

A moment that changed a career

By Stewart D. Friedman

Leadership 48 directors & boards a spoken commitment — “Yes, I’ll go along with it” — effectively quashed the pocket veto. Bryn Zeckhauser is a senior fellow at Harvard University’s Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government. Aaron Sandoski is managing director of Norwich Ventures, a venture capital firm. GE’s secret weapon From Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else by Geoff Colvin. Copyright 2008 by the author. Published by Portfolio, a member of the Penguin Group (www.penguin.com). Building people through job assignments seems obvious in theory, but in practice it’s tough. Organizations tend to assign people based on what they’re already good at, not what they need to work on. The merciless competitive pressure on every company makes it difficult to pull accomplished employees out of jobs they do extremely well and put them into positions where they may struggle. That’s a tension every organization must deal with in order to become more successful. No company assembles careers on the principles of great performance better than GE. Its breadth of businesses lets it offer a wider range of experiences than almost any other company. It uses the advantage for all it’s worth to create some of the world’s best-rounded and most sought after executives. One of GE’s secret developmental weapons, an example of the useful assignments it can hand out, is the job of running GE Transportation, the business that makes locomotives in Erie, Pa. Consider all the ways in which it can stretch a manager: Buying locomotives is a big decision for the business’s customers, so the person running the shop — recently, John Dineen, a 21-year GE employee — gets experience dealing directly with CEOs of customer companies. The business is unionized, so he learns about labor negotiations. The product is complex, as is the supply chain — more learning that’s broadly applicable. Erie is sufficiently remote and unglamorous that the business leader can develop without national media scrutiny. And if, heaven forbid, the leader is a washout, GE is big enough to handle the trouble without much trauma to the bottom line. Geoff Colvin is Fortune magazine’s senior editor at large and regular lead moderator for the Fortune Global Forum. A moment that changed a career From Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life by Stewart D. Friedman. Copyright 2008 by the author. Published by Harvard Business Press (www.harvardbusiness.org/press). By the mid-1980s, my professional life was humming. I had finished my graduate work in organizational psychology, begun research on leadership development, and landed my dream job at the Wharton School. But my wife, Hallie, and I had been trying unsuccessfully to have a child for some time. Then,

finally, at 5:30 a.m. on a beautiful autumn morning, our first child, Gabriel, arrived. In a warmly lit room in Pennsylvania Hospital I stood transfixed, holding this practically perfect being for the first time. Wrapped in a yellow blanket that covered him entirely except for his calm face, Gabriel looked at me and around the room, taking it all in. I wondered, what must I do now to make our world a safe and nurturing one for him? I could not get this thought out of my head. A week later, I arrived back in my Wharton MBA class on organizational behavior and set aside the topic for which we'd all prepared that day, on motivation and reward systems. Instead, I told the story of what had just happened to me. I tried to extract the meaning my story might have for these talented students and incipient business leaders. "What responsibility do you have," I asked, "for creating work environments that help cultivate the next generation? What will you do, as a business professional, to weave the strands of work, family, community, and self into the fabric of your own life?" I didn't know it then, but that moment changed my career. By giving voice to my feelings about what was important in my own life, and connecting them to the interests of others, I began a new journey. I refocused my research to reflect the importance of bringing the whole person to work. ■ Stewart D. Friedman is the founding director of the Wharton School's Leadership Program and its Work/Life Integration Project (www.total-leadership.org). He is the former head of Ford Motor Co.'s Leadership Development Center.