

THOUGHTS OF THE SALMON™

The importance of mediocrity (and the hypocrisy on talent)

“Mediocrity is one of the prerequisites of success.”
Wim Wenders

A strategy consulting firm has been until the mid 90s an elitist organization: very few people, obsessively selected, with the glamour of being few and for a few. That firm started growing (being successful?) only when they made mediocrity a value: the work done (mediocre), the recruited people (mediocre), the new top management (mediocre).

In many companies, however, the importance of selecting and motivating exceptional individuals, the “Talent”, is officially and continuously stated. In reality, it is often hypocrisy: in order to be successful (whether being successful is a good thing or not) being mediocre is a better starting point. Outliers are often perceived as a problem in the standard management of activities.

Then, obviously, it will always be possible and easy to find some good reason to say that they were not that exceptional: “she is not a team player”, “he has a bad temper”, “clients don’t understand her,” ...

In reality, we are simply perpetuating a mediocre organization. It doesn’t mean that a mediocre organization can’t be successful, quite the contrary. But we all prefer to assume that we are not mediocre, when statistically it is very likely that we are. We like to think of being part of a group of exceptional individuals, with us being the most exceptional of all.

In the medium term, a successful organization is good at leveraging mediocrity: the mediocrity of people working there, the mediocrity of people buying their products.

- Human Resource selection policies should take into account that for most positions it is not necessary to hire rocket scientists. Even assuming they are able to select them (it is debatable how we, mediocre individuals, could recognize and select those few really exceptional ones...), if the position is for medium-level activities, then hiring overqualified people is a mistake. It is better to be less hypocritical: for many positions good rowers are required, not potential CEOs. Putting several potential captains in a fight to see who wins is a seemingly correct strategy (even if cynical); it doesn’t take into account the damage it causes to the deep body of the organization, and it doesn’t lead to the success of the specific initiative.
- Rewarding team spirit, more than individualism, should not be just a slogan: if we have two Maradonas on the team, and then we lose, it is not good. If then (likely so) they are not Maradonas, but just pretending, it is even worse.
- In Product Development, if I believe that my elitist tastes are very common, I am making a big mistake, unless we are and want to remain in a niche market. The Product Development Director likes exclusive, niche products. If he is unconsciously frustrated because he is working for a mass-market consumer product company with a low-level brand, and he is almost ashamed of that, it is not good. Maybe he spends most of his time on fanciful activities on the niche brand, rather than on the brand that makes his living.

And in the longer term? Well, in the longer term, it is not exactly like this... thank God.

The mediocre company lives well, even for years. Maybe it has been outstanding for a limited period of time, and then benefits from that initial advantage over competition created in the past by a few people (those really exceptional ones). Up until when, the real outlier, the true Talent, the disruptive innovator comes on the market. The mediocre company goes bust, with all its hypocrisy on Talent. And a new cycle starts again.

The professor selects an assistant slightly less good than himself, in order to appear undoubtedly the most important in the pack. Years later, the assistant himself, once he becomes professor, will select a slightly less intelligent assistant, and so on and so forth. Lower and lower, until the professor selects an assistant only apparently less intelligent, but in reality so clever, an unappreciated genius, to appear to his poor eyes more mediocre than himself. And, on the contrary, she was a true genius. And a new cycle, thank God, starts again.

Giovanni Carlino
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