

# How to enable ordinary people to do extraordinary things *by Colin Dunn*

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Motivated by firms claiming that their people are ‘incapable’ of stepping up to become involved in more challenging and high value work, Colin Dunn outlines three opportunities presented to him as an up and coming Chartered Accountant which enabled him to excel in the profession. Colin writes:

## **In 1987 I was fortunate to join what was at the time a medium sized local accounting firm on the move**

I had no idea what being an accountant entailed but Dad thought it would be a solid choice for me because I was ‘good with numbers’. He was a bank manager and had met [Keith Seeley](#), the senior partner of the [firm](#) I joined. Keith told Dad the story of the firm and outlined his plans for growth. Dad suggested I call Keith and I wound up with my first ‘proper’ job.

## **On such moments are careers formed**

Malcolm Gladwell, author of the seminar book *The Tipping Point*, wrote his less well known 2008 work, *Outliers*, about why some people succeed far more than others. He describes how acknowledged geniuses such as Bill Gates, The Beatles and many top sportsmen have three things in common:

1. They had a stroke of luck
2. They grabbed the opportunity presented by that luck
3. They worked very hard to capitalise on it.

How many ‘outliers’ do you have in your accounting business? If you want a team of high performing people, you need to create an environment in which they will emerge. I have certainly always considered it a major stroke of luck to join a firm about to experience a sustained period of explosive growth (our revenue grew eight-fold in the nine years I was with the firm – all organic, no acquisition).

But it is only recently, and having been motivated by several partners claiming that their people are ‘incapable’ of stepping up to become involved in more challenging and high value work, that I have given thought to the subsequent opportunities that were presented to me to enable me to grab hold and go along for the ride. I will highlight three such opportunities for your consideration:



### **Opportunity #1: Requirement to add value to compliance work**

You could not give a file to a partner in our firm without having completed an analytical review of the financial statements. This review included a three year trend analysis of the key profitability and liquidity ratios. To accompany the review, the partners expected (and received) two or three ideas on how we could help the client improve their business. These ideas were used as conversation starters at the end-of-job interview with the client (which, incidentally, was held face to face either in our office or preferably at the client's premises as a matter of course with every single business client).

The key to implementing such a system is in your own behaviour as a partner or director. If you accept a file that does not meet the minimum requirements, you are enabling sub-standard behaviour. It's imperative that you give the file back to the accountant. Very soon, they will form new habits and you'll notice new and more valuable contributions from them.

### **Opportunity #2: Take accountants to client interviews**

The best way to educate your senior accountants in how to conduct client interviews is to take them along to interviews with you. Originally as an observer, then as confidence develops, provide them with the freedom to ask a couple of pre-prepared questions. In our firm, there were two additional requirements expected of the accompanying accountant:

1. Prepare the agenda for the meeting, including key points of discussion from the analytical review and two business growth ideas which could be used as the partner felt appropriate
2. Write a file memo of the meeting, summarising the discussion, the client's reaction to any suggestions made and any follow up items agreed upon.

### **Opportunity #3: Offer external training**

I recall a performance review where the issue of commerciality was raised. The partner interviewing me suggested that in his opinion I needed to become more commercially aware. I offered the response that I had no idea where to start. The subsequent discussion enabled us both to discover that I was not developing in this area because I had very little confidence in entering into even basic business-related discussions with clients. Like many accountants, I was very strong technically but had had no training in more rounded business skills.

Another partner in the firm came to the rescue. He saw himself in me. He confided that when he was at a similar stage of his career, he was terrified to talk to clients and would most certainly have never considered talking in front of a group of people. He had noticed that I was reticent to contribute in meetings and felt he could help.

He explained that he had overcome his fears by attending The Dale Carnegie Course<sup>®</sup>. He offered to put a recommendation to the Board that the firm sponsor me to attend the same course. With trepidation, I took up the challenge. The course ran for 12 weeks, three hours a week after work. It had a dramatic impact on me and obtained the desired results (for me and the firm).



Here's the key; there will be high performers lurking in your firm ready to explode. But neither they nor you know who they are! So progressively offer opportunities to your team such as I have outlined. See who steps up and give them increasing responsibility and client facing time. Encourage them through constant feedback – both praising them for specific contributions made and helping them understand how they can continue to improve. When you do that, the 'outliers' will emerge. I guarantee you'll be pleasantly surprised at the latent talent you'll uncover.

**About the author**

*Colin Dunn is the Principal of ReNew Group Pty Ltd. ReNew Group provides consulting services to professional services firms. Colin's passion is to help professionals achieve balance between optimal earnings and desired lifestyle. Colin started his career with one of the fastest growing accounting firms in the United Kingdom, working in audit, corporate finance and business development. In 1996 he joined Results Accountants' Systems (later RAN ONE) where he played a pivotal role in content creation and product development, before running the European operations and subsequently the Australian operations. He co-founded ReNew Group in 2004. For more information, please visit [www.renewgroup.com.au](http://www.renewgroup.com.au) or email [colin.dunn@renewgroup.com.au](mailto:colin.dunn@renewgroup.com.au).*