

Was Albert Einstein an imposter?

And what has that got to do with attending The Henley Leadership Programme?



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Searching for talent: CEOs' top concern

A recent survey of 24 CEOs by Harvard Business School¹ found that the three things CEOs worry about the most are having the right talent, operating in a global marketplace, and regulation and legislation. What is especially interesting is that having the right talent was the 'runaway' winner in the survey with 16 of the CEOs citing this as their top concern.

It is also interesting to note that the number two issue also has a strong 'people' dimension, that is to say, having employees act to the same standards throughout the world. For example, one 'bad apple' can quickly affect an organisation in the interconnected world we now live in.

As a former business executive, I can absolutely see where the CEOs are coming from – recruiting, growing and retaining the right talent is a challenge for any organisation, and the more senior one becomes, the more one realises this as you look at your 'to do' list. Arguably, the better you are at spotting and developing talented people the shorter your list becomes as these capable, talented and motivated people step up all round you to make the right things happen.

A hard lesson learned

Personally, I shall never forget the day when the largest (by revenue) client of a previous employer came up to me and said with dramatic effect: 'If I ever have to sit through a meeting like that again, I will pull the plug on everything!' – 'everything' was a lot to our business – not just in terms of revenue in the short term, and over the next five years, but also in terms of the other clients this company attracted to our business.

The client went on to explain the behaviour of one of my team members and I could completely empathise with the client and the team member. It was my failing. I had said, but not 'stood my ground', that this particular member of staff did not have the right strengths to be in the role with this client. I had allowed myself to be over-ruled, and here was the result – without some quick and decisive action we could all be 'out of a job'!

Strengths based approach

What I now realise is that as a younger manager/leader if I had been more aware of the 'strengths based' approach, I would have been able to avoid this issue. I would have been able to say to my boss that team member 'X' (henceforth to be known as 'Bob', who in that great Blackadder tradition could be male or female) has all these great skills and knowledge, but these other skills and knowledge, essential for this client-facing job, were simply just not Bob. To put Bob in this role was simply too risky for the business, as well as being harmful to the development of Bob and his/her career.

The strengths based approach is founded on the premise that you'll never be great at what's not you. So, focusing on (worrying about!) our weaknesses, as so many of us are prone to do, will not get us and/or the organisation where we want to be. Instead, working out what our strengths are, and focusing on them and where they can be most successfully deployed, will create a cycle of success for individuals and organisations.

The neuroscience

The strengths based approach continues to gather momentum as business results and neuroscience show that when we 'play to our strengths' our confidence grows, our ability to make decisions improves and business results improve. Even our health improves, with more positive experiences and confidence (created by working from a place of strength) we release more positive chemicals in the brain and we experience lower heart rates. This enables us to improve our ability to withstand pressure and to be creative.

Robert Quinn, professor at the University of Michigan and cofounder of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship, observes in TEDx Talks² that individuals usually possess a scientifically validated 'positivity ratio'. This ratio is generally 2:1: ie for every negative thought, we have two positive thoughts. Some people naturally increase this ratio to three positive thoughts for one negative thought (3:1), or higher. These people change the chemistry of their brain. The neural pathways open up and more connections are made – thus, more rather than less, becomes possible. When we realise that we can do this by choice, and by choosing this path we create positive energy for ourselves and for the people we live and work with, the sky is no longer the limit!

We do not need to be 'clever' (whatever that actually means!) to do this, but we do need to have courage. To fully appreciate what this means I can think of no better recommendation than suggesting you watch Toby Jones' superb portrayal of the true story of Neil Baldwin in the BBC's BAFTA winning film called Marvellous³. Neil is a man who refuses to accept the label of having 'learning difficulties' and is living the most extraordinary life having made a deliberate choice 'to be happy'. I do not know of any other former circus clown, who was never actually offered a job by a university, ending up by being awarded an honorary degree by that university for services to its students.

Brain scans and positivity

When scientists carry out fMRI scans on the brains of successful people, they find evidence of the ability to 'reframe' one's experience of the world into positive thoughts. So, for example, when the former Olympic and World Champion hurdler Colin Jackson sees a sequence of potentially harrowing negative images, 'positive parts' of his brain, under fMRI scan, automatically show activity, rather than those parts of the brain more associated with fear/sadness.

This positivity will no doubt also be linked to Colin's success as a coach and sports commentator following his retirement from athletics. Colin is knowledgeable and fun! For example, it was great to see Usain Bolt feeling relaxed enough with Colin to be dancing behind him on BBC1 when Colin was reporting on how Usain was coping under pressure—with about 40 minutes to go before the 100-metre race at the Anniversary games at the London Olympic Park in July 2015. Could it be said that Colin actually helped Usain to win the race by fostering playfulness in Usain so close to the race?

What we do know is that researchers from York St John University and the University of Bath⁴ have found that the opposite, arguably perfectionism, in the workplace, creates extreme stress and burnout. The link is reported as being likely to be exacerbated by a 'performance outcomes focus', where poor performance carries significant costs, leading to stress for individuals and lack of innovation for organisations.

So, as leaders and managers of others, one of our main challenges is how we can model a positive, strengths based approach to our own development and careers, so that our team members and colleagues are encouraged to adopt a positive, strengths based approach to their development. A key to doing this has to be to accept that we are human, that it is human to err and that learning from mistakes is the way forward. This brings me neatly back to Bob!

Matching the person to the role

I did manage to move Bob to a different role, reasonably elegantly, by considering what Bob was good at and encouraging Bob to see that his/her new role was well matched to his/her skills and knowledge (and would be more fun!). We did manage to retain our large client by better matching their next client manager to their expectations. With hindsight, I would prefer in the future to do my learning/experimentation in situations with less depending on them; but I also know that often the most powerful learning comes when we have most to lose, so who am I kidding about the choice piece!

Einstein and the imposter syndrome

Another observation I have is that when I am anything less than positive the 'imposter syndrome' is quick to emerge in me. The phrase came from a paper written by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978⁵. It related to their findings that many high-achieving women tended to believe they were not intelligent and that they were overvalued by others.

Research conducted in the 1980s⁶ suggested that two out of five successful people (regardless of gender) consider themselves frauds, and another study found that 70% of all people feel like imposters at some point⁷. As the Director of the Henley Leadership Programme for over 15 years, I can add to this weight of evidence by saying that very few of the executives that have attended

this programme did not laugh with relief when they heard that their 'secret' fear of not being up to the job was so common that it had been labelled as a 'syndrome'. They are even more surprised to hear that Albert Einstein may also have experienced the imposter syndrome. Einstein is reported as saying⁸ to a friend, as an elderly man, that 'the exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler'.

Well, if it's good enough for Einstein, it's good enough for me – at least to notice that the syndrome has crept up on me and then to quietly send it back to where it came from, rebuffed by examples of me at my best.

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