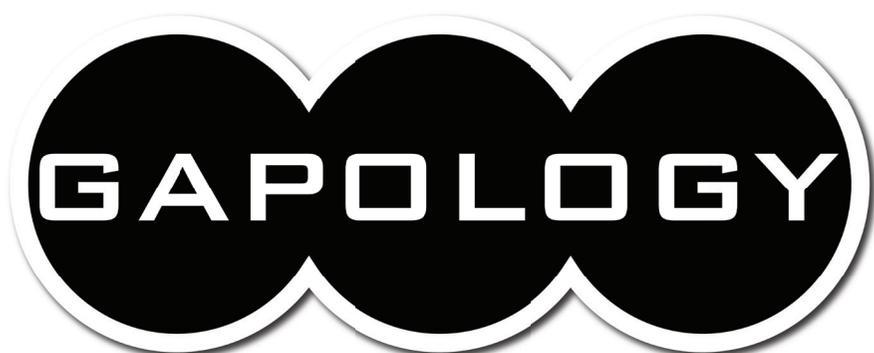


HOW WINNING LEADERS CLOSE  
PERFORMANCE GAPS



MARK THIENES  
BRIAN BROCKHOFF

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*Gapology: How Winning Leaders Close Performance Gaps,  
5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*

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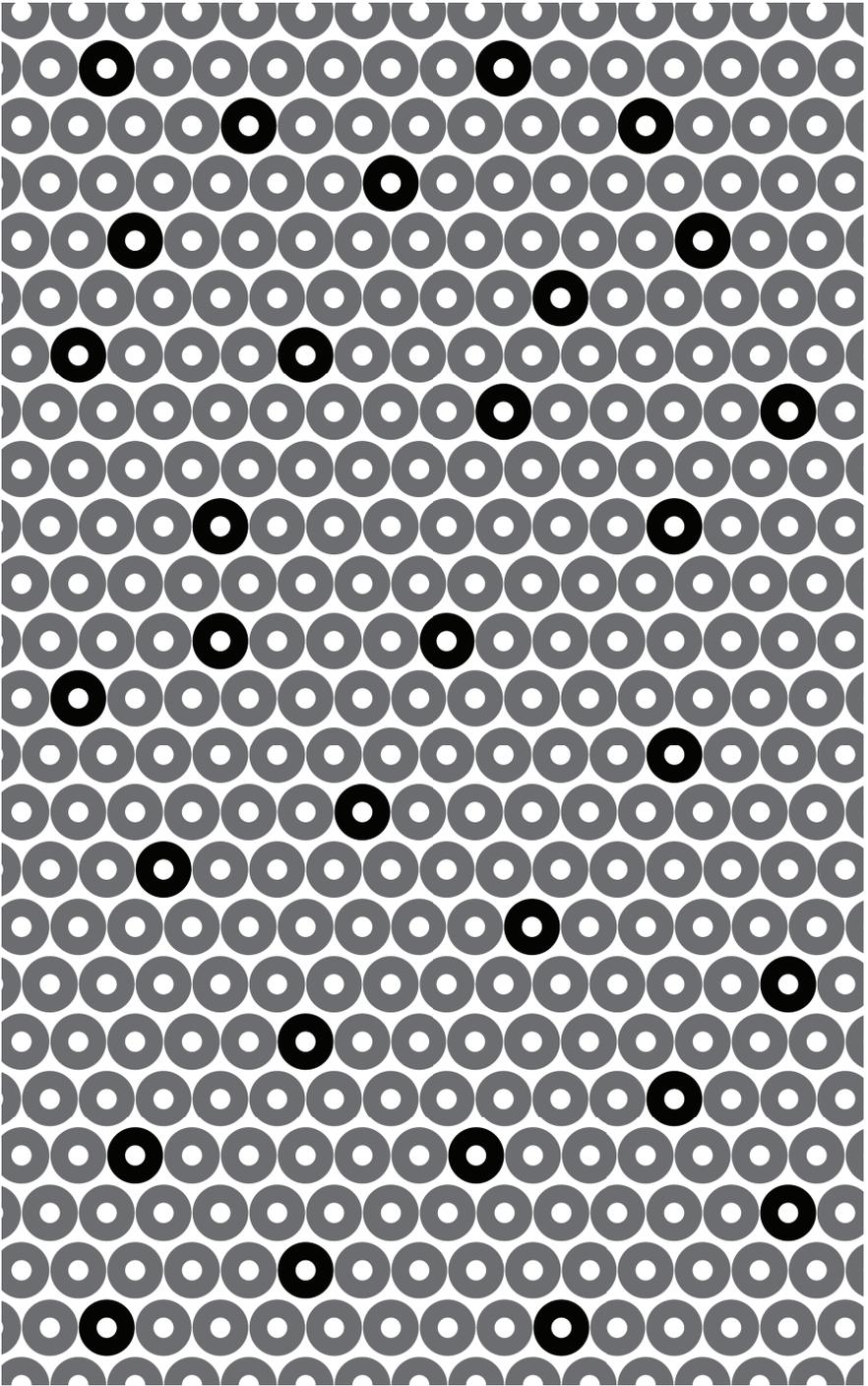
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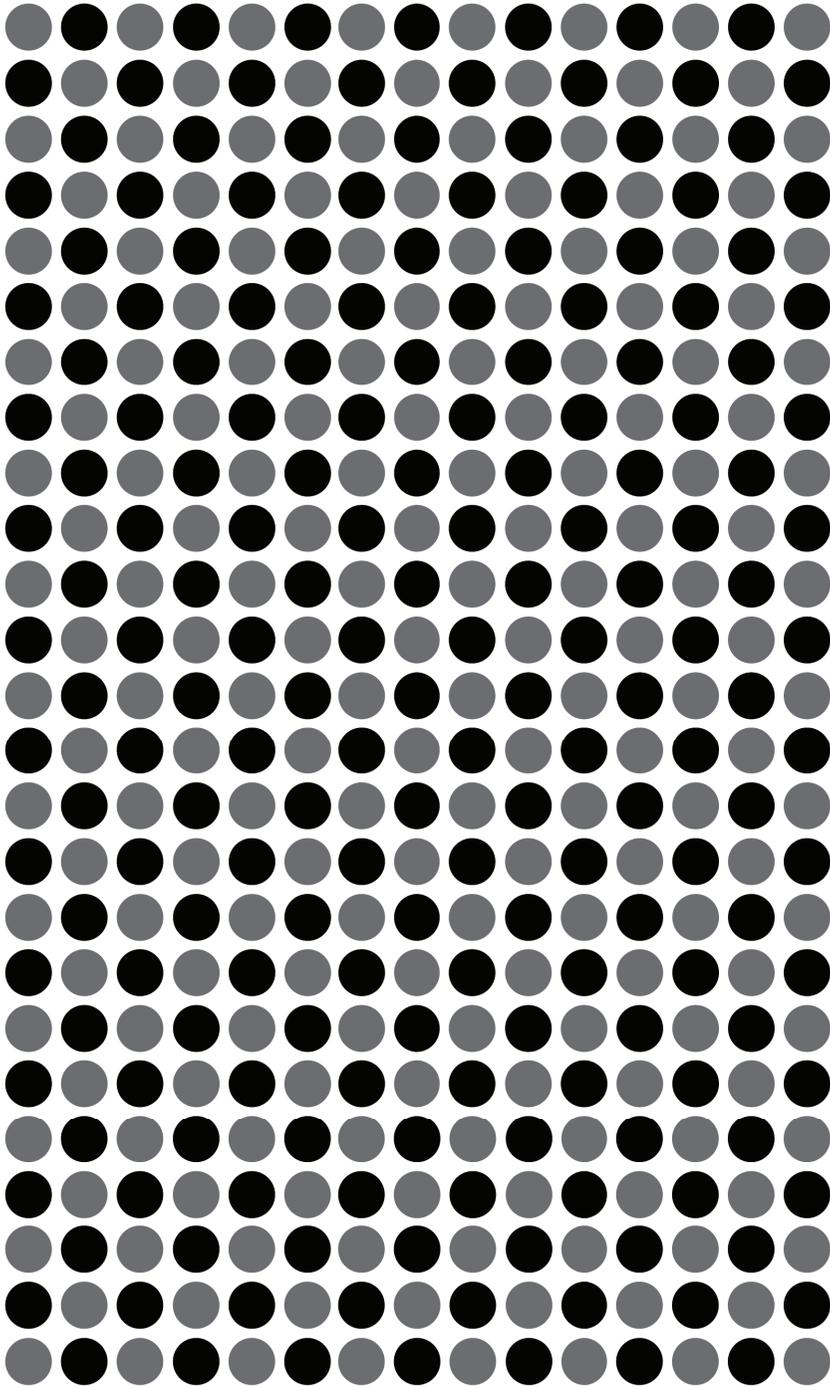
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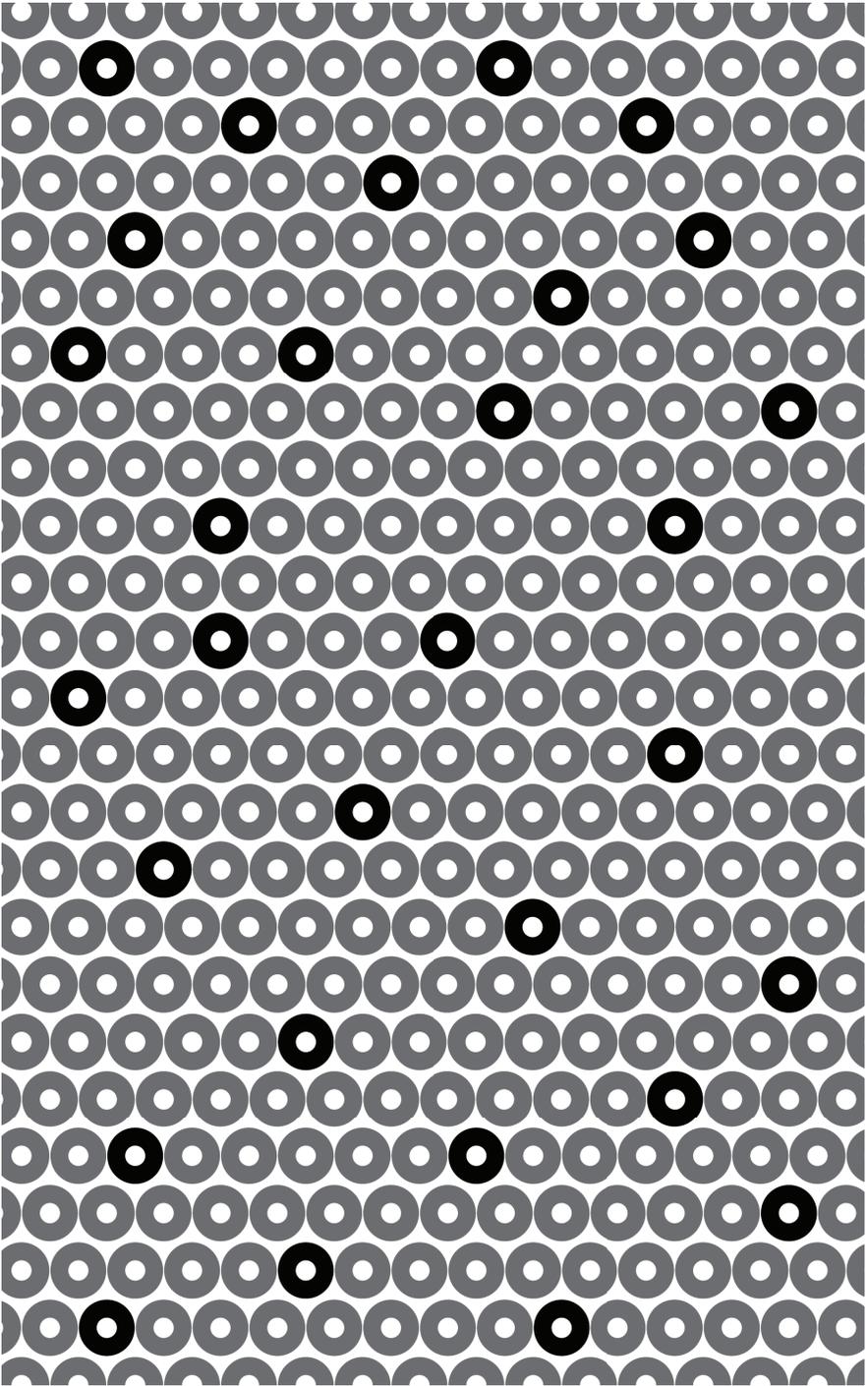


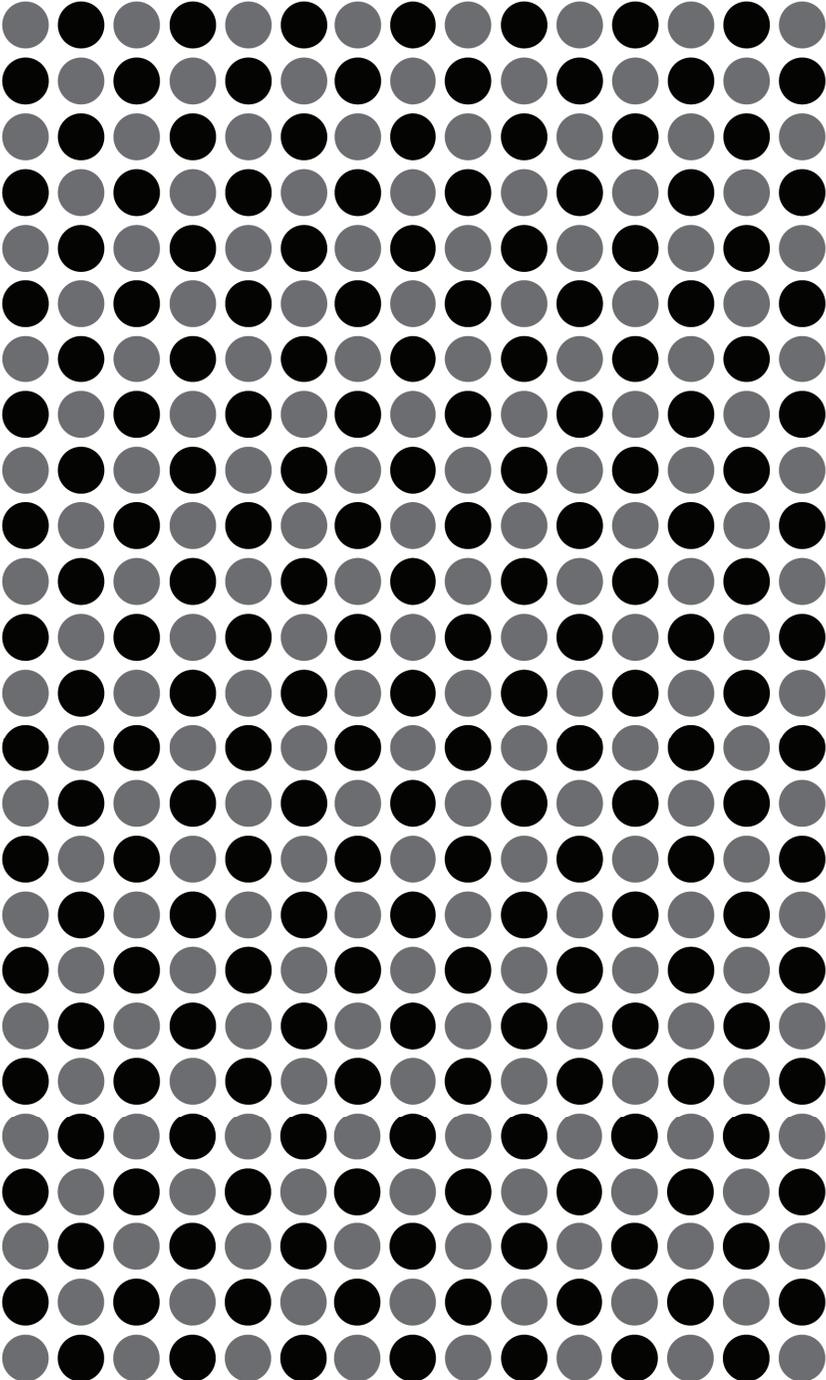


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# FOREWORD

## MIND THE GAP

A few years ago, when my husband studied for a semester in England, my son, Joe, and I went to visit him for a week.

We traveled throughout London using the city's subway system, the Underground or "Tube." There was a significant space between the station platform and the trains. As a safety precaution, a recorded announcement repeatedly told travelers to "Mind the Gap!" Since this was our primary mode of transportation, we heard this message over and over! Before long, we found ourselves telling each other to "Mind the Gap!" When I got back to work after my trip, I had to smile when I noticed one of my colleagues had a "Mind the Gap!" bumper sticker in her office. She, too, had been struck by this message while visiting London.

Now, after reading *Gapology*, "Mind the Gap!" has taken on a new—and much more relevant—meaning.

My career has spanned more than thirty years and encompassed leadership positions in operations, human resources, and learning and development with sever-

*"I highly  
recommend this  
book to all  
business  
professionals who  
expect exceptional  
performance."*

al national retail concepts. I have had responsibility for all three of these areas at Buffalo Wild Wings, Inc., where, since 2001, I've had the privilege of helping the company evolve into a high-performing, goal-oriented company with a history of achieving year-over-year growth.

*Gapology* captures the essence of many of the business challenges I have encountered during my career. More importantly, it provides strategies for developing solutions to close (and seal up) these Performance Gaps.

Sometimes in the heat of the battle, we lose sight of the methodical and logical processes that assure high performance. *Gapology* solves that!

Mark Thienes and Brian Brockhoff have done an exceptional job of simply and practically explaining how winning leaders perform—and help others perform—by identifying and closing gaps.

Trust me, Mark knows gaps. When I first met him, he was already a rock star. The company we worked for was going through major changes, shifting away from a culture where many things were mandated, with little need for managers to make decisions, and evolving into a culture that required leaders to take responsibility and make decisions on their own. Many resisted the change. In this stressed environment, Mark was a breath of fresh air. He made things happen. If he needed something that did not exist, he didn't complain; instead, he created it. Mark was clearly a top performer—a winning leader! Even back then, he was a cross between a surgeon and an artist when it came to identifying and closing Performance Gaps.

Mark was our “Maddy.”

I have always been compelled to assess where and why there are gaps in performance. Who is doing well? Who is not? How can we get the low performers to replicate what the superstars are doing? How do we perform compared to our goals? Why or why aren't we achieving expectations? Most importantly, how do we help people accomplish their goals—and the company's?

Sometimes gaps are obvious. A staff person once came into my office to inform me that field managers were not following a certain reporting procedure.

I asked how the field managers would know what they should be doing. The reply: a memo outlining the process was sent out several months earlier. However, there had been no follow-up communication. Obviously, we had a Knowledge Gap.

It is understandable that gaps happen, as long as you can identify them and implement a plan to fix them. In this particular case, once we identified the gap

about communicating the reporting procedure, we were able to take action to fix it.

Since reviewing the draft copy of this book, I have started applying *Gapology* to the personal, as well as the business, aspects of my life. If I am not meeting an expectation I set for myself—getting to the next belt level in karate or reorganizing that spare room in my house—I find myself asking, “What is the gap and how do I close it?”

*Gapology* does not just explain how to identify gaps; it explains how to implement solutions to close the gaps to achieve results. Mark and Brian have captured a simple but profound concept: winning leaders close gaps, and that is why they are winning leaders.

I highly recommend this book to all business professionals who expect exceptional performance from themselves and their teams. This book should be read cover to cover. It will likely become a much-used reference tool as new gaps arise and new solutions are needed. The “Maddy Stories” will make great individual training or teaching modules.

And you’ll save both time and money by not having to travel to London to learn how to “Mind the Gap!”

**JUDY SHOULAK**

EVP, PRESIDENT NORTH AMERICA  
BUFFALO WILD WINGS



# PROLOGUE

## MADDY'S STORY

As was the custom at the annual awards banquet of the XYZ Solutions Company, the final and most prestigious award was saved until after dinner. The wait staff scurried to gather the last of the dessert plates, wine glasses, and coffee cups from the estimated four hundred black-tie-and-evening-gown-clad district managers, sales managers, sales reps, and company executives, as an announcement came over the sound system: “The award for XYZ’s District Manager of the Year will be announced in five minutes. Please return to your seats.”

*“Maddy and her team have put together a three-year run unlike any I have ever seen.”*

-Tom Case CEO XYZ

Each of the three regions that make up the sales force of XYZ has good reason to be proud of its top performing district manager, but of the thirty district managers, only one stood out as the obvious front-runner.

Excitement was thick in the air, but not in anticipation as to which district manager would be crowned that night. No, they already knew that. The anticipation

was about what she might share with the team as to her unbelievable run of performance. How had she done it? And will her mere words have the power to further propel the company forward? History was being made that night at XYZ. District performance of this magnitude was clearly the best in the industry, and that meant XYZ was also moving to the top of the industry in market share. Everybody loves to work for a winner, and XYZ was now poised to benefit even more from the wisdom of Madeline Ferguson.

XYZ kept the final year-end results sealed until the awards banquet was held. In a closed-door meeting, the company's top executives conducted a comprehensive review of the results, and each cast his or her vote for District Manager of the Year. Thomas Case, president and CEO of XYZ, received the votes and made the final decision. It is not known how many votes Case granted himself, but he was known as a fair man, so his final decision would never be questioned. But, this year there was very little that could be questioned.

Soon the lights of the Marriott ballroom dimmed, and the spotlights lit up the stage and podium while the disc jockey blasted Tina Turner's song, *The Best*. The crowd cheered and clapped to the beat. Carefully placed on the table behind the podium on the stage sat a single glass trophy cloaked in a linen cloth. The most prized honor at XYZ was receiving that piece of glass. It was quite impressive in size and had become the source of career growth and the subject of legend.

Case waited for his cue, and as the song ended he stood from his position at the front table and walked to the side of the stage, then up three steps and across the stage to the podium. The spotlight followed him, and anyone who was not already standing and rocking to the music was now on his or her feet giving Case a standing ovation. He is wildly popular, and XYZ is known as a great place to work. He tapped the microphone and asked the three region managers to join him on the stage. Amid the applause and shouting, all made their way through the crowd, assembling in a row behind Case. He raised his hands to quell the cheering and applause

"I always wanted to be a rock star," he said as the crowd laughed and began to simmer somewhere above a boil. Case began, "I want to congratulate all of tonight's winners. In what was a challenging year for our company and the industry, you made us proud! I want to give special thanks to the three district managers who took the top regional awards earlier tonight. You have separated yourselves from your peers and made significant contributions to our company's performance this year. It is now time for one of you to be named District Manager of the Year!" The crowd erupted into a thunderous roar.

Case continued, “I would ask that you hold your applause until the end of my announcement. Although this is a time to celebrate, I consider my remarks this evening to be especially important.” He paused, then continued, “Greatness in results is something we all must understand and strive for, but in today’s challenging economy, greatness in results carries a special meaning. I request that our ‘District Manager of the Year’ remain seated until the conclusion of my remarks, while, of course, basking in the spotlight of our unwavering admiration.” Everyone laughed and cheered.

“Without further rambling, let’s get to it,” Case added, followed by another round of screaming applause. “Our District Manager of the Year, for the third straight year, is Madeline Ferguson!” Although asked to hold their applause, the central region bursts out loud for their hero, but they quickly gained their composure.

“Maddy, as we all know her, joined XYZ just a little over three years ago, taking over one of the toughest markets in the company. After getting her feet on the ground, she had a company-leading first year, even though the first few months were tough. That was followed by a totally dominant second year. Since then, there has been no looking back for Maddy and her team. She has put together a three-year run unlike any I have ever seen. Maddy, we are humbled and honored by your performance,” Case added, making a partial bow in Maddy’s direction. Maddy beamed with a glow that resembled the planet Mars.

Case paused to take a drink of water, obviously choked up, while applause and catcalls rang out. Guests sitting at the front tables could see a tear well up in his eyes. “Maddy’s result improvements this past year have spanned all measurable categories and are truly remarkable. Her district achieved the following:

- #1 in sales to plan!
- #1 in profit to plan!
- #1 in customer satisfaction!
- #1 in lowest team turnover with two of her ten sales managers promoted to district manager! Outstanding!
- #1 in community fund-raising and top volunteerism!”

Following a pregnant pause, Case added, “All of these achievements have come from a district manager who openly shares her winning tactics with anyone who will listen. Maddy joined XYZ after a very successful career as both a district and region manager for another sales organization. Anyone who has visited her office and has seen her trophy case of awards garnered from years of successful leadership knows that we are blessed by her presence.”

Case paused and wiped his eyes, clearly feeling an emotional connection to Maddy's performance. He continued, "Maddy knows how to win. You've heard her say it time after time. She simply identifies and closes Performance Gaps in herself and her team. This is not a one-time process, but it is her daily behavior. It is a skill that she has honed to perfection and spread to her team. She practices closing Performance Gaps daily and applies these very fundamental tactics to everything that requires great execution.

"You may have heard Maddy comment when asked why she was so successful in a specific promotion or event, 'Oh, that was just a Knowledge Gap that we identified and closed, or we found an Importance Gap in our team. We were able to close that one quickly.' Or, 'It was an Action Gap in a few of the sales managers, and once we closed it, the ball was in their court.' The bottom line is that Maddy gets out of bed every morning and proceeds to identify and close Performance Gaps in herself and her team. She is truly the original Gapologist!" Case concluded.

"So tonight we have a special surprise for each of you." The crowd gasped, and with those words, a white-jacket-clad waiter stepped up to each of the sixty round tables and handed each guest a copy of a white-and-black-covered book entitled *Gapology*.

"As has been our custom, the District Manager of the Year is asked to share his or her keys to success upon receiving the award on stage. For the past two years, Maddy has stepped up to this mike and talked about closing Performance Gaps. So about six months ago, I invited Maddy to the home office for a couple of weeks. Working with my close friends and winning leader experts, Mark Thienes and Brian Brockhoff, we picked Maddy's brain, gathering and documenting all of her Performance Gap identification and closure examples."

"We blended Maddy's life experiences with examples from her sales team at XYZ and have included them in Mark and Brian's new book, *Gapology—How Winning Leaders Close Performance Gaps*. Mark and Brian have done extensive studies of winning leaders and found their common thread is in identifying and closing Performance Gaps in their teams.

"Each of you is fortunate because you have just received the first printing of *Gapology*, which includes everything you will need to identify and close Performance Gaps. My expectation is that each of you will use *Gapology* to achieve excellence in execution and unparalleled results, regardless of your role. We want a big gap between XYZ and the competition!" The XYZ team went into a frenzy with a mixture of screams, shouts, and applause.

Case continued, “I did a little math, which may not surprise any of you who know me well. If each of our thirty district managers had performed at the same level as Maddy for the past year, we would have added twenty million dollars to our bottom line profit!

“So we need everyone at XYZ to become a Gapologist, identifying and closing Performance Gaps in your teams, your processes, and yourself! Let’s make this the greatest year in XYZ’s history!”

Everyone jumped to his or her feet, applauding and cheering. “Maddy, come on down!” Case shouted as the disc jockey cranks up *Celebration* by Kool and the Gang. Maddy, impeded with high-fives, fist bumps, a few hugs, and a dozen handshakes or so, slowly made her victory walk to the stage to garner her third glass trophy.

The standing ovation and cheering seemed like it would never end. This night became legendary in the history of XYZ, and most say it was the turning point that propelled the company into the industry-leading position it currently holds.

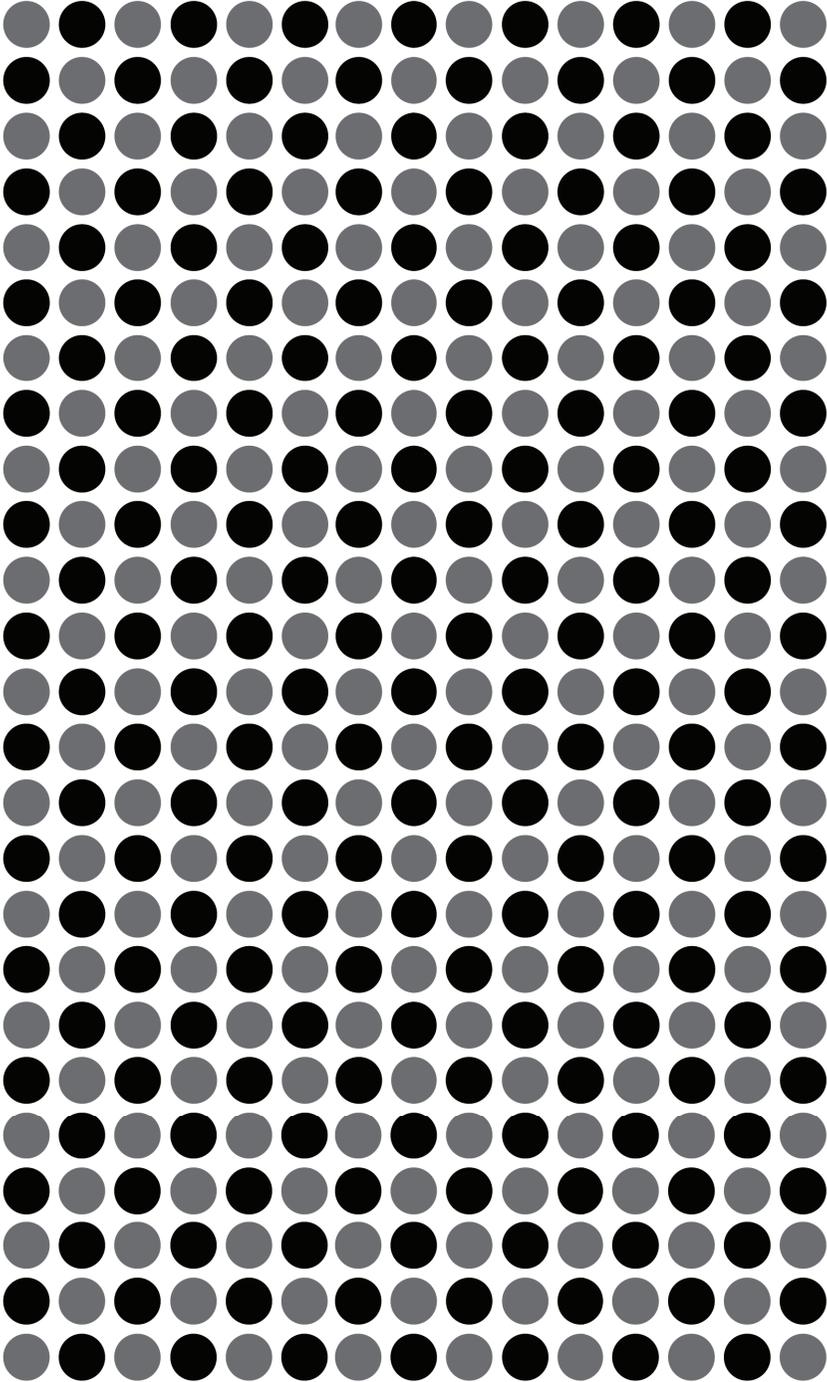
After accepting the trophy and shaking hands with Tom and the region managers, Maddy remained on stage as Case stepped back to the mike and said, “One thing before you go and celebrate the night away. Take it easy on Maddy tonight! Remember, we start the leadership workshops promptly at eight o’clock in the morning.”

Everyone laughed and some moaned. “By the way,” Case added. “I have good news for all of the district managers out there. Maddy has won her last District Manager of the Year Award!”

The crowd gasped. “That’s right... effective next week, Maddy is our newest region manager!” The crowd erupted once again for what felt like an eternity.

“Our expansion plans are on track, and we look forward to our star Gapologist contributing at a higher level, and giving these three” pointing to the region managers, “a real run for their money!”

Case concluded, “Good luck to all of my new Gapologists! Go forth and, identify and close those Performance Gaps!”



# INTRODUCTION

## PERFORMANCE GAPS

Gaps happen.

They happen in every company, department, work team, and individual performer every day.

We experience gaps when we call for cable service, try to renew our driver's license, shop for groceries, or sign up for health insurance. As customers, we are so often the victims of gaps in our everyday lives that we have learned to just accept them. We rarely even complain. We just suck it up and settle.

Gaps are everywhere.

They always have been and will always be a part of our lives, but as the world has become more complex, the number and frequency of gaps has grown exponentially. They happen in the private sector, the public sector, and nonprofit organizations.

Gaps account for trillions of dollars of lost revenue and profit each year.

*"Gapology will certainly change your results and it has the power to change your life!"*

Most gaps are simply the result of someone not taking an action that should have been taken. These are what we call Performance Gaps.

Performance Gaps are the number-one risk to all companies and organizations today. By contrast, leaders and teams that have the fewest gaps and close those gaps quickest win. They win by big margins.

Our research shows that winning leaders anticipate Performance Gaps and prevent them, but when gaps do occur, they close them quickly. Winning leaders close Performance Gaps by taking action and moving their teams to take action. Taking the right action is key to closing Performance Gaps.



FIGURE 1 - PERFORMANCE GAP MODEL

In Figure 1, the Performance Gap Model, you will see that Performance Gaps are the gaps between what you expect and the actual outcome. Performance Gaps are gaps in behavior that create gaps in results.

Winning leaders spend a significant amount of time observing their team's behavior, comparing that behavior to the expectation. They then compare the actual results produced to the result expectations. This directly connects the behaviors to the results and highlights any Performance Gaps. The better the behavior, the better the results. Gaps in behavior create gaps in results. As you compare behavioral expectations with actual behavior, you will not only see the Performance Gaps, but you will also have the opportunity to see excellence and thus have the opportunity for reinforcement and recognition. Winning leaders consistently connect behavior and results.

Gapology is the term we developed to describe what winning leaders do to identify and close Performance Gaps in their teams. Gapology is their process. For a decade, we analyzed the results, leadership behaviors, and tactics of winning leaders as compared to those of leaders who were not winning. We wanted to understand how winning leaders win and if winning could be replicated, and we were curious about whether winning can be taught to those not winning or if it is something that winning leaders are born with.

We had a laboratory of about 1,000 leaders, and over the course of a decade we interacted with these leaders, analyzed their result trends, contrasted their results with each other, and documented trends, all in hopes of eventually understanding what winning is really made of. You might say we dissected winning to find out what was inside.

To accomplish this, we interviewed both winning leaders and those not winning, trying to understand their leadership traits and behaviors, as well as what tactics the winning leaders employ in order to win, what accountability measures they apply to create a winning team, and what prioritization mechanisms are in place. Also, how do these leaders define winning and communicate winning expectations to their teams? What are the gaps between winning and not winning?



FIGURE 2 - ABC GROUPS

We limited the sample group to the top 10 percent in performance, the A-Group, and the bottom 10 percent in performance, the C-Group. See Figure 2. The A-Group, we also refer to as the “winning leaders,” and the C-Group as the “not winning leaders.” We wanted to understand the difference between these true outlying performance groups. The middle 80 percent, the B-Group, was not the focus of our study. The A-Group allows us to see the potential of all groups, and the C-Group allows us to measure lost performance. As we juxtapose the two, we gain insight into the possibilities of overall performance.

To determine their performance, we looked only at the leader's five most directly controllable and comparable metrics:

- Sales to budget (P&L)
- Profit to budget (P&L)
- Customer satisfaction (on-going survey scores)
- Team satisfaction (annual survey)
- Team turnover (annual rate)

These metrics also aligned with their annual performance measures, thus providing a level playing field and best way to define “winning” for the leaders measured.

As you might expect, the gap in results between the A-Group and the C-Group in our study was very large! Unfortunately, the performance of the winning leaders was literally being canceled out by the poor performance of those not winning; The C-Group canceled out the positive performance of the A-Group. Because of this, the performance of the total team was limited to the performance of the middle, the B-Group. The entire team therefore, becomes essentially a B-Group in performance, you might say mediocre. While we view this as unacceptable, we did not see it as insurmountable. The C-Group just needed to learn what the A-Group was doing differently, and they needed to do it fast!

The C-Group needed to understand and execute Gapology.

At first it wasn't totally clear why the gap was so great between the A-Group and C-Group. After all, both groups were given the same instruction, had access to the same tools and resources, and therefore had the same opportunity for success. Why were their results so dramatically different?

The reason for the gap became more clearly defined when the leadership behaviors and tactics of the A- and C-Groups were observed. The A-Group shared a common thread. They moved to action by identifying and closing Performance Gaps in themselves and in their teams. Without knowing it and without a common playbook, the A-Group followed a similar sequential path to winning that is not present in the C-Group. The sequential path the winning leaders followed is what we came to call Gapology. Now we knew, in part, why their performance was so different. It was all about taking action, the right action, and teaching their teams to do the same. Think about the magnitude of this for a moment. Regardless of their background, level of education, geographic location, gender,

or race, winning leaders consistently identified and then closed Performance Gaps in themselves and their teams! Wow, this was their secret!

When we first saw this amazing thread emerge it was like we had stumbled upon King Tut's tomb. The ultimate key to winning was staring us in the face. Winning leaders identify and close Performance Gaps! They do so by moving their teams to take the right actions consistently. The right actions then drive performance and results. We saw that winning performance can be taught to all leaders and therefore winning can be replicated! This is where we discovered and named the winning leader process Gapology!

Our excitement waned for a moment as we realized that we needed to tackle an even bigger question: What tactics do winning leaders use to close and prevent Performance Gaps? We needed to identify the Root Solutions that winning leaders apply in order to teach all leaders to win. And that became the simple mission of the book; to present to the world how winning leaders win! We figured it out, and all of the winning leader methods can now be yours!

As we interviewed and documented our conversations with winning leaders, we found commonalities. The most amazing was that all Performance Gaps are Knowledge, Importance, Action, or some combination of the three. This makes identifying and then closing Performance Gaps easier. Once you have identified a gap, you can close it.

See Figure 3, Performance Gap Types.

We knew we were onto something big and potentially life changing because we could teach Gapology. The secret to winning on a consistent basis was coming clearly into view!



FIGURE 3 - PERFORMANCE GAP TYPES