

more valued—the offensive line—and yet very few people know who they are or what they do. Almost no fans walk around wearing their jerseys, but they should.

When a football team lines up on the field, the quarterback stands behind a line of five oversized human beings crouched down on the turf. This is the offensive line. Just inches away from them awaits the opposing team, ready to pounce. At the sound of the whistle, massive, muscled bodies come flying forward, using every ounce of their weight and strength to rush the quarterback and smash him to the ground. The offensive line is the only thing standing between the quarterback and this charging mass of humanity. They don't score touchdowns, they don't kick field goals. They only have one job—protect the quarterback—but it is the most important job on the football field. After all, you can't win a football game if the quarterback is flat on his back before he ever has time to throw.

When Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana first had the privilege of playing behind a really superb offensive line, he excelled like never before. As Michael Lewis writes in the book *The Blind Side*, Montana played “like a kid who'd been given the answers to the test in advance.”¹⁸ After the game, Montana told reporters, “I'd never seen us execute like that. . . . That's why it didn't look tough for us. But it was. Our line was stopping them, and when I got that time, things became easy.” Everyone credited Joe Montana, but he credited his offensive line.

Even though most of us live far removed from the football field, we each have our own version of an offensive line: our spouses, our families, and our friends. Surrounded by these people, big challenges feel more manageable and small challenges don't even register on the radar. Just as the offensive line protects a quarterback from a particularly brutal sack, our social support prevents stress from knocking us down and getting in the way of our achieving our goals. And just as the offensive line helped Montana throw a touchdown that would have been otherwise impossible, our social ties

help us capitalize on our own particular strengths—to accomplish more in our work and in our lives.

These benefits aren't confined to the short-term, either. In a longitudinal study of men over the age of 50, those with a high rate of stressful life experiences suffered from a far higher rate of mortality over the next seven years.¹⁹ But the same study found that this higher rate of mortality held true for everyone *except* the men who said they had high levels of emotional support. Like a quarterback who has been protected from sacks his whole career, a lifetime of strong social relationships provides crucial protection against the dangerous effects of stress. We can't always stop the 350-pound linemen flying at us, but we can ALL invest in a strong offensive line. And that can make all the difference.

THEY EXCEL WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THEIR FRIENDS

Unfortunately, not everyone makes this investment. Often, the misguided urge to turn inward starts even before we enter the working world. You'll recall that as an officer of Harvard, I spent twelve years living in a dorm with undergraduates. While this afforded me many unique life experiences I wouldn't recommend, like going twelve years eating all my meals on trays, one of the best parts of being in the trenches was having the chance to see the different strategies these 18- to 22-year-olds devised to help them find their way through the maze of Harvard. Though every one of these students was exceptional in one way or another, when it came to handling the inevitable stresses of such a challenging and competitive environment, year after year I noticed that certain students had a significant leg up while others, despite all their intelligence and efforts, seemed to sabotage their own forward progress.

Two freshman in particular stand out in my memory: Amanda and Britney. They were roommates. Both had spirited personalities, and both made friends quickly and effortlessly that first September

But as midterms approached, their paths began to diverge. As the pressure mounted, Amanda found a secluded cubicle in the library and spent most of her days and nights there. She started skipping our dorm study breaks—she didn't have time for frivolous activities like sharing snacks and stories with her classmates. Once an active member of our dorm's Ultimate Frisbee team, she stopped coming to practices and games. When I finally caught up with her one day in the dining hall, as she was taking her lunch to go—most likely back to the library—she admitted that she was just too stressed to focus on anything else but her schoolwork. “My friends will understand,” she said. It wasn't her friends I was worried about.

Meanwhile, Britney was flourishing. She wasn't oblivious to the challenges or pressures, and she wasn't working any less hard than Amanda. But instead of quarantining herself in a cubicle, she was organizing study groups. For her “Magic of Numbers” class (note: course title not made up), she e-mailed a group of six friends and had each person write a summary of one week's readings, then they convened at lunch a few times a week to share their work. I remember I once stumbled on one of these sessions, only to find them talking about *The Simpsons*. “I thought this was a math study group?” I asked in mock exasperation. One young man looked up at me, then pointed at Britney. “We were ordered to make time for small talk,” he said. When I checked in with her at a study break a few weeks later—where she was taking ten minutes off from homework to join our Oreo-eating contest—Britney just shrugged her shoulders. “It's a lot of work. But, I don't know, I guess it's just nice to know we're all pulling an all-nighter together.”

I won't belabor the point here. But let's just say that by January, one of these students had succumbed to the pressure and stress and was wishing she could transfer to someplace less competitive. The other was happy, well-adjusted, and performing exceptionally in her courses. While Amanda and Britney are real people, they also represent the choices each of us has when faced with adversity.

Many business leaders I encounter believe, just as Amanda did, that the road to success is one they have to travel alone, but this simply isn't the case. The most successful people I've worked with know that even in an extraordinarily competitive environment, we are more equipped to handle challenges and obstacles when we pool the resources of those around us and capitalize on even the smallest moments we spend interacting with others. Every time Britney had lunch or a study session with her friends, she wasn't just having a good time—she was decreasing her stress level, priming her brain for high performance, and capitalizing on the ideas, energy, and motivation that social support provides. While Amanda was divesting from her network and floundering as a result, Britney was investing in something that continually paid dividends. Just as social support is a prescription for happiness and an antidote to stress, it is also a prime contributor of achievement in the workplace.

INVESTING IN HIGH PERFORMANCE

We learned in Principle 5, the Zorro Circle, that those of us who believe we have control over the outcome of our fates have a huge advantage in work and in life. This fact can't be denied. But it also doesn't mean we have to exist in a vacuum or that our success hinges on our efforts alone. Remember the 70-year-long Harvard Men Study? Researchers found that social bonds weren't just predictive of overall happiness, but also of eventual career achievement, occupational success, and income.²⁰

This truth is sometimes still difficult for many of us to accept, given how deep the ethic of individualism runs in our culture (after all, reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance* is practically an American rite of passage). We are particularly independently minded when it comes to assigning credit for achievements. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck likes to illustrate the folly of this