



Hiring and Promoting in an Execution Environment

We hear from leaders that people are our most valuable asset, but we also hear that they often fail to live up to our expectations. Why? The reason lies in the way we hire people, the way we select them for different positions, and the way we decide who to promote.

A concept I call “emotional ownership” is the way to look at what we need to achieve with people in an execution environment. Most people want to be valued, and they are willing to take ownership of their performance, but within bounds. Each person has a tolerance for risk taking, demands on their time and thinking, and acceptance of responsibility. When in a job environment within their bounds, people will become emotional owners of the business. They will have a level of commitment that goes beyond what would be expected and they accept accountability, but only if their work environment stays within their bounds. Having an execution environment requires that people have emotional ownership.

Do not mistake emotional ownership with actual ownership. I have seen all kinds of games played to provide the appearance of actual ownership, and they all fail to motivate people to achieve an execution environment. Most people do not require, nor do they want, real ownership to provide superior performance, and they certainly don’t want to be misled to believe something has been offered, real ownership, which in reality has not been offered. Most people simply want to work within their box, be recognized for the contribution they do make, and share to some degree in the outcome (read this as participate in profit sharing tied to achieving defined outcomes).

You may well say that is all good, but it is impractical to recognize and stay within each person’s bounds. Are there more practical alternatives? My good friend Ed Ryan, who I have discussed in other papers, would say no way. Ed was the founder of Marketing Personnel Research (MPR), Inc., and the developer of a widely used and highly successful system for benchmarking the behaviors needed to be successful in a particular job and assessing candidates relative to those benchmarks. Ed was also an ex-priest, and he was fond of saying that he used to be in the behavior modification business, but now was in the much easier behavior assessment business. Ed would tell you in no uncertain terms that you cannot change behaviors. People either have the behaviors needed to be successful in a job,



or they will fail. Put another way as Ed often expressed it, we hire people for what they have done and fire them for who they are. All of these insights Ed had, which were proven over and over again by the successes his system showed when organizations adopted it, are really another way of saying what I did above about people wanting to perform and contribute, but only if they could stay within the bounds of the box they draw. Our job as leaders and managers is to help people define that box and assess if we can work with it, or not, and either harness what they have to offer, or make staffing corrections. Straightforward and brutal, but the reality.

It is naïve to think that we will ever create an organization of superior achievers, so don't make that mistake and set that as a goal. GE tried to do this under Jack Welsh by instilling a brutally objective performance review process, which is a good thing to do, and having a goal of replacing the bottom 10% of performers, regardless of their absolute performance, each year. Even with their vast resources, magnetic draw for talent, and brutal objectivity about assessing performance, GE did not even come close to achieving an organization composed of superior performers. Your goal should not be to have only superior performers, rather your goal should be to be brutally objective and accept the realities that allow you to get a superior performance from each person you elect to have, or do not have them. Understanding that most people have a well defined box in which they are willing to perform is the start of achieving superior performance. Understanding and applying behavior based assessments to not only recruit, but also to select what you task different people with is then required to achieve superior performance.

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