

MAVERICKS

*“Are you slicing the bread, and filling it, or just slicing it?...
'cause if you are just slicing it, I can do it by myself....”
CEO, Large listed company, to a (scared) Business Unit Director.
Executive Committee Meeting.*

SENIORITY, SENIORITY....

When you start working, and you are at the bottom of the organization, you think of “seniority” as competence: “I can’t do much; someone above me is much more competent and is going to teach me; I am going to slowly make my way up, and then I’ll teach in turn...”

Unfortunately, after a while, you realize that the meaning of “seniority” is often misunderstood:

“I am senior in the organization, so:

- I attend many meetings
- I receive hundreds of emails, which I do not read
- I obsessively use a palm device (mainly to see that I am receiving those hundreds of emails I do not read)
- The more senior I am, the more I have difficulties going into the content of the matter
- For this purpose, I call my people who, however, go into the details too much. I do not understand, so I usually tell them: “You need to learn how to raise your head higher.”
- I am very good at understanding the politics behind the “cc”s of those emails I receive (and of the few I send)”.

In this context, seeing a person forty-five plus, going into the details and the content, is not only rare, but even viewed with considerable wariness, as an indicator of a lack of “vision.”

It is not rare to see (in large or small companies, in different sectors, and different countries), the competence pyramid turned upside-down: few juniors who know and do, a lot of superstructure that “manages”.

Senior people who, in reality:

- do not know (nor are interested in) the product their own company sells
- do not go into the field, into the stores
- continuously say “customer experience”, but are not customers themselves
- if you ask them the three important figures in the business, they often call the controller, who in turn will call the intern...who is actually the only one in control

The business model with many managers and few doers, where juniors immediately learn that content doesn’t pay as much as politically cruising on the surface, has to be fought from the top: if the CEO, or a Business Director, is not afraid of showing up with numbers, with the patience to go deep, working hard to listen and understand (sometimes even to study), the junior person will soon understand that this is the successful model. Otherwise, he will have the feeling that you need to climb as fast as you can, to avoid the hard work, and to be accepted into that cloud of management above your head (which, however, everybody is joking about at the coffee machine).

We need to reward more (and more visibly) competence and content versus appearance. Otherwise, could we be surprised by that thirty-year-old who, skill-less, instead of improving his competences, immediately starts to “navigate,” and to manage upward and downward in the company?

*Giovanni Carlino
(2011)*