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FROM OUR WORLD



WHY TALENT IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

True talent is the rare commodity for which modern organisations cry out. Yet too many large corporates fail to spot the talent that exists right under their noses. Matthew Moore considers why.

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What does talent look like? It's a phrase we've all heard bandied around the corporate world on a regular basis. Is it a young, super-enthusiastic graduate sporting a firm handshake and a degree from Oxford? Or a chess prodigy with an almost supernatural ability to see mathematical patterns that evade others?

Recently I had the pleasure of meeting psychologist and former NBA basketball player John Amaechi OBE, who has spent many years studying the nature of talent. He grew up in Stockport, England where he developed a passion for basketball and a desire to make it as a player in America – something unheard of for a kid from the north of England in the late 1980s. While encouraging him in the sport, John's teachers counselled against staking everything on his US ambitions. Yet by the mid-90s, he had joined the Cleveland Cavaliers and was embarking on a high-flying career in the US game that lasted until 2004.

With this sort of backstory, it's probably no surprise that, having studied psychology, John focused on the subject of talent. Organisations, he argues, have a serious blind spot here. When it comes to identifying and nurturing talent, the

received wisdom is that corporates are crying out for the latest innovative thinking or the smartest IT skills. But all too often, according to John, they look the gift horse in the mouth and fail to see it for what it is.

At Liberty Specialty Markets, we've built a highly motivated and focused team. I like to think that our ability to spot talent has played no small part in this. But listening to John raised questions in my mind. Put simply, were we as adept at talent scouting as we'd led ourselves to believe?

Psychologists point to two key factors that can undermine an organisations' ability to both nurture and identify talent. First, there is a widely held belief that an individual's sense of their own ability grows organically as they acquire skills and knowledge. Sadly, this often isn't the case. The second is that we tend to recognise talent when it looks and sounds like us. This is particularly worrying when one considers that, in a 2019 survey by HR and change consultancy Mercer, employers cited the excessive time required to fill vacant roles as the number one human capital risk facing their businesses. The best candidate might be right under their nose, but they can't see them.

All of which led me to the tale of Clever Hans.

Stable genius

In late 19th century Germany, for a brief moment, talent came in the form of a horse who appeared to be able to count:

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Clever Hans. When asked by his trainer to calculate the sum of eight plus two, Clever Hans tapped his hoof ten times. Astounding. So astounding crowds gathered to watch the horse perform his mental feats. Although not correct every time, Clever Hans achieved an impressive accuracy rate of around 90%.

His fame spread to the point at which academics decided to investigate. After careful study, it emerged that what made Clever Hans clever was actually his ability to pick up on tiny non-verbal signals displayed by his questioner. For example, when asked to calculate the sum of five plus five, as Clever Hans tapped his hoof for the tenth time, he would observe some unconscious gesture by his questioner – a raising of an eyebrow, a slight lifting of the head – and this would be enough to tell Hans to stop tapping.

Clever Hans was the first documented example of what psychologists call the Pygmalion effect. In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a sculptor who, having carved a statue of a beautiful woman, fell in love with the statue, which was then brought to life by the gods. In psychology, the Pygmalion effect is a documented phenomenon wherein high expectations lead to improved performance. So if your manager tells you you're great and thinks you'll do a fabulous job, you probably will.

Unconscious signals

The Pygmalion effect is the mechanism by which a manager's unconscious behaviour can have a profound effect on the performance of their team. Even though a manager may not say to an employee 'I think you're amazing', the employee can – consciously or unconsciously – read the non-verbal signals and respond thus: 'If my manager thinks I'm great, I must be great. Therefore, I'm going to perform to the best of my ability.'



The Pygmalion effect combined with all the assumptions and value judgements we carry around in our heads mean that when confronted by a talented individual who does not fit our stereotype of what talent looks like, we fail to recognise it.



But the Pygmalion effect has a darker, more destructive twin; the Golem effect. A manager who makes all the right noises, but radiates non-verbal signals which scream 'I think you're doing a bad job'. Lo and behold, the employee under-performs.

Back in 1965, two academics conducted an experiment to explore the impact of the Pygmalion effect in the classroom. Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen told teachers in a US school that they had tested the IQ of children in their classes and a percentage had been identified as high achievers. In reality, they had not tested anyone and had selected the so-called 'high achievers' at random. After a period, the academics returned to assess pupils' progress. While all children had made advances, those singled out to the teacher as high achievers had progressed the most, even though, academically-speaking, they were of the same ability as their classmates. What made the difference, therefore, was their teacher's behaviour towards them.

Profound impact

This phenomenon has profound implications for organisations. The reality that each of us radiates signals unconsciously that our colleagues read and respond to has the potential to undermine or reinforce the culture and values we strive to engender. Earlier in this article I mentioned the misapprehension that people's sense of self-worth grows as they become more experienced and qualified. The Golem effect is one of the reasons why that belief is flawed. All the training and merit awards in the world may fail to overcome the negative signals broadcast by an insensitive manager.

Here at Liberty Specialty Markets, all of our hiring managers attend inclusive recruitment training to make sure they're aware of the latest thinking in interview

skills, so they can make fair and effective inclusive hiring decisions. We also invite all of our employees to attend Inclusive Behaviour and Courageous Bystander training. This gives them a chance to consider how we're all accountable for fostering an inclusive environment, and how to navigate the diversity of perspectives and approaches in a working environment such as ours. Understanding the Pygmalion and the Golem effect reinforces the value of this training.

The Pygmalion effect combined with all the assumptions and value judgements we carry around in our heads mean that when confronted by a talented individual who does not fit our stereotype of what talent looks like, we fail to recognise it. Even worse, we display a range of signals that tell the individual that we do not believe them to be talented. Worse yet, confronted by a barrage of negative non-verbal communication from authority figures in their organisation, the individual begins to doubt their own abilities.

Eye of the beholder

Talent comes in many guises. The challenge for organisations is to recognise and nurture it. Clever Hans was exceptionally talented – just not in the manner the public had been led to believe. His ability to read and respond to human body language was extraordinary, but once his famed numerical abilities were disproven, he disappeared from the historical record, his fate unknown.

Diversity of talent is something no modern organisation can afford to be without. If there's one thing we can learn from Clever Hans, it is that talent comes in all manner of guises. The challenge for employers is to see beyond their assumptions and their cultural norms to recognise what really lies at the heart of each individual. Not an easy feat, by any means, but surely one worth striving to achieve. ■

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