

# STRATEGY AND THE FAT SMOKER

CHAPTER

When I first joined the Harvard Business School... [CONTINUE](#)

BY **DAVID MAISTER**

**WHEN I FIRST JOINED THE HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL** as an assistant professor, I was not full of self-confidence. In fact, I was sure that I was a hiring mistake. After about six months, there was a knock at my office door. I opened it, and there stood one of my senior colleagues. “Hi, David,” he said, “Have you got a minute for me?”

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When I tell this story in my seminars, I turn to the participants and ask, “What was it about what he did and the way that he did it that made it so effective as a piece of coaching?”

The answers people give are numerous, but almost always include the following:

#### **ENFORCING STANDARDS**

By his presence, he obviously (a) had been paying attention and (b) was able to respond in real time to my “departure from excellence.”

A performance discussion at compensation-setting time is the absolute worst time to get someone to engage with you, acknowledge a performance issue, and participate in designing a solution.

**INFORMAL AND UNSCHEDULED**

Most people agree that informal interactions have been most influential in their own development. Very few people attribute much influence, if any, to the formal processes they experienced, such as annual performance reviews, counseling sessions, even training programs.

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**HE TALKED ABOUT ME—AND ONLY ME**

The most fascinating topic for most human beings is themselves. Talk to me about me, and you have my full attention. Talk to me about anything else, and the odds that I will engage go down dramatically.

**HE SEEMED INTERESTED**

He actually made me believe that he was interested in me personally! He seemed to care, at least a little, about me as a person. As human beings, we accept the influence mostly, if not exclusively, of those we trust, and our trust is earned by true trustworthiness, not technique.

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**HE DIDN'T CRITICIZE**

At no time did my colleague say anything negative about me. He did *not* criticize me, even though a critique would have been fair and valid. The absolute worst way to get someone to acknowledge and correct a weakness is to criticize him or her!

## **The absolute worst way to get someone to acknowledge and correct a weakness is to criticize him or her!**

As humans, we have a built-in reflex: Criticize me and I will defend myself whether what you say is valid or invalid, fair or unfair.

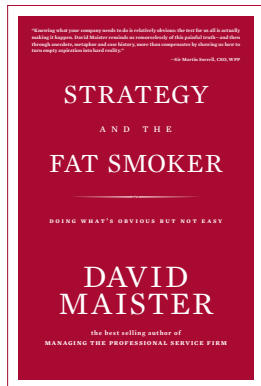
### **HE ACTUALLY HELPED ME**

I have worked with people around the world for decades, and I frequently ask, “How many of you think that your manager, coach or supervisor actually *helps* you succeed (as opposed to demanding that you do)?” The proportions are depressingly small, as low as 10 percent.

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It’s instructive to note that many of us frequently *do* apply the lessons and approaches described above, but we tend to restrict these habits to our personal lives without transferring them to the business world. When we care, we do things in a coaching fashion. When we don’t, we don’t. And in either case, we get back what we deserve.

## INFO



### BUY THE BOOK

Click here to get more details or buy a copy of David Maister's *Strategy and the Fat Smoker*.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Maister is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading authorities on the management of professional service firms. For two decades he has acted as a consultant to prominent professional firms around the world, on a wide variety of strategic and managerial issues. In 2002, he was named as one of the top 40 business thinkers in the world (Business Minds, by Tom Brown, PrenticeHall/Financial Times). He is the author of the bestselling books *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002). These books have been translated into 14 languages. For seven years, he served as a professor on the faculty of the Harvard Business School (1979-85), prior to launching his consulting practice. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

In March of 2005, he finally took his own advice, gave up smoking and lost 30 pounds.

Visit his website at [www.davidmaister.com](http://www.davidmaister.com).

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