless labor in order to please someone they may not respect. Middle-aged managers who want something more in their lives might begin to look outside the corporation. The collapse of the corporation would follow, with civilization not far behind - at least, this seems to be the driving fear that motivates systems to remain ever the same.

The *system* acts as though its rules are real and relevant. It assumes that you as a member buy fully into the rules and are willing to share them. Systems are conservative; they don't change their rules easily or often. Superficial changes rarely, if ever, change the fundamental rules of a system. As a member of the system, you are under a great deal of pressure to believe, buy into and live out its rules. And most people do.

Either subtly and silently, or overtly and crassly, systems can encourage employees to forget about their real talents, interests and passions, and to think of their life goals in terms of money and promotions. Employees are not encouraged to explore and develop their natural gifts and talents. They are even discouraged from looking closely at their deepest values. At work, people are often discouraged from engaging in any real self-exploration.

Systems see each person as a collection of simple skills and functions. They operate most smoothly when you see yourself in this way, too. As a result, you remain distant from yourself, defining yourself firmly in a limited way when the reality of yourself may be entirely different. This situation creates and perpetuates the Lemming Conspiracy.

Companies that adhere to systems are increasingly unable to meet the challenges of our modern information and technology-based society. New generations of workers are less and less willing to accept the rules imposed by systems. More and more managers are being forced to rethink the process of motivation - especially when break-through thinking is needed.

How the Lemming Conspiracy Begins – the Family of Origin – a Trip Down Memory Lane

The Lemming Conspiracy begins in the family of origin-the family in which we grow up as children. Our families give us a primary sense of what we are. This happens outside of our awareness, but it is a fundamental fact of our development. Our perceptions of ourselves - smart, stupid, good-looking, capable, incapable, *affiliative*, distant, and all of the hundreds of other ways we describe and think about ourselves - start forming by about age four. They become solidified by the time we are 18 and ready to move out of our family homes into the wider world.

Children absorb a sense of who they are and what they "ought" to be doing in the world from their parents. The rebellious teen fights this influence: "I don't know who I am, but I know who I am not. I am not like my father." What is hidden from the teenager who mutters this is that his father, when he was 18, probably had exactly the same thought about his own father.

Sometime around age 30 to 35, people often realize, with some horror, "I have become my parent." This recognition frequently occurs after they have children of their own. They have, of course, been like their parents all along without realizing it. Their first conscious memories are of the time they were 5 or 6 and their parents were 30 to 35. When recognition strikes, they are simply recalling their first memories of their parents.

This process of acquiring a fully formed image of ourselves, a picture which includes both parents, is almost completely subconscious, but is one of the most powerful forces in our lives. It is called identification. It is the fully formed picture of who we are - a picture we learn in our families of origin, and then take into adulthood. Without it, people could not grow up. They could not leave their families. They could not form ties and relationships in the adult world. They would not know the "rules" of adult life.

Who We Are and Who We Are Not

This image of ourselves gained through identification makes it possible for us to enter the adult world, and creating this image is the main function of the family system. But this image also has limits. We not only learn who we *are* in families, but we also learn who we *are not*. We learn, clearly, what role we are to play in the adult world, and we learn how to play it. As part of the family system, we start to see a divergence between how *the system* sees us and how we see the potential in ourselves. Later, we will talk about the difference between our System Self, the self that the system sees, and our True Self, the person we are able to become.

The family of origin is a system. It is a closed *circle* of relationships that has its own history, rules, roles and customs. All of these remain stable over time. you study a family for many years, you will see that certain roles and types keep reappearing, generation after generation. When we leave home we take it our "model" of the family system out into the world and recreate it when we start our own families.

Our family system is also the model for any other system that we become involved in, join or create throughout our lives. We join systems that "fit." We choose our friends, churches, synagogues, clubs, organizations, schools, companies and corporations, and they choose us, because they fit, and we fit. There is a role we can play in the system that we learned in our family of origin. This role may be exactly right for us. It may tap into every one of our natural talents and satisfy our deepest goals in life. It may express perfectly our fundamental values and involve aspects of life that we find intrinsically fascinating.

Or not. We learn roles in our family of origin that may have more or less do with our personal makeup. As we enter the adult world, we usually discover much more about ourselves than our families see. But our families and other systems in which we become involved - persist in seeing us in the same interpersonal roles they always have. Their perceptions of us don't change easily. All systems strongly encourage you to see yourself as they see you. If you fulfill your role in the way the system expects, then the system operates more smoothly, if not more creatively. The problem for you is that you may get lost and it is difficult to get another view of yourself as long as you continue in the same patterns the system expects.

What follows is a true story about a person who did everything right. She went to the right schools, made wonderful grades, got a great job, and was successful at every turn. While she lived out the life her systems encouraged her to live, she steadily lost a true sense of herself and what she wanted from her life. Although she didn't realize it, she was a victim of the Lemming Conspiracy and stood in danger of wasting her most important talents.

Sarah's Story

Sarah grew up in a small town in Minnesota. An excellent student in high school, she had many extracurricular interests, including theater, which she loved. School came so easily that she seldom had to work hard. Theater consumed a far more important share of her time and creative talent than academics.

Sarah's father, a successful computer systems analyst, had gone to graduate school right after college, intending to get a Ph.D. in history. At the time, he dreamed of teaching. After he earned his master's degree, he did teach for a while.

Teaching made him happy, but he realized that he could never earn an adequate salary in this field. He had been married two years and had a little daughter for whom he was responsible. His own father's image, that of a man providing well for his family, forcefully urged him to change.

Sarah's father switched to computers, and soon was doing well financially. When he took a job, he generally liked it at first, but it quickly became routine. There was nothing intrinsically interesting to him about computers or computer systems. When his unhappiness reached the breaking point, he simply found a new job. To him this did not seem unusual. He assumed most people didn't really like their jobs.

Sarah's mother was also a successful computer systems consultant. She didn't find her work rewarding either just lucrative. She stayed in the same job with the same firm for many years and was considered quite good at her role. She didn't find her work particularly interesting, creative or fun. It was work, and she did it and was happy to have a job.

Sarah's mother had a love, too. She created handmade clothes for children. She had quite a following among her friends and opened a shop to sell her creations. She loved all aspects of this enterprise from the fabrics and their colors, to the design and creation of the clothes, to helping people find exactly the right garment for a family or a child. But she didn't call it work. It was a hobby. In her lexicon, "work" was what you had to do. Enjoyment at work was completely beside the point.

And so Sarah went off to college. She went to a small select, liberal arts college in the South and did well-earning a 3.8 average. "I figured out very quickly what I needed to do to get an A: I just took the right courses and paid attention in class and always did just enough to slide under the wire. I took history courses and an English course, but what I really enjoyed was drama. I got involved in a theater group the first semester I was on campus. It held the whole focus of my attention throughout four years of college. I loved the life of the theater; I loved the people in theater; I loved everything about it. It easily absorbed 90 percent of my attention and energy."

Sarah never thought about what she would do after college. Even well into her senior year, she

did not have a real idea about what she would do when she graduated. An advisor, looking at her transcript, asked her if she had ever thought about law school. She had not. She had never, as far as she could remember, even known a lawyer. But this seemed like a plan.

Sarah applied to six law schools and was accepted by four, among them Yale. She decided to go there. Why? "Its Yale. You can't turn Yale down. "She walked onto the Yale campus the next fall without ever having interviewed a lawyer, or worked in a lawyer's office, or even wondered too much about what a lawyer did. She just thought it would be a way to make money.

"I knew as soon as I started that I hated law. But, once again, I could make A's fairly easily. I did just as much as was necessary, nothing more. I joined a theater group right away, and the great majority of my time and energy went there. The saddest day of my life was the day I graduated from law school. It meant that I would have to stop doing what I really liked to do in life and start working to pay back my law school debts."

Sarah's story was published on the front page of a major metropolitan newspaper, because she had secured a job in a distinguished law firm well before graduation, and because she had produced and directed a video about law students, which was broadcast on PBS. In the video, students talked about law and law school, and their feelings of anger and frustration at being trapped in a profession they didn't like and had no real interest in, but which would pay them well.

We talked to Sarah about a year after she started working for the law firm. As a young associate she had so little time that she couldn't be involved in the theater. She succeeded in the firm, but was already thinking that if she moved to New York City, she could earn more money, save it faster and eventually be able to do what she wanted.

Sarah's Family of Origin

Obviously, Sarah had absorbed a great deal from her mother and father. On the positive side, she had worked hard and had done well at whatever she set out to do. On the negative side, she had absorbed both parents' pattern of being in work they didn't like and had no interest in - work that probably ignored their greatest talents. She would turn to her father's pattern of changing jobs in order to deal with her unhappiness and dissatisfaction. And it would probably work no better for her than it had for her father. Her parents had given her the habits they were driven to use, and she had adopted them without realizing it.

Sarah had left her family of origin and established herself independently. By almost any yardstick she had succeeded, and her family had successfully performed its main role and function.

But no system had ever challenged Sarah's basic assumptions or her decisions. Nor could it. This fundamental limitation of systems is the defining fact of the Lemming Conspiracy.

From the point of view of Sarah's high school, everything was fine. One of their brightest seniors had gone to an excellent liberal arts college. To challenge whether it was the right school, with enough options to explore what she really loved, would be unthinkable. She had done well academically; she had been accepted to a strong academic institution. Perfect.

At college, once again, everything appeared to be fine and on course. How could anyone think there was a problem? Sarah herself didn't think there was a problem. It was only when the end of her senior year loomed that any troubling thoughts came to her. What would she do now? Her advisor saw a bright, articulate student with excellent grades, and one clear answer popped into his head-law school. She could get in, and it would make the college look good. Her acceptance at Yale made it all seem so right.

For the school to challenge these events would be foolish in the extreme. As a small, very

selective and expensive liberal arts institution, the school's survival depended on the success of its graduates in getting into graduate and professional schools. Getting graduates into Yale Law validated the fundamental premise of the school: "We are doing a good job because our graduates go on to high-quality graduate and professional programs."

And Yale certainly never challenged Sarah's decision. It was happy to have such a bright student. It was even happier, as an institution, when one of its brighter and more talented students landed a good job four months before graduation. *That* makes a school look good. The firm in which she landed saw its future in being able to attract smart, talented young lawyers who would work like demons for five to seven years until they were hooked into its financial rewards. Landing a Yale student near the top of her class, and *a female at that*, was exactly what the firm wanted to do). And did.

Each of these systems – high school, college, professional school, law firm – had its own goals and its own interests. Sarah was helping each of these systems to fulfill these interests and goals. But the interests of the systems were clearly not the same as Sarah's true interest - not even close. And Sarah never looked at what her own interests and goals might be. Nor was she encouraged to. Instead, she was encouraged to think of herself as part of the system she was in - bright, successful and on the way to the top. When we met her, she was unhappy and feeling trapped by debt. The only escape she could imagine was the same as the one her father had used - one that had left him unhappy and trapped most of his career.

How We Get Out of Balance and How That Leads to Stress

Sarah's story, that of a young person who goes from success to success to success and yet ends up feeling trapped and unhappy, shows in clear relief how many people live out their lives in systems. While energetically jumping through hoop after hoop, they never stop to examine who they really are and what they really want from their lives.

With patterns and roles absorbed from our families or origin, we leap into the world in our early twenties. We find systems to join that fit our sense of ourselves and our sense of what roles we could play in life. This works well for the systems, and it appears to work pretty well for us—for a while.

Throughout our adult lives, we experience regular cycles of stability and change. We launch ourselves into the beginning of our careers, just as Sarah did. At first everything may seem fine. We may feel that we are a good match for a system at the beginning. The system's values appear to match our own. Our lives seem interesting and exciting.

But with each passing year, we grow and change. We become different on the inside. We have new ideas, meet new people, have new goals and new wants. But the systems in which we remain do not change their views of us. To our systems (and this includes our family systems), we are always the same. Our systems assume we have remained on the same path, and that we have the same commitment to the system's values and rules that we always had.

System Self, True Self and Life Balance

The increasing disparity between ourselves as our systems see us and what we are on the inside—the difference between the *System Self* and the *True Self*—leads to our becoming increasingly out of balance. But we have a choice. We can either struggle against our system's definition of us, or we can increasingly allow ourselves to be seen as our system sees us. Very few people end up struggling against systems—at least, not for very long.

Instead, we *become* who our systems think we are. This invariably means that we are not attending to or putting enough energy into one or more critically important elements of our lives. Systems have only a limited view of us. We are whole people, but systems see only limited roles

and functions. How many middle-aged men have awakened in the middle of the night with the nightmarish realization that their lives feel utterly meaningless and their energies are being wasted? How many middle-aged women have suddenly seen their lives lose meaning when their children leave home? Or how many hard-driving professional women wake up in their late thirties and realize they have forgotten to build a family? One 45-year old woman we know, a successful marketing director, realized suddenly one day that she was living the life that others expected of her - not the life that would express her own true self. Her family of origin had blinded her to life's alternatives.

The Lemming Conspiracy has captured all these people and anesthetized them. These middle-aged men and women suddenly awaken to discover what has really been going on for a number of years: their System Selves, defined by the roles or functions that the system demands, and their True Selves - the whole person that was and is possible - have grown irreparably apart. The metaphor of the "boiled frog" has been used to describe what happens to us when we get caught up in systems. Conceived by Richard Boyatzis (2002), the boiled frog metaphor goes something like this: if you place a frog into boiling water it will jump out at once, but if you place the frog in a pot of water and bring the water to a boil slowly, the frog will allow himself to be cooked. In much the same way our personalities - who we are and how we face the world - come upon us slowly, until we ourselves are "cooked." Then, in middle age, we try to figure out how we got the way we are.

The Allegory of the Cave

Of course the grand metaphor for how we build a false idea of ourselves comes to us from our Hellenic relative Plato who gave us the Allegory of the Cave.

Imagine, Plato teaches, that all men live in a deep cave. They know nothing else. The entrance to the cave is miles away and has never been found. Trapped in their dark chamber, they conclude that the shadows created by the fires they light constitute the only reality. Various shapes and shadows pass in front of them. From these images they create their own reality. Now, suppose, Plato continues, that one of the men escapes the cave and ventures forth into the world outside. At first, the light baffles him. Suppose, however, that his eyes gradually got accustomed to the light. What would he think now of his old world of shadows? Would he return and tell the others about his new world of light? Would the others believe him or would they turn against him and reject him as a false prophet?

We are all prisoners in a cave trying to find the light. Each of us has to make sense of his or her time here. At some point, if we're lucky, we come to point in life when we realize that what we have experienced - our model of the world - is but one of many alternatives, one of many possible stories. Each of us, at different points in our careers, tries to answer the eternal questions posed by life: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my responsibility? To myself? To others? And how can I be of use?

These questions are about purpose. When we know the answers, we know life's meaning.

The result of not knowing? Stress. Also anxiety, anger and often depression. When the stress or anxiety reaches a critical point, it often starts to arouse awareness. It is at these times of greater awareness-times we call Turning Points-that we seek new answers and change.

We can find creative answers and new directions at Turning Points, but too often we do not, because the Lemming Conspiracy still holds us captive.

Turning Points and Life Changes

As we reach a critical point of stress and anxiety, we arrive at a Turning Point. At Turning Points we feel ready for change. We actively seek new answers. One of the best-documented Turning

Points arrives at midlife, but we have identified eight of them. With remarkable regularity, they come every seven to ten years throughout our adult lives. These all-important times of crisis can lead to positive creativity and change. But all too often, the opportunity is turned away and they do not lead to change.

At Turning Points, we often become aware of the increasing disparity between who we are and the person our systems see. And we often try to change something. But what? The answers too often come from our family of origin. We will often make the same kind of decision, and for about the same reason, as one or the other of our parents made at the same age. **We will talk more about Turning Points and how we make these decisions in Chapter 3.**

In Sarah's story, we saw the pattern of decision-making at Sarah's Turning Points-both for Sarah and her parents. At the critical Turning Point at the start of her adulthood, Sarah decided to go into a field that was financially secure but offered little personal reward, just as her father had done. Her sense of what work is and should be was formed by what she had observed in her mother and father. She was well on her way to repeating her father's strategy for dealing with stress. We can predict that she would be no more successful in her decision than her father had been.

We were able to see these same forces at work with a young man named Mitchell, who came upon a Turning Point a little later in life. Mitchell became increasingly aware of the disparity between his System Self and his True Self and was moved to make changes. The first answers he thought of came straight from his family of origin, just as they would for anyone. They could easily have led him to repeat Sarah's mistake. But Mitchell took a new path, and his story ends differently from Sarah's.

Mitchell's Story

Mitchell started working for a large technology firm straight out of college. He pursued his career energetically and achieved success early. He worked predominantly in sales. He came to the attention of his bosses, and they wanted him on the fast track. "By age 30, I liked what I was doing. I liked my co-workers and clients. The company had been good to me, but I just felt this restlessness and uneasiness I couldn't put my finger on. "

The firm could not help Mitchell with this problem. All of its answers were in the interest of the firm, not of Mitchell. Obviously, as long as Mitchell was productive, his firm would encourage him to "stay the course. "It was in its interest for Mitchell to think that a good job, good pay, and good co-workers were enough. That is exactly what Mitchell thought. Or, more correctly, thought he should think.

Once this subtle misconception takes root - that a company's interests and a person's interest are the same thing - stress and imbalance loom on the horizon. Mitchell made this mistake when he delayed his wish for change by admonishing himself to just grow up, settle down and endure. Mitchell's firm could not help him figure out who he was and what he wanted. Mitchell sensed that he had to do something different, and the fact that he was obviously successful just made his wish for change more stressful. Mitchell's True Self had diverged from his System Self, but he had no way to find and identify his True Self. He had no way to create a vision of his True Self which would help him to stand up to his systems.

Mitchell's family couldn't help. The message from his parents could not have been clearer: "Are you crazy? Stay with your job. It's secure. "He felt strongly about his responsibility to his young wife and to his newly born child. He couldn't do anything that would jeopardize their wellbeing. And yet he needed to do something.

Here, Mitchell's story departs from Sarah's. Mitchell actively sought different answers by going through a structured process that systematically focused on all of the important factors of his life

and career. It was crucial that the process not involve his firm, his family or his circle of friends and colleagues. It had to be independent of all his systems and their vested interest in the outcome of his search. As a result, it would help him come up with his own answers-what we call a Personal Vision. With his own Personal Vision, Mitchell could escape the Lemming Conspiracy and start leading his own life.

What is a Personal Vision? What must it include to be effective in illuminating your True Self and defeating the Lemming Conspiracy? Eight critical factors must contribute to the Vision. Leave one out, and you risk remaining entrapped.

Mitchell discovered the things that fit and the things that did not, and why. Mitchell had some idea of his talents, but he couldn't articulate them with any detail. By learning exactly what his strongest talents were, he was able to focus and position himself more accurately. He knew what he wanted to move away from; more importantly, he knew what tasks and roles he should move toward. He also knew why his systems' answers, although compelling, were not right for him. He was able to create a plan and make a significant move in his career to a position and role that he felt expressed his true talents more exactly. He says of his change: "My clients are happy, and I get to play from my strengths and my love. It is truly a wonderful fit."

In this book, we take you through the structured process Mitchell used to change his life and career. We call it using the Eight Personal Vision Factors. We created this process, and thousands of clients have used it successfully. It leads you to self-discovery. You must find your true natural talents and expose your hopes and dreams to daylight. You must identify your most potent skills and even journey back to your original family system. Finally, you will be able to use this process to create your own Personal Vision-the vision of your True Self in the workplace.

Your Personal Vision should have a definite structure and form to be effective.

Merely identifying and articulating the eight Personal Vision Factors is not enough. A Personal Vision involves creative integration-a creative insight, if you will.

In the end, a Personal Vision must relate to the real world if it is to help you live a balanced life. In

Chapter 2: The Stress Cycle and the Balance Cycle

The Lemming Conspiracy leads inevitably to the loss of real talent and to lives lived out of balance. The answers to questions about work and career we learned from our families help us move out into the adult world. But over time, they cease to be adequate because too much information is missing. Our systems prevent us from recognizing and changing this situation. As we let some important talents lie fallow, ignore some important aspect of ourselves, neglect a critical value, or do work for which we feel no intrinsic passion, we develop an increasing disparity between our System Selves and our True Selves. We come to live in the Stress Cycle.

Most of the people you know live in the Stress Cycle, as you probably do yourself. The Lemming Conspiracy produces the Stress Cycle for nearly everyone sooner or later. Over time the Stress Cycle comes to rule our lives.

This chapter shows how the Stress Cycle eventually captures all of us and why it has such a profound impact. But this chapter also tells us about the alternative - the Balance Cycle - and what it means to achieve it. We will describe how to move from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle and how a Personal Vision makes the journey possible. We will explain what a Personal Vision is and how you can create one for yourself. You'll learn how to beat the Lemming Conspiracy.

In the Stress Cycle, we feel as though we are jumping through hoops. We work hard and gain little. Our day-to-day lives have little real meaning for us, even when we are engaged in work we used to enjoy. We have the uneasy feeling that something is missing, but it's difficult to identify what that may be. We have the definite sense that there is no time to think about any of this anyway. We barely have time to do the things that are absolutely necessary.

The hallmark of the Stress Cycle is its relentless rush. You never stop. If you are in the Stress Cycle, you have only enough time to do the next task, or concentrate on the next project. There is no time for such "unproductive" work as thinking about your life or finding out how you really want to spend your time.

More to the point, if you are in the Stress Cycle, it is virtually impossible to identify your true talents or to move yourself into circumstances that allow you to use them.

If we operate in the Stress Cycle, we pass the tension on to our children. They see it as the normal and natural way for adults to live their lives. We can tell them a thousand times that they can choose to live their lives any way they want to, and that they don't have to choose the same answers we did - but none of that helps. We see a great many high school students already caught in the Stress Cycle. Many try desperately to avoid living the way their parents live. The hard fact is, if we are in the Stress Cycle, sooner or later, our children will be in the Stress Cycle, too.

How does the Stress Cycle start? Obviously no one would willingly and knowingly choose to live like this. No parents would want their children to live this way. So why does virtually everyone do it?

The Stress Cycle emerges directly from our systems and the Lemming Conspiracy. As we move into our systems from our families of origin, we feel an incredibly strong pull to take the next step: Select a major. Graduate from college. Get a job. Succeed. Earn more money. Buy more things. Move up in the organization. Complete the next project. Gain the boss's attention and approval. Become a boss. Retire. Die.

We are not talking about intelligence or character. We are talking about the universal pull by which systems trap us in the Stress Cycle. We are talking about how difficult it is to separate ourselves from this pull. Even people who routinely help others to look at their long-term goals never think about whether their own lives are expressing a long-range vision.

So, what are the elements of the Stress Cycle?

ELEMENTS OF THE STRESS CYCLE

1. Short-term focus. Getting the next task done. "I'll just get this promotion, and then I'll be able to live my life." Probably not. This focus on the task or project at hand means that you are never able to focus on a larger context. What about your real talents? What about your life? Most people spend far more time and energy focused on how they will spend their annual vacation than they do on how they will spend the next 20 or 40 years of their lives. Your systems want you to focus on the short-term goals. It is in their interest for you to do so. They know and rely on the fact that it's difficult to get beyond short-term goals when you have to meet the demands of work and family.

2. Status-driven goals. A new car would feel great. A new house. Maybe a second house. A promotion would mean that I'm getting somewhere in life. I want to dress like my bosses and drive their cars. I want to have the kind of lifestyle that I see in magazines and on television. I want more responsibility, so I can have more say in what happens to me. I want to be in charge, so I can have a life. Your systems want you to feel all of this. They want you to work very hard to

achieve something that is basically empty of meaning, so that when you achieve it, you will focus on the next goal.

3. Outer-directed priorities. Someone else tells you what is important. New car? Promotion? More money? Getting a college degree, earning a lot of money, gaining a position of responsibility and power-these are all worthy goals, but only if they are a direct expression of your own Personal Vision. But, if they are not connected to anything larger in your life, they become empty, and you find yourself being pulled along from hoop to hoop.

4. Reactive decision-making. Focusing only on short-term goals. Responding to everyday events as though to crises. When people concentrate only on short-term results, they become vulnerable to throwing all of their energy and creativity into problems that, in a longer view, may not be that important. Researchers in human behavior found long ago that getting people to concentrate on short-term rewards resulted in increasingly short-term behavior. This narrowing of focus inflates the importance of what are likely to be trivial events. This inevitably leads to stress. How many people have led successful professional lives and accomplished each of their many goals only to discover, too late, that they never developed a relationship with their children? Or their spouse? Or with themselves, for that matter?

People in the Stress Cycle get caught up in achieving the next goal and accomplishing the next task. They are too busy to think about what their talents are or how to use them. Too busy to examine their lives and figure out what could be personally meaningful. But people do not generally start out in the Stress Cycle. It develops over time. Eventually, they become like the frog who succumbs slowly to ever-hotter water. They don't realize that the time will come when escape is impossible.

How the Stress Cycle Takes Over Our Lives

There are many high school students who are completely caught up in the Stress Cycle. In academically competitive high schools, they are probably the majority. The Stress Cycle grips students even more firmly in college. As young men and women move out into the work world, marry, buy houses, cars, baby strollers and vacations, the Stress Cycle becomes as natural and normal as breathing. But answers that worked reasonably well in the family of origin and even for a while in early adulthood, eventually cease to function well at all. This is when stress develops.

When we live with chronic stress, we lose the ability to come up with creative answers. Our focus becomes short-term-we just want to get this job done, and then we can rest. We tend to focus on the goal directly in front of us. We don't have the energy or focus to think about the significance of what we are doing; we just need to do it. We tend to follow any direction presented to us. Unconsciously, we fall back on patterns learned in the family of origin. It is here that we start to become more and more like one or the other of our parents, as we begin to make decisions in exactly the way our parent made them at that age. What gets lost is you-and your own personal talents.

Inevitably the Stress Cycle results in an ever-escalating spiral of short-term pressures. Cycles of Stress are not limited to individuals and family but extend also to teams and organizations! We worked extensively with one team of scientists. In their work, they saw themselves as reactive and crisis-oriented and skilled at solving Quality problems for their company. In fact, the team was highly regarded for its ability to deal with immediate problems and for savings to the company in both reputation and euros. As time went on and the team went from one daily crisis to the next, however, they all began to experience considerable stress. It dawned on them that virtually all of them had the same abilities and talents. These made them excel at short-term problem-solving. What they lacked was the longer-range focus of people with divergent abilities. The decision was made to bring in members who would have a longer term view of problems. This would counter-balance the team's focus on the day-to-day and relieve the team's stress.

Anyone can be a victim of the Stress Cycle, and in truth, almost everyone is at some point. But what is the alternative? We all live in systems. We all have to live in a stressful world. All of us get some answers from our families of origin and then take them out into the world when we start our own lives. The answers we get will not be dispositive and will eventually lead us to another crisis and a new Turning Point.

But these "crises" in our adult lives don't have to be negative. At these times, we can become more receptive to change. We can look for new answers. Instead of adopting the system's answers or our family's answers, we can use this opportunity to find our own answers. Over time, we can move from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle. We can learn to recognize and use our most powerful talents every day.

Just as in the Stress Cycle, the elements of the Balance Cycle relate strongly to each other. One element leads to the next, and then to the next. Once you get into the Balance Cycle, it perpetuates itself. And, you can pass the Balance Cycle along to your children-but only if you're living in it yourself.

So how does the Balance Cycle work? What are the elements?

ELEMENTS OF THE BALANCE CYCLE

- 1. Long-term focus.** Ultimately, everything you do should connect clearly to a fundamental value or goal. In the Balance Cycle, intermediate and short-term goals are steps toward a larger goal. When concentrating on a current project, it is important not to lose sight of why you undertook it in the first place and how it relates to the next project.
- 2. Meaning-driven goals.** What you do every day should contribute to giving your life meaning. If it doesn't, why are you doing it? The old saying runs: "No one ever got to the end of his life wishing he had spent more time at the office." Time at the office doesn't provide the answers all by itself. Unless it is connected to something larger, it is just work. The meaning in work, if it comes at all, comes from its connection to all you want and need in your life.
- 3. Inner-directed priorities.** People in the Balance Cycle move toward goals they have chosen for themselves, not the **goals imposed** by their systems. As we have seen, it is often *difficult* to separate what we want from what our systems want us to want. This is why building your goals on a structure that is outside your systems is so necessary and helpful.
- 4. Vision-based decision-making.** One executive explained how he used his Personal Vision: "It is a template. Whenever an opportunity comes up, I match it up to my Personal Vision. If it will move me toward my Vision, I take it. If not, I politely decline. People often ask me how I can be so decisive and sure about important decisions. The reason is that I know where I'm trying to go, I know why, and I know it with a great deal of clarity and specificity." Another executive in a global company was recently caught up in the downsizing of his company. His original dismay at the unexpected turn of events was relieved when he received his generous separation package and he turned to the Vision Statement we had helped him to create many years earlier.

People who operate in the Balance Cycle have a positive Personal Vision of their future. They feel that what they do will lead them to ultimate happiness and satisfaction. They see satisfaction in a larger context than as immediate **gain**. They actively seek and find meaning in whatever they do.

When you're in the Balance Cycle, you can create a life in which you can use your talents. Not only in the context of your immediate job, but in the larger context of your entire life. Your talents

are more or less constant throughout your working life, but there are many other critical factors that change throughout your life and threaten to pull you away from your real talents. These factors put you in danger of wasting your true strengths.

People in the Balance Cycle are not surprised by change. In the Stress Cycle, stress, anxiety and depression build to the point of crisis, and the crisis precipitates a change which may or may not be salutary. People in the **Balance** Cycle have already considered what may be next and why. Change becomes part of the whole Personal Vision or plan. People in the Balance Cycle approach Turning Points with a blueprint for making decisions. Above all, they approach Turning Points with the idea of adding significantly to their lives, not merely getting rid of things that are causing them stress.

The Balance Cycle is an obvious and worthwhile alternative to the Stress Cycle, but how do we get there?

Personal Vision

The vehicle for moving you from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle is a Personal Vision of your life and career. A Personal Vision is an image of yourself in a future in which you are using your most powerful talents, doing work that is meaningful and fulfilling. It connects you to your own future. It can help you at each Turning Point when you make decisions about your life and career. It can help you every day to make those small decisions that lead either to the Stress Cycle or to the Balance Cycle.

Though it helps you to see and steer into the future, a Personal Vision must be firmly grounded in the present in you. It must include every significant aspect of who you are, what you're hard-wired to do and what you want from your life.

The Structure of a Personal Vision

I. To be effective, a Personal Vision must comprise all important elements of your life and career. It should take into consideration:

- A. **Your natural talents and abilities.** This is how you're hardwired. These are the you naturally do well-your inborn gifts. If you work against them, work becomes labor. If you work with them, everything is easier and more fun.
- B. **Your skills and life experience.** What you have learned in life creates a collection of hugely valuable assets to use in the next stage of your career. Your Personal Vision will help you to identify and use these assets as you grow older and your life changes. The skills you develop add to your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses.
- C. **Your Interests and fascinations.** What draws your attention, what pulls you. This often-neglected factor acts as the source of your most important creative energy. Follow your passions.
- D. **Your interpersonal style.** Accurately identifying and working through your personal style means that you can work more productively, expend less energy, and experience less stress. We're talking about analyzing your personality – how do you relate and respond to ideas and people.
- E. **Your values.** The things you feel are worth doing in life. Your values give your life an overall sense of direction and purpose. More and more, we are associating values with character. Do you live your values?

- F. **Your goals.** What you want to do in life. What you want to accomplish. Many people find out with a shock that they have been pursuing someone else's goals—too late. Defining your goals will give you the steps to follow, the way stations on your path.
- G. **Your family of origin.** As we have seen, some of the most fundamental concepts you take into adult life develop in the family in which you grow up. Including this knowledge in your Personal Vision gives the Vision integrity, depth and meaning, often in profound ways. Don't think about the problems within your family, but how each person looked at the world. What role did they *play*? How were decisions made? How was stress managed? Go back three generations. For many of you, this will be the most helpful and insightful part of the process of building your vision statement.
- H. **Your stage of adult development.** The Personal Vision of a high school student setting off to college will be different from that of a 42-year-old woman who would like to do something different with her life, or a 65-year old executive planning retirement.

II. Your Personal Vision needs to involve both objective and subjective elements. The place to start is with a completely objective look at your natural talents – your basic hard-wiring. The only way you can really assess your talents is through objective measurements involving action-based worksamples. Once you have defined and understood your natural talents information you can put to use with increasing objectivity, the direction and scope of your Personal Vision will be modified by more subjective **factors** such as interests, personality, values and goals. The Highlands Ability Battery of objective worksamples is the best tool for understanding natural abilities.

III. Your Personal Vision should be based on a structure that is outside of your current work and your social and family systems. Advice **family**, friends or business associates, however wise and well-meant, can only have meaning when it's viewed from the perspective of your own Personal Vision. To gain a more objective and complete view of yourself, you need to step outside your personal systems for a time. This is the only way you can know for sure that your Personal Vision is not just another manifestation of your family's messages, or of answers from your other current systems.

We recently conducted an intense three-day retreat among 23 executives in three different teams of the same company. The company was being merged into a larger company and many jobs were on the line. Beginning with the Highlands Ability Battery, each participant did a serious amount of work in preparation for the retreat, which lasted from 8 AM to 6 PM every day. The results exceeded everyone's expectations. Everyone was now prepared to face the interviews leading to new jobs and prospects. The participants had accomplished three things: they had gotten out of their systems and worked within a new structure; they had explored all the eight Personal Vision factors; and they had made a commitment to monitor their Vision Statements throughout the forthcoming transitional period.

IV. Your Personal Vision should provide a blueprint for important life , and career decisions. People who have a Personal Vision are sure of themselves. At important times, *they* can act and decide independently of their work and family systems because they have thought through all of the important factors that they want to influence their lives.

Creating a Personal Vision

The process of creating a Personal Vision and moving from Stress to Balance is vital. It's easy to understand the theories behind the Stress Cycle and the Balance Cycle, and how a Personal Vision can help you move from one to the other. That something is the creation of a Personal Vision vivid enough to guide your life. Here's how to get there:

1. **You must stop.** The Stress Cycle will keep you in constant flux. It will keep your mind constantly focused on events in the here and now. You must stop and give yourself a period of concentrated, uninterrupted time in order to do the work of getting to a Personal Vision. Not 15 minutes when you don't have any other appointments or commitments, but significant blocks of time over several weeks or months that are scheduled and inviolable.
2. **You must get outside of your systems.** Next to stopping, this is the most difficult step. You need answers different from those your family, friends or corporate systems can provide. Not because there is anything wrong with them, but because their stock of answers is virtually identical to your own initial stock of answers. What you need at a Turning Point is the ability to take a fresh look at your answers and preconceptions.
3. **You must engage in a structured exploration of all eight Personal Vision Factors:** natural abilities, skills, interests, personal style, values, goals, your family of origin and stage of development. If you leave one out, you risk creating a blind spot in your Personal Vision that will force you to stumble back into stress and crisis at the next Turning Point.
4. **You need to integrate creatively all eight of the Personal Vision Factors.** This task is too complicated and intuitive to perform logically. How do your values interact with your goals? How do both relate to your talents? These are not linear questions and they don't lead to linear answers. In order to arrive at a Personal Vision, you must use the more creative elements of your mind.
5. **You need to apply it to the real world.** A Personal Vision that is just an idea or a dream is not complete. You need to bring in information from the real world in order to make it a useful tool for your life.