CHAPTER 20.

What is the SMALL BIG that could turn your potential into reality?

Suppose that you are looking to persuade a new client that yours is the company that deserves a lucrative contract. Alternatively, imagine you want to position yourself as the obvious choice for a new job or promotion. Will you be more successful by making small changes in your approach to highlight your previous experiences and past successes? Or would you be better advised to focus on your potential instead, pointing out to the client or recruiter what you can deliver in the future?

In a quick (and admittedly very unscientific) survey that one of us conducted with folks in the office, a clear answer to this question emerged. You should focus on your past experience and achievements. At first glance this seems to make sense. Actual and real achievements are surely more compelling than the potential to achieve in the future for good reason: They have already been accomplished. They are concrete. They leave no room for doubt. Therefore all other things being equal, when it comes to choosing which company will secure that lucrative new contract, the odds will surely favor the one with years of experience and a glut of industry awards compared to the less experienced new-kid-on-the-block that merely has the potential to do well. Similarly, the more attractive prospect for that promotion will be the candidate who has already achieved notable career success,
not necessarily the candidate who merely has the potential to succeed.

But in reality this isn’t always the case. Examples abound of budding sports stars who negotiate eye-popping sums of money on the basis of their future potential. Former NFL quarterback JaMarcus Russell was the first overall pick in the 2007 NFL draft, landing a contract with the Oakland Raiders worth an astounding $61 million. Clearly the Raiders saw such potential in Russell that they were persuaded to pay top dollar for his services—potential that never translated into on-field success. In the business world many of us can recall instances when the promising but inexperienced candidate landed the promotion over the more experienced colleague. And if you have ever worked in a business development or sales role, you will at some time have lost a deal to a competitor who, at least on paper, didn’t come close to your levels of experience and past accomplishments.

So when it comes to persuading others, which should you focus on: potential or reality?

According to persuasion scientists Zakary Tormala, Jayson Jia, and Michael Norton (coauthor of the excellent book Happy Money) you should focus on your potential because—somewhat counterintuitively—the potential to be great at something will often seem more compelling to decision makers than actually being great at that very same thing. In other words, the promise of potential often outshines the reality.

In one of their studies Tormala and his colleagues asked participants to evaluate an applicant who had applied for a senior position in the banking division of a large company. All participants learned that the applicant had received his bachelor’s degree from Cornell University, majored in economics with a 3.82 grade point average, and earned a master of business administration degree from New York University. However, some participants learned that the applicant had two years of relevant banking experience and had recently received a score of 92/100 on a test called the Assessment of Leadership Achievement, whereas other participants learned that
the applicant had no relevant banking experience and had recently received a score of 92/100 on a test called the Assessment of Leadership Potential. All the participants were told that both tests assessed how a candidate would likely perform two years down the line.

Remarkably, the participants believed that the applicant in the potential condition would be a more successful hire than the applicant in the achievement condition. This was despite the fact that the applicant was objectively much less qualified due to having no prior relevant experience. Interestingly, when asked to predict which of the applicants they believed would be performing better after five years, participants were still much more likely to select the applicant in the potential condition achievement. In a follow-up study, Tormala and colleagues found the same results when participants had to choose between two individuals who differed on potential vs. actual achievement but who were comparable in every other way. These results clearly speak to the power of potential.

It turns out that the persuasive pull of potential over reality didn’t just hold true in a recruitment setting. Tormala and his colleagues also found evidence for the preference for potential effect in a more consumer-based environment among users of a social media website. In the study, Facebook users were shown a series of quotes about a comedian. Half were shown comments highlighting the comedian’s potential such as “This guy could become the next big thing” and “Next year everyone could be talking about this comedian.” The other half were shown comments that focused attention on the comedian’s actual achievements like, “Critics say he has become the next big thing” and “Everyone is talking about this guy.”

As was the case with the banking recruitment study, and further demonstrating a general preference for potential over accomplishment, Facebook users registered much greater interest (measured by click rates) and liking (measured by fan rates) when quotes about the comedian’s potential, rather than actual achievements, were highlighted.

But why?
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The researchers believe that one potential reason why potential will often capture attention more than reality is due to the fact that reality has happened, making it completely certain. Whereas despite the obvious disadvantages that potential can inject into a message or a communication, the uncertainty that the audience experiences when evaluating the person with potential serves to offer a wonderful advantage—namely, a tendency to arouse more interest.

So does this mean that when it comes to decision making, people will believe potential to be a more reliable decision trigger than reality? Hardly. But given that potential has an arousing quality, which in turn can persuade people to pay greater attention, it makes sense for any communicator to align appeals in a way that prospers from this insight. In fact, the authors of the study go on to make this exact point, suggesting that if supporting information is provided immediately after attention is focused on potential (e.g., a testimonial from a trusted source, a high leadership score, or some other type of persuasive message), the likelihood of a favorable attitude or impression is increased.

Suppose then that the time has come to make the case to a prospective client that yours is the company to do business with. Suppose further that you believe a competitive advantage that your company provides is a mixture of relevant previous experience coupled with new ways of thinking. One small but important area you should pay careful attention to is the order in which you present that combination of advantages. You should position your messages in a way that first focuses that client’s attention on the potential future benefits that your proposal offers, followed by examples of what your organization has previously delivered.

Similarly if you are applying for a promotion, or providing an endorsement for someone who is, then these studies suggest that you would be more effective by first highlighting the future po-

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tential you (or the person you are recommending) will bring to the role rather than immediately leading with your prior experience. Doing so could increase the chances that you will capture a recruiter's interest, meaning that the subsequent information you convey about actual achievements and experience will get more focused attention. Similarly, high school graduates should alert college admissions officers to the potential they offer early on in the personal statements that accompany their college applications.

Real estate agents looking to market an undesirable property might create a more favorable image in prospective buyers' minds by making small changes that focus more on a property's potential. For example, they could highlight the possibilities that exist for turning that run-down building into a home office or a delightful retreat for your favorite mother-in-law or suggest that you could "realize your dreams with this renovation project."

Emphasizing one's potential could also prove valuable for job-seekers who find themselves with a resume that contains less work experience than likely rival candidates. Here the recommendation is not to focus on one's experience but instead to focus on upside evidence. Will this simple shift alone be enough to get the job? Maybe not, but it could at least be the key that unlatches the door to a meeting where many other small BIG insights from this book could then be deployed to make a good result more likely.
18. **What SMALL BIG can reduce people’s tendency to procrastinate? (And yours too!)**


19. **What SMALL BIG can keep your customers hooked?**


20. **What is the SMALL BIG that could turn your potential into reality?**


21. **What SMALL BIGs could help you lead more productive meetings?**