

A Colony of Clones — Dancing with a Mustang

By Arthur Leggett · October 12, 2026



The Interviews

Some years ago, advertising luminary Renetta McCann recognized my business acumen and opened doors to the senior leadership of an advertising agency I'll call Leo Bonfire.

What followed were four trips to Chicago. Approximately twenty interviews.

But I wasn't simply being interviewed. **I was interviewing them.**

I wanted to understand how the agency's senior executives thought, how they approached horizontal problems, how they detected talent, and how they responded when their assumptions were questioned. I asked diagnostic questions to assess their mindsets.

Four trips and roughly five interviews per visit also raised questions about the efficiency of the selection process. How many conversations should it take to gauge suitability?

Ultimately, it was not a good fit.

The experience nevertheless left me with lingering questions extending far beyond one advertising agency.

Twenty Conversations

Several interactions remain vivid in my mind.

In one conversation with a senior executive I'll call Francie Jo Coppine, I questioned the health benefits of promoting McDonald's products.

In another conversation, I asked a senior executive of the innovation team what impending threat could dramatically affect Allstate's traditional automobile insurance business. Then I proposed that autonomous vehicles were that threat. Why? Because:

First, fewer accidents could fundamentally change the risks insurers were paid to cover.

Second, liability could shift from drivers toward manufacturers, software developers, and fleet operators.

Third, the resulting reduction in risk could put downward pressure on automobile insurance premiums and revenue.

My suggestion was to fight like hell to delay the ubiquity of autonomous vehicles while simultaneously developing automobile insurance line extensions to prepare for a shifting market.

A senior executive I'll call Jock Nines responded: "Did you have our client meeting bugged?"

In another conversation with a senior executive I'll call Mack Billhin, I simply asked, "How do you treat people?"

He intelligently asked, "What do you mean?"

I explained that I believed in treating people fairly, decently, and respectfully.

He responded, "What, are you a socialist?"

I laughed to myself. Me, a socialist? The irony was particularly rich considering that my blog back then was called *The John Galt Line*.

I explained that earlier that morning, I had finished reading *Leading with the Heart* by legendary Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski.

Coach K described his leadership philosophy as "**fair but not equal.**"

He believed in treating players fairly without necessarily giving them identical playing time. Performance, individual circumstances, and the needs of the team mattered.

Fairness and sameness are not synonymous.

A senior recruiter who served as my host throughout the process, whom I'll call Monica D. Christland, described me as intelligent, poised, diplomatic, and business-savvy, but indicated that the agency didn't know what to do with me.

What does an organization do when it encounters talent that doesn't fit neatly into an existing role or slot?

Does it reconsider the candidacy, the position, or create a role?

A Colony of Clones

Organizations routinely proclaim their commitment to innovation, creativity, diversity of thought, and questioning the status quo.

Candidates are measured by credentials, professional experiences, communication styles, and guesses on cultural fit.

None of these considerations is inherently unreasonable.

Standards matter.

Experience matters.

Collaboration matters.

But when does cultural fit become cultural replication?

When does a preference for familiar credentials become a substitute for evaluating capability and upside?

And when does a hiring committee become a mechanism for reproducing the people already sitting around the table?

Consider an organization that consistently hires people who think, behave, communicate, and approach problems much like its existing leadership.

The organization may become remarkably cohesive.

It may also become remarkably plain vanilla.

A colony of clones.

Who questions institutional assumptions?

Who sees the threat that hasn't yet appeared on a competitive analysis?

Who questions the strategy everyone else has already endorsed? — Hello Converse!!

And who discovers the opportunity hiding beyond the organization's established field of vision?

People Like Me

One senior executive managed the agency's Kellogg account. I'll call him Gus Marc Beres.

I asked, "What kind of people do you like to hire?"

He looked me up and down. Then he replied, "People like me," and described his work ethic.

I redirected his answer by sharing an abbreviated version of my horse-stable analogy: different animals bring different capabilities, and an effective leader needs more than copies of himself.

He snapped back, "Not people in expensive suits and shoes."

I was sitting across from him wearing a dark navy Canali suit and Ferragamo loafers. He was in khakis and a polo shirt, reclining with his hands behind his head and his feet propped on his desk.

So I tried another approach.

I said, "A golfer carries different clubs because different situations demand different capabilities. A driver provides distance; a wedge provides loft and control; a putter requires precision. Would you use a driver to escape a sand trap?"

He said he would.

I had a clearer picture of his management style.

Later, when I debriefed my host on the oddness of this interaction, she shared that he had been instructed to behave appropriately during our meeting.

Isn't the purpose of assembling a team not to replicate the leader, but to cross-pollinate ideas, combine complementary capabilities, and create possibilities no individual could have imagined alone?

The Pasture

Imagine a horse farm, its rolling pasture gleaming like gold, bright white fences enclosing a grand estate and stables.

There is the **workhorse**, dependable and disciplined; the **mule**, equipped for plowing and possessed of endurance; the **thoroughbred**, impeccably groomed, with Williams College and a Wharton MBA displayed on its caparison; the **show pony**, draped in a flamboyant Gucci caparison, sporting Christian Louboutin footwear and oversized Cartier sunglasses—a reminder that presentation can attract attention, but performance must establish substance; the **zebra**, untamed, displaying its sharp teeth as a warning against attempts to domesticate it; and the **mustang**, powerful, independent, and running freely.

Then there is the **jackass**, a member of the herd with a conspicuous bell around its neck.

Every company has a way of doing things—an ethos shaped by shared values, a vision, and standards of conduct. Becoming part of that organization requires a degree of acculturation and a willingness to embrace its shared expectations.

Acculturation is not assimilation.

Suppose punctuality is among those expectations. The jackass repeatedly arrives late and leaves early, even when all hands are needed on deck to navigate a crisis.

At what point does individuality become incompatibility?

The mustang respects collaboration. The jackass refuses shared accountability.

Cultural fit could mean shared values and responsible conduct, not identical backgrounds, personalities, or ideas.

And there is the **unicorn**, standing near the grand stables. The unicorn possesses a rare combination of capabilities that may not fit neatly into conventional roles or organizational structures. It might thrive within an established enterprise, transform one, or choose to build something entirely its own.

The question is whether an organization can recognize such talent—and create the conditions for it to flourish.

Now consider the leader. **Which horse is the best fit?** For what role, under which conditions, and measured by what criteria?

The gait may reveal potential, but **performance is proven on the track**. The leader must understand the work to be done before deciding which capabilities are most valuable.

The pasture is not a ranking of worth. It is a challenge to recognize differences, establish shared standards, and bring complementary strengths together.

The Risk Paradox

Hiring anyone is fraught with risk.

Yet conventional candidates can create an illusion of predictability.

A familiar résumé is easy to interpret. An established pedigree offers reassurance. A nonlinear career may demand greater curiosity.

But reassurance is not evidence of competence.

And talent doesn't always arrive in familiar packaging.

But what happens when a leader mistakes familiarity for the leading predictor of competence?

Are candidates rejected because they lack the necessary capabilities, or because their capabilities resist easy classification?

Does the hiring process reward demonstrated competence, or conformity to an established model of competence?

Unconventional candidates are not inherently superior.

Some are exceptional. Some are ordinary. Others are unsuitable.

The same is true of conventional candidates.

The challenge is not to favor the mustang over the thoroughbred. It is to recognize what each can actually accomplish.

Shouldn't risk assessment reveal differences in capability rather than obscure them behind familiar assumptions?

Never Try to Teach a Mustang the Minuet

Recognizing unconventional talent is one challenge.

Leading it is another.

A leader may have the courage to hire a mustang but **lack the confidence to lead one.**

Why hire a mustang only to insist it dance the minuet?

The minuet, with its prescribed steps, measured movements, and formal etiquette, offers an instructive metaphor for organizational conformity.

But what happens when a leader mistakes familiarity with the choreography for evidence of competence?

Does the organization cultivate independence or demand conformity?

Does it welcome difficult questions or interpret them as disloyalty?

Does it recognize initiative or punish employees for acting without permission?

Why recruit someone for their intellectual curiosity, only to insist they think like everyone else?

The mustang is not exempt from accountability.

An independent spirit should not excuse hubris.

Independent thinking does not excuse poor performance.

And exceptional talent does not excuse behavior that damages the social fabric of the enterprise.

But accountability is not domestication.

The objective of leadership is not to extinguish the qualities that make someone valuable. It is to direct those qualities toward meaningful results.

That requires courage.

It also requires competence, patience, discernment, and the humility to recognize strengths that the leader may not personally possess.

Perhaps the problem isn't that the mustang cannot learn the minuet.

Perhaps the leader has yet to discover another way to dance.

Consider the tremendous upside.

What might an organization accomplish if it looked beyond its established hiring paradigms?

What problems might it solve?

What blue oceans might be discovered?

What assumptions might it finally challenge?

And how much potential is lost when leaders insist that every exceptional individual first become a recognizable version of themselves?

Finding Talent in Unusual Places

In the film *The Family Man*, Jack Campbell finds himself living an alternative life as a tire salesman in New Jersey rather than the successful Wall Street executive he once knew himself to be.

When Peter Lassiter, founder of an investment banking firm, visits the tire store, Jack recognizes him and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of business. Intrigued, Lassiter invites Jack to his office.

There, Alan Mintz questions Jack's Wall Street experience and the modest revenues of the tire business. Those are legitimate questions. Jack's background doesn't fit the conventional profile.

Yet Lassiter is curious enough to listen. Jack demonstrates his knowledge of business and his ability to read people, eventually observing that Lassiter prides himself on finding talent in unusual places.

Lassiter asks how Jack could know that.

Jack answers:

“Because I'm here.”

Jack asks for a chance to prove himself, offering to start wherever necessary. Lassiter directs Mintz to show him around.

But once they are alone, Mintz warns Jack against threatening his position within the firm.

Two executives encounter the same candidate. One begins with skepticism about an unfamiliar résumé; the other is willing to explore the capabilities behind it. Mintz's later warning introduces another concern: protecting his own position.

Lassiter does not abandon standards. He looks beyond Jack's résumé to consider what he might contribute.

The distinction is not between caution and recklessness. It is between evaluating unfamiliar talent and allowing familiarity to define its limits.

Jack, of course, possesses extensive financial expertise from his original life. His unconventional circumstances conceal capabilities he has previously demonstrated. The scene does not establish that unconventional candidates are inherently superior.

It raises a more compelling question.

How many organizations would have dismissed Jack Campbell before discovering what Peter Lassiter recognized?

And what might those organizations never accomplish because they failed to look beyond the familiar?

Anticipate or React

Anticipation is a calculated risk.

Consider tennis. A player anticipates the direction of a serve and begins moving before the ball arrives. Anticipate correctly, and the player gains a tremendous advantage. Anticipate incorrectly, and the player may find himself hopelessly out of position.

The same principle applies to hockey, football, soccer, and lacrosse. Great players recognize subtle signals and anticipate where the puck, ball, or opponent will be—not merely where they are.

Sometimes they are spectacularly wrong. Other times, remarkably right.

But the best players possess another quality: they adapt. When their anticipation proves incorrect, they reassess, recover, and respond.

The purpose of diverse talent isn't to ensure that every prediction is correct. It's to increase an organization's capacity to anticipate, adapt, and respond when circumstances change.

The same principle applies to business. Anticipating change requires recognizing signals others may overlook. Responding effectively demands the willingness to question established assumptions, reconsider familiar strategies, and develop new capabilities.

Adapt or Die

I recently spoke with Brad Brief, a longtime advertising professional and an important influence on my early career.

Brad discussed the closure of Leo Burnett offices and the changes confronting legacy advertising agencies.

Our conversation returned to a familiar imperative:

Adapt or die.

Artificial intelligence is changing the economics of producing, testing, personalizing, and distributing creative work. Tasks that once required teams of specialists can increasingly be completed with fewer people, less time, and different combinations of expertise.

That does not mean human creativity has become obsolete. It means the business models through which creativity is organized and delivered must evolve.

Even Leo Burnett's corporate identity has changed, becoming part of the larger Leo network following its combination with Publicis Worldwide.

Corporate consolidation, however, is not synonymous with organic growth. Combining existing businesses does not automatically create new economic value.

The meaningful questions concern organic growth, client retention, productivity, profitability, innovation, and the ability to compete in a changing marketplace.

How does an organization adapt when the people responsible for anticipating change have been selected primarily because they resemble those already in charge?

Recognizing talent is only the beginning. The greater challenge is developing the capabilities an organization will need when familiar ways of thinking and operating are no longer sufficient.

The King's Parable

Years ago, I encountered a parable about a king who learned that a great tidal wave was approaching his kingdom.

The king summoned three wise men and asked what advice they would give the people.

The first advised warning everyone that the end was near and encouraging them to prepare spiritually.

The second suggested that the people enjoy whatever time remained before the inevitable catastrophe.

The third offered a different response.

He did not deny the approaching wave. He did not suggest that the kingdom could prevent it. Nor did he counsel resignation.

He recognized that survival would depend upon developing a capability the people might not yet possess.

The king listened.

And the third wise man offered his counsel:

"Teach the people to swim."

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